X-Reality and the Incarnation

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This essay is one of six in a collection of theological reflections on social media and new media conducted by the New Media Research Fellows at Union Theological Seminary. They are based upon the case studies conducted by the research fellows in 2011. These and other resources can be found on the New Media Project website.

Study questions: *Note that this essay includes questions at the end to help you go deeper into the topic, or to help others you may be leading to go deeper. Some of those questions will connect to other essays, all of which can be found on the project website.*

Introduction

I've started to notice something interesting when I talk to Christian defenders of social media and digital life. Even the most ardent defenders and users of new media (like the bloggers for the New Media Project and the pastors in our case studies) when faced with the ultimate test question—could church ever be completely digital?—draw a line in the sand. Church, understood as worship and sacrament, cannot take place, at least not exclusively, online. As Jim Rice summarizes from his conversations with Quest Church in Seattle, "the Christian faith is an incarnational faith; that is, real presence is an intrinsic aspect of the tradition." Incarnational presence, according to Gail Bantum at Quest, is about sacramentality, and sacrament requires a central Christian commitment to "human interaction with God and with one another."[1]

The Incarnation (and its relationship to sacramentality) is the go-to doctrine to defend against virtual encroachment. In his case study for House for All Sinners and Saints, Jason Byassee reports a similar theological argument against online-only church: "This is sacramental worship, with chant, sacrament, incense, icon, and a flesh and blood neighbor. The bodies of those who have been wounded, who House attends and rehabilitates back to health, are too important to be left to their loneliness-inducing screens."[2]

Or as a congregant at Countryside Community Church told me in more colloquial terms when I asked her whether Countryside's weekly online TV program could ever serve as a replacement for traditional Sunday service: "church are the people I see on Sunday morning who will make you casseroles when you are sick or watch out for your kids."[3]

There is good reason to ground commitment to embodied "real life" communities and relationships in the doctrine of the Incarnation, especially if we think of virtual or digital life as disembodied or immaterial. But what if this is not the right way to think about digital life after all? What if, instead of seeing the real vs. virtual divide in terms of

embodied vs. disembodied we think about the new permutations of digital and virtual technology informing our lives as particular ways we are embodied?

As the gap between digitally mediated or virtual life and so-called real life collapses, it is harder to think about new media as something we use to escape our real lives and easier to experience it as another facet of human existence, as real and material as any other practice, even if differently so. New media scholars describe this disappearing gap as X-reality—reality that moves fluidly across the virtual to real spectrum and wherein virtual or digital space is just a differently mediated way of being real.[4] If we embrace this understanding of digital existence, what does the doctrine of the Incarnation have to teach us about our increasingly digital lives?

X-Reality: Digital embodiment

It can be hard to get a handle on what embodiment means when we express very real worries that our online lives are or could become too disembodied. On a far extreme, the thought of disembodied virtual existence evokes *Matrix* -like images—human beings having the life sucked out of them by alien machines while they live escapist fantasies in their minds. Less fantastically, but no less disparagingly, there is the popular stereotype of the computer geek or hacker, like Lisbeth Salander and her friends in Stieg Larsson's best selling novels and the recent film adaptation of *The Girl in the Dragon Tattoo*: sporting Nine Inch Nails t-shirts and too many body piercings, pasty from lack of sun exposure, socially awkward, intensely out of touch with "normal" human interactions. They have bodies, of course, but they live so intensely in their online worlds that they lack even basic concern for bodily hygiene or health.

Despite these recognizable and sometimes laughable pop culture stereotypes, the concern that virtual life might impoverish or even destroy real life is something to be taken seriously. The first ever Internet rescue camp opened last year in South Korea to help cure young men and boys who spend up to 17 hours a day on the Internet. Exhibiting classic signs of addiction, these youth find it increasingly difficult to disengage from digital life, especially online gaming. In the most extreme cases, some have dropped dead from starvation while gaming because they forgot to eat for so long. The cure, to the degree that it has been tested, seems to lie in intense physical activity like zip lining, ropes courses, and horseback riding: activities that help build strong physical and emotional connections to the real world and break the lure of online fantasy worlds.[5]

But even in these extreme and disturbing cases, disembodiment is not the primary concern. Like other forms of addiction, normal attachment to self and others is distorted by an obsessive chemical and/or psychological need for the object of addiction: alcohol, heroine, or in this case, virtual gaming. The fact that the Internet can be an object of addiction emphasizes the degree to which our experience of it is embodied—unchecked use, especially during the very formative years of youth, re-wires our bodies, distorting or

overriding our most basic physical instincts. Only something that profoundly affected us in our body-soul unity could have such profound bodily effects.

To insist that virtual reality is embodied, even in the case of detrimental addiction, is to draw a distinction between something being embodied and it being good. There are many things that are fully embodied that are dangerous and should not be encouraged. A young woman who cuts herself in despair is not less embodied even though she may suffer from a negative body image. The same might be said of other addictions, like those to heroine or alcohol. The result may be a radical disregard for bodily safety and integrity, but the addiction itself is deeply embodied. Even outside the case of addiction, recent scholarship suggests that the very patterns of human thought and experience are being rewired in our increased use of interactive media. Whether or not these changes are to be celebrated, feared, embraced, or resisted, they are only possible because they affect us in our embodied realities, not merely in some fantasy or ethereal plane.[6]

I'm driving this point home because the assumption that embodied equals more human equals good is so strong, especially for Christians for whom faith in the Incarnation grounds their affirmation of material, embodied existence. Notice the language quoted above from Bantum of Quest Church in Seattle. As an incarnational people, she insists, her church believes in sacramentality. Sacramentality requires "human interaction with God and one another." This is why, she says, church cannot be entirely online. The implication is clear: "human interaction" stands for real, not virtual, interaction and is the basis for sacramental and incarnational connection.

This strong and seemingly natural reaction is held despite the fact that this same pastor, and many others like her, also experience strong human connection via digital mediation. The use of social media has allowed pastors at Quest to "get to know the congregation, and members of the congregation to get to know one another, and enables the church to connect with the real, day-to-day lives of congregants (and in particular, with younger members of the faith community)." Social media have helped build "community among church members, facilitated the connections between and among members of small groups, and been a vehicle to expand the avenues of pastoral care."[7] I am confident that these ministers would affirm that these connections are real human interactions even though they are virtually mediated. Just as I am sure they would agree that all human interactions have the capacity to be harmful, even those that take place solely in the real world. The work of evaluating whether or not a human connection is real or whether a human interaction is good requires more than assessing if it is virtually mediated or not.

In some ways, the more powerful our connections online, the more nervous we seem to become about preserving some space for real-life interactions. And for good reasons: there is something irreplaceable about the human body as a medium for connection and communication. In 2000, a research group at the MIT Media Lab published a paper on the importance of human embodiment in computer interface design. They discovered that the

more a computer avatar looks and feels like a human, the more responsive human users are to the interaction. To seem human, avatars need more than computer-generated human features. They need to meet our expectations for feedback and responsiveness—they need to participate in the normal give-and-take, the emotional exchange that forms part of our basic expectation of interacting with our own species. This, the scientists argued, is deeply connected to the way humans communicate using our embodied presence. "It is not just that we enjoy looking at humans more than at computer screens," the team concluded, "but also that the human body ... provide[s] for a more rich and robust channel of communication than is afforded by any other medium available today."[8]

Christians also believe that our embodied presence is made a vehicle for divine communication and sanctifying grace. It is understandable why most of us are nervous to abdicate the sphere of real life no matter how satisfying and rich online connections become. Recognizing the way in which digital life is embodied and forms a continuum, instead of a sharp break, with non-digital life can help us develop the means to assess the kinds of connections and interactions virtual mediation allows and the kind that are best reserved for real-life encounters. This continuum is what digital media scholars call X-reality.

Rather than see computer-generated spaces, places, and worlds as "notably outside of what we might call real life," X-reality describes "a mobile, real-time, and pervasively networked landscape," says Beth Coleman. In X-reality, we don't leave our real lives to engage a shadowy virtual existence. In fact, the binary between virtual and real disappears as we move across sites that are real, simulated, digital, and embodied to various degrees. I don't create a virtual me in digital space—I create a digital space to be me across the boundaries of time and space.[9]

The idea of X-reality depends on human embodiment and human connection. In earlier incarnations of virtual reality, the emphasis was on creating unrealistic or fantasy worlds that people could escape into. The phrase "virtual reality" is something from the recent past that conjures up all those *Matrix* fantasies or hacker stereotypes. But who of us on Facebook or Twitter thinks of our social media presence as "virtual reality?" We have not escaped to another plane of reality; we are using a form of technological mediation to be present to others across time and space.

The distinction that is drawn between digital and real life is not between embodied reality and disembodied fantasy. It is between "face-to-face" interaction where people share the same geographic and physical space and interactions that are mediated by technology (the telephone, the Internet) to allow connection across time and space. The quality of the connection is not evaluated based on mediation or lack thereof. As we all know, face-to-face interactions can be devoid of any real, emotional connection. And as many of us are learning, a Facebook message can create real emotional presence. X-reality names the fact that in our full humanness, embodied and emotional, we move between face-to-face and

mediated interactions with increasing speed and fluency. We create digital extensions of ourselves, what media theorists and programmers call "avatars."

After James Cameron's film, it is hard not to think of giant blue creatures when we hear the word "avatar." And it is true that Cameron's fantasy raises fascinating questions about exactly what "embodiment" really means if the brain is capable of incorporating objects, limbs, and even an entirely different body into its sense of physical presence. What computer scientists and new media theorists mean by "avatar" is a bit less sci-fi, however. An "avatar" is a digital representation of a human agent—called an "embodied agent" in computer science terms. Avatars can be the human-like figures that populate video games, but they can also be the human-like presence that talks you through an automated phone call with your bank or the profile you create on Facebook.

If an avatar can simply be a digital representation of a human agent, the overall online presence we each create through Facebook profiles, Twitter feeds, blogs, games, and other social profiles together create our avatar—the online representation of ourselves. While we all know that we pick and choose what we present online, the overall effect of these media platforms, according to Beth Coleman, is to create presence, to announce to the world, "I am here." Moving between our face-to-face and mediated connections with increasing fluency means, according to Coleman, that "neither geographic territory nor corporeal embodiment stand as the exclusive indication of being somewhere, of being present."[10] In other words, through technological mediation, we increasingly experience ourselves as present with and to people who are far from us in geographic space. We do not go online to escape our real lives but to make those lives present to a wider community.

Even more radically, some media theorists suggest that we will stop using terms like "going online," "virtual reality," and "cyberspace," noting that these terms imply "a form of engagement that stands outside of the geographically and corporally bounded world we occupy."[11] As wireless technology expands and the ease of access to real-time, increasingly visual, interactive media proliferates, it becomes harder to think of "going online" as a discrete activity we do apart from all other day-to-day activities. We are increasingly online simultaneously with all other activities in our lives, and the digital terrain is just another plane "from which experience may be instantly drawn."[12]

If we no longer go online, but live online alongside and within our real lives, it certainly makes no sense to think of online activity as disembodied. A young mother wrestles her toddler into a shopping cart with one hand and updates her Facebook status with her other. Within minutes, her mother, mother-in-law, and seven close friends respond offering her moral support to get through another exasperating moment raising small children. At one and the same time the mother is present to her toddler, who will not let her escape to a virtual world no matter how much she might want to, and is present to her community, which is scattered geographically all over the country.

If by embodiment we mean something like real human connection or real human presence, X-reality suggests that we share our embodied presence across face-to-face and mediated interactions. For Christians who take the doctrine of the Incarnation seriously as a place to anchor and defend embodied connection, the Incarnation has much to teach us about digital forms of embodiment as we inhabit X-reality.

Incarnation and embodiment

From the very beginning of Christian doctrinal controversy, upholding the doctrine of the Incarnation—which meant, in more technical metaphysical terms, defending the full human and divine natures of Christ in one human person—was a bulwark against various forms of Docetism or Gnosticism which wanted to downplay or even disregard Jesus' human nature in order to emphasize his divine or spiritual nature. The creedal affirmations strongly affirmed that Jesus was fully human and that his material nature, including the unity of his human body and soul, was essential to his salvific work. In the words of the fourth century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus, "that which is not assumed is not saved"—meaning that only if the Second Person of the Trinity assumed a full human nature, body and soul, could that nature be saved. Our salvation depends on Jesus really being, not just seeming like, a human.

Unfortunately, as Feminist and Womanist theologians have made clear in the past fifty years, this emphasis on Jesus's full humanity did not mean a robust embrace of human bodily experience, especially not the bodily experience of women and people of color who were often considered deficient humans. While officially the church taught the essential unity of body and soul in all persons, including Jesus as one of us, what it meant to be human was increasingly located in the faculty of reason and in the spiritual qualities of "man"—that which separated us from other animals, not that which we shared with them. Bodily experience—sex, childbirth, eating, physical labor, pain—were not often elevated as sources for theological knowledge or the experience of God. Especially after the Enlightenment, spiritual knowledge was that which could be had regardless of our bodily experiences, something either assented to by reason or experienced in a spiritual way and considered above reason.

Feminists and Womanist theologians especially challenged this Enlightenment legacy, reclaiming the doctrine of the Incarnation to validate women's bodily experiences as sources for divine revelation and connection to the divine. For these theologians, God choosing to become human means that our embodied experience is revealed as capable of bearing God to ourselves and to each other. The insistence on embodied experience led these and other theologians to insist on more embodied forms of worship and community formation. Because we are an incarnational people, affirming our embodied material reality, our faith cannot exist merely in rational assent to propositions. Our faith lives in the membrane of our body-soul connection, nourished through material sacraments, and

strengthened in community, which depends on embodied presence. In other words, our embodied nature emphasizes our vulnerability, interdependence, and connection to one another. Our humanness is not about that which separates us from the rest of creation, but that which connects us to all things, especially to one another.

When Quest Church's Bantum insists on an incarnational identity to resist virtual encroachment on church, she is drawing on this theological legacy. We have just begun to shake off the mind/body dualism that has plagued our tradition, remembering the importance of embodied practices for the life of faith. If church is just a group of individuals abandoned to their "loneliness-inducing screens," isn't this just a return to the bad old days when Christians made faith a purely private, internal affair, disconnected from thick forms of community, real presence, and bodily practice? Whatever goods we might find through technology, surely we have to draw the line somewhere if we are going to maintain our incarnational identity?

Unless, of course, we do not lose our embodied presence in our mediated exchanges. If we increasingly move between face-to-face and mediated interactions, where both together form our "real lives," we do not abandon embodiment for virtual existence. Our fully embodied selves are present in different ways across different platforms of communication.

If we accept this evolving sense of X-reality, our worries about new media aren't as easily explained on a "embodied" vs. "disembodied" dichotomy. That does not mean, however, that the doctrine of the Incarnation ceases to be important or has nothing to teach us about our newly mediated forms of real life. The Incarnation remains as true and necessary to the life of faith as it has ever been. Our belief in the Incarnation continues to shape what we, as Christians, believe to be true about reality, ourselves, and our relationships with God and one another.

I want to consider three ways the Incarnation might help us interpret X-reality within a Christian framework, both to make sense of this moment of human life in theological terms and to provide part of a theological framework to evaluate the role of mediated human connection in our lives.

Claiming the "X" in X-reality

"X" in X-reality is a common prefix in scientific discourse meaning "to cross." In the sense new media scholars intend, X-reality describes the way we increasingly cross over from face-to-face to mediated interactions. It also describes the way new media forms permeate across all spheres of life, no longer representing a discrete sphere one enters and exits, but a new terrain we traverse in the course of our daily, "real" lives. In Christian theological terms, the abbreviation has often stood for Christ, as in the popular acronym for Christmas: "Xmas." How can Christians claim this "X" in our experience of X-reality?

One thing the Incarnation teaches us is that God chooses to reveal Godself in the stuff of this world. Surely then, X-reality too is not immune to the pervasive grace and love of God. If X-reality contains our embodied presence, so too must it be capable of bearing God's presence, since it is in our embodied nature that God chose to be present to us. I want to suggest three ways we might think incarnationally about X-reality: the Incarnation as a guide to *metaphorical interpretation*, to *ethical evaluation*, and to *concentrated attention*.

Metaphorical interpretation

Beyond simply affirming embodied reality, the doctrine of the Incarnation also teaches us that the things of this world can bear more meaning than they originally appear to bear. Material reality is affirmed in the Incarnation, but it is also transformed. In Jesus we see a human life, usual to its time and place, fully embodied, fully immersed and connected to the world around him. But here also, we are taught, is God. There is a surplus of meaning to his life, and in that surplus a whole mode of interpreting the world is opened: human life in all its everydayness and extraordinariness has the capacity to mean more than it seems and can be probed for hidden or spiritual meaning.

For late antiquity and medieval Christianity, this understanding of the Incarnation grounded a whole mode of allegorical or symbolic interpretation. The words of scripture, icons, and the natural world were all open to layers of interpretation because Christ himself is a kind of symbol or allegory for God—the Word or image of God to be read, interpreted, and meditated on. Like any other aspect of human existence, we might embrace this theological mode anchored in the Incarnation to interpret X-reality. This would involve a more poetic or metaphorical reading of X-reality as a mode of human existence. What meaning does this mode of existence offer if we look for spiritual metaphor?

One such metaphorical interpretation could illuminate interconnection as the guiding premise of X-reality. Everything is linked to everything else. As we click on links on a web page we go into a web of connections that we experience as having depth—a depth of interconnection. The more connections we make between ideas, pages, and links, the thicker the experience. We emerge from a two-hour web search like coming out a vortex, our minds swirling with ideas, and even more so, links among ideas. So too, our real-life experience is deepened as we move from one plane of experience (what is happening in the immediate here and now of geographic space) to another (the swirl of information and connections in mediated space). As a manifestation of human reality, we can read this new sense of depth and interconnection theologically as a metaphor or symbol for the divine interconnectivity of all things made possible in Christ. The web of redeemed creation can form a kind of antitype to the web of information that now layers our life.

In this example, the Incarnation motivates a metaphorical interpretation of X-reality, and the interpretation I've offered as an example itself takes on an "incarnational pattern"— the depth of interconnection in X-reality teaches us something, even if just metaphorically, about the kind of interconnection God desires in creating and redeeming the world.

Ethical evaluation

Of course, the Incarnation is not just a guide to metaphorical interpretation. For many theologians, seeing the Incarnation as a model for interpretation is too "ideational." That is, it makes the Incarnation too much about ideas, especially the theological debates over the two natures of Christ. Womanist theologians, drawing on an ancient tradition of seeing Christ as our exemplar, have been especially important in insisting that the meaning of Jesus for the life of faith does not lie in ideas about his natures or theories about his saving death. His meaning lies in his life. We know Jesus is God in the love he bears witness to, in his healing, his touch, and his faithfulness to truth and peace in the face of violence and injustice. Working within this theological tradition, we could evaluate the meaning of X-reality, not as a metaphor for divine connectivity, but in terms of the goods or ills it produces, particularly the genuine human connection and solidarity it engenders or denies.

Does the new ability to connect across face-to-face and mediated interactions engender the Christian virtues of peace, patience, honesty, justice, humility, and love? Does our embodied presence in mediated encounters convey the Christian spirit we hope for in our face-to-face connections? If so, X-reality bears Christ.

This tradition of thinking incarnationally helps us to evaluate and assess the impact of mediated reality without relying only on embodied vs. disembodied polemics. We can concede that digitally mediated interactions are embodied interactions, but we might still find some of them problematic because of the quality of the interaction and the virtues and graces they allow or disallow. Using this incarnational rubric might help us as faithful Christians think about when digital mediation bears Christ and when it doesn't, just as we can use it to think about how non-mediated interactions are more or less Christ-like.

Concentrated attention

We might, however, answer that hyper-connectivity does not engender or bear Christ. X-reality might indeed allow for our embodied presence across mediated and face-to-face interactions, but our own presence might be so dissipated by overextension that we have little substance to offer anyone, in our physical or virtual presence. This dissipation could be considered aside from the point made above, that any given human interaction has the capacity for life-giving connection or for harm. The Incarnation might also speak to the problem of overextension and over-connection. In the Incarnation, we might see not just

an affirmation of embodiment and embodied connection, but also the affirmation of concentrated attention.

The doctrine of creation teaches us that all things are good because they are made so by God. All creation shows forth the wonders of our maker. But the doctrine of the Incarnation points to one particular creature. The uniqueness of Christ calls for our attention, directs us to focus, and lures us into deeper concentration on this one moment within all creation. In the specificity of God's revelation in this one person, we are directed to fix our attention, to mediate on this mystery, to worship. In paying attention to this very particular mystery, our senses (both natural and spiritual) are trained to pay attention to the mystery in all particular creatures. Limiting our attention to this one person creates the capacity to focus our attention on all people, even all creation. As French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil describes it, truly paying attention to another person is the full content of love and the only real spur to justice; so too paying attention to God is the full content and method of prayer.[13] Christians begin to learn the practice and virtue of attention in the Incarnation.

In fact, perhaps attention or the lack of it is what drives all our other worries. Perhaps what we worry about when we insist that church cannot take place solely through technological mediation is not "embodiment" as much as distraction and dissipation of our capacity to hold only one connection at a time.

Conclusion

All three of these incarnational meditations on X-reality—the Incarnation as a guide to metaphorical interpretation, ethical evaluation, and concentrated attention—might speak to this worry and help us learn to better describe and evaluate our interactions, whether they are mediated or face-to-face. A Christological hermeneutic can offer us a metaphorical interpretation of the experience of X-reality that teaches us something about divine interconnectivity and presence across time and space. The quality of these connections can be evaluated Christologically, based on the ethic of life that Jesus offers us in his incarnational presence. And the incarnational emphasis on meditation and fixed attention reminds us that limiting our connections, at least for certain seasons, is necessary to foster the kind of embodied presence we are called to create in our face-to-face and mediated interactions.

Accepting that X-reality increasingly erases the divide between virtual and real life and creates capacity for embodied presence across face-to-face and technologically mediated forms of communication means that we cannot anchor our physical, face-to-face connections in the incarnation and relegate our mediated interactions to some other sphere. Both forms of human connection bear in them incarnational presence. The more fluently we learn to move across these spheres of interaction, the more we need to recognize the potential for incarnational presence in our mediated connections. This does

not mean, however, that we have to abandon our commitment to physical, face-to-face interaction. Rather, recognizing that incarnational presence that can permeate X-reality, we can begin to think about what we hope for and require from our different forms of human connection. In this process of discernment, we can foster an incarnational identity that meets the demands of our reality in its increasingly mediated forms.

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[1] Jim Rice, "Case Study Report on Quest Church, Seattle," New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary, October 31, 2011, http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/quest-church/full-report.
[2] Jason Byassee, "Case Study Report for House of All Sinners and Saints," New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary, http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/house-for-all-sinners-and-saints/full-report.
[3] Kathryn Reklis, "Case Study Report on Darkwood Brew," New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary, http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/countryside-community-church-ucc/full-report.
[4] I am indebted to Beth Coleman's description of X-reality in her excellent book about our networked existence *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
[5] Martin Fackler, "In Korea, a Boot Camp Cure for Web Obsession," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/technology/18rehab.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.
[6] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
[7] Rice, "Case Study Report."
[8] Justine Cassell, Tom Bickmore, Hannes Vilhjalmsson, and Yan Hao, "More Than Just a Pretty Face: Affordances of Embodiment," Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Intelligent User Interfaces (New York: ACM, 2000): 52-59.
[9] Coleman, *Hello Avatar*, 20.
[10] Ibid., 36.
[11] Ibid., 20. See also McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).
[12] Wark, *Virtual Geography*, vii.
[13] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Capricorn Books, 1951).

Study questions (going deep)

1. What assumptions about embodiment do you bring to your ministry or congregational life? What does "being embodied" mean to you?

2. If God becoming flesh is key to understanding and experiencing Christian faith, can a person be fully engaged in the Christian community through digital mediation alone? Why or why not?

3. Have you experienced real connection and "real presence" (the ability to be yourself) in virtual space? How are those connections different from those you foster or create "face-to-face"?

4. What are some new media practices you have engaged in (individually or as a church) that create life-giving connections? Why or how have they done so?

5. What are some aspects of human relationship and church community you want to reserve for face-to-face interactions? What are some that are served just as well or better through digital mediation? Why?

6. What is something you personally or as a congregation want to pay more attention to? Is social media a help or a hindrance to this? Have you ever considered a "media Sabbath" or "media fast" to encourage deeper concentration on other goods (spiritual and social)?

7. If the sum of our digital presence (our Facebook and Twitter profiles, our blogs, etc.) might be called our "avatar" (the projection of ourselves in digital space) how would you describe your church's avatar?

Further study questions (going really deep)

Research fellows for the New Media Project have written six different but interrelated theological essays, each focusing on and drawing from a distinct theological tradition and discipline. The following questions draw from the essay above and its relationship to the other New Media Project reflections.

1. How does your belief in embodied relationships or incarnational presence influence how you think about what Lerone A. Martin called proclamation, power, and practice in your use of new media ("How media changes American culture and religion")? Does one of these aspects of new media use require face-to-face interaction more than the others? Does one flourish more through digital mediation?

2. Jim Rice sketches four ecclesiological models ("Models of the church and social media") that might help us understand why and how Christian communities use new media differently (institution, community, herald, and servant). He also suggests, borrowing from Bob Sabath, that Christian communities are marked by charismas that define their major and minor attributes: Spirituality, Community, and Ministry. As you assess your own community's charismas and ecclesiological models, how does that relate to your belief in incarnational presence or embodied relationships? Do certain charismas or church models lend themselves to digital

mediation more than others?

3. As you reflect on the different models of salvation outlined by Monica A. Coleman ("New media: A savior for the digital age"), how does your own emphasis (or lack of emphasis) on the incarnation intersect with your view of salvation? What does this intersection suggest about the relationship between embodiment and salvation? What connections do you see between Reklis' suggestions to evaluate new media practice through an incarnational lens with Coleman's suggestion that "When churches use new media to create community, connect to people, offer greater inclusion, justice and compassion, new media saves us."

4. Verity A. Jones reflects on how Christian understandings of the Trinitarian relations might help us evaluate the ways social media create human community, connectivity, and relationality, for good or for ill ("Faith communities in high relief: Reflections on the Trinity"). As you think about Jones' six Cs (collect, connect, convert, conspire, cultivate, and change), how do these relate to Reklis' suggestion that the doctrine of the incarnation can help us ethically evaluate new media practices?

5. Many new media users, novices and experienced advocates alike, worry about the limitations of new media, especially for church ministry. Reklis describes this worry as typically couched in concerns about "disembodiment." She also suggests that digital mediation is not disembodied, but differently embodied. How does this shift in the discussion relate to what Jason Byassee calls an "underdetermined response to technology" ("Practicing virtue with social media: An 'underdetermined' response")? How does Byassee's call to reflect critically on new media practices without either rejecting or accepting them out-of-hand relate to Reklis' calls "thinking incarnationally about new media"?