

# **The Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife: is it a successful "fresh expression of Church"?**

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## **Introduction**

This paper briefly examines the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife as a "fresh expression of Church", and is adapted from part of an essay for the Eastern Region Ministry Training Course, submitted in 2007, entitled "How aptly do 'Fresh expressions of the Christian Church' respond to major cultural trends within contemporary society and to what extent do they remain true to God's kingdom?". There have been a number of developments since then, including changes to the ministry group, which are not reflected in this paper.

The article first briefly describes the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife. It then analyses to what extent it fulfils criteria in two different dimensions in its expression of "Church":

- how well it can answer four questions relating to itself and its activities:
  1. Is our church expressing a healthy spirituality?
  2. What are we doing to bridge the gap between church & culture?
  3. What are we doing for the dechurched?
  4. What are we doing for the unchurched & spiritually searching?
- how true it is to God's kingdom in its interactions with its contemporary context, using three different models ("critique"; "affirm"; "transform") identified by MacIntosh (2007).

## History

Early in 2007, a number of Anglicans started getting together via a shared and publicly available group within SecondLife (<http://www.secondlife.com/>), a shared virtual "reality" community hosted within the US. Initially, they just looked out for each other when online, and when they noticed each other, would get together in a public space or a property owned by a member to chat and discuss their experiences of being Anglican online and offline: and sometimes to pray. There were already a number of other religious groups on SecondLife, mostly based in the United States, and most coming from the charismatic tradition, but no Anglican community. The group, of a dozen or so members, adopted a charter:

A Christian community for those who call themselves: Anglicans, Episcopalians or members of the Church of England, Episcopal Church or any of the other bodies of believers who share the Anglican heritage.

Around April 2007, a new member joined: an ordinand in New Zealand with experience of fundraising and management. "Arkin Ariantho", whose name off-world or IRL: In Real Life is Mark Brown, almost immediately grasped the opportunities for Church expression within SecondLife. He formed a ministry group, and also managed to get funding to allow the purchase of land within SecondLife: most important, he commissioned the creation of a cathedral.

Most of the church buildings within SecondLife, up to that point, had either been of a modern design or intended to reflect a classic mediaeval parish church, but the group agreed to aim for a large building, to look like a mediaeval Anglican Cathedral, in an attempt to reflect the tradition of the Anglican Communion and to raise the profile of the group and the Church within the SecondLife community. The building modelled in part on Durham Cathedral, and with the Anglican Rose as its centre-piece has won awards, and is frequently visited by Christians and non-Christians alike.

On most Sundays, there are three services are celebrated: one for Australasia, one for Europe, and one for the Americas, all of which have regular attendees. After careful discussion, it was decided to use compline, morning and evening prayer, as both representative of the Anglican Communion and also to avoid antagonising the Anglican establishment. Early in the formation of the ministry team, it was decided that it was in the interests of the community and the members, at least three of whom are ordained or ordinands that it should be held "in good standing" with the Anglican establishment. To this end, discussions have been started with various bishops and other officers of the Anglican Church in England and New Zealand to ensure that the Cathedral, the associated group, and the worship that takes place does so in ways that are not seen to "rock the boat" too much. This decision was made because a number of the ministry team feel strongly that the Church has great opportunities within the online world, and that getting "buy-in" from the establishment is much more likely to allow these opportunities to take off than if concerns were raised about, for instance, the place of the sacraments within the community. For this reason, it has been decided not to celebrate any of the sacraments until further discussion has taken place.

## **A fresh expression?**

It is striking that, in many ways, the practices of the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife are very traditional, and do not accord well with any of the "fresh expressions" outlined in Cray, Graham et al. (2004), for instance. They do place in a very untraditional setting online but, on the other hand, within a very traditional building: a walk-through of the Cathedral can be found here <URL: <http://slangcath.wordpress.com/about/>>. There are frequent pastoral encounters, and anecdotal evidence suggests that people are often more happy to discuss their spirituality and indulge in associated activities like requesting prayer online, where power relationships between members seem reduced, and where walking away from an encounter is as simple as pressing a single button or clicking a mouse button. There is also an extension of the community on Facebook in a group "Anglicans in Second Life" at <URL: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=17950684272>>, whose members currently number 39 of the 276 members of the main group. The blog (Brown et

al. 2007) is regularly updated, and hosts discussions on theological and social issues such as the nature of sin in an online setting.

Assuming that, despite its generally traditional practices, the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife is considered to be a Fresh expression, to what extent is it an apt response to major cultural changes, and how true is it to God's kingdom? The most obvious answer to the first question is that there is an enormous growth in the use of technology, and this alone embracing new technology is an apt response, but it goes beyond this. Many people in particular young people are spending more time online, participating in communities which are not local or familial, but which feel absolutely natural media for them. A researcher once asked a member of the ministry team the following questions:

Does it worry you that Second Life requires a fastish computer with download privileges? This might seem to exclude the poor, and also excludes those who only have access to free computers at school, work or through libraries. Is this acceptable for a Christian group?

The answer was that the group is addressing Christians and non-Christians where they are: in their local context. Given the resources available, this is all it can do for now, alongside trying to engage the wider Anglican establishment in the future of this growing context.

How well does the Anglican Church in SecondLife measure up to Mobsby's four questions?

1. *Is our church expressing a healthy spirituality?* There certainly seems to be a healthy spirituality being expressed by the Cathedral community, in services, discussions, and even some meetings off-line.
2. *What are we doing to bridge the gap between church & culture?* The group is attempting to show that the Church can operate, and operate effectively, at the cutting edge of the new culture, and respond to the questions that arise from within it. The culture within SecondLife is predominantly young, educated and Western: a demographic with which the

Church often struggles in other contexts.

3. *What are we doing for the dechurched?* One of the striking things about the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife is that it allows those who have drifted away from the Church a safe place to encounter it again, with the knowledge that they can come and go in their own time, and cannot be pressed into doing things that they have no interest in. A number of members have explained that they are unhappy with their local Church due to tradition, poor preaching or for other reasons but feel that they can safely and enjoyably engage in worship within the Cathedral.
4. *What are we doing for the unchurched & spiritually searching?* Unchurched members of SecondLife often visit the Cathedral and even attend services. As mentioned above, the opportunities for more equal discussion allow pastoral encounters that might otherwise not take place.

The final question to answer is the extent to which the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife successfully fulfils the three-fold criteria ("critique"; "affirm"; "transform") identified as a way of addressing how true an expression of Church might be to God's kingdom. Here, as above, the issue of the rather traditional nature of the community's activities should be identified. The community has gone out of its way not to "rock the Anglican establishment's boat", so it is complicit, to an extent, in the hegemony of the established church. On the other hand, it makes an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, and also addresses issues of theological and societal concern within the online community, such as pornography and gender issues. The extent of critique, then, is debatable, but there is certainly an affirmation of the "democratised" nature of SecondLife, particularly in the pastoral encounters. Currents which might be seen as running counter to this such as robing for services and the self-selecting nature of the ministry team have been subject to soul-searching and debate within the community. In one measure, it seems that the Anglican Cathedral in SecondLife is having some success: transformation. The numbers of unchurched and dechurched members of the community is striking, and it is also important to note that a number of members of the community identify themselves as Christians even Anglicans by default in all their dealings

within SecondLife.

If there is one area in which the Anglican Church in SecondLife seems deficient, it is in the lack of sacraments. There are real technological and theological reasons for this, but, within an Anglican context, at least, it is hard to consider the Cathedral a "full" expression of Church without any sacraments. This is an area of continued research and discussion within and without the community.

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