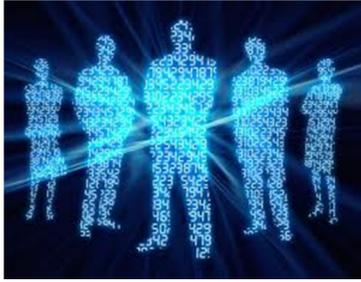


## ALCM 2013 Biennial Conference, Valparaiso, Indiana

*God Is Here: Worship in a Wireless World*



Plenary: Tuesday, 2 July 2013

### ***What It Means in Daily Living: Virtual Realities and Redefining Community***

Craig M. Mueller

*American individualism is reinforced by the increasing amounts of time spent online and in virtual communities. Does the Sunday liturgy hold up an alternative view of the human person and the importance of communal gathering of the body of Christ in real space and time? And what could the Church learn from the current contemporary technological context that might invigorate our mission and ministry?*

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### **Introduction: Technology is changing our lives**

Oh, no! A plenary without PowerPoint. YouTube. WiFi. Video. Twitter feed. High tech sound and projection. Just you. And me. Our bodies. And this space. And an old-fashioned handout! Can we do it? How long will *this* last?

It has changed my life. I'm not talking about a religion conversion. I'm talking about my personal relationship with my iPhone and the power and mystery of the Internet. Can you believe that ten years ago these things did not exist: Facebook, Twitter, 4G, iPhones, iPads, ubiquitous wireless, Skype, smartphones and their apps, and of course, the cloud!

What amazing times in which to live! No wonder we "love" our smartphones and laptops. Our iEverything's and our eLives! Awesome. Magical. Cool. Fun. And constantly at our fingertips! They have changed our lives.

For example: After hearing a new wonderful choral piece at a live concert, I can go home and listen to it instantly on Spotify. On Christmas Eve morning we can download the program for the King's College Lessons and Carols and have the full texts and art. I have a meditation app with me everywhere I go, with soothing sounds of bells and gongs. I can come out of a movie and wonder if it goes with the upcoming Mary and Martha text and then check a lectionary app: it is July 21.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Oh, let's just be Lutheran and answer *both*. Here's how technology both sunk and saved me a week ago. Somehow, in a manic wave of making a new folder, changing a file name, moving files, deleting files and then realizing I hadn't emptied my "trash" in a long time .... I realized I had permanently deleted the file ... for *this* presentation. Take a breath, I said. It will be OK. Hours and hours later, after downloading a file recovery program that didn't seem to work, and then spending a couple hours updating an earlier version of the file, I talked to my young nephew. He knows everything tech, and usually can solve most of my computer problems. He said the Apple Time Machine had everything from the past couple days, even if you weren't connected to an external hard drive. [I.e. back-up.] Sure enough. It was there. Moral of the story: call my nephew first ... OR: too many lessons to even name. One of those "the worst of technology, best of technology" stories.

One recent editorial mentioned that we have lost the ability to daydream. That our brains need downtime to recharge, reset, reflect. Our default setting, though, is rarely to do that. At any free moment I seem conditioned to reach for my iPhone. Waiting for the elevator. In the supermarket line. In stopped traffic. At an intermission. Even walking down the street.



But what does that mean for downtime—what we used to call quiet time—before worship? Or the few moments that you work with the tenor section and the rest of the choir isn't involved? Or a sermon that doesn't *connect*? What will happen when we start wearing Google glass? And we have the Internet on our bodies continuously? It looks like the soprano is paying attention. She is grinning. She's probably reading a text, checking Facebook or taking a picture of you! And you

won't be able to tell!

Our daily routines are changing so quickly that it feels like we haven't been able to catch up with them. And so I wonder: is the meaning of being human changing?

It isn't popular to name some of these concerns about the digital revolution. It feels a little risky to for me to talk about this. I don't think my teen-aged niece and nephew have any concerns. And the last thing I want to be is a grumpy old middle age man whining about the dangers of technology like our forebears did when radio and television were invented. That's why I made sure I first told you all the things I love about my iLife!

You would think a conference about worship and technology would focus on creative ways to use screens in worship. Or have worshippers text a question or comment to the preacher. Or text a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" after an anthem, sermon or hymn. But today we are going to focus more on the effects of technology on our lives today, and what might mean for worship, ministry, spirituality, even theology.

In the mid-1990s the Lutheran World Federation published a document on worship and culture called "The Nairobi Statement." Many of you know it. It was foundational as the ELCA developed its Principles on Worship, and eventually *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. It defines worship as contextual, transcultural, crosscultural and countercultural. We're going to focus on the countercultural part today. In short, worship is countercultural when it challenges the idolization of the self, or the acquisition of wealth at the expense of the care of the earth and its poor. So how is worship countercultural in our wireless world? Try on these five ways.

### **Worship moves us from entertainment to enchantment**

Several years ago Daniel Lyons noted : "We may not believe in God anymore, but we still need mystery and wonder. We need the magic act. Five centuries ago Spanish missionaries put shiny mirrors in churches to dazzle the Incas and draw them to Christianity. We, too, want to be dazzled by shiny new objects... our iPhones ... have become totemic objects, imbued with techno-voodoo."

Well—we've lived through several decades of worship wars. How many of your congregations have had those difficult conversations about traditional versus contemporary worship? Should we do Sunday mornings the way Jay Leno does late night talk shows? Will contemporary services "attract" young adults or those outside the church? Will they help us grow?

Should we resist our culture's obsession with cult personalities, amusement, popularity and success? Should worship be countercultural and challenge the individualism and idolatry in much of our entertainment-driven society?

Going to the Apple store is a magical experience for many. And you can watch a toddler swipe the screen of an iPad and discover surprises and delights. And speaking of young adults and how they find enchantment, I say that high mass in my church's neighborhood is 11pm on Saturday nights when thousands and thousands of young folks gather at bars for food and drink. There's ritual. And there's community.

Here's the question for us: can worship enchant people today? Can it inspire a sense of awe and wonder? Can it entice people to God's mercy and grace?



I hope so. But it may demand that we use fewer words. That we engage bodies more. That we use all five senses. That we leave space for silence. And mystery. That pastors and worship leaders plan and practice their gestures, movements and words as carefully as musicians rehearse theirs!

*To think about: Does corporate, embodied worship have the potential to enchant us even in a digital age of gadgets, YouTube, video games, and the ubiquitous voice of Siri?*

### **Worship moves us from the individual to the community**

If you have a smart phone, get it out and open up your map app. The little bubble will show you where you are, right here in Valparaiso, Indiana. Now zoom. Can you see all of Indiana? Maybe someone next to you will need to help. But the bubble is still there and you are still the center. OK, all phones away! Or I will lose you. Like happens to all of us in the middle of choir rehearsals or classes or, I fear, worship services.

I have to admit, that while in New England the last couple weeks, I used the map app quite a few times when I was lost or needed help getting from point A to point B. Years ago, I would have been the stereotypical male who did not stop and ask for directions. I just went by intuition. Which got me, well, nowhere.

Simon Carfield, author of a book about maps, grieves that we are losing the beauty and romance of paper maps. And the tactile joy of folding one up! But this is the quote from an NPR interview with him that I find more haunting: “the other thing we lose, is a sense of how big the world is. Because now we look at our map, there's a real sense of, 'Get me to where I want to go.' You get the feeling, 'It's all about me' ... One of the biggest, if not *the* biggest impacts of the digital and technological revolution — is how we see ourselves in the world.”



Most of the new members of my congregation are in their 20s and 30s. When I ask them what percentage of their friends and colleagues attend church or synagogue, the answer is usually under twenty percent. So then I ask them: what are you doing here? The most common answer revolves around community.

We are stronger together. As people worship, sing, and pray together, something happens. Can this communal bond give perspective to the rest of life? Can it open us up to the needs of others? Can it deepen commitment to the common good? Can it inspire us to work for justice and peace in all the earth?

*To think about: Are there some things the Church could learn or borrow from technology that could deepen community, including communal gatherings for worship?*

### **Worship invites us from hyperconnectivity to a balance of work and rest**

Most of us are rarely “unplugged” these days. We receive a continuous stream of texts, tweets, news feeds, emails, and status updates. Speaking of such, how long has it been since you checked your email? I’d rather we all do it at once, so go ahead. Since I don’t have a PowerPoint with visuals, ALCM has sent you something for your little screen. Go ahead, take a look. Take a look. Or share with some one near you.



A day at the beach.



Cheering your team.



Dinner with friends.



An intimate date.



With your BFF.



At a museum.



Beginning and ending the day.



Gathering for worship.



Favorite choir anthem.

Now: can you resist temptation, renounce the force of instant gratification and all its empty promises? In other words, I hope you can put the phones away.

Jaron Lanier is a computer scientist and pioneer in digital media. In his book, *You are Not a Gadget*, is this amazing quote: “When developers of digital technologies design a program that requires you to interact with a computer as if it were a person, they ask you to accept in some corner of your brain that you might also be conceived of as a program.”

In less than a generation, it is as if we have merged with our machines. Many Americans stare at screens for more than eight hours a day, more than any other activity, including sleeping. And by carrying communication devices on our bodies, there is no longer a clear line between work and the rest of our lives. One study showed that 80% of people check their work email on their so-called vacation.

I just read a riveting new book by Douglas Rushkoff called *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. Rushkoff, a media theorist, contends that we are living in the future we have been waiting for. But no one has time to live it. We strove for an instantaneous network where time and space were compressed. It’s not a Zen sense of the present moment that we are living, though. We have lost a sense of narrative, he says. Everything is a CNN feed. “People meters” track our reactions to politicians or news before we even have a chance to think about something.

Rushkoff goes on: “Our digital universe is always-on, constantly pinging us with the latest news, stock quotes, consumer trends, emails groups, social gaming updates, Tweets, and more, all pushing their way to our smart phones. There are so many incoming alerts competing for attention that many phones now allow users to swipe downward to reveal a scrollable screen containing nothing but the latest alerts pushed through. Everyone and everything intrudes with the urgency of a switchboard-era telephone operator breaking into a phone call with an emergency message from a relative, or a 1960s news anchor interrupting a television program with a special report about an assassination.”

The distinction between work and rest—central to Jewish and Christian understandings of worship—is breaking down. No wonder people are turning to spiritual practices like meditation to deal with the stress of our fast-paced lives.

A number of voices are suggesting we simply turn off our phones or shut off our email once in a while. Yet, our smartphones have become like appendages. And some of us aren't able to live, sleep, or go a couple hours without them.

One blogger notes that we like to peer into other people's lives and compares our to theirs. Sounds like Facebook. Sometimes it is JOMO: The Joy of Missing Out. "Sure glad you're all having a good time. Glad I'm not there." Or other times it's: FOMO: The Fear of Missing Out. You're home alone watching your friends' status updates of something great happening. And you wish you were there.



Should we consider worship on the Lord's Day as the primary "spiritual practice" for Christians? A number of writers are now encouraging an occasional fast from technology for an hour, a day, or even longer. Could we do it? If people are losing the ability to unplug and reflect on their lives, can worship teach new spiritual patterns and form us in alternate ways? Can the gospel be a countercultural message in our time, reminding us that our identity is in who we *are*, not in what we *do* to fill up every spare moment.

### **Body/Breath/Voices Break**

OK, it's time for a body break. And a breath break. These plenaries are a lot to take in. Our minds wander. Our butts get tired. Let's reset. Stretch. Roll your shoulders back. Plant your feet firmly on the ground. Stand the way you would sing. Now relax. Let your arms relax. Or yoga prayer position. Or liturgical *orans* position. And slow down your breathing. Be present to your bodies. To this community. To this moment. To the breath of God within you.....

*Bell (from an app) begins. A minute of silence.... bell ends .... then someone starts singing "Beautiful Savior," leading all to sing it twice a cappella.*

That communal experience needed bodies, voices, a community, and acoustics. Worship is one of the few times that we sing anymore. To some, worship may seem like a group of individuals coming together to get their individual needs met. But what if we helped people to see worship and its music making as a communal, countercultural, bodily gathering in real space and real time?

### **Worship moves us from the virtual to the bodily and the earthly**

The line between our virtual and real lives seems to be blurring. Some say we are becoming cyborgs. One ultra-efficiency advocate teaches workers how to hack sleep by taking naps every four hours. It is like treating the human body as a lithium battery, an approach used by several high-tech CEO's. Rushkoff, who I quoted earlier, notes that we are trying to bring human evolution up to the pace of Apple system updates. Internet workers are expected "to accept the cyborg ethos" as a given circumstance. Some phones vibrate when there is incoming information. No wonder people experience a phantom vibration syndrome even when there is no phone in their pocket.

He goes on to say, that there is a dissonance between our analog bodies and our digital lives: our analog bodies evolved over millennia, and are conditioned to circadian rhythms—to changes in sunlight, seasons, moon cycles, even ragweed in the air. And the digital, virtual realities sometimes seem like they are trying to defeat these natural rhythms. Our virtual lives enjoy a freedom from time. But our bodies still age, and feel the effects of stress and attending to the demands of our e-lives.

In other words, the essence of being human is sometimes being defined as information or consciousness. I read a New York Times article on the front page of the business section, speculating about avatars with uploaded contents of our brains that could live on forever. Until someone hits the delete key by mistake, I suppose.

A book about our e-personalities called *Virtually You*, notes that our e-personalities cannot tolerate downtime. There is always more fun to have, something to discover, a connection to be made. Yet, ironically, the author suggests that we are losing the “ability to enjoy things or immerse ourselves fully in them, one at a time and for a prolonged time.” What we lose is the ability to reflect on our lives. To know ourselves. His advice: think before you click. Proceed with caution in the virtual world.

How strange that we are becoming more virtual after many of us have been trying to learn how to become more at home in our bodies. Recent theology has been trying counter centuries of dualism that valued the soul over the body.

So, what does it mean to be an embodied human being—in this virtual day and age? And what does it mean for worship? From Martin Luther’s vantage point, it is not possible to be “spiritual” without bodily participation. If Luther insisted on the real bodily presence of Christ in Holy Communion, he would be baffled that many postmodern people claim the word *spiritual* rather than *religious*, contending that they can be Christian by merely being good and believing in God. Luther would deem it impossible to be Christian without the body of Christ, that is, the physical reality of Christ’s presence in the eucharist and in the gathered community.



Think of the popularity of yoga, meditation, tai chi and other spiritual experiences that connect mind, body and spirit. Perhaps the more virtual our lives become, the greater need for experiences in real space and time. Here’s what I wonder: can embodied worship ground us in incarnation, in bodies, the earth, in nature, and the cycles of the sun and the moon?

### **Worship leads us from consumerism to a sense of mission and vocation**

Do you have your calendar or email set to send you reminders? Do you get blinks or pings or dings when you have a new message, tweet, text, or friend request? We get reminders to do things and to be places. And reminders to buy things. Ads telling us what we need to be happier, sexier, thinner, richer, cooler, calmer.

Even religion has become something to buy, a commodity. No wonder we shop for churches. The way we order customized drinks at Starbucks, it’s the way many people do religion and spirituality these days. Choice is the order of the day. A coffee executive revealed to Diana Butler Bass that at his establishment there are eighty-two thousand possible drink options and combinations available from his menu. According to Bass, “Choosing faith is now a bit like ordering off the menu at a high-end coffee shop.”



In the midst all of all the choices we make of what to buy, and how to invest our time and money, the Sunday assembly reminds us of our baptismal vocation: worship and mission. Or as we say in the baptismal rite, offering praise to God and bearing God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world. Can we be formed in these values without going to church? It’s possible. Yet Eleanor and Alan Kreider propose that we cannot participate in God’s mission without worship because “we are not strong enough or clever enough.”

Doesn’t it seem that people want to make their lives count? Can the baptismal life join them to something greater than themselves? Can we encounter in worship God’s passionate desire for our world in such a way that it transforms lives?

It may very well be that digitization and virtuality are changing what it means to be human. Our iThings and eLives have many, many amazing, awesome, magical things about them. Thomas Friedman says this about the digital revolution of recent times: “The combination of these tools of connectivity and creativity has created a global education, commercial, communication and innovation platform on which more people can start stuff, collaborate on stuff, learn stuff, make stuff with more people than ever before.”

My point is that there are also concerns to name and monitor. There will be plenty of other conferences, workshops, and books about how to use technology in churches. So we are considering another side of the coin. Perhaps our communities of faith are places to help people reflect on the need for balance, for downtime, for rest, for face-to-face encounters, for tech-free experiences in nature. Perhaps we as church leaders can at least attempt to model a healthy relationship with technology.

What I am suggesting is this:

That worship (and thus other spiritual practices) help to refocus our lives, moving us from:

- + from entertainment to enchantment
- + from the individual to community
- + from constant stimulation and connectivity to times unplugged rest and renewal
- + from virtuality to experiences of the body and the earth
- + from consumerism to a lives of vocation and mission.

I have raised more questions than solutions in my presentation. I hope the conversation will continue over lunch and in other settings.

*To think about: How can church leaders articulate why worship in real space/real time matters in our wireless world? Should we be talking about this in sermons, classes, choir rehearsals?*

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## FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Aboujaoude, Elias. *Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality*

**RECOMMENDED!** Arthur Boers. *Living Into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions*

Carr, Nicholas, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*

**RECOMMENDED!** Gaillardetz, Richard. *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*

Kreider, Alan and Eleanor. *Worship and Mission After Christendom*

Morozov, Evgeny, “The Perils of Perfection” (Silicon Valley Wants to make life as smooth as a California highway). New York Times, March 3, 2013

**RECOMMENDED!** Rushkoff, Douglas. *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*

Smith, James K.A., “Alternative Liturgy: Social Media as Ritual” (*our lives are formed/deformed by the liturgies we practice*). *Christian Century*, March 6, 2013

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*  
--- “The Flight from Conversation” New York Times, April 22, 2012