ABSTRACT

THESIS: Material Beliefs in a Virtual Church: A Heuristic Study of the Limitations of Virtual Religion

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This thesis compares an online church with a local physical church in terms of communication dimensions of the community, communication dimensions of sacramental practice, and communication dimensions of faith in general. In a local physical church, these have been traditionally conceived, defined, and profoundly understood in phenomenal or physical terms. In this, the objects of faith and the related rituals deal with the “real” and give even the transcendent physical and actual meaning. However, in an online environment, what was previously physical has become virtual, thus causing the transcendent to be virtualized as well. As such, two guiding questions for this thesis are: 1) Given the virtual nature of the Internet, do the beliefs that a church advocates seem to be or become less real or phenomenal when a church predominantly employs religious practices online; and, 2) Given the power and range of responses that individuals can have when responding to Internet content, do the beliefs that a church advocates become more ideocentric and emotional for its online users?

Given the tremendous variations that are employed in religious groups, these two questions will naturally generate more heuristic rather than universal findings, as the title
recognizes. LifeChurch.tv has been chosen as the subject for this heuristic investigation due to its manifestation in both an online church and in local physical counterparts. Each is examined through the LifeChurch.tv website using a method of ethnographic research, combined with a longitudinal study, and the resulting findings are interpreted through cluster criticism. A less grounded and more individualistic experience was found in the rhetoric surrounding the online church.