

Click to Connect: Participation and Meaning in an Online Church

Christian Harwig

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Johan Roeland¹

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

j.h.roeland@vu.nl

Hijme Stoffels

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

h.c.stoffels@vu.nl

Abstract

This study is a qualitative study into the meaning that visitors derive from participating in the Dutch online church Mijn Kerk (lit. My Church). By focusing on the experience of the individual visitors, the everyday context of visitors is taken into account. What people are looking for online is determined by their relationship with the local church as well as further offline circumstances. This can be roughly divided into two categories: connectedness (with other people) and sustenance (inspiration for everyday life). Within Mijn Kerk visitors both offer and search for fulfillment of these needs, resulting in four typical behaviors: to vent, to encourage, to inspire and to recharge. Being very approachable, relatively anonymous and non-committal, while at the same time offering stability, real personal contact and durable relationships, Mijn Kerk is a unique community online in which people try to overcome the tension between individualism and the desire for connectedness.

1 Corresponding author: Dr. Johan Roeland, Faculty of Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein; De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam.

Keywords

online churches – community – networked religion – digital religion

Introduction

In 2013, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the largest Protestant denomination in the Netherlands, founded a new, independent online church called Mijn Kerk (litt. My Church). Mijn Kerk is one of the many ‘pioneer plants’ the Protestant Church established in recent years: experimental and innovative faith communities that aim to find new ways of connecting people who do not, or no longer, attend church. Interestingly, Mijn Kerk did not start in a local offline church, but was developed as a completely new and independent online space. Its pioneer manifest states:

MijnKerk.nl being a pioneer plant also means that MijnKerk.nl is not primarily meant as a bridge to existing churches or as an extra activity for churchgoers who want variety... we want to grow into being church in all its richness, focused on people who don't visit the church (anymore).²

With this intention Mijn Kerk deviates from many other online church initiatives, which are often closely related to local (offline) faith communities. At the same time, Mijn Kerk also differs from previous online church initiatives that emerged in the nineties and the first decade of this century. These churches were built as relatively independent churches as well, but closely mimicked offline churches (rituals, practices, architecture, aesthetics) in order to create a trustworthy and familiar environment for visitors. Instead of simulating offline church environments, Mijn Kerk uses the familiar environment of the Internet and social media. By integrating media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and interactive website elements in the online church, a public environment is created that is (believed to be) familiar to its target audience that is not necessarily familiar with conventional church environments.

Mijn Kerk is an example of digital religious innovation, offering an online religious space, environment and community that in many respects differs from existing offline communities, due to the specific characteristics of digital media technologies on the one hand, and a specific target audience (the

² Fred Omvlee et al., *Pioniersplan MijnKerk.nl 2014–2016. Concept Pioniersplan* (24 april 2014). Translation by authors.

unchurched) on the other. Mijn Kerk aims to be an online public gathering place where both believers and unbelievers get in touch with each other, share things with each other, and find support in times of troubles. While missionary motives (i.e. a focus on proselytizing) might have played a role in the development of Mijn Kerk, the main underlying vision seems to be informed by a particular public theology: to create sociality and togetherness in what is believed to be a highly individualized and secularized society.

In this article, we provide the results of a case study research on Mijn Kerk, with a particular focus on its visitors. Several descriptive questions will be addressed, including: what kind of church or community is Mijn Kerk? Who are the visitors of Mijn Kerk? How do visitors practice religion in this online environment? What are their motives to visit Mijn Kerk? Which meanings do they attach to Mijn Kerk? And to what extent is this innovative church successful and how is success defined? By answering these questions, we pin down the 'social form'³ of this particular online initiative and link up with theoretical debates that aim to rethink the notion of religious community in an age in which religious sociality is increasingly constituted by new media cultures and technologies. In addition, we discuss the level of commitment of individual visitors of Mijn Kerk and link up with debates on individualization and consumerism – notions frequently associated with online forms of religion.

On Contextualization: Methodological Considerations

Of course, much research has already been conducted on online religion in general, and more specifically on online churches, cyber churches, online religious communities and virtual interactive worship places.⁴ However, the impact of

3 François Gauthier, 'Intimate Circles and Mass Meetings. The Social Forms of Event-Structured Religion in the Era of Globalized Markets and Hyper-Mediatization', *Social Compass* 61 (2014) 2, pp. 261–271.

4 Tim Hutchings, 'Online Christian Churches: Three Case Studies', *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 23 (2010) 3, pp. 346–369. Tim Hutchings, 'The Internet and the Church: An Introduction', *The Expository Times* 122 (2010) 1; pp. 11–19. Tim Hutchings, 'Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church', *Information, Communication & Society* 14 (2011) 8, pp. 1118–1135. Tim Hutchings, 'Creating Church Online: Networks and Collectives in Contemporary Christianity', in *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*, ed. Pauline Hope Cheong (New York: P. Lang, 2012), pp. 151–168. Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and the New Media* (New York, London: Routledge, 2017). Simon Jenkins, 'Rituals and Pixels – Experiments in online church', *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2012) 1, pp. 95–113. Yanli Chen and Randy Kluver, 'The Church of Fools – Virtual ritual and material faith', *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008) 1,

Web 2.0 and social media have changed the Internet so drastically, that new research is necessarily. In addition, the methodology for researching online religion is constantly evolving to overcome the shortcomings of earlier research.

We shortly mention three related but slightly different shortcomings in early research on online religion that are frequently addressed and criticized in contemporary literature. A first shortcoming is the *neglect of contextuality*, including the offline context of individual media users – as if the Internet were a ‘separate or disconnected sphere’, that is, a sphere disconnected from ordinary offline life.⁵ More recent studies pay attention to offline-online interactions, and look closely at the way offline conditions influences online practices and vice versa. A second shortcoming is the *combination of media-centrism and media determinism* that underlies many early accounts of online religion. The basic assumption of this combination is, that the Internet and new media have a determining impact on religion – an assumption that often led to highly utopian or dystopian accounts of the impact of the Internet on religion. In recent studies, however, it is argued that media not only contributes to, but also reflects wider social developments in the religious sphere. As Castells put it: ‘(...) technology does not determine society: it *is* society.’⁶ And Campbell, applying this insight to the topic of religion, argues: ‘(...) while initial speculation suggested the nature of contemporary religion might be completely altered due to online engagement, current research suggests the features of religion online closely mirror changes within the practice of religion in contemporary society.’⁷ A third shortcoming concerns the *focus on media texts, institutes and structures*, which are, again, often seen as deterministic realities that have an ‘effect’ on individuals. More recent studies challenge this approach, arguing that ‘the’ media as such ‘do not of themselves tell us anything about the *uses* to which media products are put in social life.’⁸ Hence a practice approach is increasingly favored in contemporary research, that focuses on media *practices*

pp. 116–143. Nadja Miczek, ‘Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds. Christian Online Service between Dynamics and Stability’, *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008) 1, pp. 144–173.

5 Heidi A. Campbell, ‘Community’, in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 57–71, at p. 63.

6 Manuel Castells, ‘The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy’, in *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy*, eds. Manuel Castells and Gustavo Cardoso (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2005), pp. 3–22, at p. 3.

7 Heidi A. Campbell, ‘Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2011) 1, pp. 64–93, at p. 65.

8 Couldry, *Media, Society, World*, p. 36.

rather than media *texts*, asking ‘what people (individuals, groups, institutions) are doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts.’⁹

To overcome these shortcomings of early research, recent research of online religious communities pay more attention to (1) the offline contexts of individual users, (2) the wider social and cultural ecology of online activities, and (3) the media practices of individual users. So, Tim Hutchings, in his research on online churches, includes the perspective of both the offline backgrounds of individuals and their online practices in his analysis of these churches, concluding that the online church for most of its visitors functions as a supplement to the offline religious community and not as a replacement – which has often been assumed in both scholarly and popular accounts of online religion. It also turns out that most of the visitors are either actively attending a local church or have done so in the past. Almost no non-Christians are active in online churches.¹⁰ Furthermore, the online church seems to attract those who because of negative experiences in the local church or physical limitations (illness, no fitting church in the residential area, etc.) don’t feel at home in the local church. Hutchings points out that these people were already without a local church community; they did not directly trade in the attendance of the local church for that of the online church. The dystopian image that online churches would cause a decrease of offline church attendance turns out to be unfounded. Moreover, Hutchings claims that the online church can help strengthen the ties to the local church community for its visitors.¹¹

Another example of a more contextualized approach to online (religious) communities is Willem de Koster’s dissertation entitled “*Nowhere I Could Talk Like That*”: *Togetherness and Identity on Online Forums*.¹² This study takes account of different contexts in which online phenomena get their meaning and function. In his research of online forums, including a forum for Protestant homosexuals in the Netherlands, he shows how different shapes and experiences of online togetherness can be explained by the offline social context of the individual visitors. De Koster advocates a focus shift from the online community as a whole to the individual users and their (often very diverse) experiences. According to De Koster, too often generalizing assumptions are made, while only the individual differences can provide explanations for different experiences online. Only through contextualization we can fully comprehend the different social effects that online activities have. Thanks to his open approach and

9 Couldry, *Media, Society, World*, p. 37.

10 Hutchings, ‘Creating Church Online’.

11 Hutchings, ‘The Internet and the Church’.

12 Willem de Koster, “*Nowhere I Could Talk Like That*”: *Togetherness and Identity on Online Forums* (Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit, 2010).

sensitivity for the social context of the users, De Koster is able to distinguish different groups of users. With these findings he builds a theory that is able to explain the differences in online experiences among different users. This would have been impossible if his research was restricted to the online realm.

Our own research on Mijn Kerk has been strongly informed by these more contextualized approaches of online religion. In addition, another theoretical tool turned out to be very useful in our research: the metaphor of communities as networks. In connection to the work of theorists such as, among others, Manuel Castells¹³ and Jan van Dijk,¹⁴ the notion of 'network' basically describes how new forms of sociality replace traditional communities as the way in which interaction is organized. Communities become social, rather than spatial structures. The individual has become a node in a private network in which he/she is connected to various social networks with ties of varying intensity and depth. Society is the patchwork of the totality of these networks, including online networks. More specific, in a network society, the online world is no longer separated from the offline world. Together they form one reality, in which the transition from mediated to direct social contact is virtually seamless. This also has consequences for our religious lives. Campbell, who connects this thinking on networked sociality to religion,¹⁵ speaks of *networked religion*: no longer are people connected to just one (offline) religious community, but to several highly personalized communities.¹⁶ Campbell states that online churches fit into this trend:

What makes cyberchurches a form of networked community are the ways these settings can supplement or extend people's offline religious participation, by offering intimate fellowship with others or providing connections to a likeminded theological context.¹⁷

In line with these recent trends in the study of online religious communities, we decided to study Mijn Kerk from the perspective of the visitors of this online church, paying attention not only to their online activities and actions but also to their offline-online interactions. Moreover, in our questionnaire

13 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

14 Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society*, 3th edition (London: SAGE, 2012).

15 Hutchings, 'Online Christian Churches'.

16 Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society'.

17 Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', p. 70.

we included topics such as motives for participating in Mijn Kerk as well as experiences and meanings of participating. Furthermore, we paid attention to the social and religious significance that visitors derive from this online community.

The remainder of this article is used to first give a description of Mijn Kerk and the practices of its users. After that the research methodology will be explained. Then a few notable findings will be discussed. And finally conclusions will be drawn and discussed.

Mijn Kerk: First Impressions

Mijn Kerk's website (www.mijnkerk.nl) was officially launched on October 15, 2013. On the website one can read blogs, watch short video-sermons by online pastor Fred Omvlee, share 'moments of happiness' and light (digital) candles. In June 2015 the Mijn Kerk website was visited by about 6.000 unique visitors every month.¹⁸ In addition to the website, Mijn Kerk has a public Facebook-page, a closed Facebook-group, a YouTube-channel and a Twitter-profile. The public social media-accounts are mainly used by the editors for promotion of blogs, video-sermons and announcement making. In the closed Facebook-group the editors are less active, and the initiative lies with the users. According to its heading, the group is intended for people who want to ask or share something, but do not feel comfortable doing this on the public Facebook-page. The group has over 500 members (562 at December 18th, 2015). A core-group of about 40 members is responsible for most of the messages. So, most of the members are inactive, and not posting any messages. It is unclear if they read posts from other members. People who do post messages share their moments of happiness, but also a lot of tragic and sad stories are shared. In addition to these personal stories a whole lot of other things are shared, often related to faith and believing in God: poems, prayers, photos, songs and hymns, YouTube-videos, hyperlinks and recommendations for books or events. Visitors comment on most of the messages posted, very often within the hour. In their comments people share their own experiences, write encouraging words or promise to pray or light a candle for the person who posted the initial message. Depending on their Facebook-settings, members of the group are automatically notified when a new message is posted in the closed group.

18 Omvlee, *Pioniersplan*. Early 2016 Fred Omvlee stepped down as online pastor for Mijn Kerk, he was succeeded by Otto Grevink. Since then the website has also been completely revamped and the social media presence has been extended to Instagram.

Website statistics and survey results give an overall picture of the average visitor of Mijn Kerk. What stands out is the fact that the majority of visitors are women, and most of them are over fifty years old (58%). Nearly sixty percent of the visitors visit Mijn Kerk at least once a week, many of them even more often. What is also striking is that most of the visitors were raised Christian (91%). Most of them are still active (66%) or less active (22%) in their local church. The people that were interviewed for this study too were, or had been, active in a local faith community.

Design and Implementation

In line with De Koster, the focus of this study is primarily on the individual visitor, rather than on the group as a whole.¹⁹ Only by approaching the visitors of Mijn Kerk individually one can distinguish the different motives, practices and functions. A qualitative study with semi-structured interviews proved to be the most appropriate research method for determining the different motives, practices, and functions at play. That way, we could direct the interview with specific questions while at the same time keeping enough room to notice significant, but unexpected aspects. Interviews, in this research, have an advantage over content analysis because visitors can be asked directly for their opinion and experience, instead of having to derive this from the content.

In the closed Facebook group of Mijn Kerk there seems to be a real sense of solidarity and community spirit. This therefore seemed the most appropriate place to recruit respondents. An appeal in the closed Facebook group resulted in nine respondents who were willing to give an interview. Including the interview with pastor Fred Omvlee, ten interviews were carried out. The selection of the respondents was at random, anyone who followed Mijn Kerk on social media could read the calls to respond to the survey or give an interview. Nevertheless, most of the respondents turned out to be active visitors of Mijn Kerk. An effort was made to interview the respondents in their own house as much as possible. This was done partly because this is a familiar and (presumably) safe environment for the respondent and on the other hand because it makes the connection of the online and experience and the specific offline context very obvious. The data obtained from the interviews was loaded into a qualitative data analysis program and was coded in two rounds.

As mentioned before, in addition to the interviews an online survey was deployed. The quantitative data produced by the survey were used to form a

19 De Koster, *Nowhere I Could Talk Like That*.

first impression of the visitors of Mijn Kerk and as a validation of the findings of the interviews. 106 visitors of Mijn Kerk completed the survey.

In the process of data collection, the team of Mijn Kerk has been very helpful. They provided access to the closed Facebook-group, gave permission to post the call for respondents and helped to launch the online survey. In addition, they also provided several documents, including their pioneer manifest.

Mijn Kerk and the Offline Churches

The first thing that became clear when talking to visitors of Mijn Kerk was the different relationships they have with the local (offline) church. Some of the visitors became active in Mijn Kerk because of shortcomings that they experienced in their own religious communities. Others, who initially dropped by just out of curiosity, stayed and became part of the regular visitors. None of the interviewees has left his or her church after involvement in Mijn Kerk. The fear of people abandoning local churches in favor of the online churches (again) turns out to be unfounded. In fact, the opposite seems to be true: many visitors who felt abandoned by the offline church, joined Mijn Kerk. Because of disappointment, (physical) disability or other personal reasons, five of the nine interviewees didn't fit in their local church, or couldn't participate fully there. For them, Mijn Kerk is a place where they can participate, in spite of personal barriers and hindrances. This is in line with earlier finding by Hutchings.²⁰

Visitors in general are quite negative about the idea of the online church as a complete replacement of the local church. Virtually all of them see Mijn Kerk as a supplement and an enrichment. In some cases and for some people Mijn Kerk seems to fulfill some of the 'church functions' better than the local church. In these cases Mijn Kerk functions as a partial replacement. Getting inspired, listening to sermons, praying, lighting candles and getting in contact with fellow believers can be done in both the offline and the online church. For other aspects people still prefer the local offline church: the sensory contact with other people, joint celebrations, sacraments and the more stable nature of a meeting in church at a particular time and place. These unique properties of the local church have yet to be (fully) satisfactorily implemented online. The online church too has some characteristics which cannot be fully realized offline: the possibility to visit the church whenever and wherever you like, very low social obligations, relative anonymity, and the possibility to get in contact with people from many different traditions in one place.

²⁰ Hutchings, 'Creating Church Online'.

The two types of churches both have some properties that are unique and others that overlap each other. Neither one can be a complete replacement of the other, but where they overlap, it is possible for one to replace the other. Visitors prefer Mijn Kerk for some of the church functions or are forced to use the online church for these, due to personal circumstances. For example, some of the respondents were physically or mentally unable to visit their local faith community. For these people Mijn Kerk is a feasible alternative.

The local church and Mijn Kerk as social networks both play a role that fits the personal situation of the visitors. Because different functions and properties of both types of churches are integrated in the life of churchgoers, involvement in Mijn Kerk does not come at the expense of local church attendance. In fact, participation in Mijn Kerk can even stimulate attendance of the local faith community. One of the interviewees, for instance, started visiting a church in her hometown again, after getting contact with the pastor of Mijn Kerk. Two other respondents became more involved in their local church, after they had been less active there for a while. One of the respondents, Anja,²¹ was physically not able to visit her local church anymore after she had been involved in an accident. Visiting Mijn Kerk helped her to get back in touch with her local church:

Because of Mijn Kerk I'm again more involved in my own [local] church. I still don't attend the services, but I have contacted the reverend. I said something like: "Yeah, I don't go to church, but I would like it if you could visit me sometime." Before that [visiting Mijn Kerk] I thought: "Let's just leave it this way".

Anonymity, Privacy and Bonding for Mijn Kerk-visitors

Mijn Kerk's closed Facebook group is in many ways a special place online. Its content deviates from what is common on Facebook. Facebook is known as the platform where people share their successes: holiday pictures, great experiences and inspirational stories. In short: everything to which others can respond with a 'Like'. Unlike this, Mijn Kerk's closed Facebook group stands out because of the many sad stories: many of the posted messages show signs of brokenness and loneliness. Apparently, the closed group is a place where there is room for a vulnerability that is often missing on the public part of Facebook.

²¹ All respondents' names were anonymised.

Visitors consider the closed group as a safe and trustworthy place, where they dare to share their personal stories.

The interviews show that the unique type of privacy present in the closed group is what creates this sense of safety. One can join the group with a personal Facebook account only by sending a request or by invitation of an existing member. Unlike earlier online churches no separate avatar is used: the personal presentation in the closed groups is the same as for the rest of Facebook. And because many people present themselves on Facebook to their entire social network, including to people who know them well offline, it is relatively difficult for them to pretend to be someone they are not. Therefore, people in the closed group are convinced and assured that they deal and communicate with real people.

The messages posted in the closed group are only visible for other group members. This restricted visibility gives users a sense of security: what they share is not public and therefore also not visible to their (other) Facebook friends. If users want to, they can very well maintain the separation between *Mijn Kerk* and other personal social networks. Although one has to have a Facebook-profile to join the closed group, group members initially do not know each other, nor do they know anything about each other. Names and profile pictures are always visible for all group members, but apart from that there is a great degree of control over one's own privacy. So, the extent to which a person becomes known, is defined by that person itself. This lowers the threshold to become a member of the group: if you want you can join and read along, without ever having to share something personal.

One of the interviewees, Marieke, who frequently posts messages in the closed group, says:

It is not really anonymous, but at the same time it sort of is. I think it helps me. I mean, it is not anonymous, because you get to know each other quite well if you communicate with one another on the Internet. But you do not see each other, so there is some distance and that makes it easier for me.

Besides being 'sort of' anonymous, the relationship with the group is also voluntary and without obligation. In daily (offline) life, there is no dependency between the group members. Sharing something personal with a stranger therefore has no direct impact on everyday life. Interviewees also like the fact that they are not obligated to respond to messages of other members, or to visit *Mijn Kerk* at regular intervals. There is hardly any moral obligation or responsibility towards the other group members. In the local offline church group members often do experience these obligations. Another interviewee, Paulien, says:

These obligations in a congregation that you attend every Sunday, I always find very difficult. Of course, you don't have to talk to all those people in church every Sunday, but still... it agitates me, every now and then... all the fuzz. And I think that with this [Mijn Kerk].. this is a little more remote, and that's what I like about it.

This type of hybrid anonymity, where relative anonymity and permissiveness is combined with real personal involvement is highly appreciated by the visitors of Mijn Kerk. Paradoxically this light connection and the ability to leave whenever one pleases, make that visitors continue to visit Mijn Kerk, and bind with it anyway.²² This mild form of solidarity fits in well with the idea of the network society, where people fear static, one sided, bonding obligations, while at the same time long for real personal contact.²³

Different Functions and Needs

Mijn Kerk consists of several elements, often with different functions. This makes that visitors use Mijn Kerk in different ways. The meaning they derive from Mijn Kerk is determined and colored by the function the online church has for them. The meaning of Mijn Kerk can be summarized under two needs that it provides for its visitors:

1. The need for inspiration for everyday life – stories and materials that help you to continue your life's journey. This need is summarized with the word *sustenance*: food for the journey and inspiration for everyday life.
2. The need for contact with other people – the ability to share your story and support each other. For some this is also the need to be part of a community. We summarize this need with the word *connectedness*.

For all active visitors Mijn Kerk fulfills (to a greater or lesser extent) these needs for sustenance and connectedness. But visitors do not only visit Mijn Kerk to get sustenance and/or connectedness, they also fulfill these needs for others. Thus, four typical behaviors emerge: to seek sustenance, to offer sustenance, to seek connectedness and to offer connectedness. The search for sustenance, material that gives new energy and inspiration, we call *to recharge*. Users can, for example, recharge by viewing the short video sermons of the pastor and by

²² Cf. De Koster, "Nowhere I Could Talk Like That".

²³ Sake Stoppels, *Oefenruimte* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2013).

reading the blogs. The offering of sustenance to others, we call *to inspire*. For example, visitors can inspire each other by sharing a poem, a photo or a bible verse. Connectedness too is both sought and offered by visitors. The search for connectedness is indicated as *to vent*. One can, for instance, vent by posing a prayer request, or by sharing a personal story in the closed group. Offering connectedness to others, we call *to encourage*. Praying for someone, or boosting his or her spirits, in a comment are ways to encourage. Consequently, all conduct and activities of people in Mijn Kerk can be put on two axes: the first being sustenance – connectedness and the second searching – providing, as shown in Figure 1.

The role that one assumes within Mijn Kerk and what he or she is doing there, is not static, but may change over time. For example, several people indicated that they originally came to Mijn Kerk looking for inspiration but stayed because they found connectedness. De Koster noticed this same kind of change of function in his research on online forums.²⁴ Also, no visitor acts solely as someone who vents, encourages, inspires or recharges: behavior of visitors in Mijn Kerk is a composite of several of these activities. But, for some users one particular activity may get more emphasis than for others.

What visitors are searching for in Mijn Kerk is closely linked to their off-line situation and in particular the (possible) relation with the local church.

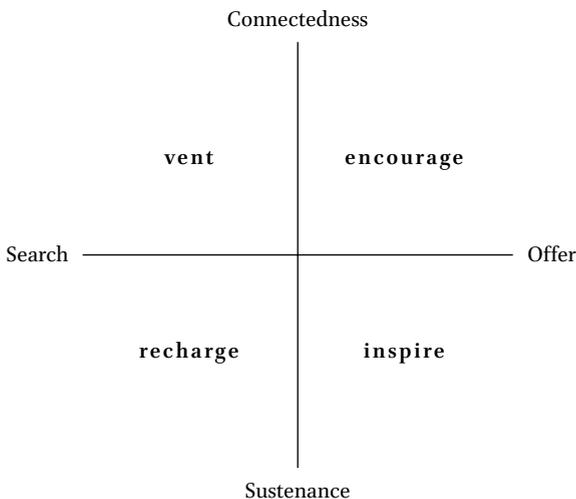


FIGURE 1 *Different functions and needs within Mijn Kerk.*

24 De Koster, *Nowhere I Could Talk Like That*.

They come looking online for what they are missing offline. This is in line with networked society theory, which states that people choose to engage in social contacts and maintain them because they fulfill a clear function. If the existing network (the offline church) cannot fulfill a certain need, people will find a complementary network. Or, if the network of the local church as a whole is no longer tenable, a replacement network will be sought.

People who visit Mijn Kerk mainly in search for sustenance, for example, do this because their local church is not open throughout the week. They are often very active in their own faith community but are glad that Mijn Kerk provides a place where they can recharge twenty-four hours a day. They want to be inspired, but they often do not feel the need to share personal stories or to get into personal contact with other visitors. For example, in response to the question if she feels connected with other visitors, respondent Harriët says:

Well, it sounds rude if I say “no”... It’s like a snapshot. I read what someone else has posted and at that moment I feel a connection. But I’m not connected to that person. But I do like it. I mean: when I turn off my computer, I forget [that person].

For others, Mijn Kerk acts as some sort of public platform. These visitors, who already have a strong offline network in which they can share their stories, often do not feel the need to share personal things in Mijn Kerk. However, they do want to explain their vision and share the things that move them with others. For people who are lonely, or who are unable to share their faith with people in their surroundings, Mijn Kerk does have a great social function. Although these people too point out the limitations of the online church, Mijn Kerk is very important for their contact with other people. Finally, a last group of visitors sees Mijn Kerk as a place to be there for other people, something they are not always able to do as much as they want in offline life.

Group Dynamics and Different Meanings

The popularity and long-term commitment of visitors of Mijn Kerk can partly be explained by the different needs and functions that it fulfills, as seen above. Those seeking solace find people who are willing to comfort (and vice versa): those venting and those encouraging provide in each others needs. Likewise, those visitors who want to share things that move them find people who are looking for inspiration. Because visitors can provide in each other’s

needs, the closed Facebook group can flourish without great effort on the parts of the editors of Mijn Kerk. Not all needs fit so nicely together. The various functions of Mijn Kerk can in some cases also be contradictory, leading to misunderstandings among visitors. For example, those who visit Mijn Kerk to inspire or to recharge do not quickly share personal experiences and also do not understand why others do feel the need to do so. In contrast, the people who do share personal stories are surprised (and sometimes a bit suspicious) about all the people who just seem to read along, without ever getting personally involved.

The difference in functions also means that Mijn Kerk gets different meanings in the lives of its visitors. Connectedness is something that requires investment. Those who are looking for connectedness, will have to actively participate in Mijn Kerk, share their own lives and get in contact with other visitors. Building these relationships takes time and effort, which makes the connection to the network of Mijn Kerk stronger and more valuable. The most active members, who share the most personal messages, are the ones who feel the most connected both with each other and with Mijn Kerk. For them, Mijn Kerk is unique: there is no other place (online and offline) where they find anything like it. So, leaving the group would mean giving up personal contacts. This is different for people who are primarily searching or providing sustenance. Mijn Kerk is often just one of the many places where they recharge or inspire. To them it also matters less who writes or shares the messages. Knowing the person behind a post for them might even distract them from the content, which they are out for. For them Mijn Kerk is valuable, but not irreplaceable.

Conclusion and Implications

In this contribution, we offered a case study of a Dutch online church named Mijn Kerk. In this final section, we turn to the question what we can conclude from this case study in terms of the main theoretical debates that we shortly mentioned in the introduction. First, as many studies have pointed out before, our case study shows that new media technologies offer opportunities for new types of communities with, according to the participants, a real sense of solidarity, connectedness and community spirit. Being established in an online environment, this particular church offers a number of features that are probably not completely unique to, but certainly very much inherent to online environments: accessibility, 24 hours availability, a certain degree of anonymity and privacy, and low social obligations. So, the Internet and new

media facilitate new types of religious community that are strongly defined by what we, following Campbell²⁵ and Hutchings,²⁶ referred to as *networked* interactions and practices. While of course we might find these networked interactions and practices outside the online realm as well, also in the religious domain, new online communities such as Mijn Kerk seem to be better adapted to the networked attitude of individual participants than more traditional and conventional church-like types of community that we find in organized Christianity.

Second, contrary to expectations of greater accessibility for people who are not familiar with church, an online church such as Mijn Kerk is not necessarily successful in proselytizing. Instead, Mijn Kerk primarily caters for people who already attend local churches and/or are familiar with Christianity, offering them an attractive environment and repertoire to extend their networked religious practice beyond the offline, local domain. The relationship with the local church and other offline conditions determine what people are searching for online. The function Mijn Kerk has for its visitors differs per individual and is determined by the broader context of the personal social network. Roughly speaking, participation in Mijn Kerk provides for two needs: the need for contact with other people and the need for inspiration for everyday life. We have called these needs connectedness and sustenance. In Mijn Kerk one can search for fulfillment of these two needs or offer it to others. This results in four practices, which we marked with the terms venting, encouraging, inspiring and recharging. Visitors are not limited strictly to one of these four: often their behavior in Mijn Kerk is a combination of several of these practices. Also, the two needs are not mutually exclusive. In the course of time, the needs, and thus the practices, of visitors can change.

This brings us to our third point, regarding the modes of participation that we found among the visitors of Mijn Kerk, in relation to participation in offline churches. In line with, among others, Hutchings²⁷ and Campbell,²⁸ we argued that for most people the online church is a supplement to the offline church, rather than a replacement. Most of them are active participants in a local

25 Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society'.

26 Hutchings, 'The Internet and the Church'.

27 Hutchings, 'The Internet and the Church', p. 17. Hutchings, 'Creating Church Online', p. 165.

28 Heidi Campbell, 'Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks', *Journal of Media and Religion* 3 (2004) 2, pp. 81–99, at p. 92.

church; the online church just offers a different repertoire and space for their networked religious practice, which is no longer limited to their local environment. However, for a small group of people, for whom church attendance has become problematic for reasons of personal disappointment or physical limitations, the online church functions as an alternative to offline churches. These visitors tend to be more involved and more willingly to invest in Mijn Kerk; their connection to Mijn Kerk and its visitors can be qualified as 'strong ties'. For them, Mijn Kerk is a unique and almost irreplaceable community, while for others it is only one of the many places where they can find inspiration.

Further research is needed to find out why Mijn Kerk fails to attract non- and ex-church members. However, it has become clear that the Internet church performs very distinct functions for its visitors. Both functions and experiences of participation in a faith community are determined by the contextual circumstances of the visitor. Church attendance both on- and offline can therefore only be fully understood if account is taken of the wider context of individual social networks.