Models of the church and social media

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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: Toward a “Digital Ecclesiology”

In his 2004 work, Christian Community in History: Historical Ecclesiology, Roger Haight takes an approach that has been described as “ecclesiology from below,” which is concrete, realist, and historically conscious, intentionally connected to the social and political realities faced by the various branches of the church. Other recent works, such as Gerard Mannion’s Ecclesiology and Postmodernity and Comparative Ecclesiology, have continued the effort to contextualize ecclesiology, a departure from the traditional “ecclesiology from above,” which tended to be abstract, idealist, and ahistorical.

As the study of ecclesiology more and more reflects the historically conscious approach of Haight, Mannion, and others, the realities of the church in the digital age will be a factor. In fact, just as there are communion ecclesiologies and feminist ecclesiologies—theological studies of the church from particular perspectives—a “digital ecclesiology” could yield fresh and profound insights into the nature of the church in the postmodern world and, conversely, into the ways that church bodies make use of new media technologies.

Haight and Mannion’s work in the emerging field of comparative ecclesiology was presaged by Avery Dulles’ groundbreaking 1974 work, Models of the Church, which, like subsequent work in the “ecclesiology from below” movement, focused on the lived experience of the church, rooted in a time and place, even as it postulated themes that transcended the various eras of church history. Dulles offered five “models,” each of which, in turn, exemplified a principle aspect or attribute of the church. The models, explained in more detail below, include church as institution, church as mystical communion, church as sacrament, church as herald, and church as servant. A balanced theology of the church, Dulles believed, must find a way of incorporating the major affirmations of each basic ecclesiological type; no one model explains the whole picture, and thus we must work simultaneously with the different models to understand the church.

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Dulles’ models provide a helpful construct for exploring how religious institutions use new media today. Do the implicit or explicit ecclesiological assumptions of a religious institution, body, or network affect how that body approaches the use of social media? Do our corporate electronic practices reflect our theological understandings and commitments? What are the theological assumptions behind our practices, and can we act in ways that reflect a more conscious awareness of such assumptions?

The reflections that follow will utilize four of the primary models in Dulles’ typology: institution, community, herald, and servant.\textsuperscript{10} We will use the language of “community” instead of Dulles’ “mystical communion” for the second model, although it is worth noting that all of his models presuppose theological and spiritual understandings—and not just sociological—as they apply to church bodies.\textsuperscript{11}

Research fellows for the New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary conducted six case studies on how religious bodies—ranging from congregations to a clergy network to a Christian university—use new media, and social media in particular, in carrying out their missions. What ecclesiological assumptions are reflected in the digital practices of these bodies, as reflected in the case studies? Do their particular ways of using new media reflect a certain “model” or understanding of the church? Or are the assumptions evidenced by their media practices grounded in a variety of ecclesiological approaches, rather than one in particular?

In an echo of Dulles’ models that offers further insight into the New Media Project case studies, Bob Sabath\textsuperscript{12} posits that religious bodies and organizations are in general marked by three attributes or charisms: Spirituality, Community, and Ministry. Each body, Sabath explains, tends to “major” in one of the three charisms, minor in another, and neglect the third. Thus, for example, a faith entity might be very strong in its outreach and advocacy programs, moderate in its attention to the communal aspects of its life together, and weak in the nurturing of prayer and spirituality. This tendency to emphasize one charism over the others isn’t necessarily a weakness, Sabath says, or even a reflection of human limitation. Rather, communities, like individuals, manifest different “gifts of the Spirit,” and thus will have different attributes to offer the broader church and the world.

In like manner, none of the religious bodies and communities involved in the New Media Project case studies fit neatly into one particular ecclesial model. Some may “major” in one approach or way of using media, minor in others, and neglect still others altogether. Some aspects of what churches and religious institutions do in their use of new media will echo one ecclesial model, and other aspects will reflect other models—and some activities will simultaneously be consonant with the principles of more than one ecclesiological model at the same time. It is not surprising that each of the case studies contains examples of all the models of the church. And thus this paper makes no attempt, nor sees any value in, placing a case study subject \textit{in toto} into one category or another. Rather, we are looking at the
individual practices of the case study subjects and examining how those practices harmonize with the principles emphasized in the particular models of the church.\textsuperscript{13}

**Model I. The Church as Institution**

From the earliest years of the church, Christianity has always had an institutional side. It has had recognized ministers, accepted confessional formulas, and prescribed forms of public worship. Thus “institution,” in and of itself, is not a negative word or concept in regard to the formal organizational structures of people, clergy and lay, with specific roles and responsibilities. And yet the institutional model cannot properly be taken as primary. Rather, the institutional aspects of the church are properly seen as structures in support of the other models: i.e., for disseminating the Word, for building community, for serving the world.\textsuperscript{14}

While none of the New Media Project case studies represent an exclusively institutional ecclesiology, each of the study subjects engage in media practices that exemplify aspects or principles consistent with such an ecclesiology. For example, the prime beneficiaries of activities of the church, in the institutional model, are its own members, and some social media actions of the case study subjects are certainly intended to benefit their own members or support their own institutional structures, minimal or extensive as they may be. For instance, while the House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS) emphasizes a flat structure, they also have a high ecclesiology around the role of the pastors, a tendency commonly associated with the institutional model.

Other case studies noted a similar deference to or elevation of the (usually ordained) pastors. A member of The Young Clergy Women Project (TYCWP) reported her discouragement that church members wait for her to be the “voice” on the church’s Facebook page, seemingly wanting her to behave in a more institutional manner. This may be an example of new media helping to bring focus to and emphasize polity questions that would exist with or without digital media. It is not unusual for congregants to have a more-institutional understanding of church than does their pastor. A pastor may want to empower and build community, while congregants want the pastor to speak with “authority.” Research Fellow Verity A. Jones notes in her case study, “[W]hen an institution engages Facebook or Twitter, it often falls back on patterns of such [institutional] ‘speak,’ using recognized authorities to vet the message.”\textsuperscript{15}

Even in cases where the use of new media is intended to accomplish objectives outside of the institution itself, the actual practice may reflect an institutional concept of church, usually focused on the pastor. For example, the use of new media at Community of Hope AME Church (COH) is most often focused on building community, proclaiming the Word, and working for social justice, yet according to Research Fellow Monica A. Coleman, “The social media face of the church is still largely [Tony] Lee.” Despite attempts at more community-based uses of digital communications, she notes, “the use of social media
around community formation appears to be more vertical than horizontal. ... The minister is still the mediator for the community."

Again, the elevation of the pastor's role may have little to do with the actual desires of the pastor, but rather can be a collateral consequence of specific practices. Eugene Cho, founding pastor of Quest Church in Seattle, has a national profile, largely because of his use of social media (as well as the charitable organization he founded, One Day's Wages, which is discussed below). His popular blog (a recent post received 77 comments—and the post was blank!), his Twitter following, and other social media presence inevitably leads to a sense of celebrity, even among those in his faith community who have known him well for many years.

While “tradition” and institution are not the same thing, institution is often the carrier of tradition. Thus the “deep traditionalism” of a place such as HFASS can reflect indirectly an assumed ecclesiology of institution, even while its members espouse an explicit anti-institutionalism. Similarly, Coleman notes that Lee “often finds himself situating COH within the larger African Methodist Episcopal Church traditions.” Lee says, “If you idolize the liturgy without understanding its shape and evolution, then you can’t shift and evolve. So what are the needs of folk now?” Innovation and change often grow best in the context of respect for institutional tradition.

Respect for institutional authority is also very strongly implied in concerns raised about the use of digital media as an important pedagogical tool at Abilene Christian University (ACU). Research Fellow Lerone A. Martin raises the question, “And what about authority?” ACU’s leadership expressed “deep concerns about the plethora of religious and secular voices that may influence the spiritual formation of the university’s student body.” Later in conversation, Martin noted the tension when “personal piety bumps up against beliefs of the institution.”

It’s not surprising that throughout the case studies one finds, explicitly and implicitly, evidence of anti-institutional assumptions, practices, and beliefs. For example, Research Fellow Kathryn Reklis studying the Darkwood Brew (DWB) notes that “[a]uthority is decentralized on the web—we don’t need an expert to tell us the facts about something, we have Wikipedia.” Likewise, HFASS members reflect a suspicion of structures and authority and have negative presuppositions of the church: “They might expect the church to be simply oppressive and be surprised to find it a liberating place,” writes Research Fellow Jason Byassee. Even an organization such as ACU, with a clear sense of institutional authority, recognizes that “the rapid changes in communication technologies as well as the increased access to knowledge and information has shifted the role of educators from ‘prognosticators to interpreters,’” a shift with significant pedagogical implications.
Churches and other religious bodies that practice a more institutional approach to their corporate life will likely find social media helpful primarily as a tool for dissemination of information, guidance, and instruction through its various channels. As Dulles puts it, “From the point of view of its teaching function, [the Church] resembles a school in which the masters, as sacred teachers, hand down the doctrine of Christ. ... Thus teaching is juridicized and institutionalized.”23 The democratic nature of social media might be a source of tension for these institutions. For example, the Roman Catholic Church in recent years has sought to prohibit discussion of the ordination of women. It's not surprising that that prohibition carries little weight in the world of social media, even (especially) in Catholic media forums. Dulles points to this phenomenon in one of his many prescient comments, written in the 1970s but obviously relevant to the digital age: “Finally, this ecclesiology is out of phase with the demands of the times. In an age of dialogue, ecumenism, and interest in world religions, the monopolistic tendencies of this model are unacceptable.”24

Model II. The Church as Community

Intrinsic to the flattened, democratic nature of new media is the development and nurturing of community, which offers a natural synchronicity with the concept of the church as a “mystical communion” (koinonia) of people with shared beliefs. This model, which draws on the biblical images of the body of Christ and the people of God, tends to be more democratic than the institutional/hierarchical models, emphasizing the mutual service of members to one another.25 This model of the church takes on even more relevance in our post-structural, post-modern age and resonates closely with the digital communication move from a one-to-many model to a many-to-many model.

A primary purpose and intention of social media use in all of the case studies is to build community. The studies are replete with examples of using digital media to “build relationships,” to “network,” to “connect people to one another”—all ways of talking about community building. The Young Clergy Women Project is essentially a community built largely on the relationships nurtured via social media. One participant in the TYCWP says she “values relationships, and ‘what it means to have a holy, wholesome, loving, mutually up-building relationship.’”26 Abilene Christian University intentionally turned to an emphasis on social media in its mobile learning initiative because of its stated belief that “humans learn best when they are in community.”27

While there is almost universal agreement in the case studies regarding the efficacy of social media as an aid to building community, many doubts and concerns are expressed around the question of whether the connections experienced in virtual community constitute “real” community, especially in the context of a faith that is at its heart incarnational. For instance, Reklis reports that “DWB could not be ‘real church’ for these folks (though it is spiritually and theologically very meaningful to them), because as one of them put it, ‘church are the people I see on Sunday morning who will make you casseroles
when you are sick or watch out for your kids.’” Some case study subjects express the clear conviction that virtual community is not enough. “The web is good for connecting with and furthering church community. It’s not a good substitute for church community,” says Bolz-Weber of HFASS. She invites her community, Byassee says, “into a form of life that can’t be mediated online, but only in embodied ways—there is indeed no app for Sabbath.” While Jones notes that TYCWP has no consensus on “whether an online community can be defined as ‘community’ or be legitimately considered ‘prayerful,’” she adds that “[i]n lieu of opportunities to have face-to-face relationships, the online community has substituted well .... It cannot replicate in-person relationships, but it can substitute for it when it’s not possible. And the relationships are certainly substantive and ‘real’ for the women involved in the network.” Rather than question the basic value of social media to a relationship, the focus for many is exploring how social media is changing relationships and how we navigate that change.

The case study subjects report many ways in which social media help build community. Leaders of Quest Church, for example, say that social media use enables church leaders to connect with the real, day-to-day lives of congregants, and in particular with younger members of the faith community. Bolz-Weber at HFASS tells of starting a Google prayer group, which she says shows that pastoral care is communal, not simply individual. Lee of COH says that “[s]ocial media allow him to connect with new people and stay in touch with people who may move away from the local area”—and adds, “It extends our arms and lets us have other ways to reach and to touch people who need hope.” A member of the COH men’s ministry speaks of the use of text messages in forming an electronic prayer chain for a member in need. A TCYWP pastor with an infant son says that “Facebook helps me to connect to people on this human level when I don’t have time to visit all of them and know them.” Another describes online conversations on Google Chat: “We would share our sermon ideas and do Bible study online. It was a really nice community. Most of them I still have never met in person.”

Social media can also provide useful tools for tapping in to the gifts of the community. Bolz-Weber, for instance, reports using Facebook as part of her process of sermon preparation. Students at ACU reportedly participate with the teachers in the production of knowledge and research: “Faculty are viewed no longer as the font of all knowledge and expertise but rather as guides who help students discover, interpret, and synthesize multiple streams of knowledge.” Such crowdsourcing reflects a less-institutional, more community-based ecclesiology.
Oftentimes, social media and other digital tools are used to aid in the formation of real-world, face-to-face community. Quest Church and others use electronic tools, including Facebook and their websites, to facilitate the formation of and connections between small groups of congregation members. New media use at ACU, Martin notes, “actually seems to be promoting physical gathering. Students who matriculated during the advent of the mobile learning initiative reported an increase in group study sessions and gatherings. From 2010 to 2011, 86 percent of students reported improved student-to-student and student-to-teacher collaborations and interactions after employing the use of their mobile devices in the educational process.”35 While ACU leaders insist that “mobile learning will not replace physical gathering,” the study also reports that “digital communication is helping to forge community at ACU.”36

The community model of church lends itself most naturally to social media applications, and churches with a community-oriented ecclesiology are likely to be quite comfortable with the relationship-building aspects of new media. The emphasis on the church as the body of Christ and as the people of God—an emphasis on the communion of the members with one another—fits well with the democratic and many-to-many nature of social media. Dulles maintains that “these interpersonal models have great appeal in our day because they meet a human need that is acutely experienced by many of the faithful. ... People find the meaning of their lives ... in terms of the informal, the personal, the communal. They long for a community which, in spite of all the conflicts build into modern society, can open up loving communication.”37

The biggest caveat for the church in this metaphor is the importance of keeping in mind that the church is not just a collection of people in communion together. Rather, in Christian understanding (as opposed to a merely sociological analysis), the church is understood as the community brought together by the Holy Spirit with Christ as head, and not just a social connecting point. But as long as this realization is kept conscious, an ecclesiology of community can be a very helpful touchstone for engagement with social media.

Model III. The Church as Herald

Hans Kung wrote that the church is not the kingdom of God, but “its voice, its announcer, its herald,”38 proclaiming the Christian message to the world and reinforcing it among believers. In this model, the Word is primary, and the emphasis is on faith and proclamation over institutional structures or mystical communion. The basic image is that of the herald of a king who comes to proclaim a royal decree in a public square.39 The emphasis is more on proclamation to the world than dialogue with the world. While at face value this contains an implied modernist assumption about the nature of authority, in contrast to the postmodernist, dialogical nature of social media, proclamation of the Word is still central to Protestant understanding of the church and is an important motif in many of the case study examples.
Several of the case study subjects use the language of “telling the story” to describe their use of social media. Bolz-Weber asks, “How do we, who communicate the Word of the loquacious God, make theological sense of these changes? ... ‘Faithfully communicating the gospel is at stake’: how do we tell our old story in new ways that draw in new generations without abandoning our tradition?” Likewise, Reklis declares, “At stake is the mission of sharing the Gospel faithfully in a new age.” Eugene Cho of Quest Church says that when he thinks theologically about social media, he says he focuses on the ability to “communicate story and narrative.... [N]ew media, of course, provide channels for delivering and shaping narrative—including the ‘greatest narrative,’ the gospel story itself.”

Some of the herald or proclamation of the gospel is intended to reach an external audience. In my case study, I wrote that “[d]igital media have been helpful in attracting new people to the church and in amplifying the church’s voice as it speaks to the world beyond its walls,” adding that “[r]eaching new people and inviting them to church may be accomplished as frequently today through blogs and Google searches as by more traditional methods of word of mouth or door-to-door outreach.” A TYCWP pastor says of her congregation, “The website is our primary form of evangelism .... Because we find more and more that when people come to church they have found us on an Internet search looking for a progressive church.”

New media and other electronic forms of communication also serve as an aid in the proclamation of the Word internally, that is in preaching to one’s own congregation, and the case studies give several examples. COH’s Lee, for instance, reports that he “loves having biblical commentaries downloaded on his phone and iPad because he can research a sermon while traveling.” A TYCWP participant said that she uses Facebook to “tell the story about ... our church.” Others, including Quest and COH, report using other forms of digital media, including podcasts and live streams of worship services, to supplement the sermons they give to their assembled congregants.

In the Internet age, suspicion abounds regarding “heralds” from on high; the mode of our era is more about participation and dialogue than it is about passively accepting received wisdom from authority figures. This, of course, is as true for people of faith as for anyone. As Reklis puts it, “Especially among younger generations, the idea of viewing a one-hour program live every week or even downloading and watching it in segments might seem a little too much like old media in a new package.”

Even in a well-established institution with deep roots such as ACU, “the teacher or religious leader will still possess a form of authoritative power for direction, vision, and assessment, however it will be significantly augmented. The professor will increasingly morph into more of a guide and/or mentor in the pedagogical experience,” comments
Martin. The church at large will be well-served by paying attention to the implications of that pedagogical evolution.

Karl Barth, in *Church Dogmatics*, argues that the church is actually constituted by the Word being proclaimed and faithfully heard. The church, Barth says, is the congregation gathered together by the Word—and in the early twenty-first century, social media can be, and occasionally is, an effective vehicle for that proclamation of the Word. Churches with an ecclesiology emphasizing the heraldic task might well find social media a useful tool to further their preaching and teaching work.

The danger of an over-emphasis on this model for understanding the church echoes two risks inherent in social media as well: Neglecting the incarnational aspect of the Christian faith (and of the importance of “incarnational,” embodied human interaction in general) and focusing too exclusively on witness to the neglect of action. Thus there are essential lessons that apply to our engagement with social media in the foundational Christian doctrine: The Word became *flesh*.

**Model IV. The Church as Servant**

Christ came into the world not to be served, but to serve. The church, carrying on Christ’s mission, is to serve the world. The fourth model emphasizes the church’s relationship and responsibility for the whole human family. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “The church is the church only when it exists for others.” This view of the church grows from the understanding that Jesus came not only to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, but to give himself for its realization. This model emphasizes relationship and dialogue with the world—if the church fails to respect the accomplishments of the world and learn from them, it risks becoming out of touch with people and becoming incapable of effectively heralding the gospel.

Many of the case study examples focus on social justice, but the Community of Hope AME Church is the most explicit about its commitment to liberation theology. “In practice, Lee is a liberation theologian. His message is focused on including the excluded,” and the church understands that “sin is not just personal sin, but deep societal ills/social sin and the healing is through community.” The context for sin and brokenness, writes Coleman, is “the ‘hood,” and central to the church’s response is “connecting social activism to social media and theology.” She gets specific in describing COH’s commitment to social change: “COH spends as much time outside of the church building as it does inside, if not more. They are committed to working against crime in the community, with young people around bullying and self-esteem, and in local gang-intervention.” Social media plays a key role in this outreach for justice: Social media is the mechanism of liberation; it makes people visible who have been overlooked.
In similar manner, leaders at Quest Church say that social media have been useful in outreach efforts: “Justice and compassion are probably the most tangible ways that [social media have] been the most effective.” \(^{52}\) Social media have helped “the church’s work of mobilizing around social issues and building support for various causes, both those initiated by church members and initiated by others.” \(^{53}\) A lay leader at the church says, “What we’re trying to do is to take our ministry beyond our walls.” \(^{54}\) One of the most effective examples is the organization established by Cho called One Day’s Wages, a “grassroots movement of people, stories, and actions to alleviate extreme global poverty.” \(^{55}\) New media has increased the ability of the church to mobilize for social change: “We’re able to rally the larger church around a cause, to create a stir, to inform as well as to call people to action in a way that I don’t think we were able to do as effectively maybe 10 years ago.” \(^{56}\) Similarly, COH partners with the nonprofit Dreams Work in helping young people harness arts and technology around social issues, including a project on bullying, which Coleman notes “is just one of COH’s social justice ministries,” along with community walks against crime, a youth program in the local middle school, and ongoing work in brokering truces between gangs. \(^{57}\)

Darkwood Brew, which exists as an online service, has social justice roots as well. DWB grew out of a “pilgrimage” from Phoenix to Washington, D.C., which in its principles called for “Christian love of neighbor,” which includes “[s]tanding, as Jesus does, with the outcast and oppressed, the denigrated and afflicted, seeking peace and justice” and “call[ing] forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies.” \(^{58}\) ACU echoes the belief that Christian service goes beyond the walls of the school “to educate students for Christian service in all walks of life.” ACU officials speak of the connection between individual rights and a concern for the common good, and affirm that spiritual growth and formation includes at its heart giving and sacrifice for others. \(^{59}\)

Like COH, other case study subjects manifest their commitment to social justice by who they attract and include. Part of HFASS’s mission is gay inclusion, and part of the church’s gift is that it reaches “people whom much of the rest of the church, even those trying to be gay-inclusive, never could reach.” The church does so by keeping the gospel at the center: “They do it by making gay inclusion not their focus. Their focus is on Jesus, how screwed up his people are, and so how spacious and proactive his grace is.” The servant model is also apparent, sometimes in concrete economic ways, in how church members relate to one another. For instance, members sell possessions from their homes on eBay to start a deacon’s fund, largely for other members in need—which Byassee calls “an experiment in entering more deeply into the sort of community envisaged in Acts 2.” \(^{60}\)

Churches and other religious bodies committed to an ecclesiology of the church as servant have found social media an invaluable tool to engage in the work of faith-based social change. From meet-ups and action alerts to Facebook causes and online event organizing, social media have become central instruments for those seeking to bring the biblical values of justice and peace into active engagement with the brokenness and dysfunction of
our world, to offer a healing presence and a balm in places of pain, poverty, and injustice. Engagement with the world is a central aspect of this model; Dulles quotes Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson, “The house of God is not the church but the world. The church is the servant, and the first characteristic of a servant is that [he or she] lives in someone else’s house, not [his or her] own.”61 Utilizing the tools of social media in our efforts to live as servant to the world is an apt example of living in “someone else’s house” as we seek to emulate the one who created our own.

**Conclusion: New Wine and Old Wineskins**

The way the church behaves digitally in our world today is no different, morally or spiritually, than any other mode in which the church is manifest. If the church is a servant to the marginalized and an advocate for justice, the church will use its digital presence as a way to fulfill those missions. If the church emphasizes the formation of Christian community, social media will be an increasingly important contributor to the nurturing of communal connections. Proclamation of the Word will always be central to the church’s calling, and new media will join older media as vehicles for the announcing of the good news.

The church in the twenty-first century faces many challenges unique to our age, including new modes of communication and relationship, but at heart the essential questions remain unaltered even as they are interpreted and mediated through new media. How are we, as disciples of Christ, to love God and our neighbors? How are we to serve the poor and the marginalized, to build the community of believers, to strengthen our bonds as the church, and to proclaim the gospel in our time? It’s likely that digital media will be a growing part of the way that the church seeks to answer those questions in the days to come.

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1 Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1, Historical Ecclesiology (New York: Continuum, 2004). The descriptions of “ecclesiology from below” and “above” are from Continuum.


3 A comment on the book *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through The Centuries*, by Bernard P. Prusak (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), summarizes well the tension between tradition and openness to new and contemporary realities in understanding the church: “The tendency to presume that nothing new or unexpected could develop in the unfolding future of the Church might close us to the presence of the Spirit in
our midst, and fail to recognize that our time, as much as any past time, is an opportunity for God’s creative activity and grace.”


5 “Comparative” ecclesiology refers to a systematic reflection on the points of similarity and difference in the ecclesiologies of different denominations or branches of the church. Dulles (see reference in note 6), although himself a Catholic theologian coming from a Catholic perspective, intentionally and explicitly sought to develop a comparative ecclesiology, examining Protestant as well as Catholic understandings of the church.


7 Dulles subsequently added a sixth model, the church as a “Community of Disciples,” which focused on the sense of believers always being learners, being formed by the scriptures, acting lovingly, sharing in Jesus’ mission and service, and being co-responsible for the church’s mission and identity.

8 Dulles did not include as a separate model “church as vehicle for outreach to the unchurched,” the Great Commission that is central to the understanding of several branches of (mostly) evangelical Christianity. For Dulles, that aspect would be included under the model of the church as Herald, proclaimer of the Word; the Word is to be proclaimed ( explicited) to believers as well as it is to be proclaimed (introduced) to nonbelievers.

9 Dulles, *Models of the Church*.

10 Dulles’ third model, the church as sacrament—defined as “an instrument bridging the gap between earthly and divine, a conduit for divine grace to humanity”—reflected a language and approach more common in Catholic theological understanding and thus less applicable in the Protestant institutions, organizations, and networks that were the foci of our case studies. This is not to underestimate the importance of the concept of the church as “embodied mystery,” which is an essential understanding in all streams of Christianity.

11 A sociological definition of “church” would refer to any group of people who consider themselves followers of Christ. A theological definition, on the other hand, would acknowledge the mystery of Christ as realized in the community of those who believe in him and are assembled in his name. Thus church is understood theologically as not a purely human thing, not simply of this world, but rather the work of God, who is present and operative in the church through the Spirit.

12 Sabath, a cofounder of Washington, D.C.’s Sojourners community, is currently web technologist at Sojourners. See his conversation “Community That Transforms” and his blog post Poorer, Poorer. Slower, Smaller. Smaller Smaller (http://sojo.net/blogs/2012/02/16/poorer-poorer-slower-slower-smaller-smaller), wherein he discusses the three “energies” of prophet, pastor, and monk.

13 In this essay we are making no assumptions about the actual ecclesiology (or ecclesiological tradition) of any of the entities studied. So, for instance, various practices of Abilene Christian University, which is rooted in the low-church Churches of Christ tradition, may well reflect, albeit implicitly, an institutional ecclesiology, which historically has been more typically connected to bodies in the high-church strands of Christendom. Again, in this paper we’re looking at specific practices at how electronic media are used, not stated beliefs or doctrinal positions.

One other factor in analyzing how digital practices fit into ecclesiological models is what might be understood as a theological version of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. At stake is not only the directly analogous issue of the effect of the observer on the participants (a phenomena noted in the House for All Sinners and Saints case study), but also the related matter that the perspective and bias of the fellows is manifest in the language used in the case studies. Thus a practice that the case study subject might understand as proclaiming the Word to the unchurched (which may well be construed as exemplifying the Herald model) might be reported as ministerial outreach to vulnerable and marginalized people (which may well be construed as exemplifying the Servant model). In other words, some of the typological choices may reflect language used by the person writing the study as much as the practices of the subjects themselves.
14 Institutionalism—the view that defines the church primarily in terms of its visible structures, especially the rights and powers of its officers—is “a deformation of the true nature of the church,” according to Dulles. Such a view, he writes, “binds theology too exclusively to the defense of currently officially positions, and thus diminishes critical and exploratory thinking.” Thus Dulles, member of a church historically identified with the institutional model, writes, “I take a deliberately critical stance toward those ecclesiologies that are primarily or exclusively institutional.” One of the explicit reasons for Dulles’ critical perspective on the institutional model is its lack of biblical backing. Biblically, he argues, institutions are subordinate to persons (“people were not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for people”). In fact, Dulles writes that one may conclude, on a biblical basis, that Christianity is not healthy unless there is room in it for prophetic protest against abuses of authority.

But he also recognizes that a Christian may energetically oppose institutionalism and still be very much committed to the church as institution. Even holding as primary another function or model of the church does not necessarily contradict holding a strong sense of corporate identity. Dulles, Models of the Church.


16 Monica A. Coleman, “Case Study Report on Community of Hope AME Church,” New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary, http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/community-of-hope-ame-church/full-report. Lee’s “worst practice,” Coleman writes, “has been managing all the media himself”—which even Lee admits is an unsustainable model. Some of this top-down focus comes from intentional choices by the pastors; for example, Lee said that getting input from his congregation on sermon topics “doesn’t fit his personality.” Church leadership, he says, tends not to use input garnered through new media for making decisions. But social media has been helpful in humanizing the pastors and taking away the “sense of celebrity,” which is “particularly noteworthy for a ‘new black church’ that (like the not-so-new-black-church model) relies heavily on charismatic leadership for its sustenance.”

17 Jason Byassee, “Case study report on House for 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. Byassee adds, “The church is often depicted as simply an advanced guard for blowing up everything and starting over, but what strikes me about House is its deep traditionalism. ‘You have to be rooted in tradition in order to innovate with integrity,’ Bolz-Weber insists.”

18 Coleman, “Case study report.” She continues, “In this context, Lee does not see himself as doing something that radically deparfs from tradition. Lee describes himself as ‘a regular AME minister doing what AMEs do. We build churches; we adapt. And that is part of the tradition of the AME church. This is remembering what the AME church does well.’”


20 Lerone A. Martin, New Media Project Research Fellows discussion, October 2011.

21 This reflects attitudes at HFASS toward authority in general. “Another hallmark of the church is its attitude toward authority,” notes Byassee. “Generation X and younger do not respond to being marketed to, in the way their parents did. ... This is a flattened world. ... Authority is given away, and those who try to squeeze it, lose it.” (Byasee, “Case study report.”)

22 Martin, “Case study report.”

23 Dulles, Models of the Church, 34-35.

24 Ibid., 41.

25 The focus on church as community includes both interior and external connections—the invisible communion of grace as well as the visible fellowship of believers, and both aspects have social media parallels. H. Richard Niebuhr, in The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper, 1937), wrote: “The true church is not an organization but the organic movement of those who have been ‘called out’ and ‘sent.’ Institutionalized Christianity as it appears in denominations as well as in state churches, in liberal programs as well as in conservative creeds, is only a halting place between Christian movements. The Franciscan
revolution not the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation not the Protestant churches, the Evangelical revival not the denominations which conserved its fruits—and denied it—show what Christianity is. Since its goal is the infinite and eternal God, only movement or life directed toward the ever transcendent can express its meaning.”

26 Jones, “Case study report.”
27 Martin, “Case study report.”
29 Jones, “Case study report.”
30 Byassee, “Case study report.” Despite that conviction, members of the HFASS report examples of genuine web-mediated community. For example, Byassee notes: “The beneficiary of the Google thread laying out the community’s prayer commented this way: ‘Thanks for all your prayers and support. It’s my first experience with the support of a Christian community (well, any community for that matter) and it’s pretty ... amazing.’ ... The surprise was in the support of a loving community. That such support was extended online is almost incidental.”
31 Coleman, “Case study report.”
32 Jones, “Case study report.”
33 “Asking members what they thought of John 3:16 yielded a flood of angry responses,” writes Byassee. “She had to abandon plans to preach on Nicodemus in order to take up the theme of being born again.” (Byassee, “Case study report.”)
34 Martin, “Case study report.”
36 Martin, “Case study report.”
37 Dulles, Models of the Church, 55.
38 Hans Kung, The Church (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 135. From Dulles, Models of the Church, chapter five, “The Church as Herald.” The biblical term ekklesia means those summoned by a herald, those called out (ek-kletoi). The ecclesiology represented by this model is characteristically congregational; in its pure sense the church is regarded as complete in a single local congregation, not dependent on any worldwide structure. Broader unity comes from the fact that all are responding to one and the same gospel.
39 Byassee “Case study report.”
40 Reklis, “Case study report.”
41 Jim Rice, “Case study report on Quest Church, Seattle,” New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary, http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/quest-church/full-report. Social media aren’t, Cho continues, “just a means for us to engage in pop trends, but also to utilize to communicate the larger narrative of God that has been personified in Christ. That would be probably the strongest theological reason why I engage in new media.”
42 Rice, “Case study report.”
43 Reklis, “Case study report.”
44 Coleman, “Case study report.”
45 Reklis, “Case study report.”
46 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 298-300.
47 Dulles, Models of the Church, 79-82.
49 Dulles, in his chapter on the church as servant, emphasizes that the church is not just a humanitarian social agency. Rather, in Dulles’ words, the church is the “universal sacrament of salvation and the Body of Christ,” and as such has a mandate to serve.
50 Biblically, the church as servant model is based first on following Christ’s example—”Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” Philippians 2:7; Jesus’ “mission statement” (Luke 4:16-19) is a good
summary—but also is rooted in the prophetic tradition, including the idea that Isaiah’s “servant songs” (Isaiah 42-53) apply not only to Christ but to the church as well.


53 Rice, “Case study report.”

54 Rice, “At home with new media.”


56 Rice, “At home with new media.”


59 Martin, “Case study report.”

60 Byassee, “Case study report.”

61 Dulles, Models of the Church, 89.

Study questions (going deep)

1. In his essay, Rice reflects on “four of the primary models in Dulles’ typology: institution, community, herald, and servant.” Explore Rice’s essay and ask where your tradition falls in the typology. Pose Rice’s questions to your own community: “What ecclesiological assumptions are reflected in the digital practices of these bodies? Do their particular ways of using new media reflect a certain “model” or understanding of the church? Or are the assumptions evidenced by their media practices grounded in a variety of ecclesiological approaches, rather than one in particular?”

2. Bob Sabath posits that religious bodies tend to “major” in either Spirituality, Community, or Ministry, and give less emphasis on the other two. Is that true for your religious entity? If so, what implications might that have for how your religious body might best use social media?

3. Given your tradition’s understanding of ecclesial authority, how do congregations and leaders in your tradition respond to the flattening of content production and consumption made possible in today’s digital communication world? In other words: Information shared via new and social media tends to flow between friends rather than from a designated authority who has vetted it—is this reality embraced by your tradition or is it resisted? Why?

4. How do congregations and leaders in your tradition respond to the decentralization of planning and executing programs and mission now that has been made easier and more visible via social media? What might this response
have to do with the theological orientation of your tradition?

5. How is a church community defined? By membership? What does membership entail? Can people who only attend a live streaming worship service via their computer be considered members? What if they give financially to the church? Is “church” the people, the worship, or the mission? Is there a difference?

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. Churches that emphasize different models in Dulles’ typology might be expected to have differing views on the meaning and significance of incarnation or “embodiment,” as explained in Kathryn Reklis’ essay, “X-Reality and the Incarnation.” Is this true in your experience? How do the ecclesial practices of your church relate to the importance of “face-to-face” connection, and how does that affect social media use by people in the church community?

2. Monica Coleman, in her essay, “New media: A savior for the digital age,” raises provocative questions about ways in which new media “saves” people from isolation, estrangement, and disconnection from community. How might this analysis resonant for people connected to a church that emphasizes one or the other of Sabath’s three “charisms”?

3. Jason Byassee, in his essay, “Practicing virtue with social media: An ‘underdetermined’ response,” makes a clear assertion about the purpose of the church: “God is the one saving us. The church is gathered in response to that saving work.” How does that fit with Dulles’ various models, and how might that understanding influence the way a church body uses social media?

4. Do you see any connections between the three areas of emphasis that Sabath points to and the three ways that, according to Lerone Martin’s essay, “How media changes American culture and religion,” new media has helped shift the church and culture in this country (proclamation, practices, and power)?

5. In her essay, “Faith communities in high relief: Reflections on the Trinity,” New Media Project Director Verity A. Jones focuses in particular on the community building aspects of social media, in the context of the intrinsic relationality evidenced in the Trinity. How might that understanding strike someone who comes
from an “institutional” understanding of church? Someone who emphasizes the “herald” model?