@Edinburgh2010: Online Ecumenism in an Age of Participation
by AARON T. HOLLANDER[1]

"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language..."
~Revelation 7:9

"The old is passing away; the new is yet unformed."[2] These words, written by delegates to the 1910 World Missionary Conference, serve as an encapsulation of these delegates' developing context at the start of the 20th century. Many of these individuals found that they shared an experience of both instability and creative optimism when they considered the swift changes in the communities from which they came. Various technologies, including the telephone and improved telegraph systems, were opening new possibilities of rapid communication across large distances, and missionaries in formerly isolated lands could recognize a thirst for modernization among their parishioners and neighbors. In Edinburgh, missionaries and theologians alike had the audacity to envision a world in which Christian witness would not be carved up along denominational lines and linguistic barriers, but rather, might breathe again in the exhilarating atmosphere of Pentecost, in which unprecedented comprehension could be achieved across inherited cultural boundaries. In such a light, it was not a warning but a celebration that "we can never understand our own Holy Scriptures until they are interpreted to us through the language of every nation under heaven."[3]

Today, reflecting on the centenary of Edinburgh 1910, we find that we are coming to terms with our own experiences of instability and creativity. The turn of this present century has been characterized by cultural and technological shifts at least as dramatic as those of the last. In the foreground of these is the ascendancy of the Internet from a niche science project to a versatile and pervasive communications infrastructure. Alongside the technological development, no less, is the sociological impact of such a comprehensive increase in our potential for communication. Through the Internet, global civil society is in the process of

[2] World Missionary Society, *Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), p. 26.
[3] World Missionary Society, *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), p. 296.

constructing and reinforcing what Tim O'Reilly calls an "architecture of participation,"[4] in which everyday communication across spectra of national, ethnic, professional, and religious difference is at once facilitated, encouraged, and unregulated. The Internet, especially among the young who use it as instinctively as one might use a pen and paper, can be considered a communication tool for building this participatory society, albeit one of particular speed and scope. But it is also a critical part of the architecture itself: a change in context, an evolution of possibility, a development in the nature of community.

This chapter is, first, an *account* of the Edinburgh 2010 communications strategy, the real-time reporting and social media conversations surrounding sessions during the conference, and the "user-generated" web of continued collaboration between the home networks of those who connected at the conference and then returned their separate ways – all of which have made not only pragmatic but theoretically and theologically robust use of the Internet. Second, the report addresses the *reception* of Edinburgh 2010's online elements, as they were considered both in conversations on online social networks and in the concerns of delegates at the conference. An Appendix is available – fittingly – on the Edinburgh 2010 website, in which the conference's incorporation of the Internet is analyzed from the perspective of the study process.[5] At the opening of the 21st century, the Church exists in a world that is rushing headlong towards the integration of physical and digital life; this brief report touches on the provisional, and open-ended, manner in which the mission of this Church can move in the unprecedented connectivity of this time.

1) Account

When documenting its strategy in the year leading up to the conference, the communications team of Edinburgh 2010 described its role in the proceedings as follows:

- "To promote the Edinburgh 2010 website [www.edinburgh2010.org] as a global platform for Christians interested in mission related topics → To popularise what is at the moment mainly an academic project.
- To encourage communities and organisations all over the world to set up (ecumenical)

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[4] Tim O'Reilly, "The Architecture of Participation," O'Reilly Media. http://oreilly.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/articles/architecture_of_participation.html (accessed July, 2010).
[5] Since the Appendix is a brief analysis from the perspective of "Mission & Postmodernities," it appears as a document under study theme #3, currently at http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/3-mission-and-postmodernities.html (as of September, 2010).

events on or around 6 June 2010.

- To encourage young people to participate in the project."[6]

However, these practical goals were grounded in a more comprehensive perspective on the importance of communication between conference delegates and the global Church in its diversity: "The aim of the project is a serious, in-depth interaction on both the Missio Dei in general and on specific missiological themes. *It is hoped that this discussion will not just take place among conference delegates, but that it will develop into a global conversation about mission before, during and after the conference.* [emphasis mine]"[7]

This intention to maintain an environment of open-ended interaction between the conference in Scotland and the many home communities of its delegates (along with the first professed communications goal, to strike a balance between academic and popular attention to 21st century mission) highlights a theme of Edinburgh 2010's mindset. Without in any way devaluing the dedication, experience, and expertise of the professional ministerial and academic establishment, the stakeholders of Edinburgh 2010 were committed to soliciting and incorporating lay voices from beyond this establishment, and to using Internet resources as the space for a vibrant conversation on the study process themes that would not be restricted to the nominated delegates. Especially because of the communications priority to promote awareness of and participation in Edinburgh 2010 among communities of the global South, both our website and our adjunct social networking hubs took on additional significance in the effort to include individuals who could not be present in Edinburgh.

It is in this light that Facebook (the dominant online platform for social networking in 2010) was exercised as a primary location for this international conversation that ran parallel to the formal study process. Facebook's value in this effort was threefold: its immense popularity and visibility,[8] its egalitarian cost of participation (free), and its sophisticated group-management software, which allows nested conversations on many different topics to be linked together, so that any individual in any nation who wished to contribute could do so,

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[6] This text and the quote to follow appear in the internal Edinburgh 2010 Communications Strategy documentation, finalized as of September 2009.

[7] The utility of online communication had already been demonstrated through the global nature of the formal study process, in which deliberate and close collaboration was necessary among working groups in multiple continents, and in which materials (written drafts, videos, reference articles, etc.) could be shared instantaneously. The *efficiency* of such collaboration had increased radically – and so, use of the Internet as an in-between space accessible to all constituents was a clear boon to the ecumenical engine of Edinburgh 2010, even before the communications team had designed the space for the general public to participate.

[8] Current estimates put the "population" of Facebook at more than 500 million individuals – if measured alongside physical nations, it would be the third largest, after China and India.

with access to the whole, multi-directional conversation up to that point. Between September and November, 2009, Kirk Sandvig[9] facilitated three "online consultations" on the study process themes. Each two-week-long discussion could be as broad or as focused as the self-selecting online community chose to make it; indeed, each of the three consultations had a distinct character as participants came and went. Furthermore, the insights of each contributor were immediately available to the others – in addition to the questions that launched discussion on each study theme, many responses were themselves picked up and discussed in the open forum. Three examples:

- "In our country… there was bold, audacious missionary expansion. Some pat each other on the back for the success… but it missed God's promptings, calls and cries... because we missed hearing his voice amongst the silenced, the victims of the expansion… Now, we are perhaps listening again, feeling, probing, learning…" (South Africa)

- "I imagine a kind of peer-to-peer friendship based witness, rather than Crusade at Baseball Stadium? …   I imagine a kind of community living in rural manner with self sustainable vegetable garden, rather than Mega Church?" (Japan)

- "One of the keys to many of the issues mentioned in this discussion is in language. As long as the language of discussion, as in this forum, is English, that is enormously empowering to the native English-speaking world. It can severely restrict the freedom and likelihood of initiatives being taken by churches outside of the Western world. … Much of East Africa has not only mother tongues available, but also a regional language; Kiswahili. Yet I would say that 99% or more of foreign missionary inputs into the region come through and are in English." (UK expatriate, living in Kenya)

Both the formal study process, undertaken among individuals who had come through a nomination process in their institutions and denominations, and the informal online consultations, characterized by unrestricted freedom to contribute, interpret, and direct conversation, had a vital place in the preparations for Edinburgh 2010. Since some of the formal Edinburgh 2010 delegates were also participants in the online social network, the conversation was two-way, and the insights of volunteer contributors around the world were able to be a factor in the thoughts of participants leading up to (and during) the conference.

As the communications team shifted its focus from building international interest in Edinburgh 2010 to the task of making the speeches, workshops, and liturgies of the conference program itself accessible to all those who could not attend, it was decided to

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[9] Youth & Mission Coordinator for Edinburgh 2010.

maintain this two-way character of conversation. The Edinburgh 2010 website continued to be a practical venue for sharing delegates' speeches and essays, and for live video broadcasting of sessions and celebrations – but the conversation migrated from Facebook to another online social networking hub that was better equipped to facilitate real-time reporting on the conference's concurrent themed sessions: Twitter.

Twitter's model of communication involves publicly visible posts of only 140-characters, but with a unique system of linking posts by many people on the same topics. Users create *hashtags* (for example: the inclusion of the tag "#th1" signified a post's relevance to Theme 1 of the study process), which can be then employed by other users to make their own comments on the subject. We used the *edinburgh2010* Twitter account to share updates, as they were occurring, from each of the study process workshops at the conference. A member of the communications team was stationed in each of the concurrent sessions, sharing items of interest with those members of the global Twitter community who had chosen to "follow" Edinburgh 2010 (i.e. to have our updates appear, in real time, on their own pages). Examples of insights and questions broadcast from the study process sessions include:

- "Seminaries can too easily become cemeteries - theological hermeneutics must incorporate the freedom of Holy Spirit..." #th6

- 1910's urgency to conquer diversity has paradigm-shifted into 2010's reluctance to smother diversity... #th2

- "Does mission only belong to the Christian Church? Or is it larger than we are?" #th3 (#th2)

- If only the 1910 delegates could witness us at #e2010 importing video from YouTube to hear global voices on postmodern architectures... #th3

Simultaneously, the Edinburgh 2010 website was extracting these Twitter posts and filtering them by theme (using the simple hashtag system we had designed: #th1 for Theme 1, #th2 for Theme 2, #tr7 for Transversal 7, etc…), so that each study process page on the website would display running commentary from within the theme workshops at the conference itself.

Twitter, moreover, is set up to facilitate multi-directional conversation. By including the tag "@edinburgh2010," any user in the world could direct a comment or question to our media stewards at the conference – contributions which we could either respond to or pass on to the delegates at which they were directed. One Twitter user (USA), in response to a

delegate's discussion of mission spirituality during the Theme 9 workshop, suggests: "@*edinburgh2010* A spirituality of mission is outward focused. It contemplates God's presence in the world and not simply in my heart." Another user (Germany), seeking clarification of a delegate's comment, asks: "@*edinburgh2010* What do you mean with Empire? What do you mean with Mammon? Is it the same? What can I do not to be a complice [sic] of Empire?" Many other users, (in South Korea, Jamaica, El Salvador, etc…) sensing that their own networks would gain value from the updates from Edinburgh 2010, "retweeted" our posts so that anyone following them would see these selected posts from the conference. We see here, again, the symbiosis between the human interaction of delegates in a room together and the online community of interested parties, however remote they were.

Unlike in 1910, no "continuation committee" is being established for Edinburgh 2010 – that is, the stakeholders of the event have chosen to leave the achievements and vision of Edinburgh 2010 in the hands and hearts of the delegates as they return to their own contexts. But, while there is no official long-term, institutional successor to Edinburgh 2010, a different sort of continuation has begun to flourish organically on the Internet.

Alongside the many fruits of the Edinburgh 2010 study process, liturgical creativity, and common call to the churches, surely we must name the bonds of friendship that were formed among delegates and staff in Edinburgh. In 1910, maintaining such bonds would require either geographical proximity or tremendous effort, but today's participants have gone their separate ways and rejoined their networks, confident that a new meta-network of ecumenical conversation and collaboration has come into being. Services like Twitter and Facebook are of great value in such an international community: for instance, a new Facebook group, "Generation 2010," already serves as a blank slate in this regard, nothing more or less than a convenient space for assembly, discussion, sharing, and open-ended cooperation between those individuals who met at Edinburgh 2010 and their own local communities, now woven further into contact with one another. For this younger generation and those to follow it, the Internet is not so much a new technology as it is a natural habitat – and a Church that is fluent in online communication and community is neither a novelty nor a sideshow, but rather a visible, practical attempt at mission "from everywhere to everywhere."[10]

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[10] To dig down into the significance of this bountiful and "viral" phrase of modern missiology, see 1) Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A World View of Christian Mission* (London: Collins, 1990); 2) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), Chapter 12: Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm; 3) the Edinburgh 2010 study

2) Reception

Since our focus is on the use of the Internet as a collaborative medium in mission, it is necessary not only to present the manner in which online resources were used by the conference, but also to examine how they were *responded to* by individuals and churches around the world – indeed, "Edinburgh 2010" is the sum of all these directions of communication and commitment, not only the physical coming together for five days in a single city.

Of the online consultations that he coordinated on Facebook, Sandvig writes:

> I was a bit surprised at the level of discussion and debate that was able to be conducted online. I usually prefer to discuss when I see people face to face, but I think the benefits of having these discussions online in such a way is that it allowed people to clearly articulate their well-thought points, without having to worry about being interrupted or cut off. People were free to post their ideas along with everyone else's.[11]

In the records of the online consultations, we see that four or five individuals tended to be the most consistent contributors, offering thoughts on every topic and question. In a communal discussion in person, this sort of enthusiasm would almost certainly come at the expense of less vocal participants, who might have trouble contributing their thoughts in the fast-paced environment. Online, however, this imbalance was evened out. Participants who only posted one comment were not beholden to the pace of the conversation, and could contribute what they wished, when they wished, confident that their posts would be visible to those reading the proceedings at a later time. Some of these isolated comments were taken up and discussed by others, since the agenda was flexible and informal. Likewise, although the conversation took place in English, participants were not penalized for untrained use of the language, as they might have been in a more formal setting of education or publication. The culture of such social networking websites prioritizes content over polished form and grammar, and accordingly, native speakers communicated with non-native speakers without hierarchy.

On Twitter, as we reported live on the conference sessions and press conferences, other users responded directly to us, referenced our updates in their own musings, and shared insights from conference delegates with their own networks. Many of the direct responses

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process documents, e.g. Theme 8: Mission and Unity: Ecclesiology and Mission [Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, ed., *Edinburgh 2010, Volume II: Witnessing to Christ Today* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), p. 206]; and 4) the Edinburgh 2010 *Common Call to the Churches*, Point 7.
[11] Kirk Sandvig, email to author (July, 2010).

were simply encouraging messages in support of the Twitter project[12] or particular questions about conference content. But we also received messages of criticism, which were frequently the most valuable as we endeavored to use our Twitter account as a litmus test of international sentiment about the discussions in Edinburgh. One user challenged the notion that the conference delegates are capable of issuing a "common call" to the churches: "@*edinburgh2010.* The Common Call isn't really common until it is entrusted to, challenged by, and embraced by the faithful people of the world." Another user took issue with an admittedly glib post about understanding other religious traditions before making truth claims about them, and writes: "@*edinburgh2010* What?? The Qur'an in Sunday School? You have to be kidding. It's hard enough to teach Christianity there."

Here we see one of the main shortcomings of using this otherwise useful tool for managing discussions on many topics simultaneously: the limitations of brevity and speed. By condensing the complex and thoughtful contributions of the delegates into 140-character bursts, much subtlety of the thought process that led to particular comments could be obscured, leaving the final product fragmented and seemingly shallow.[13]

Finally, an essential caveat: during the conference, the optimistic ideal of the Internet as an in-between territory with equal access for all was itself called into question. Despite the equalizing factors discussed above, a delegate from Malawi, Fulata Mbano-Moyo, pointed out that the availability and speed of online resources varies dramatically along lines of nationality and wealth. She argued that the extreme slowness and patchy accessibility of the Internet in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere can make the hosting of educational or conversational communities online (or indeed, our proposed use of the "website as a global platform") unintentionally but no less functionally stratified. It is telling that, although users from over 195 countries accessed the website's contents in 2010 alone, use was overwhelmingly concentrated in Europe and North America.[14]

So, does the Internet – a milieu that will only continue to evolve and integrate with

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[12] e.g. "@*edinburgh2010* keep up the good work. We're getting a good flavour of what's going on." Or, in one instance, "@*edinburgh2010* Thanks! I used this tweet in my sermon this morning"!

[13] Moreover, there is a clear consequence to the real-time reporting model that we used to share the fruits of the conference sessions online: because updates were posted as they occurred at the conference, many comments that were intended only as thought experiments or rough proposals for later refinement could easily be misinterpreted as official stances on the issues. Where we had space, therefore, we tried to distinguish in our Twitter broadcast between prepared remarks and first musings – though such space was frequently lacking.

[14] Data were drawn from a report of the Edinburgh 2010 website analytics. India, Australia, and South Korea were exceptions to this trend, although, not surprisingly, these are nations with particularly developed Internet infrastructures – in their wealthier areas.

daily life and culture – represent an unprecedented communicative and collaborative potential for human beings in an ever-more-connected society? Or, is it more akin to an attention-sapping, wealth-prioritizing mall of endless distractions from the earthly and spiritual dimensions of the gospel? Or both simultaneously? These questions are taken up in more depth in the online Appendix, both from the perspective of computer scientists and from that of theologians with a particular interest in the conditions and cultures of postmodernity. Without historical distance, however, we see only the first sparks of the potential and pitfalls to which the 21st century Church will be subject, and we cannot fully comprehend (much less adequately respond to) these issues. They will need to be lived out, habitually discerned, and improvised in faith.

Conclusion

Without fluency in the many modes of online interaction, churches are increasingly isolated and mute relative to their neighbors; at the same time, churches can serve by providing sanctuary from the frenetic pace and noise of network culture. No context is free of perversity, nor empty of sublimity; the Internet, indeed, is awash in triviality and violence, and yet is filled with the multi-directional and unexpected currents of the Holy Spirit. I would suggest that on the Internet, like other settings of communal human flourishing, the gospel and its disciples have a presence that can affirm and defend the life abundant (John 10:10) of our *oikumene*, our one, co-inhabited Earth.

Edinburgh 2010 integrated online technologies and communities not only in its broadcast of conference proceedings but also in its very identity as a multi-denominational, multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-directional conversation about the trajectory of the Church's witness in this century. In this sense, the use of our website and our social networking hubs is a development in both the tools of mission and the character of the ecumenical missionary community. This evolution is incomplete: It makes uses of immature media for communication and incomplete systems for collaboration. Yet, we can be confident that even this modest innovation required of the agents of mission as we came together for Edinburgh 2010 is a confirmation that the mission of the Church continues to be discovered and lived into being.[15] We engage in mission, but never exhaust it.

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[15] cf. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 10 - "The missionary task is as coherent, broad and deep as the need and exigencies of human life."

Appendix: Context & Analysis

Throughout the years of planning for the Edinburgh 2010 conference, it was clear that the Internet would need to feature prominently in both the international study process and the process of conversation between the delegates at the conference and their ecclesial, journalistic, and academic networks at home. And, while online tools and media could have been employed solely for their speed and convenience, the potential was clear for a more comprehensive integration of the Internet's connectivity and community in Edinburgh 2010's vision of 21st century mission. In this Appendix, the conference's incorporation of the Internet is set into *context* by considering a recent work of network theory and some of the insights from Edinburgh 2010's study process group #3, "Mission & Postmodernities." Although I cannot do more here than scratch the surface of the theoretical dimension, I hope to demonstrate that the Internet is not merely incidental to our participation in *missio Dei* in the 21st century, but rather has potential as an international, intercultural, interreligious architecture in which new possibilities for mission are brought to light.

"When we change the way we communicate," writes Clay Shirky in his authoritative opus on social organization and communications technology, "we change society."[16] The growing Internet connectivity that is the context of Edinburgh 2010's online efforts, Shirky argues, amounts to an "epochal" transfer of publishing technologies from a professional class to the general public, in that every individual with access to the Internet has the opportunity to define the extent of his or her visibility to others – and the opportunity to communicate with those others in an open-ended fashion. Our networks of social interaction have always been complex, since, like our primate cousins, we rely on the interactions and relationships among many different groups for our survival and flourishing. Indeed, Shirky proposes, despite the skepticism that many feel towards online networks of thousands of "friends," it is not that our capacity for social complexity is being stretched by Internet technology – rather, the *cost* of interacting in many interlocking, specialized groups is shrinking.[17] In other words, our communications technology is only now catching up to our innate social aptitude.

What does this expanded communicative potential look like? Earlier forms of

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[16] Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (London: Penguin Press, 2008), p. 17.
[17] Ibid., p. 22.

technology have successively increased the distance and speed of both one-to-one and one-to-many communication – either personal conversations (e.g. telephone) or impersonal, one-way broadcasts of information (e.g. television). The participatory Internet, on the other hand, both expands the reach of and erodes the distinction between the conversational and the broadcast forms;[18] we are seeing the tremendous growth of *many-to-many* conversation, which looks less like a simple tube and more like a spectrum of radio frequencies, with many flows of information, of variable volume, and to which anyone can tune in and respond in kind. These flows are simultaneous, rapidly evolving depending on the interests of those participating in them, produced by anyone with Internet access and the will to communicate, and multilayered – hosting not only the publication of new content but also responses to that content, and responses to the responses…

It is only once we consider the ways in which these newer modes of communication are used, however, that their import becomes clear for Christian community and mission in this century. Here again Shirky's summary is valuable.[19] The function of many-to-many communication first distinguishes itself from that of one-to-one and one-to-many communication in the form of group *sharing*, or aggregation. In these settings, such as photo-sharing platforms or basic blog hosting communities, individuals can publish what they wish, usually organized by subject matter, and the websites serve to collect and organize this user-generated content. In this way, the effort by each contributor (and the organizers of the community) is limited, but the effect is to create a new communal resource. Nevertheless, no ideological cooperation or even meaningful interaction between contributors is necessary – each individual chooses how much share, and others can choose to view and respond, or not. The value of such an aggregating online resource for mission is its openness, simplicity, and international scale: Wide varieties of people who might never attend any ecumenical gatherings, who might never have heard about the formal initiatives, who might not have the chance to participate in the meetings of denominational bodies, can nevertheless gather and share information of interest to them and their own work.

The next stage of complexity is networked *cooperation*. In settings in which genuine conversation is taking place, the contributions of each participant have a direct bearing on others, and the resource being created is greater than the sum of its parts. In Internet

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[18] Ibid., p. 86.
[19] The ideas in this paragraph and the following two are drawn from Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, pp. 49-54.

communities with a global reach, the risk is high that civility and relevance will be jettisoned as the network of participants grows in size, but the possibility is also introduced for collaborative production of content. At this point, collective decisions must be made, such as the review of ideas and editing of written material in an online space, which led to Edinburgh 2010's study process reports being released long before the participants came together in a room – or, hypothetically, the decisions on content and priorities that would be necessary if the Generation 2010 group on Facebook were to publish a newsletter on youth and mission.

And third, an online network can evolve to the point of collaborative *action*, which is both more difficult and more fulfilling than collaborative production because it involves integration between the rapid and expanding group communication pathways on the Internet and the myriad needs and benefits of physical communities. For collaborative action organized through online technologies to be successful, a network needs both a form of shared vision and a mechanism for focusing disagreements into creative productivity. Edinburgh 2010 itself required (and continues to require) this sophisticated level of cooperation in order to manage the in-person discussions, liturgies, and collaborative writing of the delegates in Scotland, as well as to inspire the coordination of local activities by partner groups around the world. Through a program called *2010.global*, the organizers of Edinburgh 2010 invited communities of Christians "to gather ecumenically in [their] locality, to thank God for a century of mission, and to wrestle with the challenges of all that lies ahead."[20] Such events, of course, were only the beginning – they enabled "Edinburgh" 2010 to be a network of interlocking international groups, capable of sharing initiatives with one another and tuning in together to the moments of liturgical celebration that orient us towards Christ's mission as it is experienced and articulated anew in the 21st century.

During the conference, a small group from the Mission & Postmodernities workshop identified "the social network" as a resonant ecclesiastical model – characterized by the modes of many-to-many communication summarized above, transparent and flexible in membership, able to draw on the contributions of all its members to develop its priorities, organized but not limited by geography (due to the global horizon of Internet culture), and capable of holding many different commitments together within a common vision of

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[20] From the 2010.global brochure, available at http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/participate/2010global.html (accessed July, 2010).

reconciliation and love for God and neighbor.[21] These traits, indeed, fall within the notoriously uncertain terrain of postmodernity – representing a system of values in which fluidity, polycentricity, and subjectivity are prioritized.[22] A global civil society whose engine is the Internet can be described as postmodern because such social principles predominate in online forms of community and conversation.

The Theme 3 study process group was charged both with considering the ways and contexts in which the Church's longstanding, modern perspectives are facing disorientation and disintegration, and with articulating the possibilities for renewed equilibrium when Christian witness is oriented by postmodern insights. In this task there was ambiguity on two fronts: First, there was no consensus as to whether a postmodern condition is beneficial or detrimental to mission – or whether it is entirely irrelevant – or whether "postmodernity" is even worth defining and distinguishing from a modern mentality that has become aware of its own limitations.[23] Second, little distinction was made between the crises afflicting our modern mentalities and the postmodern overtures to overcome these crises: When Theme 3 participants were asked to contribute and prioritize terms that characterize postmodernity, for instance, four of the five concepts that garnered the most recognition were "fragmentation," "relativism," "search for significance," and "consumerism"[24] – although these are certainly realities that present a challenge to Christian witness today, they are *also* the very challenges that inspire postmodern attempts to fill the experience of subjectivity and contingency with renewed relational commitment and contextually-powerful ethics. The unfortunate presence of the phrase, "lack of commitment," further down the delegates' list of postmodern traits demonstrates our need to further elaborate the distinction between the disenchantment with

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[21] In her own contribution to the conference, visual artist Heather Chester used the vivid imagery of the *tent* to symbolize our contemporary network culture. The tent, in her vision, is a technology of flexible, itinerant, and shared dwelling across many contexts and in many diverse forms of company – a space of "networking, partnerships, and connections."

[22] As contrasted to "modern" values such as linearity, standardization, and the search for objectivity – or "pre-modern" values such as absolute authority, tribal loyalty, and stable social structures. The crux of this regrettably simplistic summary is not that these are universal norms for all people in a given time period – but rather that they are characteristic of worldviews that influence our societies, in variable ways and concentrations. Thus, no one can accurately claim to live "in a postmodern context," since, especially in a global community, significantly distinct perspectives conflict with one another in the same places and times; as Anastasia Vassiliadou put it during Edinburgh 2010's Theme 3 workshop, "We still have an open account with modernity."

[23] See Balia and Kim, ed., *Edinburgh 2010, Volume II: Witnessing to Christ Today*, p. 62 – in which the Theme 3 study process authors address this issue in the introduction to their report.

[24] The term that received the third greatest number of votes of recognition was "fluidity" – although it could be seen as a form of instability, I would argue that this concept holds particular value for a postmodern Christianity that seeks to incorporate the diverse insights and commitments of a global conversation, taking place through constantly changing demographics and technologies.

modernity's sure-principles and grand-narratives (an acutely-felt, anchorless, anguished condition that might best be described as "late-modern") and the emerging, prismatic integrity and creative navigation of this fragmented state (which more accurately represent the early, and open-ended, stages of a functional postmodernity).

This distinction is especially important as we consider whether the "online Church" is merely a form of capitulation to a narcissistic culture, which expects even information of great importance and complexity broken down into sound-bites and lowest-common-denominator opinion pieces confirming whatever we happen to believe anyway – or whether it is a window on a genuine transformation taking place in the missionary mindset and inter-personal architecture of the global ecumenical community. The distinction is important because we need to discern both the extent to which a fully Internet-integrated society can serve the realization of the gospel's reconciliations across our inherited barriers, and the extent to which it risks enabling witness to a gospel that is little more than a spiritual flavor to be consumed "on my own terms."

During the Theme 3 workshop on Mission & Postmodernities, a number of delegates expressed pleas for an alternative to the "culture of Me" so prevalent in online communities. It is a fascinating paradox of today's Internet that its immense potential for inter-community communication and meta-community organization is rivaled by a palpable and usually unchallenged self-centeredness. Some commentators on the culture of the participatory Internet fear that the millions of builders of an online "architecture of participation" may in actuality be sowing "an endless digital forest of mediocrity,"[25] in which the loudest or most appealing opinions bear the most weight, regardless of concern for the expertise or experience of others. In this context, Ernst Conradie of South Africa warned at Edinburgh 2010 that "Consumerism is the fastest growing religion," and suggested that if Christianity is to offer a viable alternative to consumer utopianism, it must not frame the gospel or participation in gospel-oriented communities as products for easy consumption themselves. Other participants in the Theme 3 workshop agreed that the risk of such ego-centric gospel of Me might be even greater online, where communication is divorced from the face-to-face and flesh-to-flesh interactions that characterize the altruistic, other-oriented aspects of human being.[26]

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[25] John-Paul Flintoff, "Thinking is so over," *The Sunday Times*, June 3, 2007, Review of *The Cult of the Amateur*, by Andrew Keen.

[26] Though this is not the place to address the suggestion at greater length, delegates from several different continents proposed that our common creatureliness and ecological embeddedness – "eco-centricity" – are

Indeed, both late-modern and postmodern characteristics of Internet culture are becoming clearer – and coming into conflict with one another. For instance: The Mission & Postmodernities study process authors write of contemporary worldviews[27] in which "everybody has a voice; there is not necessarily any 'right' or 'wrong' voice; it all depends on the point of view. Thus everybody contributes, and everybody is free to pick what is preferred from the patchwork of many voices."[28] This cultural trait, however, is neither late-modern nor postmodern *in itself*: the key is how it impacts the psychology and commitments of those who experience it. A genuinely postmodern Church can recognize the importance of every voice being heard and encouraged to contribute its perspective, however unusual or "heretical," without shrugging and giving free reign to eclecticism in the absence of a monolithic, unifying narrative; rather, such an context can nourish relational maturity and talent for discernment in a fluctuating world.[29]

The study process authors used a particularly rich symbol to encapsulate this Christian maturity in postmodern settings: "The Chinese character '*sheng*', signifying 'holy', consists of three parts: there is a large ear and a small mouth, posing above the character for 'responsibility'."[30] It is this sort of "holy" mindset that will need to predominate in Christian contributions to network culture: many-to-many communication characterized by voracious and open-hearted listening, speaking that need not dominate in order to be significant, and passionate accountability to the diverse flesh-and-blood communities that our virtual communities are connecting and enriching.

We continue to wrestle, each in our own contexts, with the needs of our networked world and the still-gestating fruits of our work together surrounding the Edinburgh process; we will need these connections to remain intact and alive with communication in order to

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values that will become increasingly necessary to counteract the disembodied narcissism of much Internet communication…

[27] Predominantly in European and American nations, but also, increasingly, in the international and intercultural trading ground of the Internet.

[28] Balia and Kim, ed., *Edinburgh 2010, Volume II: Witnessing to Christ Today*, p. 65.

[29] One of the conveners of Theme 3, Rev. J. Andrew Kirk, writes of this need for listening and discernment: "It would be arrogance of the most extreme form to pretend that we already had all the answers to the complexities of human existence in a vast universe. We do not know from what direction we may receive wisdom and knowledge that will enrich our appreciation of the full reality of existence. All this is true. However, it is not necessary to invoke the spectre of post-modernity to make this point; it should be deeply embedded in our self-understanding as the finite creatures of an infinite God. Not only is there always more to learn about God and God's world, there is a responsibility to be open to correction." From his paper, "The post-modern condition and the churches' (co)mission," available for download at http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/main-study-themes/3-mission-and-postmodernities/theme-3-papers.html (accessed August, 2010).

[30] Balia and Kim, ed., *Edinburgh 2010, Volume II: Witnessing to Christ Today*, p. 78.

count Edinburgh 2010 as a success. With the publication of the third Edinburgh 2010 study process volume we are concluding the collaborative action that enabled this conference and its many international counterparts to be created and shared by so many – and moving into the collaborative action necessary to contribute our hands and hearts to *missio Dei*, as we discover its 21st century shape in all our communities of living witness. Such a network – such a Church – of multifaceted global vision and missionary participation is not the same as an *institution*, even one with a high degree of autonomy in its local parts; it is not an edifice that is built and defended to the death but a continually self-rejuvenating "act of love,"[31] which crosses social barriers, uses many languages, and negotiates between the unique insights of each for the blessing of all. Let us commit to this network becoming, in the symbolism of Judeo-Christianity, a glimmer of Pentecost rather than a foundation for Babel.

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[31] Shirky writes of this distinction while describing that massive, collaborative engine of knowledge, Wikipedia – *Here Comes Everybody,* p. 141.