

A PLACE TO BELONG: FINDING MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY PRINCIPLES IN ONLINE STREAMING

Paul Harding, Mount Vernon Nazarene University

The need to belong to a community of meaning is something that lies at the heart of the human experience. At a fundamental level, humans are wired to interact with other humans in meaningful ways, and today's globalized world only amplifies this. In her book on counseling the globally mobile, Lois J. Bushong writes: "We know by intuition and Maslow's hierarchy of needs that each person in this world is a relational being. Because of that, we all need to have a sense of belonging to some place and to some people."¹ Shared interests or a sense of belonging often bring people together, and 21st century technology has broadened this search. Such communal identity can take many forms, and the loss of it is something that has been addressed extensively by Robert Putnam.² Though groups may rise and fall, their core has remained since ancient times. In Homer's *Odyssey*, mythological beings lament hero Odysseus being in isolation: "For too long he has suffered, with no friends, sea all around him, sea on every side..."³ In a group, members gain an identity as part of membership, regardless of any other social, material, or spiritual benefits. But as given communities pass out of fashion, we see the rise of others. To remain relevant, then, communities must often evolve or die out.

The Church

Just as all types of groups bring unique identities to their expressions of community, the Church must also engage and innovate while staying true to its core. For Wesleyans, this means doing community life in ways that reflect our commitment to holiness and the *missio Dei* (mission of God), redeeming Creation through personal transformation. One text, Henry H. Knight III and F. Douglas Powe's text *Transforming Community: The Wesleyan Way to Missional Congregations*, depicts frameworks for community centered around a shared Wesleyan holiness ecclesiology.⁴ Holiness theology can, however, sometimes struggle with relating to or welcoming those who have not yet undergone transformation. In the secular world though, a new type of community excellent at welcoming outsiders has grown up within the last ten years: streaming communities centered around video content creators whose work is streamed over the internet. Since many of these groups do authentic, centered, outsider-welcoming community more effectively than the Church, this essay will focus on three such streaming communities—Leonhart, Critical Role, and Cohn Carnage—highlighting a specific

¹ Lois J. Bushong, *Belonging Everywhere & Nowhere: Insights into Counseling the Globally Mobile* (Indianapolis, IN, IN: Mango Tree Intercultural Services, 2013), 104.

² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Touchstone Books by Simon & Schuster, 2001); Robert Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

³ Homer and Emily R. Wilson, *The Odyssey: Translated by Emily Wilson* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 106.

⁴ Henry H. Knight and F. Douglas Powe, *Transforming Community: the Wesleyan Way to Missional Congregations* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2016).

takeaway the Church can learn from each. This is not to say the Church must begin streaming (perhaps it should, perhaps not), or that streaming is the ultimate form of community, but rather that there are core principles in streaming groups that the Church can benefit from observing.

Impact of Covid-19

As early 2020 saw the rise of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, this need for a sense of community and belonging quickly became apparent to every organization. But reaching non-members always poses a conundrum. In his book on organizational culture *Know What You're For*, pastor Jeff Henderson writes: "We all want to belong. One of the best lessons I've learned at North Point Ministries is to help people feel *a sense of belonging before they believe*. Belonging is a fundamental human need that is often overlooked and untapped by most organizations."⁵ The cultural landscape of 2020 has many groups, especially the Church, looking to new sources to learn how to innovatively "do community." This is evident in the Summer 2020 issue of *Didache*, in works like Andrew Pottenger's '*Insult to The Incarnation*'? *Online Technology And Christian Worship After Covid-19*,⁶ or Jan Duce's *The Body Of Christ: Together In More Ways Than One*.⁷ With gathering restrictions in place for safety reasons, many groups had to either stop meeting or find new ways of meeting at a distance. While new expressions of communities began to emerge as now-virtual meetings of coworkers, religious groups, and other previously in-person groups developed, an existing virtual community continued largely unaffected: streaming communities.

Online Streaming Groups

Many people find virtual community through online outlets centered around an interest, often in groups which allow rapid interaction with other members. In the early days of the internet, this looked like chat rooms, forums, and instant messenger sites, but the spirit of these early innovations has lived on via successive platforms. Today, communities often form around people who produce video content, called "streamers", who have subscribers or followers on video platforms like YouTube or Twitch. While these content producers differ in personality, many have core similarities that earn the loyalty of their communities. Many have found a way to turn their passion into a livelihood by sharing their love for something with the public in an inviting way. All offer viewers a sense of group connection, regardless of location. In a 21st century world focused on purpose, fulfillment, and connection, such communities provide a real sense of meaning to those who join them, particularly if those individuals do not "fit in" with more "traditional communities." As one of those more traditional communities, the Church has a great deal to gain by studying these alternative groups.

⁵ Jeff Henderson, *Know What You're for: A Growth Strategy for Work, an Even Better Strategy for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 178.

⁶ Andrew J. Pottenger, "'*Insult to The Incarnation*'? *Online Technology And Christian Worship After Covid-19*." *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 20, no. 1 (2020): pp. 1-5.

⁷ Jan Duce, "The Body Of Christ: Together In More Ways Than One," *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 20, no. 1 (2020): pp. 1-4.

Leonhart: Showing Accessibility and Inviting Engagement

Can the Church learn from Pokémon cards? From YouTuber LeonHart’s methods, the Church might learn the importance of belonging, accessibility, and engagement with community members and seekers alike. During times of uncertainty and stress, there is often a resurgence of nostalgia, as people reach back to the familiar and comforting. For many born in the 1990s, one such nostalgic hobby is Pokémon, the collectible characters from the anime and card game of the same name. YouTube sensation Leonhart’s followers (known as “the HartSquad”) are a prime example of this. Throughout every video in which he opens sealed packs of Pokémon cards or reveals the condition and rarities of his finds, Leon, the personality behind the LeonHart channel, speaks about making videos as a way to connect with people who share his love for Pokémon. He expresses his desire to bring back nostalgic memories, but also connects to those new to the hobby by using accessible language and weekly content structures. The LeonHart YouTube page’s slogan sums up Lee’s goal perfectly: “More than a channel, it's a community!”⁸ It is no surprise, then, that the Leonhart channel had over 1 million subscribers as of October 2020, bolstered as people staying home in 2020 renewed their interest in Pokémon. What exactly makes watching someone else open trading cards compelling viewing providing an experience of belonging?

Lee does several different things to create a feeling of belonging, maintain interest, and bring viewers back. He demonstrates his passion for the subject matter in every video. A voice actor (and licensed attorney), Lee has a honed ability to capture and hold his audience’s attention by being a dynamic personality. While this strategy sometimes makes streamers come across as fake, Lee shows himself to be genuinely invested in Pokémon and in creating content. He collected and played Pokémon as a kid, getting back into it later in life, so he knows what invites nostalgic resonance. His channel description reads: “Whether you're a former Pokémon cards collector, current Pokémon cards collector or simply wanting a safe family friendly unboxing and opening channel for all; Leonhart is your Pokémon cards home! Make sure to join the community by subscribing!”⁹ How might the Church refine its welcome, connection points, and messages to participants, prospective or existing?

Another element to Leonhart’s success as a community is engaging formats and structure. He regularly polls followers about future content and talks frequently about how he makes videos because he loves to, but also because he knows viewers find meaning and enjoyment in them. His content has common elements, including trying to guess which “Energy” cards will be in a given pack, certain scripts he says every time a given card is revealed (i.e. “Natu, how do you do?” upon finding a “Natu” card), regular topic features like “Guess That Grade” (guessing PSA card grades on finds) and vintage pack openings (videos featuring valuable card packs from the 1990s). Through these measures of familiarity and interaction, Lee ensures that his content connects with viewers and evaluates their preferences should anything not land as successfully. He is connecting, even though he is at a physical distance from viewers and does not even know them.

⁸ <https://tjpnews.com/add-this-youtuber-to-pokemon-playlist/>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/c/Leonhart54/about>

Critical Role: Friendship and Storytelling

Another source of community is the opportunity to step into another world, particularly with others, to experience adventures and triumphs. This is demonstrated by the strength and growth of communities built around role playing games. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the content creators of Critical Role. Originating as a group of voice actors who played tabletop role playing game Dungeons and Dragons together, when the group was invited to stream games on online platform Twitch none of them expected to become a sensation. The ongoing fantasy game story, centered around their personal characters and played out at the table among friends who put pieces of themselves into their honest character acting, was accessible, inviting, and relatable enough that viewers quickly felt part of the story. A tremendous art and cosplay community has grown up in the years since Critical Role started in the mid-2010s, with streams now featuring an intermission with slideshows of the hundreds of art pieces fans send. Eventually expanding to their own YouTube and Twitch communities (and a Kickstarter in which 88,887 backers pledged \$11,385,449 to make a Critical role animated show),¹⁰ Critical Role had over 598,000 Twitch followers, and over 1 million YouTube subscribers as of October, 2020. So what makes Critical Role so compelling? As a community also centered around story, what can the Church learn from it?

For one, Critical Role offers a whole world of entertainment. Dungeon Master Matthew Mercer guides his players through stories taking place in a fantasy world of his own creation. Filled with classic fantasy tropes of wizards, magic, political intrigue, and bands of adventurers, Mercer's world also flips those tropes on their heads. Much like in Scripture, it is often the misfits who are offered a chance to save the world, and races the world looks down upon are given a chance to show who they really are outside stereotypes. Good and evil exist, and good nearly always triumphs, but there are also realistic scenarios in which the choice or person that is good or evil may not be immediately clear. These elements all offer a compelling sense of sensational realism, bringing enough reality to create touchpoints of familiarity that subscribers are engaged in the world while offering enough fantasy and storytelling magic that it gives viewers a chance to live in another world for a few hours. The Church has an incredible (real) story to tell, and even invites individuals to join in it. Can it improve how it communicates this to people, better telling the story of God and us?

Another way Critical Role innovates is that it invites subscribers into a deep friendship. Through varied channel content (Critical Role cast members streaming video games together, a weekly discussion show analyzing episodes, an interview show, and more) the cast offers viewers an invite into their own friendships. Viewers start to feel like they know the actors, in and outside the weekly story. Inside jokes, running gags, and constant gentle reminders of "And don't forget to love each other!" create a strong bond even across the separation and divisiveness that the internet often sees. Ultimately, Critical Role celebrates individuals and their friendships, and the real difference these can make. This is perhaps the clearest takeaway for the church, as Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch describe: An effective missional community: "...will strive for a

¹⁰ <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/criticalrole/critical-role-the-legend-of-vox-machina-animated-s>

type of unity-in-diversity as it celebrates individual differences and values uniqueness, while also placing a high premium on community.”¹¹

CohhCarnage: Using Terms of Inclusion and Belonging

At just over 245,000 subscribers, streamer CohhCarnage’s YouTube channel is somewhat misleading about his true community size. As a Twitch streamer, he has a far larger following on his Twitch Channel¹² (at 1.3 million as of October 2020) where he streams gameplay daily. Cohh’s channel demonstrates the sincere level of interactivity and two-way relationship possible in online streaming communities. He describes his channel as follows: “CohhCarnage and The Cohhilation are a community of people who all share the "Happy, Helpful, Respectful" Mantra. A home for everyone who is looking for a great community of friends and family.”¹³ Even when streaming a single player game, Ben (Cohh’s real name) frequently uses plural language, i.e. “First we’re going to go over here to grab this stuff, then we’ll go back to that other area.” By saying “we”, Cohh makes the viewer feel they’re a part of the action and belong to the community. He interacts with people via Twitch’s chat in engaging ways, thanking people for wishing him well or subscribing and frequently answering viewer questions. Often, these interactions have a real impact on the game i.e. “Hey Cohh, you forgot to open that chest over there.’ Oh hey, I did. Thanks Chat.” Cohh takes suggestions and thanks the commenter, making them feel they matter. The Church often utilizes similar “we” language but can still sometimes fall short in two-way relationships with participants. How might those interactions be better invited?

CohhCarnage’s most standout feature is his creation of a casual, welcoming atmosphere that is still purposeful. He occasionally eats lunch or drinks coffee while he plays video games. He does not shout (much, and then usually out of surprise or joy), tries to limit objectionable content, and has a laid back, calm demeanor. Rather than isolating himself, his office sees frequent incursions by one of his cats, who occasionally step on his desk (or keyboard). His wife, Laina, stops in with their children (both under three as of 2020) to ask him a question, tell him a story, or hand him one of them to hold. He frequently expresses gratitude that subscribers enable him to play games for them as a full-time job. But Cohh’s community also deals with life’s tougher subjects. For example, Cohh shared during a stream that one of the family’s dogs was dying. He streamed some that day, and then, visibly emotional, thanked viewers for their support and let them know that he was quitting earlier than usual for some family time. While streams are a positive and relaxing space, Cohh recognizes he can share even the mundane and tough elements of daily life there. In turn, followers feel they get to know Cohh as a real person. The bond of community is strengthened such that many people subscribe, paying monthly for content they could access for free, since doing so enables Cohh to continue. The Church, whose people can sometimes be less-than-honest about real struggles, might learn from this transparent approach. Many people are looking for real connection with others, even in mundane or hard things, rather than someone presenting themselves as perfect.

¹¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 39.

¹² <https://www.twitch.tv/cohhcarnage>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/c/CohhCarnage/about>

Common Core Element: Marks of Belonging-

Each of the communities listed above has above 1 million followers. What are some common elements among them that are useful for those seeking to develop new expressions of community? What can the Church of today learn? First, it can gain a new outlook on community and language. The thing that distinguishes many streaming communities is a unique collective term for those who are a part of that community. Traditionally, this has looked like society's popular labels of yesteryear: the Scouts, Loyal Order of Moose members, etc. Today, this has extended into online virtual communities in a way that is more inclusive than exclusionary. Like the Leonhart channel's HartSquad mentioned above, many online communities have collective names. Critical Role's community members are collectively called "Critters", while those who follow CohhCarnage are termed "The Cohhilitation". This collective identity concept is even one the Church already has experience with. Acts 11:26 speaks about the term "Christian" first being used for disciples at Antioch, while followers of "the Way" was used before that.¹⁴ We must ask, however, whether "Christian" is seen by the world as inclusive, loving, and welcoming, or exclusionary? The Wesleyan Church is a strongly missional one, driven by its commitment to bear God's image to their neighbors for the good of the individual and the world. How might its people communicate who they are in a welcoming way to those neighbors? Can outsiders join a Church community as readily as they can the Cohhilitation or HartSquad?

A second key element of belonging the Church might observe from streamers is learning to identify with one's communities through daily life, offering opportunities for connection. Many streaming communities offer merchandise to let members express their membership via their clothing, coffee mugs, notebooks, etc, and through going out into the world. Someone wearing a Critical Role hoodie can take their community membership out of the virtual world into the real one when a stranger in a restaurant recognizes it and starts a conversation. Others encourage real-world follow-ups. When Hartsquad members are encouraged to visit their local game shop to buy some Pokémon cards, for example, they connect with others around a shared interest, offline. In this way, virtual streaming communities cross into territory outside their platform, as members show membership in action during their daily life. In Christian terms, this might be called being more missional. Can our Church communities do this? Do they already? Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch believe they must if the church is to adapt: "If the church is living an intriguing new lifestyle that is so marked by goodness that it makes the gospel attractive, then to truly be effective it follows that this lifestyle must be lived in close proximity to not-yet-Christians."¹⁵ Ultimately, then, the Church's people can create a sense of community, in person and online, through their everyday words and actions. Many streaming communities are doing it effectively. Is it time for us to ask them to teach us how, even if we do not use the knowledge to stream but to simply better our congregations and their expressions of community and reaching outward?

¹⁴ Acts 9:2, NIV.

¹⁵ Frost and Hirsch, 78.

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