

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
October 23, 2011

Revelation 2:1-7 and 3:14-22
“The Kaleidoscopic Church – Part 3”

The comic page of the San Francisco Chronicle last Thursday carried at least seven cartoon strips that referenced the world of computers and thus tied in with the first part of today's sermon.

“Time” magazine ran a cover story on computer icon Steve Jobs. Suellen and I strode by an Apple store in downtown San Francisco recently and it was jam-packed with people from all over the world. I walked through the store and thought: “This is where it is happening.”

It's happening in the church. There are cyber, internet and online churches scattered all over the wired and wireless world.

Online churches refer to a wide variety of ways that religious groups are using the internet to facilitate its religious activities, including worship services. The services are similar to those on TV so they have no appeal to me although they could work for the homebound and estranged members of churches.

Many internet churches are descendants of brick-and-mortar churches, some are still connected to traditional churches and some are totally independent. They offer members an alternative to traditional meetings within a church building.

Christians are also increasingly using social networking sites but criticism of these sites has grown due to the prevalence of questionable content and issues of safety.

As Internet usage continues to thrive, Christians are using websites, blogs, social networking sites, media services, chatrooms, discussion boards, and other electronic means to provide social connection, education, and enrichment of their faith.

One site states: “We can post things about the Bible from our homes, ask questions, give opinions and interact with other Christians all over the world 24/7/365 and not just on Sundays and Wednesdays. Denominational walls are coming down.”

I visited some of these sites this week and many have scary theology and can easily draw in uncertain and vulnerable seekers. While there is some value in these sites I find many of them theologically questionable.

Thus, we value membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA) or other mainline denominations whose theology align with the best liberal arts education in the country and offer a safe and personal haven for its adherents. I'd visit the websites of mainline churches before I throw myself naked to the web.

Tapping into the Cyberchurch and sound online theology can be valuable and it is definitely a wave of the present and future so long as it doesn't draw people away from a real life church. Cyber churches are widely criticized for their lack of "human connection." So we celebrate our access to the web but we celebrate more our participation in a real life church such as ours.

This sermon is the third in a series of the kaleidoscopic church. We see the church as through a kaleidoscope and appreciate its color and form when held to the light of God in Jesus Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Real life, nitty-gritty, human interactive and personally relational churches have existed from the beginning as affirmed in the two readings from Revelation. I chose the first and last of the seven churches mentioned there. John's churches are a kaleidoscope. He has affirmations and criticisms of the churches as he would of ours today.

There are wonderful things to say about this church and there's room for growth. We wouldn't be a vital community if there wasn't room for growth and we wouldn't be here if we didn't appreciate the beauty of this Body of Christ, the church.

We will conclude the kaleidoscopic church series next week with words on the Reformation and the Reformed branch of the church since it will be "Reformation Sunday."

The first in this series spoke about the church's history and painted the church in broad strokes, last week we addressed the influence of immigration on the church and the current debate, and today we fill in some of the gaps with a word on the Cyberchurch (which we just did), the post denominational church and the interreligious impacts on the church.

The post-denominational church: Suellen would not be here today if her Methodist De Pauw University mother married her Catholic Notre Dame University boyfriend. They grew up together in East Chicago and planned to get married after graduation. The man's parents wanted Suellen's mother to convert to Catholicism and Suellen's mother's parents thought it wasn't necessary so the relationship broke up and Suellen's mother later married her Presbyterian father.

Things are different today. The US has nurtured associations of denominations such as the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals that foster toleration among different expressions of the faith. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is very accepting of other denominations and is a member of the National and World Council of Churches as well as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Developing from these alliances and other factors, such as denominationally mixed marriages and neighborhood concerns, is that we are now in a "post denominational" situation where religious identity has lost its place in individuals' lives. It is relatively easy

for an Episcopalian to join a Lutheran church. Even conversion from Catholic to Protestant or visa versa no longer carries the weight it did fifty years ago.

Fundamentalist churches are emphasizing non-denominational worship expressions. Fancy rock bands attract people to these churches but the theology is generally stifling and restrictive.

Most Americans have an eclectic faith, one stitched together from many different threads of tradition and contemporary ideas and attitudes. Mainline churches learn from each other and adopt mutually acceptable practices.

Still, there are positive aspects to denominations. They help provide religious identity amid the pluralism of belief. They provide needed resources for local communities of faith, such as facilities for training ministers, for publishing curriculum resources, and for overseeing certification procedures.

I'm thankful that there is an expression in the kaleidoscope that appeals to me and my understanding of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus which leads to my final statement of the kaleidoscopic church. It's the church among the many other religions in the world.

In Marin we value our relationship with other religious communities nurtured primarily by the Marin Interfaith Council. Carol Hovis, a Presbyterian minister directs it and Lori Woods, who worships with us, administers the office.

The religious landscape in the US is no longer dominated by Christianity although Christianity still outnumbers other religions. The best we can do with these religions is to take them seriously, establish relationships and dialogue with them. We can even join together in actions of mutual concern. MIC fosters these things.

We can learn from each other. A recent prayer retreat sponsored by MIC was led by a Catholic sister from Dominican University and a Zen Buddhist monk from the Green Gulch Zen Center. It took place at the Brahma Kumaris Anubhuti Meditation and Retreat Center in Novato. In the course of the day the monk mentioned that he grew up a Christian and although he has spent most of his adult life in meditation as a Buddhist he occasionally prays to God.

Having said this he was curious about prayer and asked about its efficacy. The sister, others and I offered insights and the monk expressed appreciation with what was given. We affirmed his insights and practices of meditation. Buddhists can learn a lot from us about prayer and we can learn a lot from them about meditation. From our perspective, both are important for a fuller relationship with the divine.

A note on religious dialogue: Most people in the dialogue say that the best conversations happen when the parties come to the dialogue with respectful, solid, thoughtful and enthusiastic convictions about their own faith. In the dialogue everyone becomes wiser and relationships grow.

We live in a Cyber church, post-denominational and religiously pluralistic kaleidoscope and yet we belong to a kaleidoscopic pattern that is ours, the Presbyterian Church (USA) nurtured here at Redwoods and that feels wonderfully secure and meaningful. This church is our home and we stand at its windows and look through the kaleidoscope into the light of Jesus Christ and we soar in our faith and praise God. Amen.