

New Book Describes History-Making Church in the Virtual World

First UCC Second Life is the first church with full standing in a mainline denomination to exist only in virtual reality

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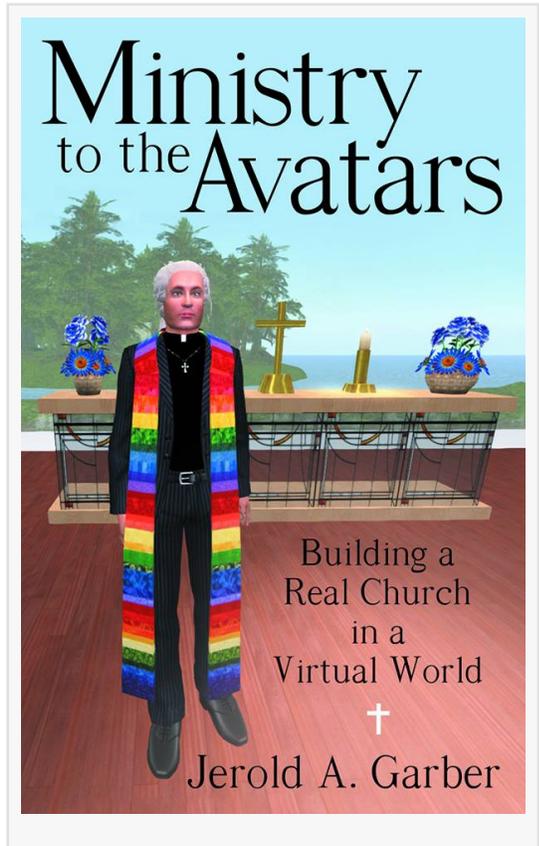
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NEW BOOK DESCRIBES HISTORY-MAKING CHURCH IN
THE VIRTUAL WORLD

The world is changing rapidly, and perhaps the most compelling evidence of this change is found in the way people use technology to access services that formerly required an in-person visit. Now, for the first time, a real church with denominational standing is as close as one's computer. In *Ministry to the Avatars: Building a Real Church in a Virtual World*, author and reverend Dr. Jerold A. Garber shares the transcendent story of [First United Church of Christ Second Life](#)—a virtual church designed and built in [Second Life](#), a 3-D virtual world with over thirty-six million individual accounts and over one million active users each month. While it began as an experiment in faith and inclusivity, First UCC SL today has full standing in the Eastern Association of the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, and it is the first church in a mainline denomination to achieve full standing while having no physical property or location.

Since its founding, First United Church of Christ Second Life has grown into a multifaceted, vibrant ministry with a 365-day-a-year presence in Second Life, and it is also a member of the Open and Affirming Coalition of the UCC, an association of churches affirming the full inclusions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons in the church's life and ministry.

Garber recounts an example of the vibrant ministry possible in Second Life: "I spent countless hours listening to stories of real life exclusion, discrimination and outright cruelty. One resident avatar I know as Stacey said that real life at work had become intolerable. Alcoholic parents had retreated from really being in touch at home, and life seemed utterly bleak. I listened. Listening is what ministers do. I am not a therapist. I could not "treat" a disorder. But I could listen. At the end of a long evening (our two avatars were sitting in a virtual hot tub to chat) I simply asked, 'So, what decisions are you postponing?' Weeks went by. When next I heard from my friend Stacey she had news. She had made plans to move out of her parent's home into a place of her own. She had found ways to cope with the pressures at work and not let them get her down by being resolute about who she was. I asked her what had happened to help her make the real life changes. The answer came back in two words, 'You listened.' I heard that. I came to understand in that simple answer perhaps I was hearing something else. I became convinced that I really was meant to keep on listening with a purpose. And soon a ministry, a real church, was born"



Jerold A. Garber has served real-world UCC churches as both an interim and settled minister. Ordained in the United Church of Christ, he founded First United Church of Christ Second Life in recognition of the needs of marginalized groups who are in Second Life to find places of faith that are genuinely welcoming of everyone. Garber is a former teacher, public broadcasting executive, and radio newsman. He lives and works in Southern California's Mojave Desert. Church website: <http://www.firstuccsl.org>

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