

REFLECTIONS ON ONLINE COMMUNION

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While online worship has taken place for years, many more congregations of the Church of Scotland (and other parts of the church) have been meeting for worship online since the coronavirus restrictions on gatherings came into force. Such services have prayer, the reading of scripture, preaching, music and singing. Some have also included the sacrament of Holy Communion. A minister may have conducted the service in his or her home, using liturgies with or without adaptations, while people in their homes have received communion in bread and wine which they had prepared.

The Theological Forum has been considering this practice, new to many in the Church, of online communion, and offers these reflections. We do not offer these to lay out right or wrong approaches or even to offer firm guidance, but rather to explore some theological issues which may be brought to the surface when people consider online sacraments. And we do so conscious that this is a new and quickly evolving reality for the church, and that new insights will emerge as we continue in this extraordinary season.

Online worship generally, and online Communion in particular, has provided a profoundly moving experience of community for people. Under the current restrictions of physical distancing (often called social distancing) and self-isolation, a large proportion of the population is spending the day indoors, able only to be with those who share their household. For people who live alone (but not only them), the possibility of isolation is obvious. Online worship by means of video-conferencing (eg Zoom) has provided a strong sense of community, with people able to see and hear their fellow church members and others in real time, worshipping and praying together. Others have watched recorded or partially or fully live services produced by their own churches and streamed (eg on YouTube or Facebook).

Part of the meaning of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the uniting of the body of Christ in the shared meal. Online communion brings to the fore in a significant way that meaning of the sacrament.

It also makes clear the spiritual presence of Christ. We celebrate communion in the time of the ascended Christ. We do not share a meal with the physical Jesus as did the disciples. Instead, we share in his real presence made spiritually present for us by the Holy Spirit, “the Word truly held forth and received in material signs”. (Joint Report on Sacramental Ministry, General Assembly 2019, 2.1) In our own homes, and separated physically from our sisters and brothers, we may experience the presence of Christ no less than when in church. Indeed, some may experience that presence in a particularly vivid way online.

It is at least arguable that the essence of Holy Communion – the ongoing reception of the forgiving grace of God in the physical and nourishing signs of Christ’s body and blood – is even more important in a time when other ways in which we apprehend God’s love may be limited, such as work, meeting friends and family, acts of discipleship and church fellowship. As the Forum (with others) reported to the General Assembly last year: the sacraments “matter profoundly because it is in and through them that the grace of God is signified and the Word of God revealed.” (Joint Report on Sacramental Ministry, General Assembly 2019, 2.13) We participate in sacraments “in order that we may share in the very life of God revealed through Christ and by the Holy Spirit.” (Joint Report on Sacramental Ministry, General Assembly 2019, 2.14)

There are reasons why some will hesitate before adopting online celebrations of Holy Communion. For some the single physical location of the congregation is essential, conveying the theological insight that God took human flesh in one single physical human being. A dispersed congregation is arguably not a congregation at all.

And yet the experience of people worshipping together is often quite otherwise, that the bonds of unity seems all the stronger in an online service when physically prevented from congregating in church.

And it has been argued that this time is so difficult, so far from God’s kingdom-community, that we should refrain from online communion, which seems almost to hallow our being separated. Certainly this argument has a certain force against online worship being normative. But at this time, we are considering an abnormal situation, worship and sacraments *in extremis*. We can still lament the coronavirus, and the suffering it is bringing across the world

directly and indirectly, while gathering in spite of it, as a community which prays for God's reign to come, which eats and drinks together in anticipation of the heavenly banquet, and which trusts in God's love which reaches out to creation in infinitely creative ways.

One particularly tricky point which we have explored is whether the online communion needs to be in a live worship setting, or whether it could be recorded. If recorded, that would mean a potentially significant difference in time between the minister conducting the service, breaking the bread, and offering the elements, and people receiving. This could be a matter of minutes, or hours, but possibly days or months, depending on how long the recording was available. We may hesitate over this: it seems to interpose a more significant temporal gap between minister and congregation than the physical space (which may be thousands of miles).

But is this temporal gap theologically significant? In the recorded service, Christians hear the word in scripture and sermon, see the word held forth in bread broken and cup lifted, and hear the minister offer the gifts in which the grace of God is signified. Should we not also say that such Christians share in the very life of God by the Holy Spirit as they receive? In a conventional service, there is a gap of some seconds and often minutes between minister's words and people eating and drinking – is a longer span of time in a recorded service of particular significance? After all, we believe that Christ is made spiritually present to us in the sacrament, but from *eternity*, and as a foretaste of life *eternal*.

We may also reflect on the difference between video-sharing software, which allows the congregation to see and hear each other, and streamed services in which the congregation do not see or hear each other, but only see and hear those leading the service, though they may communicate by writing into and reading a live chat function before, during and after the service, or even emailing the leader of worship during it (eg prayer requests). These different forms of participation may well lead to varieties of experience in worship. But it is not clear that we should see great theological significance in these alternatives. Seeing or hearing others who receive communion is not essential, as we know from the Church's inclusion of those who are visually impaired or have hearing loss. It may be that seeing other members of the congregation on a screen acts as a helpful and moving proxy for the usual reformed practice

of the congregation sharing the elements one to another, but it would only be a proxy. Receiving the bread and wine when only able to see and hear the minister would still be communion in its most important sense of the Spirit's making Christ present. After all, when ministers take communion to someone who is unable to go to church, it is not always possible to have others such as family members or an elder there.

These are novel and involved issues, with varieties of evolving practice and experience in a rapidly-changing technological scene, and we would anticipate further insights as people across the church reflect on their new experiences.

It may be helpful to look at some of the typical liturgies in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated in the Church. If there are significant changes required, that may indicate that there are theological shifts in online celebrations which should be noted. We take the orders in the current *Common Order* from 1994 in turn, and note any changes which may ideally be made:

First and Fourth Order: no obvious changes need be made.

Second Order:

In the prayer of thanksgiving, the words "this one bread and this one cup" may be better recast as "what is eaten and drunk" or some other phrase.

In the communion, when the minister says "Eat this, the bread of heaven" and "Drink this, the cup of salvation" these could be recast as "Eat the bread of heaven" and "Drink the cup of salvation."

Third Order:

In the communion, when the minister says:

"This cup is the new covenant... Drink from it, all of you", it could be recast as "This is the new covenant... Drink of it, all of you."

Fifth Order: any changes could be in line with those for the Third Order.

It is apparent that the words of almost every part of the communion service require no change when people are in a different physical space from the minister: including the prayer of confession, Gloria, scripture readings, sermon, creed, prayer of intercession, invitation, the grace, unveiling of the elements, narrative of the institution, thanksgiving, Lord's Prayer and breaking of bread.

Where there may ideally be small changes in wording are in the taking of bread and wine and in the communion itself, so as not to imply that only the bread and wine in the minister's home is being set apart, but that rather the bread and wine in every communicant's location as part of the online service is similarly set apart to this holy use and mystery.

There will of course be other differences from celebration in church or in another single physical setting. People will not receive bread from the same loaf which the minister broke, nor will they drink from the same cup from which the minister drank. But precedent for this is found in more conventional locations where there are many loaves or wafers or indeed bread already cut including gluten-free bread, and many cups large and small, some of which may have alcoholic wine and others non-alcoholic juice.

If alone, people can only serve themselves, which would not happen in church. And the peace can only be exchanged by touch within a household, but imaginative ways of exchanging the peace can be done in words and actions online.

Nevertheless, these changes while marking our physical separation from each other at this time, do not seem to be of the essence in the celebration of communion. And so, since our liturgies require almost no changes, that offers evidence that online Holy Communion is not much different theologically from more typical celebrations.

The question may arise as to whether church law gives permission for online celebration of sacraments. The relevant act is Act V 2000, the Consolidating Act anent the Sacraments (as amended by Act IX 2003). The Act sets out that "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper shall normally be celebrated in Church at stated times determined by the Kirk Session." It is clear that these are not normal times: physical distancing has led to churches (amongst many institutions) doing much of their activity in novel ways. Furthermore, the Act goes on to say that "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper may be administered privately in Church or elsewhere at the discretion of the minister." Online services may be public – open to all – or private – open perhaps to minister, member and their elder, and clearly are taking place elsewhere than in church. It seems to us that while the act does not explicitly permit online celebrations of Holy

Communion, it certainly does not forbid them, particularly in these abnormal times.

A word about the sacrament of Baptism may be appropriate here. Would the principles laid out above also apply to Baptism? One could imagine an online celebration of Baptism with prayer, scripture and sermon, confession of faith, creed and prayer for the sending of the Holy Spirit upon water in the home of the person being baptised, the pouring of water (though not by the minister), the words of baptism said by the minister in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, blessing and promises, congregational commitment and Lord's Prayer. If bread and wine in houses distant from the minister can be set apart from all common uses to this holy use and mystery, so too surely can water. However, we would envisage very few situations where the adult or family of the child would not prefer to wait until such time as there could be a gathering in church of a fuller community in person. Nevertheless, Act V 2000 does make provision for "situations of emergency" which allows a minister to act in accordance with his or her pastoral judgment, or even for the baptism to be administered by someone not ordained. It is at least arguable that an online baptism may also be a way to respond to a situation of emergency.

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