



# **Resource for Theological Discernment**

**Online Gathering for  
Worship with Holy  
Communion**



# Resource for Theological Discernment

## SACRAMENTS

The United Methodist Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.

## HOLY COMMUNION

The United Methodist Church acknowledges that the continuing presence of Christ with his people is signified and sealed by Christ in the Lord's Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church. In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptized people on their way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom. Thus the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.

The Basis of Union (1992 Edition), Paragraphs 6 and 8

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## Introduction

During the current period of isolation resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak, congregations and faith communities have been using and experimenting with a variety of ways in which communities may continue to be nourished and their worship, witness and service may be maintained. A question which has naturally been raised regularly in discussions regards the provision of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

This paper is designed as a resource for Theological Discernment for Ministers and Church Councils who are considering Online Gatherings for Worship with Holy Communion. It is not a comprehensive theological treatise on the issue of Holy Communion, but rather highlights some of the key points which will enable Ministers or Church Councils to grapple with the theological, pastoral and practical considerations necessary to make a decision regarding whether or not to offer such services.



Should Ministers and Church Councils decide that they wish to offer services of Online Gathering for Worship with Holy Communion, there are a set of [Guidelines](#) which have been prepared by the Assembly to enable this offering.

### **Alternatives to Communion in the current circumstances**

In the current situations there are at least three potential options for communities of faith in addressing this issue. The first two options are readily available to congregations within our current liturgical guidelines and understanding of the Sacraments.

Firstly, congregations might be encouraged to simply wait out the current period without a celebration of Communion during this period. It can be noted that the expectation of frequent celebrations of Holy Communion is relatively new in our tradition. There are plenty of precedents for congregations having long periods of time between sacramental celebrations – from the Quarterly Communion, to the “Bush Christening”. Some thought might be given to encouraging congregations to enter into this “fast” creatively, especially in rural areas where broadband access can be problematic.

Importantly, more than simply ‘enduring’ this period, congregations can be encouraged, especially since this is the liturgical season of Lent, to see this period of ‘going without’ as a spiritual discipline, a time of ‘fasting’ which encourages us to hunger for Jesus the Bread of Life, to pray for those who are physically and spiritually hungry and to pray for the body of Christ both local and universal. Such ‘fasting’ may grow our longing for community both digital and in person when it is allowed, and our desire to gather around the table and have the body and blood of Christ placed in our hands by another person.

Congregations may decide that “We value our communion so much that we will suspend all communion services until we can do it together again. So, by not celebrating an online communion, we don’t reduce the significance and importance of communion; quite the opposite, we enhance it.”

Naturally, the extent to which this is seen as a helpful and healthful approach may well be shaped by the length of time for which the current restrictions are maintained – a long enough fast becomes starvation!

A related second option available to congregations, is the use of particular liturgies which do not replace the Sacrament of Holy Communion, but which provide a specific time within worship for the remembrance and celebration of the saving activity of God through Jesus Christ. Such liturgies may recognise and even lament the absence of the Sacrament, but nonetheless remind us that Christ remains present with us, the Spirit connecting the people of God across distance despite our current circumstances, and look forward in anticipation to the time when we will once more be able to celebrate Holy Communion. One such liturgy is the “[Liturgy of Empty Hands](#)” which has been developed by Rev Dr Amelia Koh-Butler and has been adopted by a number of international ecumenical bodies. Another example would be the liturgy



of the [“Love Feast”](#) as used by a number of denominations including the United Methodist Church. One creative suggestion would be to celebrate a love feast with the addition of an empty chalice and empty plate as a visual reminder of the elements and the people who are not there.

Despite the very real, imaginative and life-giving possibility of these options for communities of faith, there are still many communities of faith within the Uniting Church who may desire a way of continuing to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion and Ministers and Church Councils will need to make the decision as to whether to offer Online Gatherings for Worship with Holy Communion. The rest of this paper will be focussed on the issues to be considered in making that decision.

### **Central theological questions**

The Methodist Church in the UK, in a paper which decides against giving permission for communion in online contexts, highlights three essential issues – (1) the gathering of the people of God, (2) the issue of presiding, and (3) the elements (“the body and blood of Christ”).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada, in a ruling which allows communion “with the aid of technologically mediated presence”, focusses more narrowly on the issue of the presence of the body of Christ in the community of faith, and also makes the point that in the Reformed tradition, “The right and regular celebration of the sacraments is a mark of the church and access to communion is therefore a fundamental aspect of our understanding of the church and its local expression.”

The West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church, in allowing and providing guidelines for ‘online communion’, focusses the greatest attention on the pastoral need and the call to provide a response “In Extremis” (that is, in an extraordinary time of great distress and need).

### **The Gathering of the People of God**

In describing the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the Basis of Union speaks of “the continuing presence of Christ with his people ... signified and sealed by Christ in the Lord’s Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church.” (Basis of Union Para 8) The Uniting Church affirms the presence of Christ in the gathered community and one of the key issues at hand in this circumstance is whether groups of people joining together in online settings can be seen as authentic gatherings (ekklesia). Many people in this current context will have experienced groups who, having shifted their work online, continue to enjoy rich relationships of working and learning, collaboration, mutual support and care, and service and outreach. It can be noted that the UCA’s provision of the approved liturgy for “Communion Beyond the Gathered Congregation” implicitly acknowledges a definition of the community which is at least to some extent extended in time and place.

On the other hand, the theological significance of physical embodiment is a key concept within Christian theology. The central theme of the Incarnation itself shapes our understanding of



the importance of embodiment in our thinking. Specifically, there is something important captured by the fact that the sacraments are physical ways of encountering God's grace, using water, wine and bread. Moreover, the physical gathering of the people has been an important part of our tradition's understanding of the presence of the body of Christ and the symbolism of the presence of the gathered community may be impaired where the community is only present in non-physical ways. Some may feel that "There is a difference between Community and communion ... we can speak of online communities [but] Communion has to do with ... a spiritual union... we are bodies, we are also spiritual creatures. There is no spirituality without the body."

### **Presiding at the Lord's Table**

One of the issues highlighted by UK Methodists in making a decision regarding this matter was the place of the Presider at the Sacrament. While clearly electronic means allow for the Presider to lead the congregation verbally, there was concern that three of the four "acts of presidency" would be undertaken by those in remote settings, namely taking the bread and wine and preparing them for use, breaking the bread, and distributing the elements.

On the other hand, the Presider would indeed be able to undertake what the UCA tends to speak of as "the manual acts", but only in a representational and symbolic sense, that is, with the elements present with the Presider. However, it may be noted that there is already a sense in many UCA churches that the manual acts are done only with a symbolic and representational set of elements. For example, in many congregations, the Presider may break a loaf or raise a cup, but then the congregants partake of bread which has been previously sliced and cut up, or individual cups which were previously poured. So, in the case of an online Communion, it does not seem presumptuous to suggest that the manual acts carried out by the Presider on the elements which are with the Presider can symbolically represent the consecration to this task of all the elements present in different places with online participants.

Some traditions, in wrestling with the dilemma posed by the current context have suggested that in line with ancient practice, the 'household' could be seen as the basic "unit of the believing, teaching church" and that celebration of Communion might take place in the household setting presided over by an appropriate member of that household, perhaps a parent. The guidelines provided by the Assembly do not envisage extended permission to preside to those not currently authorized by the Church by their ordination or by the Presbytery as Lay Presiders, but certainly there is a sense of appropriateness in thinking about individual households, led by a Presider remotely, taking part in the Sacrament together.

### **The Body and Blood of Christ**

Another reason for caution concerns the issue of the elements being taken by congregants being separated geographically. In the decision of the UK Methodist church, the unity and integrity of Christ's body was seen as being signified by a single loaf and a common cup, or if this is not practical for a variety of reasons, at least by their proximity together on the table, being taken and prepared together and having the prayer of thanksgiving said over them. The



physical remoteness of separate supplies of bread and wine contradicts the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ.

On the other hand it may be noted that this physical unity is not seen as being contradicted by the fact that thousands and millions of communities across time and space celebrate Communion together, entirely isolated from one another yet joyfully proclaiming that they are joining together with the faithful of every time and place and even the choirs of angels!

In the words of a Uniting Church theologian, “The UCA does not isolate the bread and wine as the unique location of Christ’s presence. Although we affirm Christ’s presence in the bread and wine, this affirmation is part of his presence among the people and the actions of the liturgy. Along with other strands of the Reformed tradition, we do not seek to explain that presence with theories of transubstantiation or consubstantiation.” Thus, a question for Ministers and Church Councils to consider may be whether in the scenario of Online Gatherings for Worship with Holy Communion, they can comfortably affirm Christ’s presence in the bread and wine, among the people and in the actions of the liturgy.

Interestingly, Lutheran theologian Dr Deanna A. Thompson (St. Olaf College, Director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community) in making the case for virtual Communion, makes the point that fundamental to our central understanding of the body of Christ is that it is indeed ‘virtual’ – Christ is present virtually through the bodies and actions of his followers.

### **The Pastoral Need**

We have already noted above the responses of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, highlighting the importance in the Reformed tradition of maintaining access to Communion and of the West Ohio Conference UMC’s response as a pastoral response to a situation of extreme difficulty. Anyone who looks on social media will see that these same concerns are driving many within our Uniting Church to ask questions about how the pastoral need for the sacraments may be met. Clearly this is a live issue within our immediate context!

One UCA Minister in discussions concerning this matter referred to Wesley’s discussion of the ‘**extra-ordinary**’ and the calling to step outside of the ordinary, responding to the extraordinary circumstances which we encounter from time to time, and went on to make the strong statement, “The Church **must provide** for the celebration of the sacrament to its people.....it cannot deny that sacrament to them unless it simply cannot do otherwise....”

The words of Brazilian theologian and liturgist Cláudio Carvalhaes (Associate Professor of Worship, Union Seminary) also seem particularly apposite. “One thing for me is clear: if we call the sacraments the gifts of God to the world, and some will call them even means of grace, we cannot say “nope you can’t have it now.” Be it for whatever good and sound theological reason you might have. During a crisis, we are not supposed to protect tradition but to bless the people.”



## Further Issues for Consideration

The Guidelines provided by the Assembly affirm that it is a matter for the Church Council with the Minister to make decisions regarding the form of the elements and make the point that appropriate communication to remote participants before the service, concerning their preparation of the elements is also important.

## SOME FURTHER RESOURCES FOR DISCERNMENT

### UNITING CHURCH RESOURCES

1. J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, Uniting Church Press, 1980
2. Robert Gribben, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*, Uniting Church Press, 1990
3. Paul Walton, "A Very Short Guide to Uniting in Worship", Worship Working Group, in Christopher Walker (ed). "Being and Doing Church – A Uniting Church Perspective", The Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2015
4. Geoff Thompson, "Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many, Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union", Chapter Four, Uniting Academic Press, 2016

### RECENT ARTICLES IN THE LIGHT OF COVID19 AND ONLINE WORSHIP

1. Jack Jenkins, "Coronavirus and the Church: As Parishioners Remain Housebound, American Christian Clergy Debate online Communion" SIGHT Magazine, 28 March, 2020
2. Kathy Smith, "Church Polity and Online Sacraments in the Christian Reformed Church."
3. Rev Gregory Neal, "Holy Communion Over the Internet", Reflections on an Experiment in Sacramental Practice.
4. United Methodist Church: Discipleship Ministries, "The Online Communion Dilemma"
5. Papers from the Online Communion Task Force members of The United Methodist Church
6. "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry", Faith and Order Paper 111, World Council of Churches