
The Virtual Body of Christ Post-Pandemic: Called to Continue Offering the Sacrament of Holy Communion in Online Worship

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I used to be a digital skeptic, convinced that virtual connectedness was not able to foster meaningful relationship-building among us. Getting diagnosed with incurable cancer, however, led me to reconsider my assumptions about many things, including my certainty that virtual connectivity is incapable of enriching our lives.

Amid so much loss, I was introduced to the life-giving possibilities of virtual connectedness. Relatives and friends got in touch through a website focused on caring for those who are sick. Friends created a virtual calendar of food and cleaning needs. As news of my cancer spread virtually, others living with incurable cancer got in touch to offer resources and support. These online connections were not simply poor substitutes for real interaction; they nurtured my broken body and filled my soul at a time of despair. I wouldn't have survived my cancer quarantine without them.

Not long after I moved into my first remission, I came across Jason Byassee's insight that the body of Christ has always been a virtual body.¹ Byassee observes that the Apostle Paul was almost never physically present with most fellow members of the body of Christ. While Paul was physically distant from the early churches, he was virtually present through his letters that were read aloud to the gathered community. Inspired by this insight that the body of Christ has always been a virtual one, I began to explore ways in which the virtual body of Christ has always played in ministering to those who suffer, and how we might utilize digital tools to enhance our ability to live out this calling in contemporary contexts.²

My work with Paul's image of the body of Christ highlights how members of the body of Christ are called upon to attend especially to those who are broken and hurting. "[T]he parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones

1. Jason Byassee, "For Virtual Theological Education," *Faith and Leadership*, March 2, 2011, <https://faithandleadership.com/jason-byassee-virtual-theological-education>.

2. Deanna Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016).

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we honor the most . . . If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it" (1 Cor 12:22-23a; 26a).³

The linkage of the church as the body of Christ to the cross of Christ is also a critical component of Paul's vision. His understanding of the church as the body of Christ is aligned with the view of God's solidarity through the cross with those whose lives are undone by suffering. Privileging the weakest within the community is what New Testament scholar Michael Gorman refers to as Paul's vision of a "cruciform hierarchy."⁴

In his explanation of the variety of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12 Paul insists that the diversity of gifts of the Spirit are given by God "for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). That the listing of the charismata occurs just before the passage on the diversity and mutual reliance of each body part on one another makes visible what theologian Guillermo Hansen calls the "vulnerable interdependence" among members of the body.⁵

Pre-pandemic, many church leaders I engaged with around digital technology acknowledged the growing need for the church

3. Scriptural citations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

4. Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 272.

5. Guillermo Hansen, "The Networking of Difference that Makes a Difference: Theology and Unity of the Church," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 51 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 36.

to have a virtual presence. Well-functioning websites, online registrations, perhaps a Facebook group that enabled people associated with the congregation to connect digitally were often priorities. At the same time, it was also evident that for many faith communities, digital engagement with members and the wider community was tangential or even inconsequential to the heart of their ministry and mission.

But everything changed in pandemic; incredible numbers of churches moved online. Christian congregations across the globe pivoted to offer online worship, virtual youth groups, Bible studies and coffee hours; even weddings and funerals were virtual when the pandemic was at its worst.

With the mass migration to online spaces, congregations have been forced into reimagining what it means to be the body of Christ in the digital age. There also have been disagreements and debates about what aspects of being church should go online and what practices should be in-person only. While Lutherans and other Protestant denominations have been divided over the issue of offering Holy Communion via online worship, many congregations that decided to offer the Eucharist as part of online worship did so precisely because the pandemic was an extreme circumstance, a special situation.⁶ Those of us who came out in support of offering Holy Communion during online worship referenced ways in which the church has offered access to the Eucharist outside of worship for those who are ill, hospitalized, or imprisoned.⁷ We extended that reasoning to the pandemic reality of being confined to our homes and unable to gather in person during the pandemic.

What to do about online worship and Holy Communion in a post-pandemic world

Now that churches have opened back up for in-person worship, some of the most pressing questions church leaders face have to do with whether and how to continue using digital tools; and for those who have offered the Eucharist as part of online worship, whether to continue that practice. In part because worship attendance coming out of the pandemic is not back to pre-pandemic levels,⁸ there have been calls for Christians to forego worship in their living rooms and come back to church.

In January 2022, Episcopal priest and *New York Times* columnist Tish Harrison Warren's provocative op ed piece called on congregations to stop livestreaming worship, "[b]ecause offering church online implicitly makes embodiment elective," she wrote. "It presents in-person gatherings as something we can opt in or out

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of with little consequence." For Christians, physically gathering as church should be seen as essential and irreplaceable to what it means to be Christian not just in the past but also in the present and future.⁹

Harrison Warren's piece ignited spirited debate among religious leaders and practitioners alike. There were readers who acknowledged that while they have returned to many pre-pandemic practices in their lives, they continue to worship online because it's more convenient. "I think the worst part of online services is that on a busy weekend I can have an excuse to stay at home," one reader confessed.

Harrison Warren's point that worshipping online diminishes the embodied commitment Christians have to gather together in the flesh to worship, along with the concern that the church's decisions are driven more by "consumer demand" than by theology have also been central talking points for those who oppose offering Holy Communion during online worship. Lutheran theologian Paul Hinlicky has argued that when members of the body of Christ cannot gather physically for worship around the same bread and wine, attempts at communion through online worship spiritualize the bodily presence of Christ and fall woefully short of what the eucharistic banquet is intended to be. Hinlicky writes,

The broader point is that a vague notion of "real" presence evaporates the concrete promise and its intended audience; it is a de facto spiritualizing of the Lord's Supper to accommodate an individualistic and consumeristic need for private assurance—a capitalist version of the "private mass" which the Augsburg Confession vigorously repudiates. Of course, Christ can be present anywhere and everywhere i.e., without the Lord's Supper, but as Luther explained, "it is one thing for God to be present and another thing for God to be present for you." God is present "for us" as the body of Christ given for

6. See Kyle Kenneth Schiefelbein-Guerrero, "Whether One May Flee from Digital Worship: Reflections on Sacramental Ministry in a Public Health Crisis," *Dialog* 2020: 59, 49-77.

7. See my article, "Christ is Really Present, Even in Holy Communion via Online Worship," *Liturgy*, 202: 35:4, 18-24, and Schiefelbein-Guerrero's piece as well.

8. See for example Yonat Shimran's article, "More houses of worship are reopening, but attendance is flat, new survey shows," in *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/03/25/worship-attendance-covid-pew/>.

9. See, for instance, Tish Harrison Warren's "Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services," article in *The New York Times*, January 30, 2022.

us specifically and concretely according to Christ's last will and testament.¹⁰

In response to Hinlicky, I have argued that we should take seriously that our *bodies* are involved and engaged in worship streamed through our computers, and that it's still possible to be gathered with other *embodied participants* of the assembly that is done online.¹¹ I have argued that it's also possible to interpret virtual communion as an embodied way of connecting to the *real, bodily* presence of Christ. Martin Luther insisted that "[t]hese words ['take and eat, take and drink'], along with eating and drinking are the main things in the sacrament. And whoever believes these words has exactly what they say, forgiveness of sins."¹²

I made those arguments in the middle of the pandemic, when in-person worship was not happening in many communities of faith. Especially when most of us were quarantined by COVID, I found arguments about consumer demand missed the mark when they did not acknowledge that many of the faithful were in desperate need of the gift of Holy Communion. Drawing on the ELCA's articulation of the gifts of the Eucharist, I proposed that offering Holy Communion online "creates and strengthens faith for our daily work and ministry in the world," and that participating in the rite "draws us to long for the day of God's justice" and "provides sure and certain hope of the coming resurrection and eternal life."¹³

But now that congregations are once again gathering for in-person worship, what should they do about online worship and Holy Communion as a part of it?

Online worship and virtual communion as part of the vocation of the (virtual) body of Christ

In addition to those who agreed with Harrison Warren's call to abandon online worship, there were many who were critical of her position. The Rev. Marc Schelske, pastor at Bridge City Community Church in Milwaukie, Oregon, offered this response to Harrison Warren's proposal to stop offering worship online:

The view of embodied worship on display in the op-ed is only one that works for able-bodied people with weekends off work. There's just no way around that. I

10. Paul Hinlicky, "Why Virtual Communion is Not Nearly Radical Enough," April 2, 2020, <http://mcsletstalk.org/communion-and-community/why-virtual-communion-is-not-nearly-radical-enough/>.

11. See Thompson, "Christ is Really Present, Even in Holy Communion Via Online Worship."

12. Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," Accessed November 23, 2022, <https://www.bookofconcord.org/smallcatechism.php>

13. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), adopted for guidance and practice by the ELCA, August 19, 1997, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The_Use_Of_The_Means_Of_Grace.pdf.

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love gathered worship. I love the comfortable practices and traditions I'm used to. But the pandemic has made it clear that those comfortable practices were also exclusionary, and I'm convinced that following Jesus must lead us toward hospitality and inclusion.¹⁴

Rev. Schelske articulates well how the church's use of digital technology can increase access for those who are ill, grieving, have transportation challenges or work conflicts that make it hard to get to in-person Sunday morning worship. And because we have these digital tools that can help us connect with one another virtually, he argues, there is strong theological warrant for the church to use them to do just that.

Schelske's response, along with a number of other critical responses to Harrison Warren, illustrate how digital tools not only help the body of Christ to better live out its mission of caring for the weakest members, but also how use of digital technology can facilitate participation and contributions to the life of the church by those whose physical limitations prevent them from participating in person. "Having an online option allows me to serve. I have shared testimony via video link and even preached sermons that way.... Having a Zoom chat and prayer after the service is [fabulous], and can be integrated with those in church, too,"¹⁵ writes another reader.

Testimonies like this one enhance and expand our understanding of how the body of Christ can attend to the weakest members of the body and open up new opportunities for participation. These ways of connecting can help the church better embody the interdependence embedded in Paul's vision of the body of Christ. According to biblical scholar Rolf Jacobson, "Paul emphasized that everyone in the congregation had all of the spiritual gifts only if they all belonged together. Those who speak in tongues need inter-

14. See Rick Pidcock's interview of Schelske in, "A Response to Tish Harrison Warren about Livestreaming Worship," *Baptist Global News*, February 1, 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/article/a-response-to-tish-harrison-warren-about-livestreaming-worship/#.Y3UBI3bMK5c>.

15. As published in Tish Harrison Warren, "7 Thoughtful Reader Responses on Ending Online Church," *New York Times* op ed, February 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/opinion/online-church-services-readers.html>.

preters of tongues or they are merely clanging cymbals. Those who have prophetic powers but lack love are nothing. We only have all the gifts if we persist in the body together.”¹⁶ Jacobson then applies this insight to the status of the “weakest” members of the body:

One thing this means for the virtual body of Christ is that those who are isolated and suffering are not merely in need of the care and gifts of the strong and healthy, the strong and healthy also need the spiritual gifts of the isolated and weak. . . . Grace and spiritual gifts flow both ways. In addition, we must remember what Paul taught about the spiritual gifts. Each of us has our own unique set of the lesser spiritual gifts, but everyone can seek the greater spiritual gifts: faith, hope, and the greatest of all, love.¹⁷

In other words, Paul’s vision of the body of Christ must be understood not as a unidirectional framing of the relationship of the weakest members to those who are not today undone by suffering. Those who are viewed as the “weakest” members also play a critical role in the functioning of the body. And in the vulnerable interdependence within the body of Christ, members are called to be ready to receive the gifts from all others within the body, and digital technology can enhance the ways in which those who are unable to attend in-person worship can be an integral part of the community.¹⁸

As I continue to be in conversation with synods and pastors throughout the ELCA about what it means to be the virtual body of Christ during and post-pandemic, most congregations seem to be retaining online worship. But conversations about whether to continue offering online communion is more contested terrain.

Since the pandemic began, there have been those who have supported online distribution of the Eucharist only if it is done synchronously (often via Zoom) where participants are gathered in real time and can interact with one another during the service. Some synods instruct clergy “to preside at the table in real time,” and “[not to] video tape the eucharistic portion of the liturgy for play back privately one household or person at a time.” Why? Because “[t]hat minimizes the intended communal nature and may lead to misunderstanding or misuse.”¹⁹

In my conversations with pastors who follow this approach,

16. Rolf Jacobson, “Then and Now: Cancer and the Body of Christ Before and After the Digital Revolution,” a Syndicate Symposium on Deanna A. Thompson’s *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*, May 8, 2017, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-virtual-body-of-christ-in-a-suffering-world/>.

17. Jacobson, “Then and Now,” <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-virtual-body-of-christ-in-a-suffering-world/>.

18. I make this argument more fully in “Toward a More Accessible Body of Christ,” forthcoming in *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, ed. (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2023).

19. “For Those Choosing to Share Communion with Digital Communities,” the Virginia Synod of the ELCA, March 2020 newsletter, <https://www.vasynod.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Resource-for-Communion-during-COVID-19-March-31-2020-Final.pdf>.

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I hear an acknowledgement that online worship is an important part of ministering to all rather than only to those who are able to attend in-person worship. But I also hear in those conversations a desire to prevent those who might be worshipping in their living room on Sunday evening because they slept in and went out to brunch instead of to church from having the full worship experience when it’s convenient to them. They want to encourage those who are staying away out of convenience to return to active participation in the embodied life of their congregation, or at the very least participate virtually when others are gathered in person at church.

I appreciate the challenge churches face in discerning how to best use digital technology to be the body of Christ in a hurting world. As a regular in-person worship attender, I also miss those who have not yet come back to church and prefer online worship, sometimes out of convenience. At the same time, I find the practice of livestreaming worship on Sunday morning with Holy Communion and then editing out the eucharistic liturgy and distribution of Holy Communion from the recorded version to not necessarily have the weakest among us at the center of their reflections.

My calls for the church to attend first to the weakest members

Many who are ill have little to no control over when they sleep or when they’re lucid enough to plug into daily patterns of family life, community, and church. Offering the entire worship service in recorded form makes it more likely that those who are ill can be included in the full experience of worship.

of the body and their suffering is grounded both in Paul's vision in 1 Cor 12 as well as in my own experience of being seriously ill. Many who are ill have little to no control over when they sleep or when they're lucid enough to plug into daily patterns of family life, community, and church. Offering the entire worship service in recorded form makes it more likely that those who are ill can be included in the full experience of worship.

As Rev. Schelske points out, the pandemic helped congregations become more aware of the many who have long been excluded from in-person worship. It's not just those who are sick, hospitalized, or in prison; it's also those who are caretakers, those who work in hospitals, at gas stations, and beyond who are prohibited from participating in Sunday morning worship regardless of whether it's online or in person.

While many may be sympathetic to cases of hardship and challenge, there are still those who stay home because it's convenient. What is the church to do about them?

My suggestion is to graciously continue to offer online worship with Holy Communion while simultaneously creating new pathways for (digital) engagement for folks who worship online to be connected to one another and to those who regularly show up in person. It is simply the case that we are not privy to the internal process of discernment of those who have not returned to in-person church. As a recent ELCA statement says, "What a person says or does gives us clues, but ultimately, we cannot see into someone else's heart." This insight from Luther that we cannot know what others believe in their hearts and therefore should refrain from rushing to judgment is being applied to the context of Lutherans interacting with those of other religious traditions. I propose we apply it to fellow Christians who have not returned to worship as well.

The pandemic turned the world—and with it, religious institutions and practices—upside down. As we emerge from that pandemic it's not yet clear what it means to be the body of Christ in this particular moment. I hope we can continue robust conversations about how the church may use digital technology to better live out our mission as the (virtual) body of Christ.

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