



**Uniting Church in Australia**  
**ASSEMBLY**  
Assembly Standing Committee

12-14 November 2021

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Title	Church in the Digital Age Task Group Report
Type of Paper	For information
Assembly or ASC Minute	
Consultation	The Convenor of the Task Group
Purpose	To inform ASC of progress of the Task group
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	
Recommendations	That the Assembly Standing Committee: 1. Receive the Report
Submitted by	Rob Floyd Assembly Associate General Secretary <a href="mailto:robfnat@nat.uca.org.au">robfnat@nat.uca.org.au</a> , 0407 944 417

## Interim Report – Church in the Digital Age Task Group

The Group formed with members: Ann Perrin, Josh Wyatt – Convenors with Tim Jensen, Duncan McLeod, Jenny Hughes, Seung Jae Yeon, Amelia Koh Butler. Both Radhika Sukumar White, and Liam Miller have left the group citing workload issues.

Two assumptions made by the group that have bearing is that digitality is more than transactional, and a translation of current practice into the digital medium but a way of transformation. The second, we are human creatures with sensual capabilities before we are disciples

We have met three times: 24 June, August 23 and October 14. We organise our life through Slack. <https://slack.com/intl/en-au/>

The task group now frames the Terms of Reference as follows:

Task 1 Missional Engagement and Discipleship

Task 2 Sacraments – theological, liturgical, regulations, guidelines

Task 3 Human existence

Task 4 Gathering and sending the church

Task 5 Ethics of digital engagement

Task 6 Church as instrument

Task 7 Ecumenical engagement

Task 8 Implications UCA doctrinal positions

We also invited 30 current digital practitioners to a zoom conversation on August 14. The conversation was framed around:

1. Share with us a snapshot of what digital ministry looks like in your context.
2. *The Wins*: what has made an impact? What's working?
3. *The Learnings*: what didn't work so well? How did you pivot?
4. *What's Next*: what do you see as a priority over the next 18 months?
5. Considering that, how might we reflect theologically?

### *First theological thoughts from practice is Appendix 1*

To survey what digital practice of the wider national church request for minister, congregations, presbyteries to respond in written form went out in the National Update. We had 7 responses.

An invitation to engage went to the National Conference Leaders Meeting in September with a different set of questions rather than the Terms of Reference. For the November 25 meeting, the task group will be engaging with CALD communities through Apwee Ting and First Nations Communities through Michelle Cook.

The group reviewed several videos from the Global Network for Digital Theology Conference. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnlzB7qamlogFMkeeFOvtRA/videos>

*Exploring online liturgical practice; God theology in the digital age; Digital theology dilemma and artificial intelligence; Hope, Eschatology and Digital Culture; From analogue to digital; Inevitable hybridity*

One comment following our discussion about what was learned was “It was interesting that it was almost the dual use of digital technology - the apocalypticism and fear focus from militaristic use of A.I. with the eschatological and love/hope focus of the possibilities offered by and held in digital technology. Herein lies the many tensions of work in this field - the

sense of community versus the capacity for a false identity to be used, the connection amongst young people versus the vulnerability this creates with bullying, harassment and grooming practices.”

Current Research Work prompted by the terms of reference:

- Review of Ethics from ecumenical partners
- Transignificance in sacramental rites: Based on the work of Schillebeeckx, Transignification suggests that although Christ's body and blood are not physically present in the Eucharist, they are really and objectively so, as the elements take on, at the consecration, the real significance of Christ's body and blood which thus become sacramentally present. The concept of transignification is based on the thought that there are two kinds of presence, local and personal. Jesus is personally, but not locally, present in the assembly of representative elements and Body of Christ community. One can be locally present, as when riding on a bus, but one's thoughts can be far away, making one personally not present. An introduction to the idea for congregations can be found at <https://vimeo.com/582810890>
- Embodiment: Haptic communication in the virtual church world.

We have become more aware of how classical theology contains only certain voices heard in only particular ways. However, through the digital, different voices can be heard speaking from different theological contexts using diverse forms of communication. This is challenging set theological positions. The bible and theology are becoming democratised. Communities of faith form beyond the usual geographical boundaries.

Rev. Ann Perrin  
Josh Wyatt  
Co-convenors  
On behalf of the Church in the Digital Age Task Group.

## Appendix 1: Theological Reflection on Digital Practice

**Sonder Collective:** Theology of presence both cosmic and relational in nature. E.g. communion online when we eat communion we are gathered with the people from generations ago and across the world with my family overseas. Communion is a cosmic reality and I think that when we come to digital ministry it allows us to open our eyes to see more clearly a theology of presence because we are being able to enter into what that reality might be when we are connected in the miraculousness of God across space and time that's not held in earth space or time, in an existence of being a tangible thing in front of my eyes. God exists everywhere not just in front of me and I think that then also comes into that interaction and what I've seen in my community is this theology of presence to be open to be able to wrestle with people all types of people and wrestle with questions that we have because we provide a space and a platform that says: any medium, anytime, any opportunity, this is a place you can come and talk about God. Any platform that they use is fine. The age when the Church and its structure is where all the faith questions happen is no longer. People don't go to the pulpit to wrestle with their faith. They wrestle with their faith with other people and so where is offering a ministry of presence to be able to do that more tangibly in more ways? It's the digital space where from multiple different areas people can meet.

**Salt Bush, Uniting Scattered Communities:** the comment that "Communion is a cosmic reality... digital ministry it allows us to open our eyes to see more clearly a theology of presence" resonates with us and our engagement with people from rural and remote areas. What we are finding at Saltbush are incredible God moments each time were online or we engage with our people across NSW ACT; there is a broadening and a recognition of presence where they are, in their place in/on country and a willingness to exploring what this looks like. There's something which appears to be broadening out in a more general way, that people are actually able to connect with a deeper spirituality and one that also respects and acknowledges First Peoples and their experience of what is and what was. This continues to be an expression of spirituality which is a God space and an invitation to explore how we journey with that. I think what is offered to us in this country is that we have that space to do it in the bush but at the same time are a bit afraid at how this will challenge our long-held traditions and beliefs.

**Banyule Online Messy Church:** I've been doing a lot of thinking of about Paul's theology of the church as the body of Christ, one body with many parts and I think that's a very helpful analogy, thinking about this. Does one body with many parts having to be gathered in the one place? I think we see lots of examples in digital communities of how that is bit also is not the case. You know when you're watching kids in Minecraft or helping each other connect one skill set to different skills sets or one wants to tell a story one way and someone else has another idea you see one body move many parts interacting together in order to grow and this ends in discipleship. A small example but I find that motif of one church, one body, great many parts really helpful theology. I will do slightly more writing and thinking and exploring around that idea.

**Wagga Wagga Uniting Church/Riverina Presbytery:** I think that one church concept has really been something that comes to the fore for me as well particularly in little rural towns that often have long histories of competition and divisiveness. That they are now able to come together in worship has been an incredible opportunity. I think in a very real sense God has moved into the neighbourhood through the use of online platforms and there's almost a decentralisation of the churches sacred space and the recognition that everywhere is sacred space and cultivating that has been really important but for me one of the greatest things has been in the Uniting church we affirm that everyone has a gift to offer but to see elderly people in particular rediscovering that that it's not too late for them that is not too late

for them to do something differently to learn new skills engaging different platforms. Its been incredible to. See them rise to the challenge to change their thinking. There is a Setswana idiom which translated into English would say something along the lines of that person is a person because of other people. This we've really recognised in this time of lock down. We are living in a iconic society where people don't want to talk about God yet there is an increasing recognition of their need for connexion, need for one another and this really is the time when I think the church has had something spectacular to offer: the gift of connexion if we do it well. But it's not just about people tired of being alone, we wanted to connect and you see that when a 90 year old who has never used technology suddenly says can someone come and teach me how to use zoom and suddenly they're not just using zoom to attend church on a Sunday but there's suddenly connected with grandchildren up in QLD using that technology that they've acquired. It is representative of the deep desire to connect, fundamental human need and our church is really beginning to offer ways for people to do that they haven't imagined before.

**Eastwood Uniting Church/World Methodist Council:** On one occasion, we did communion and the bread of life by exploring the old terms of “consubstantiation, transubstantiation and transignificance”. Using the last term has prompted me to do a reflection with the World Methodist Council about the significance that we place on things. I became convinced you could see the idea of transignificance in online communion. The events of the last at 18 months changed my perceptions about how mystery worked and so now I'm playing with the question of how might we do online baptisms. I imagine somebody being baptised in a place, with a zoom congregation who moves them to the bottom of the screen in gallery view, and everybody else on the screen pouring their water, to show the flowing waters across different dimensions of space and praying while they're doing it and being involved in baptising a person. You still need someone live with the person being baptised, but why can't we all bear witness to that real event? I think that there's a transignificance moment that we are facing in church that can make all the difference. [I have since wondered if we could also show footage of past baptisms, to connect us with the dimensions across time and join with the great cloud of witnesses.]