

From the Church in the Digital Age Task Group

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Introduction: Our UCA expression

In the Uniting Church in Australia, we claim to be part of the Church of Jesus Christ globally and through time. It is Christ who gathers (irrespective of whether they are in one place or online). We testify to this in our Eucharistic Prayer, referencing our connectedness in the sacrament with believers through time and place, united in a rite characterised by mystery and grace. The church cannot proceed forward without digital presence. This is how humans will continue to nurture and nourish spiritual community. We cannot ignore the current and continuing (contextual) norm.

In any discussion about how we 'do sacraments', we need to consider why we 'do' sacraments. The Basis of Union reminds us of the purposes of Sacraments:

...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. (Basis of Union, Paragraph 8)

Here, we see the emphases:

- to build the spiritual community for the sake of the Mission of God
- to nourish and nurture for discipleship

This leaves us with some ongoing questions:

- Do our activities online and onsite fulfil the purposes of sacramental community?
- Do they help or hinder us to serve the Mission of God?

During our conversations, we have identified some aspects of community:

- Physical [haptic¹]
- Intellectual
- Emotional [mob²]
- Relational

And our main concern is with the SPIRITUAL.

Yet, the above aspects inform and have consequences for the spiritual. As we consider the importance to us of body and physicality, we are challenged by the fully human and fully divine Christ, who is both present in incarnation AND present beyond the material. According to John

¹ Haptic refers to touch and the physical experience

² 'mob' here refers to the Australian expression "our mob" and a sense of relational belonging, also experienced in emotional attachment

Wesley, spiritual experience must inform our theological work. Thus, our sacramental theology must be informed by the contextual experiences of the last two years.

Councils of the church

As inter-related councils of the church, we also have a range of responsibilities for consideration of the sacraments in digital settings. Ordained clergy and others with responsibility for presiding in the sacraments are entrusted with their responsibilities by the church, always in reference to the wider community of faith. Good order is maintained - people are trained for appropriate leadership, with attention to context, shared understandings, appropriate words and actions.

It is possible within our current polity to provide for the sacraments to be undertaken in the context of communities of faith mediated through digital media. It is also possible through shared physical space.

Assembly has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, including the promotion of the Church's mission, the establishment of standards of theological training and reception of ministers from other communions, and the taking of further measures towards the wider union of the Church. It makes the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils. It is obligatory for it to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.

Presbytery's responsibilities include providing for persons other than Ministers of the Word or Deacons to preside at the celebration of the sacraments where, in the opinion of the Presbytery, circumstances so require. In this, the Presbytery is responding to the identified needs in local settings.

Church Council's responsibilities include assisting the Minister(s) in the conduct of worship and in the administration of the sacraments, and determining the time and place of services of public worship. Church Councils have been grappling with the practical questions: How do we keep people safe? How do we offer extended care, particularly for the most vulnerable? How will we continue to care for those for whom gathering onsite is too great a risk to their own health and to the wellbeing of their households or residential communities. (Should these concerns prompt new conversations for residential care?)

Fulfilling the Purposes of Sacramental Community: Eucharistic Generosity:

Jesus promised his ongoing presence in the community of faith through the material substances of the daily meal. This promise is fulfilled through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church that creates connection and community not based in geography, but on generosity. Here in the everyday meal is the generosity of the God of the feast. It is an eschatological gesture that allows the wine to spill over the lip of the cup and there to be crumbs left under the table. The Eucharistic meal is one of generosity without demarcation, an evangelising act that reveals the glory of God.

The meal is a sustaining moment that is remembered and celebrated within the life of the body of Christ, wherever two or three are gathered, even online. The Spirit gathers us together and the Spirit witnesses to our unity, a unity that is not dependent on physical proximity. Eucharist is founded in God's glory.

People spoken to during our research report their experience of the grace of God, the nourishment of the liturgy, and the connection to the 'gathered community'. This is reflected in the higher level of participation invited by platforms like Zoom. Its accessibility has enabled some people to attend more often and to dissolve problems of transport, distance, health and access.

Our anecdotal feedback is that the reach of the church has grown in numbers and spiritual depth through this difficult time. (We are also mindful that some members of the church have not been able to connect digitally. However, pastoral responsibility for those who cannot connect is a different question to whether connected presence is valid).

It is therefore crucial to understand the new context we now find ourselves in. Coping with Covid, we have moved through a process of social re-organisation. Digital spaces have enabled people to participate. Some will therefore want to continue, if they have found it empowering. This is the new normal. The Church has a presence as gathering space in the digital world. There is no: *where* and *if*. The Church has become present digitally. How best to take up such a space that glorifies God and expresses this Eucharistic generosity?

Building Community for Mission: Scattered Community and the Body of Christ

The scattered community is an expression of the Body of Christ. Just as God, in Christ and the Holy Spirit, moves freely beyond the barriers of an ecclesial orthodoxy, God gifts all people the gift of presence. It does not matter who they are.

Those who accept this gift and respond to this grace may find themselves without fellowship. They are not excluded from the Body of Christ. The scattered community is made the Body of Christ by the action of Christ and the Holy Spirit and not so much by a dictum from the Church.

As the scattered people is an expression of the Body of Christ, the rest of the church must creatively explore ways in which the members of the scattered community can know they are valued and significant in the economy of God. This is now being done through the digital platform.

Pastoral Continuity

Not only testifying to the past and future, Christ is continuing to be present to us in the spiritual nourishment of bread, wine and people, so how we make the connection in the present is

important. It weighs upon our hearts when members of the body are disconnected. Concern about disconnection raises questions about whether we may now leave behind those who have been online and who cannot gather or whether we may become estranged from those who regard situated physical gathering as essential for 'real presence'.

Ecumenically, we have observed that some churches have prioritised the need to gather onsite in physically situated gatherings over the safety and wellbeing of their members. Generally, the Uniting Church has maintained a priority of concern for the vulnerable in our community. What would make us change that priority? As people transition to 'living with COVID', we are conscious that some people are now gathering onsite and many continue to gather online.

The UCA has many small congregations with many people in Aged Care. Many of our members may never feel able to be regularly onsite again. We have picked up many 'visitors' and 'newcomers' who are exploring faith and community online. What do we plan for ongoing connection with them? Are we intent on building opportunities for sacramental community with people who will not be able to come onsite?

A story to share from Amelia.....

In my local ministry, I have a story of visiting hospital to take communion to someone who has limited access and limited visitors (2 per day and only one at a time)- I took an iPad to enable the person to be joined by others in community to share Communion, so there could be sacramental community. Of course, we would have preferred having four people in the hospital room, but not if it were to place further stress and pressure on our health system. Of course, we could have limited the rite to only who was in the hospital room, but the sense of sacramental community and spiritual care was strengthened by the presence of two additional worshippers praying with us online.

Ecumenical Perspectives

The 21st Century has seen a deepening in exploration of what it means to be GLocal – both global and local. When the Uniting Church in Australia came into being, we understood ourselves to be part of a world movement of seeking union, but also committed to a local expression of church. The "in Australia" part of our identity is important. We understand what it means to have a population scattered geographically, diverse in language and culture, united and uniting by circumstance. As polyglot, diversity and breadth of experience and practice is normal. We have adopted digitality as part of the new normal. Historically early adopters of technologies, Australians use technologies for social, family and work connections. Gatherings of people and teams happen online as well as in person. It is not an either-or, but a both-and. We participate in ecumenical and interfaith gatherings and spiritual communities online. An expression of this would be the Assembly Iftar dinners we have held during COVID times (2020 and 2021).

Ecumenical conversations remind us, we are not the same. The United Church of Canada (UCC) has adopted digital and online sacramental practices. There has been commentary from

leaders of European churches who have recently experienced UCC eucharistic hospitality with a degree of wonder and surprise. In debriefing with them, they have posed questions about experience. It has helped them in their journey to talk with UCC and UCA people who have online experiences to draw upon. Ecumenical conversations are not static. They are progressive. Our ecumenical ears need to be attuned to the questions and our voice needs to speak out of our lived experience.

The United Methodist Church (a large global expression of Methodism) shows us what can happen when the decision is taken to define gathering as being in one place and in one time. They have been unable to maintain Connexionalism without Conferences. They have been unable to appoint Bishops. At this time, they are arguing about whether they will be able to gather for Conference, knowing that UMC members in Africa are divided into those who have access to (and control over) who has access to vaccines and those who do not. (Depending on whether or not you will support particular theological or social justice positions has become a reason why your local leadership may have access to vaccines.) By contrast, the Uniting Church has acted in faith that the Spirit might still move in Council when people are gathered online. We have discovered that communities are different, but they can still bring what they have to the service of the Gospel. Sometimes, we have discovered, we can gather from different sites. This is part of our ignited imagination within the context of our age.

Conclusion

The Church in the Digital Age task Group believes that the church cannot proceed forward without digital presence. This is how humans will continue to nurture and nourish spiritual community. We cannot ignore the current and continuing (contextual) norm. We do not need to try to be the same as others. We do need to be mindful that our current practices and our pre-COVID practices have not been the same as other churches. No other place has experienced the length of lockdown that Victorians lived through. Difference in experience does not mean other churches are not faithful, nor does it mean that we are not faithful. Some ecumenical friends are doing sacraments online. Many are not. So, we need to think about who we are and what we prioritise about our practice.

We do need to think more creatively about how to enable Sacramental community. The COVID experience has pushed us into a creative zone. This zone of experimentation and discovery is vibrant and has all the hallmarks of spiritual vitality. We should not quickly escape this creative space.

Ongoing Discernment

Could we have an intentional period of hermeneutical engagement (like a Period of Discernment) when we are committed to experimenting for the sake of sacramental theology and practice into the future for the world church? Could we run the experiments that might be more difficult for other churches? Our diversity allows us to draw from different traditions and see what works and does not work in a wide variety of settings and languages.