

Experimenting with Communion

In this paper I propose a framing of the Assembly's current discussion and impending decisions about online communion through using the concept of the church as a "collection of experiments" in following Jesus. This concept comes from the contemporary English Anglican theologian Mike Higton. I suggest it aids our thinking not only about online communion itself, but also about what is at stake for the UCA in the Assembly exercising "determining responsibility" in matters of doctrine.

I will later draw out something of the breadth of Higton's ecclesiological metaphor, but for now, I will quote this simple statement of his argument: "With all its division, and all its diversity, the Christian church is beckoned by the Spirit into the discovery of God's abundant gift in Jesus Christ. Its life is a collection of experiments in which the abundant love of God is explored and embodied."¹ Higton (as will be seen later in the paper) is not suggesting that these "experiments" are random or uncontrolled; nor is he suggesting collective and critical discernment be dispensed with in evaluating these experiments. But he is providing a different and, in my view, helpful set of concepts by which to think about the church and its division, diversity and doctrine, including as these apply to diverse communion practices.²

What, then, if we do think of our diverse experiences, brought about by COVID circumstances, of both online communion and intentionally fasting from it as different experiments in following Jesus? Strikingly, the ASC's decision to allow for the temporary celebration of online communion has allowed us to make visible the experimental nature of the church in ways that are usually hidden. We are able to ask about what we have learnt from online communion and what we have learnt from fasting from it. If we put the issue in these terms, the responsibility of the Assembly to exercise determining responsibility will not be reducible to a binary of approving or disapproving online communion.

To unpack these possibilities, what follows will be structured around these issues:

1. Is online communion a doctrinal matter?
2. The Assembly's "determining responsibility": selected case studies
3. Doctrine and "experiments in following Jesus"
4. Expanding and reconfiguring the doctrine of communion

1. Is online communion a doctrinal matter?

Some people deny that it is a doctrinal matter on the grounds that we are dealing with a question of practice, with no implications for doctrine.³ This is a very difficult claim to uphold. The historical diversity of communion practices (especially since the Reformation) is directly related to doctrinal differences. Indeed, they have been—and remain—church-dividing differences. Communion is one of the practices of the church that focuses some key issues about what we understand Christianity to be. Not only does it have its roots in the early Christian communities' remembrance and proclamation of Jesus' death (and thus never was a 'simple' meal and never was intended as the occasion for an undifferentiated 'experience' of God), it was relatively quickly invested with an expanded range of meanings about the nature, visibility, order and discipline of the Christian community. Over time, this expanding range of meanings has extended to claims—and disputes—about the manner of Christ's presence, the modes of eating and drinking, and the relationship of the spiritual to the material. Communion, in other words, is a practice which (like most established Christian practices) carries many meanings. Change the practice and you change—or expand, illuminate, or reconfigure—the range of meanings the practice has. Given the role of this practice as itself a proclamation of the gospel, and its role in defining, sustaining and *uniting* the Christian community, any change in practice/meaning is a matter of the church's collective discernment and thus a matter of church teaching, i.e., doctrine. And what the church teaches about communion will have implications for what it teaches about other

matters. For instance, when the Uniting Church decided that baptism alone, and not confirmation, was the basis of admission to communion, it was also making statements about baptism, the nature of faith, and the nature of the Christian community.

Thus, online communion is a doctrinal matter, and within UCA polity this makes it a topic for the Assembly's "determining responsibility."⁴ At face value, the language is that of adjudication and control. In the culture of the UCA this language frequently generates negative connotations of a top-down exercise of authority (despite the fact that the Assembly is an elected representative body). The flatness of this language also obscures the dynamism associated with the exercise of that responsibility. And the very idea of "determining" suggests a measure of closure with which doctrinal work is often associated.⁵ In order, therefore, to develop a sense of what it actually means in the UCA and how it might be applied to online communion, the next section of the paper offers a brief and necessarily selective historical survey of how it has been practiced.

2. The Assembly's "determining responsibility" in doctrine: selected case studies

Four case studies will be presented: the decision to prohibit re-baptism; the re-affirmation of women's ordination; the decision to adopt two distinct ordinations for Deacons and Ministers of the Word, and the decision to allow same-gender marriage.⁶

Prohibiting Re-baptism

Shortly after union, the impact of the charismatic movement in the UCA led to significant numbers of ministers re-baptising those who had been baptised as infants but for whom an experience of renewal later in life prompted the desire to be baptised again. This was perceived by others as a denial of God's grace in infant baptism. Following the reception of a Report from the Commission on Doctrine, the Assembly resolved to disallow this new practice on the basis that it was inconsistent with the Reformed and Evangelical traditions which formed the Uniting Church. The decision was grounded almost entirely on the exposition of existing and received doctrines of the antecedent churches. Strikingly, there was minimal reference to the Basis of Union.

So in this case, the determining responsibility was exercised through the application of existing doctrine in order to prohibit an introduced practice.

Re-affirming Women's Ordination

The practice of ordaining women was already in place in all three of the uniting churches prior to union and was enshrined in the Basis of Union. In the mid-1980s some male Ministers of the Word (MOW) claimed the right to dissent from this established practice and its underlying theology by refusing to work with women MOWs. The dissenters justified their dissent on the grounds that the Basis of Union itself allows for "difference of opinion" when the issue is not of the substance of the faith.⁷ For the dissenters, women's ordination was not of the substance of the faith. Based on a report from a Task Group appointed by the Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, the Assembly decided, however, that women's ordination was a "fundamental implication of the gospel"⁸ and ruled that no Minister of the Word had the freedom either to refuse to work with women MOWs or not to recognize the validity of women's ordination. The report, which was accepted by the Assembly, drew on the commitments in the Basis to the priority of scripture, the influence of contemporary biblical scholarship, and the freedom to depart from tradition.

So in this case, the determining responsibility was exercised through drawing on, developing and employing some of the stated commitments of the Basis in order to disqualify internal dissent from women's ordination and to reaffirm existing practice and doctrine.

Distinct ordinations of Deacons and Ministers of the Word

In 1991 the Assembly fulfilled the commitment in the Basis to “renew” the diaconate by establishing the ministry of Deacon as a gender-inclusive, ordained ministry.⁹ In order to prevent any suggestion that Deacons were subordinate to Ministers of the Word (as they were in the pre-union uniting churches), it was decided to have one common ordination for both Deacons and Ministers of the Word and separate commissioning to either of the two ministries. The decision was subject to strong criticism on the grounds that this arrangement of ordination/commissioning was a doctrinal novelty, a departure from a Reformed understanding of ordination, and ecumenically confusing.¹⁰ Accordingly, the 1994 Assembly adopted a theology of ordination which superseded the 1991 decision. The matter of a non-hierarchical relationship between the two ministries was preserved (so it was argued) by insisting on distinct ordinations to the two ministries, which were said to overlap whilst each having their respective foci. The details of the theology behind the 1994 decision are complex. But the rationale behind the resistance to the 1991 decision was largely grounded in a desire to uphold a broad Reformed understanding of ordination and on what was itself (ironically) a novel appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity (rather than Christology) as the framing doctrine of ministry and mission.

So in this case, the Assembly exercised its determining responsibility by juggling tradition, doctrinal novelty, a commitment to develop received orders of ministry, and contextual alertness. Both the 1991 and 1994 decisions were their own respective mixtures of these impulses.

Adopting Same-gender marriage

The decision of the 2018 Assembly to adopt same-gender marriage followed six years of discussion, engagement and theological debate, both at two previous Assembly meetings and across the church in the interim. The specific contours and the content of the 2018 decision were shaped (arguably more so than in any of the other case studies presented here) by the process of discernment undertaken at the Assembly meeting. The final resolution saw the Assembly endorse two different ‘beliefs’ about marriage, allowing congregations and ministers to determine local practice.

So in this case, the Assembly exercised its determining responsibility by expanding its doctrine of marriage in order to reflect the diversity of the church, on the basis of which a new practice was introduced into the church. The use of the category of ‘belief’ was also novel.

As already indicated, this is by no means an exhaustive selection of case studies. Nevertheless, it shows that the UCA’s practice of determining doctrine is mixed and varied. But so has been the substance of each determination: they have variously consisted of limiting, clarifying, expanding or initiating. There is no reason why this variety should not emerge. Indeed, it could be argued that these case studies are a microcosm of the diverse ways the Christian community has determined doctrine over the two millennia of its life. In sum, however, the case studies do suggest that the UCA has shown an openness to novelty as well as resistance to it. Received doctrines have sometimes been used as definitive criteria; other times they have been resisted; sometimes they have been expanded. Sometimes existing practices have been discontinued, sometimes novel practices have been discarded because of the beliefs attached to them, and at other times other novel practices have been introduced on the basis of emerging beliefs. I do not believe that there are any clear chronological trajectories visible, except perhaps that the strong definitive appeal to tradition employed in the decision on re-baptism has not been repeated.

Against this background, the issue of online communion presents as its own unique case study. The decision, in response to promptings from the wider church,¹¹ to allow online communion at least temporarily, means that a novel practice has been *officially* introduced (unlike the emergence of re-baptism in the 1980s), although without a clear doctrinal determination on the relevant issues. This

means that as the church moves towards a doctrinal determination on this practice, it is able to draw on the experience of the church to inform its determination. The background depicted above also allows us to see how we might frame the options before us. I suggest they are as follows:

Will existing doctrine be used as a criterion to disqualify a new practice?

Will a novel doctrine be developed to justify a new practice?

Will diverse doctrines be endorsed to justify diverse practices?

Will the existing doctrine of communion be expanded or reconfigured in the light of what is being learnt through the COVID period?

This paper is moving towards exploring the last of these options.¹² To explore it, I will first pick up some further insights from Mike Higton.

3. Doctrine and “experiments in following Jesus”

In the following remarks, Higton helps us see that doctrine and particular experiments in following Jesus do not stand apart from each other but mutually inform each other, or, if you like, are mutually embedded in each other. No doctrine and no experiment in following Jesus can ever rise above the ambiguities of Christian life. But that is not a reason not to experiment. Nor is it a reason to ignore doctrine, neither as something from which to learn nor as something to develop.

Christian life is a series of experiments in following Jesus, who was, and is, and is to come. Each experiment discovers possibilities of worship, witness and discipleship in some specific location; each unfolds something new of the gift given by God in the resurrection; each is a re-reading of the scriptures. Each also demonstrates the human propensity for misunderstanding and betrayal. Practices of summarising, articulating and arguing about the faith emerge within this shared life, in contexts of proclamation, confession, teaching and controversy. These doctrinal practices help shape both Christian explorations and Christian betrayals. They do not float above Christian life, but are ingredients within it: they are among the things that specific Christians do; they are tangled in Christianity’s webs of power, privilege and property; they exist in different forms in different Christian locations, each with its own contingent history.¹³

Every sentence in this quotation warrants reflection. But the two that I will highlight are these:

“Each experiment discovers possibilities of worship, witness and discipleship...”

“Practices of summarising, articulating and arguing about the faith emerge within this shared life, in contexts of proclamation, confession, teaching and controversy.”

In other words, doctrine helps us to understand and articulate the possibilities that are discovered even as those discoveries themselves call forth new summaries and articulations of the faith.

Noting this, it is important, I believe, to remember that during the COVID circumstance of closed church buildings, our church has been conducting two experiments: *feasting* in online communion and *fasting* even when online worship has been offered. (And that of course, is quite apart from the more general experimentation we’ve been doing with online worship *per se*.)

It is against this background that the Assembly exercises its “determining responsibility,” but not fundamentally or primarily by making a decision on practice. Rather, I propose that it does so by helping the church unfold the meaning of communion as it is discovered through these experiments. In this, I believe, we do not invent a new doctrine of communion, but we expand or reconfigure the doctrine we have received.

Expanding and Reconfiguring the doctrine of Communion

As I indicated at the outset of the paper, the practice of communion has been progressively invested with an accumulation of meanings. In the history of Christianity, in their quests to discern God's will, different Christian communities have variously discarded some of those meanings whilst sustaining, deepening or adding others.

Again, it is possible to look to the UCA's own extremely brief history with communion as a microcosm of this process of receiving, discarding, sustaining and deepening. A full account of this process would require attention to at least the following: the statement about communion in the Basis;¹⁴ the UCA's formal response to the WCC's *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*;¹⁵ the rationale for admitting baptised children to the table;¹⁶ the practice of lay presidency;¹⁷ and the development of the various liturgies of communion in *Uniting in Worship* and *Uniting in Worship 2*, including the liturgy for communion beyond the gathered congregation.¹⁸ From my observations of these developments, I'd argue that what we have conspicuously discarded (at least mostly) is the inheritance from our Presbyterian forebears to overemphasise communion as a penitential rite open only to the 'worthy.' Arguably, the meaning most conspicuously deepened (specifically through our official liturgies) has been that of communion as a sign *and* seal, and not just a memorial, of Christ's presence. The most obvious *de facto* expansion of meaning relates to communion as a meal of the kingdom (as classically affirmed) and thus continuous with Jesus' practice of table fellowship (as highlighted by contemporary biblical scholarship)¹⁹. This is manifest in the unrestricted invitation to the table now almost universally practiced in the UCA (even though this meaning of communion is not formally taught by the UCA).²⁰ This last example obviously overlaps with the presenting issue of online communion. It is notable, however, that the church has not felt the need formally to adopt a doctrine of the unrestricted table, but nor has it at any point deemed it necessary to prohibit the practice.

What, then, might we learn from our experiments of feasting and fasting that will help us receive, deepen, add, discard or reconfigure various meanings of communion? And how might received doctrine help us interpret these experiments? Of course, these questions can be answered only by the whole church. But as a suggested starting point for wider discussions I offer the following reflections on some of the experiences of both feasting and fasting in conversation with the UCA's most basic statement of the meaning of Communion, i.e., Paragraph 8 of the Basis. Clearly this paragraph does not say everything but it says enough to be a conversation partner.

The Uniting 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.

Those who have practised online communion and who bear witness to the experience as indeed communing with Christ and being nourished in faith and strengthened for mission through it highlight for the rest of the church that Christ is the primary means of "signifying and sealing" his own presence independently of the church's received practices.

Those who have refrained from communion but who have nevertheless continued to be nourished in the faith through proclamation of the Word and prayer highlight for the rest of the Church that Christians are promised the "continuing presence of Christ" in many forms. In doing so, they also highlight the particular focus of communion (the drama of Jesus' passion) and its orientation (unity,

participation in mission, foretaste of the kingdom). As I said at the outset of this paper, communion was never developed or intended as an undifferentiated encounter with God.

Those who have practiced online communion have opened up for the church the possibility of a discussion about the dependence of communion on the category of “sacrament.” This long-established category has surrounded discussions of communion with claims about materiality (something central to the Christian faith), creation, and the relationship of the visible to the invisible. This is a valuable debate. But it would be a mistake, in my view, to defend online communion by basing it on arguments for the materiality of virtual reality. In its own way, this would be to accept the controlling role which the category of sacrament has exercised and to stay within its parameters without asking whether it should have that controlling role. To practice online communion gives the church the chance to ask what role the category of sacrament should have in our understanding and experience of communion.

Those who have refrained from online communion because it compromises the powerful, liturgically enacted symbolism of human and communal bodily actions of gathering, giving and sharing remind the rest of the church that this rite has its roots in a particular shared meal that was itself continuous with other meals that Jesus attended.²¹ In those meals diverse human beings are gathered together with all the possibilities and failures, and all the discomforts and joys of bodily existence as the site of God’s reign and presence. The less this is symbolised and enacted in our communion practices, the more we risk losing contact with the Last Supper as a “foretaste of the Kingdom.”

On the basis of these admittedly undeveloped reflections, several possibilities for expanding and reconfiguring the doctrine of communion emerge. For instance, we might deepen our teaching about the primacy of Christ as the one who signs and seals his own presence. We might emphasise and expand our teachings about the specific intentions of communion. It is not a broadly defined encounter with God, but it intends an encounter which focuses on the death of Jesus, the unity of the Christian community, orientation to mission, and the hospitality of the reign of God. All our communion practices need to be measured by these intentions. We might want to reposition the place of the category of sacrament in our doctrine of communion, whilst adding new ideas about the mediation of human community and God’s presence in the virtual realm in ways that are not simply pale reflections of or accommodations to sacramental metaphysics.

In the end, the Uniting Church may well come to make specific decisions about online communion. It may decide that it is unconditionally valid. It may decide that it is valid in certain circumstances. It may decide that it is not valid. But it seems to me that it is too soon to make any of those decisions. This particular experiment in following Jesus needs more time for its results to be interpreted. But I also argue that we cannot make decisions about it on the basis of a narrow criteria which draw on just one or two elements of our received doctrines of communion. Nor is there any reason to think we need to develop a wholly new doctrine of communion or that our existing doctrine cannot be received anew and creatively engaged. We have an opportunity to deepen our understanding of communion. In doing so, we may find that we need to reform some of our existing face-to-face practices, quite apart from whatever is finally decided about the practice of online communion.

In sum, I argue that the Assembly can exercise its determining responsibility on this matter by refraining from making a decision either way about online communion. Instead it can reaffirm our existing complex and multi-faceted doctrine of communion whilst also inviting the church to engage this material afresh as part of our ongoing experimenting with communion. In doing so, we continue that long “series of experiments in following Jesus, who was, and is, and is to come.”

Geoff Thompson

¹ Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 203.

² The language and resonances of “experiment” are obviously looser than the biblical idea of the church as a pilgrim people and than the axioms popular in Reformed churches, i.e., *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the church must always be reformed) or (more radically) *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (the church reformed, always reforming). As we will see, however, Higton’s concepts explicitly relate this looseness to Jesus Christ, a connection which these other metaphors and axioms often obscure because they become markers of denominational identity rather than mandates to reform.

³ There is also an overlapping argument that the question is already a matter for congregational discernment without the Assembly having to give permission in the first place. But if it is agreed that online communion is a matter of doctrine, then UCA polity does not leave it to congregations, unless of course the Assembly discerns determines that it is a matter of local discernment (which, of course, it what the temporary provision has done).

⁴ *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 15(e): “The Assembly...has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline...”

⁵ I would also argue that the effects of this language are compounded by the similarly flat description of doctrine in the Assembly’s 2009 document, “The Nature of Doctrine and the Role of the Assembly – Three Kinds of Theological Statements.” See Christopher C. Walker (ed.), *Building on the Basis: Papers from the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Working Groups on Doctrine and Worship 2000–2011* (Sydney: Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2012), 142–148. Whilst the descriptions and definitions outlined in that document are in themselves fine and illuminating, they leave unaddressed the dynamic of the doctrinal enterprise or how doctrines so adopted by the Assembly actually function. I’d argue, in passing, that the time is ripe for sustained attention to the understanding of both the development and functions of doctrine in the UCA. We need, I believe, to expand our discussions of doctrine beyond debates about the authority of scripture and/or the use of the overworked Wesleyan quadrilateral. The former often reduces doctrinal discernment to a contest between different ways of interpreting scripture (and in way that manifests a latent protestant Biblicism that resides equally in self-styled ‘liberal’ and self-styled ‘conservatives’ in the UCA). The use of the latter can yield a methodological overconfidence that obscures the ambiguities, disruptions and surprises of spiritual, communal and long-term discernment. More radically, I’d also suggest that over time our discourse about diversity and the priority given to context has weakened our capacity to develop a shared discourse about how the UCA determines and uses doctrine.

⁶ For the sake of focusing on the main points, many shortcuts have been taken in presenting these case studies. The complexity of the relevant theological issues has been avoided. References to “the Assembly” making decisions covers cases where it was the Assembly in session and where it was the ASC of the time.

⁷ *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 14 d. At issue is what is meant by the Basis’s own language, “adhere to the Basis of Union.” The Basis itself defines it in these terms: “...the phrase “adhere to the Basis of Union” is understood as willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.”

⁸ “Why does the Uniting Church Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?” in *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 564. Hereafter *Theology for Pilgrims* will be designated as *TFP*.

⁹ This was alongside the adoption of a wide suite of newly-designated lay ministries, and of explicitly and formally aligning the UCA understanding of ministry to the contemporary Australian context.

¹⁰ The concern was that by making ordination generic and not *essentially* linking it to a particular ministry risked reifying ordination—and those ordained—in a way that repeated that which Protestants had historically resisted. This concern may have been over-stated, but this was the point of contention.

¹¹ That the decision to allow online communion was a response to requests from the wider church must be emphasized in the public discussions of this issue. It was not the ASC taking the initiative to exercise an uninvited top-down authority.

¹² Although she does not use the word “reconfigure,” Kathryn Tanner writes of how in the course of its history and movement into new contexts, Christianity “rearranges” itself. Her reflections on this illuminate a little more

fully what I am seeking to develop through the idea of reconfiguration. A knowledge of Christian history shows, she writes, “the variety of ways that Christianity can be put together and pulled apart for novel rearrangements, and at what real human costs... . Rather than suggesting... a norm of conformity with the past, knowledge of the diversity of Christian self-understandings highlights the ambiguities of theological achievements, their often limited relevance to particular times and place, and their tendencies towards obsolescence. Any belief in the inevitability or fixity of a certain understanding of Christianity erodes before a sense for the flexible richness of so variegated a Christianity ever dissolving and resolving itself again into new organized wholes.” Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), xvii–xviii.

¹³ Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine*, 75.

¹⁴ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 8.

¹⁵ “Response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry by the Uniting Church in Australia,” in *TFP*, 210–229.

¹⁶ “Children and Holy Communion,” in *TFP*, 486–506.

¹⁷ “Lay Presidency at the Sacraments,” in *TFP*, 425–440.

¹⁸ See *Uniting in Worship 2* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2000), 225–232.

¹⁹ One early contribution in this area oriented to UCA issues is the collection of essays in Judi Fisher and Janet Wood, *A Place at the Table: Women at the Last Supper* (Melbourne: JBCE, 1995). Although not addressing their relationships to the Last Supper, UCA scholar, Kylie Crabbe has explored the “boundary-crossing” character of Jesus’ meals in her “A Sinner and a Pharisee: Challenge at Simon’s Table in Luke 7:36–50,” *Pacifica* 24 (2011): 247–66.

²⁰ Although only a partial overlap, this deepening of communion as an inclusive *meal* of the kingdom is also reflected in the common practice of congregations literally gathering around the table. This taps into much broader discussions about the links between communion and the church’s self-understanding. Nearly three decades ago, American Presbyterian theologian Letty Russell argued that the church should structure its self-understanding around the metaphor of a “round table.” She wrote of gathering around the communion table as counter-cultural because it points to “the *already* of welcome, sharing...and partnership [which] opposes the *not yet* of our divided and dominated world.” See Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993), 17.

²¹ These issues were set out by Rev Dr Sally Douglas in her “Theological Reflection: Holy Communion During COVID-19” presented at the Assembly’s online seminar “Fast or Feast”, October 1st, 2020, She drew on biblical exegesis and on what she and her parishioners at Richmond UCA (Victoria) experienced through refraining from online communion.