



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY
Assembly Standing Committee

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Title	Church in the Digital Age Task Group
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	Information and decision
Assembly or ASC Minute	ASC Minute 20.78.04
Consultation	Online forums, personal contacts
Purpose	Final report
Attachments	None
Proposals:	<p>That the Assembly Standing Committee</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encourages the Assembly Circles to further explore and report on what works well for their areas of interest in physical gatherings, what works well for them in hybrid settings and what works well for them online AND identify what obstacles might be experienced. [Note – We are suggesting here that there are challenges and obstacles in every setting, and the task is not to shut things down but to identify things that could be better resourced and worked upon.] 2. Requests the Standards for Ministries Committee to encourage theological and ministry education bodies to collaborate in order to provide a suite of offerings in gathered, hybrid and online modes that are cross-creditable and accessible across current geographical boundaries and to ensure that digital ecclesiology is a topic addressed within formation for all ministry leadership. 3. Ensures that through the ACT2 project, or another appropriate means, guidelines for healthy digital communities and their operation, and for the oversight and operation of non geographic communities should be developed. 4. Determine that Holy Communion online is a new expression of our ecclesial life.
Submitted by	Rev Ann Perrin, Task Group Co-convenor

Church in the Digital Age Task Group Report

Since April 2020 the church experienced a time of innovation and experimentation as a response to the COVID pandemic. Initially, due to closure of public buildings, the church was forced to express its ecclesial life through digitalisation. It had responded very well with worship being recorded or streamed live on different social media platforms or zoom. Zoom has been used for fellowship and discipleship activities as well for those who have been able to access zoom. We also note that there have been those who haven't been able to access Internet due to location or lack of resources. There have also been those who refused to believe that digital connection is church. We now face a future where digital expression operates alongside our other church activities. Hybrid worship still continues in some congregations.

While this response was initially a technical fix to enable the church to continue in regular activities, worship, and connection, it does prompt the question where is God in the new places we find ourselves? Is there room eventually to approach digital ecclesiology as an adaptive opportunity for future generations of the church?

While the COVID pandemic may have accelerated and expanded some understanding of the place and possibility of the church in the digital age, such progression fits within a wider experience and developmental framework of the current era in which we live. When the World Council of Churches unveiled its Digital Map¹ in relation to children's ministry in 2017, there was a sense of inevitability. Young millennials had been born into a digital age and would take the church into expressions of relational engagement beyond our imaginations. It was an expected 'new' tool, situated in a series of 'new tools' being trialled by ever more seemingly youthful leaders operating in a GLocal environment². It made sense to resource digital map-making. (Can you remember the last time you bought a street directory? How often do you use google maps or another app on your phone or in your car?)

So it is for people exploring faith. (Who still carries a hard-copy Bible AND a tablet or phone?) We live differently. There are people who prefer a paper diary or a camera that doesn't have a speaker function, but they are now considered quaint specialists or eccentrics, rather than fitting the personas of general population. Migration studies among aid agencies readily claim that the most urgently sought aid is more likely to be a smartphone than an item of food or medication or shelter. The phone, after all, can help you find all the others. It is the new fishing-line for the starving person.

We can see our digital expression as the Holy Spirit creating and recreating our understanding of the Triune God leading us into new ways of being the church. Digital expression of faith is not necessary only for this current season responding to the COVID pandemic environment, but rather opens us to the future unfolding of discipleship in the context in which we live.

The members of the CIDA Task Group whole heartedly believe that God is inviting us into a new thing, a re-creation and an expanded understanding of God at work in the world. We however recognise that there are anxieties about this new venture. These anxieties arrive when we attempt to fit the new practice into present understandings of the expression of our doctrinal positions. We also note that the task group is made up of practitioners and resourcers who are reflecting on experimental and innovative ministry practices put in place.

There will follow comment on each of the Terms of Reference. The Task Group would like to note the unfolding nature of this conversation and the terms of reference. The questions we would like to ask are different today than they were yesterday. We would encourage the asking of new questions as they arise. E.g., any upheaval in social media today can result in changed digital expression across all social media platforms.

The following nine topics are those given to the task group in the terms of reference for consideration of the implications of the digital age for the Uniting Church's worship witness and service:

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-develops-digital-map-for-churches-commitments-to-children>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glocalization>

1. The UCA's confession that the Church is an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.

The United Church, since its inception, has understood itself as an instrument through which Christ may come and bear witness to himself. Digital expression does not change this. What digital expression has opened up for some of us is that Christ comes in other ways to bear witness. Christ is still present in our worship, witness, service and fellowship even if we are on Zoom or live streaming to social media platforms.

The church is gathered in new and different ways, that are not of lesser value nor meaning. Christ's presence permeates all of human experience, indeed all of Creation, including when this presence is enabled through digital expression.

2. Christian convictions about the work of the Holy Spirit in the gathering and sending of the church.

The Holy Spirit still gathers and sends us into our worship, witness, and out in service to the world. Through technology, we have an expanded understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. If we follow the Christian conviction that the work of the Holy Spirit is free from the confines of human expectation and the churches' ownership, then it is the Holy Spirit that brings into being the new. Therefore, digital expression of our faith is no barrier to work of the Holy Spirit and may provide new opportunity to experience, be attentive to and share in the work of the Spirit. Maybe at this time in our history can we ask the question: is the Holy Spirit doing a new thing in how we are gathered and sent?

3. Christian convictions about the embodied, communal, and holistic nature of human existence.

The digital age broadens out the experience of human existence by connecting people from different regions, nationalities, gender identities, ages — really anyone who has a way of accessing the internet. Its accessibility allows those who are unable to physically attend due to disabilities or mental health struggles. Over these distances ideas and experiences can be shared, giving a sense of connecting with a wider faith community and despite their physical or geographical isolation recognising their shared humanity.

Here we can address the anxieties of digital expression: disembodiment, anonymity, authority, and access.

Disembodiment – when we proclaim Jesus bodily resurrection, we have historically done so bodily present in physical proximity to one another i.e. in church. We have also acknowledged that we do so with Christians across the world e.g. by use of the Common Lectionary and World Day of Prayer and with the cloud of witnesses when we proclaim the Lord's Supper. When we do this online the complication is that because we are gathering from different places, we appear to become disembodied. We ask ourselves however, whether this is real, given that each digital participant indeed HAS a body. We can see ourselves however as a community differently bodied. One of the ways we know we are still connected to each other through the Holy Spirit is because of our haptic imagination.

Anonymity – we have strong desires for being in community where we are known to those around us. On whatever digital platform we find ourselves if we view it as being disembodied the experience becomes impersonal at best and can lead to violence under the cover of anonymity at worst. The complication is that there is no accountability because of distance, and this can bring out the worst in us, and harm from being dismissed.

Authority – in the day of fake news and independent algorithms controlling what we see and hear, we can question the veracity of information, so from where does our authority come? Where do we turn for theological and pastoral leadership? The nature of authority is also tested by the number of voices now speaking into theological and scriptural conversations and discernment. Voices from the margins are far more present than they have been before. Sometimes these voices are at odds with set doctrinal positions.

4. The ethics of digital engagement which ensure the safety and flourishing of all people.

Ethics according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary is defined as *a set of moral principles; a theory or system of moral values; a consciousness of moral values.*

For the UCA as a religious organisation there are three areas to consider.

1. Theological ethics – how are we discerning, responding, and offering theological guidance to the church.
2. Our legal responsibilities
3. Pastoral responsibilities.

For the church maintaining the safety of all who engage in this new way of gathering is an ethical concern and is now expressed as the Uniting Church's response forming National Safe Church Unit.

<https://safechurch.uca.org.au>

It reminds us ... *emphasis on care for the vulnerable leads us to take note of times when our systems and processes are vulnerable to enabling abuse or mistreatment of members of our community, especially those who may have less power or ability to protect themselves.* Being alert to the use of online situations that can lead to abuse is now recognised and the national church has responded by partnering with the e-safety Commissioner in hosting Webinars and offering resources for parents, young people, and children.

The Task Group believes that there is also a need to ensure that we have guidelines describing what a healthy online community looks like and how it operates.

These resources are to prevent the risk of “diminished humanness” as Angela Williams Gorrell discusses. The risk is that online we do not see ourselves and other people as full human beings with minds, hearts, emotions, hopes, friends, families, reputations, and struggles. The other can become abstracted to the point that our humanness is ignored, forgotten or even becomes irrelevant. There is a new rhythm and awareness of our humanness needed if we are to be faithful to Jesus online.

Social media platforms now provide individuals with the ability to express their faith through memes, likes and comments. There is also the possibility of niche groups forming on social media that can be private and not under the scrutiny of institutions. It has also now been suggested that we rely on technological platforms for our teaching and preaching. However, we have also entered a computing age where search algorithms can privilege particular topics and meanings. Search engines and searchers are not in a benevolent relationship. Algorithms can lead the unwary down paths that lead to a distrust of digital media. Information could be “fluctuating, untruthful or biased”.

We also need to be aware of the possibility of our imagination travelling too far from God as we navigate new situations in the digital space. What are the ethical parameters we can use to encourage and test our imagination as we seek to shape a church faithful to building God's Kingdom on earth in this new space and way.

Samuel Wells and Mike Higton offer a pattern of theological reflection to enable us to discern our way forward. Wells proposes that the bible is not a script to be followed, rehearsing, and repeating the same story over and over with new players and on a new stage. He draws on scriptural narratives and church history and offers practices that characterise both improvisation and ethics as a way of doing justice to each new moment of creation.

Higton describes the Christian life as a series of Jesus experiments in which we discover new gifts through the resurrection with each new reading of scripture sensible to our misinterpretation, yet we are charged with replaying the logic of the early church (c.f. Luke 24:32). It becomes an imperative that we now ground ourselves in Church history, scripture, and the gift of the resurrection so as to venture into the new digital age with a sense that we will continue to recognise the call of God in the new technological age. And as the Uniting Church test our discernment in Council.

5. The theology and practice of the sacraments.

Sacraments are a means of grace, an encounter with God that is both tangible and mystery. As the church finds itself in an immense paradigm shift in response to digital engagement throughout the COVID pandemic and beyond, our understanding of such means of grace is expanded. Experiencing the sacraments celebrated through technology and a physically dispersed community makes us acutely aware of our inability to set boundaries for the Spirit at work in the world. We become increasingly conscious of our inability to control the presence of and encounter with the risen Christ, living more fully into the sacraments as a means of grace. Our understanding of the nature of community and how we gather is also expanded. The intention of an individual to connect with community digitally constitutes a gathered community. A new way of forming the gathering has emerged. Here, the grace offered by God becomes wider than previously imagined; the Spirit is more wild and free than perhaps may make us comfortable. The current context invites a rediscovery of the mystery of the sacraments and the limitless nature of the grace that is offered.

The Uniting Church gathers its theological understanding of the sacraments from several sources. The First is the Basis of Union in paragraphs six and seven as well as the liturgies in Uniting in Worship II and Communion beyond the gathered congregation, the Doc-Byte on Holy Communion etc.

Holy Communion online can challenge the understanding of the authority of the Presider as ordained or authorized by a presbytery. It is in our ministry practice that we articulate our theology.

The scattered community is also an expression of the Body of Christ. In as much as Christ and the Holy Spirit who by their very freedom move beyond the barriers of an ecclesial orthodoxy and gift all people no matter where or who they are, the gift of their presence. Those who accept this gift and respond to this grace may find themselves without fellowship but not excluded from the Body of Christ.

A scattered community then 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 being an expression of the Body of Christ, it is then the task of the rest of the church to creatively explore ways in which the members of the scattered community can know they are valued and significant in the economy of God.

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 church has grown in numbers and spiritual depth through this difficult time.

The church has always been innovative in its sacramental imagination. When the pilgrimage to Jerusalem became too dangerous for pilgrims, the church created labyrinths to encourage the contemplative way. Stations of the cross is another practice, whether walked about neighborhoods or given creative expression, we can still walk with Jesus to the cross and beyond. This hermeneutic of virtual logic is activated when we engage in Holy Communion online or beyond the gathered congregation. It is seen and experiences in presence and absence – of Jesus the Christ.

Questions that may be further explored in this paradigm shift include — given our understanding of what it means to be the gathered community is expanded, and the sacraments are able to be offered with greater freedom and grace, what does this mean for the boundaries of placement and responsibility for discipleship

and pastoral care in ongoing ways for this newly “gathered community”? It may be that the initial and immediate response to the COVID pandemic has a different answer to these questions than the sustainable ministry practices that are informed by, shaped by and initiated from the pandemic.

6. Implications for any existing UCA doctrinal positions.

Focusing on para: 4, 6, and 18 of the Basis of Union there appears to be no real implications for the celebration of sacraments digitally. The clear expectation is the celebration of the presence of Christ. It appears that the Church in the digital age is supported with the first sentence of para 4 “The Uniting Church acknowledges that the church is able to live and endure through the changes of history because its Lord comes, addresses and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work.”

The sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism is also supported by para 6 “The Uniting Church acknowledges 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.” Through the availability of such digital platforms as zoom, both sacraments fulfil the requirements of being both heard (words) and visible.

Finally, from paragraph 18 we are a church on the ‘way to the promised end’, we have the resources, technology, and divine inspiration to continue our “worship, witness and service to God’s eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.”

7. Implications for liturgical practices, regulations and guidelines that order our worship, witness and service.

Liturgical practices do appear different in the digital realm. However, these do not contravene any of the accepted practices, regulations, or guidelines. It is acknowledged that the sacraments will be presented differently but the question of the real presence of Christ in these settings cannot be answered and remain mystery. As much as it is in a traditional setting, as it is hoped that we are able sit with the mystery of Christ’s presence: that is free and available, not according to our control or design.

There are implications for the need for new guidelines for digital communities that have started and are continuing. Guidelines describing what healthy digital communities look like and how they operate. The Uniting Church up until now has organised its life around geographic boundaries. Pastoral oversight of faith communities that are forming beyond geographic boundaries becomes necessary.

8. Ecumenical learnings, opportunities and implications that arise.

There is no doubt that the digital age has made relationships in global and ecumenical settings more accessible. Relationships are built, strengthened and maintained in vastly different ways today than even pre-pandemic times. Conceptually, the world is united differently; people’s willingness to worship together, learn from one another and communicate across vast distances has been dramatically enhanced. When compared with even the turn of the millennium, the world is far more connected and has much greater access to technology throughout the most remote regions of the globe.

When considering the particular matter of online sacraments within the context of the global church, there have been many and varied responses to celebrating sacraments online. Some of our sibling churches have abstained from the sacrament, while others have celebrated sacraments with new appreciation, and others have allowed for temporary provision for the current context. For example:

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 words of Brazilian theologian and liturgist Cláudio Carvalhaes (Associate Professor of Worship, Union Seminary) also seem particularly appropriate. "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." The immediate crisis of the COVID pandemic has revealed to us that in fact there were many people who were removed from the community, unable to receive or celebrate the sacraments. Enabling online participation in the sacraments, people were able to receive the gifts of God's grace. This has been a great blessing, particularly important for members with poor health, or in nursing home care, unable to attend church in the building.

9. How digital technology enhances, enables, encourages, and prompts new missional engagement and new ways of discipling.

Churches moved quickly into the digital space March and April 2020. There was very little missional aspiration to the joining the digital world. Uppermost was the pastoral response to congregations now having to navigate the world of COVID pandemic and the uncertainty and ambiguity of lockdown. Church in the digital age prompts new missional engagement and new ways of discipling. As we're living in a new digital world we've witnessed industries around us being disrupted, from music, transportation, communication, technology and more. The church is not immune.

New discipleship and missional activities calls the church to respond beyond the technical fix that has enabled the regular activities our churches to continue. It prompts the question how do we build the Kingdom of God within the new spaces in which we find ourselves? Is there room eventually to approach digital ecclesiology as an adaptive challenge for future generations of the church. Already noted above there are digital missional gatherings already in the UCA and discipleship on line. What can we learn from them that can be contextually applied in different circumstances? c.f.

Sonder Collective <<https://www.sondercollective.org>>;

Neveroddoreven <<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100088893618280>>

With Love to the World <<https://apps.apple.com/au/app/with-love-to-the-world/id1516204721>>

To engage in the digital missional space one uses the same tools as engaging with a new culture. Enculturation leads to learning about the new space (place) and adapting the way the gospel is proclaimed and received. One might think into the possibilities offered by a new environment for the proclamation of the gospel by realizing a presence, through the imagination of those well versed in the translation needed for the digital world. It is recognised that missiology and theology can become highly contextualized especially as theologians from the Global South decolonize and localize theology. Digital media changes how we communicate and with whom we communicate.

Digital is now the 'front door' to church and is the new starting point of mission and discipling in a digital age. Before a congregation meets a new visitor, it's likely the new visitor has first researched the congregation online. This is where first impressions are made, not at our physical front door, but at our digital door. How can we make a great first impression? The church has an opportunity to invite the community into the story of Christ and it starts with making an intentional presence online. In a congregation context this would look like seeing real, authentic, welcoming photos of the congregation (not just the building), showing hope, community, and life.

The church can now use digital means to reach thousands of people in a way like never before. Social media may be deemed evil or untrustworthy, however, we must see social media simply as a tool that may have been underutilized. With the likes of Facebook and Instagram, we can use paid advertising at a fraction of the cost of similar media (e.g. print) to talk directly with those who are engaging with our congregation on the fringes and invite them into a next step.

Church in the Digital Age is transforming our church. The church can spark hope and encouragement in the midst of pain and suffering. If we are called to meet the people where they're at, then we are called to venture out into digital spaces to make meaningful connections, to make disciples, and explore new missional methods to engage in a life that reflects Christ.

Conclusion

When we look at the major technological changes that have occurred during Salvation history each and every time we can see a new way the reach of God has been extended. From oral to written tradition. From the scroll to the codex that enabled the first apostles to carry letters of encouragement to fledgling communities on the Way. The Gutenberg printing press fueled the Reformation by making scripture available outside of churches; led to bibles being not only available in churches but to being present in family homes, encouraging the necessity of learning to read. We remember Samuel Morse and the first electronic message "What has God wrought?" (Numbers 23:23). We are still asking that question. The church has always made use of technological advances through communication history and so again we are to wonder at where God may be leading us.

The way the church behaves digitally in our world today is no different, morally or spiritually, than any other mode in which the church is manifest. If the church is a servant to the marginalised and an advocate for justice, the church will use its digital presence as a way to fulfil those missions. If the church emphasises the formation of Christian community, social media will be an increasingly important contributor to the nurturing of communal connections. Proclamation of the Word will always be central to the church's calling, and new media will join older media as vehicles for the announcing of the good news.

The Task Group encourages churches seeking to move towards a digital ecclesiology to focus not simply on how technology should be used in the church environment, but also on why and for what purpose they choose to engage digital media. Theological reflection should be at the heart of this strategic reflection.

It is therefore crucial to understand the new context in which we now find ourselves — that due to COVID we have moved through a process of social re-organisation and that the digital spaces have enabled people to participate — and that they will therefore want to continue. It is empowering for users. This is the new normal. The Church is a digital presence so how do we best take up such a space that glorifies God and continues to express God's Eucharistic generosity in all our undertakings?

Recommended reading

Beck, Michael Adam and Picardo, Rosario, *Fresh Expression in a Digital Age EPUB*: "How the Church Can Prepare for a Post-Pandemic World"

Higton, Mike *The Life of Christian Doctrine* London: T&T Clarke 2020 Kindle

Kurlberg, Jonas and Phillips, Peter, M. Eds *Mission Dei in a Digital Age* London UK SCM Press 2020

Schmidt, Katherine G., *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination*, Lanham Maryland: Fortress Academic, 2020

Sørensen, Christian Grund "The Sword of the Cherubim: Do Algorithms Inhibit our Access to The Knowledge of God" in Kurlberg, Jonas and Phillips, Peter, M. Eds *Mission Dei in a Digital Age* London UK SCM Press 2020

Wells, Samuel *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* Grand Rapids Michigan: Brazos Press 2004

Williams Gorrell, Angela *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019

Recommendations

That the Assembly Standing Committee

1. Encourages the Assembly Circles to further explore and report on what works well for their areas of interest in physical gatherings, what works well for them in hybrid settings and what works well for them online AND identify what obstacles might be experienced. [Note – We are suggesting here that there are challenges and obstacles in every setting, and the task is not to shut things down but to identify things that could be better resourced and worked upon.]
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