



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY
Assembly Standing Committee

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Title	Growing in faith Report to ASC following the referral of questions arising from the Church in the Digital Age report
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	Decision
Assembly or ASC Minute	March 2022 ASC, 22.10 March 2023 ASC, 23.08.04
Consultation	Growing in Faith Panel, other relevant theologians.
Purpose	To address questions raised by the ASC.
Rationale & Findings Summary	<p>The report is a response to ASC referral (23.08.04) and may provide theological considerations enabling the ASC to feel comfortable regarding its decision (22.10.04) during “this period of creative, contextual theological exploration and celebration”, “to allow the continuation of online gatherings for Holy Communion”.</p> <p>The report suggests some further areas of possible exploration which do not directly impinge upon the decision above.</p>
Attachments	
Proposal/s	That the Assembly Standing Committee: 1. Receives the report.
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Growing in Faith Circle Report for ASC

How do we understand the following in the light of the 'Digital Age'

- *The theology and practice of being ecclesia,*
- *How we understand humanity and personhood,*
- *The theology and practice of the sacraments*

1. *The theology and practice of being ecclesia*

1.1 Fundamental to the Christian understanding of God is that God is Creator. The creator-creation distinction preserves the holiness and freedom of God over and against creation. At the same time, God is deeply entwined with creation. Indeed, God's being as Trinity means that God's very being must be understood through God's unfolding life with creation as Father, Son, and Spirit. In other words, God's being is found in God's being with creation and all God's creatures, principally with humanity. All accounts of Christian assembly (ecclesia) derive from God's being with humanity, which gives rise to humanity's being with one another in community. This is the foundation of the theology and practice of ecclesia: our life together begins with our life with God, or better, God's life with us.

1.2 God is one. And yet, God's presence exists in the world in a variety of differentiated ways. As such the whole community of God's people is not a single, unitary community, but a network of differentiated communities with their own particularity.¹ Not every configuration of human community is necessarily an example of God's ecclesia, nor is God's ecclesia only found in one form. God's presence in and through differentiated communities is enabled by God's mediated presence through different aspects of creation: history, culture, practices, art, music, tradition, ceremony, and on and on. The differentiation of creation, reflected in the diversity of concrete ecclesial communities, flows out of God's gracious dwelling with humanity through the fullness of creation itself. Diversity is God's good gift to humanity.

1.3 Sometimes Scripture implies mediation (and thus differentiation) is necessary for humans to survive the holiness of God's presence, in other stories in Scripture there is a somewhat elusive slippage between God's mediator and God. Nonetheless, angels and messengers, Word and sacrament act in their own way as mediators of God's presence. Depending on one's theological proclivities and commitments the details of the how, who, and why of this mediation might be nuanced, expanded, and countered, but Christians in some form maintain God's presence can be mediated. Such mediation is distinct from God (it cannot rightly be identified with the full presence of the One, Holy, and Undivided Trinity) but it is not discrete from God (it shares in and is constituted by God's good nature). Indeed, one of the major breaks between this age and the age to come is that God's presence will no longer be mediated. For this reason, teaching (Jeremiah 31:31-34), as well as faith and hope (1 Corinthians 13:12-13), will be unnecessary and fade away, and God will be the light of the New Jerusalem.

¹ This is a source of both grief and grace.

1.4 In the present time between this age and the next, mediation means that in the present order we may nonetheless encounter the presence of God and through this receive what is necessary to take hold of the life that really is life. Because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Spirit, we encounter God in the present age of creation as if we were living in the next age of God's fullness. Creation and New Creation appear to us simultaneously in the life of the ecclesia. Thus parts of creation are gracefully appropriated by God as the means by which God is present with us.

1.5 The theological point of God's presence in absence - that is, presence mediate through creation² - is confirmed in our own experience of presence in absence with one another. As those created in the image of God, humans share (in a finite and fragile sense) this ability to mediate our presence. To be felt, experienced, and present in a place or to a people, from whom we are absent. Indeed, as created beings fashioned in the image of a (The) Creator, we are creative. Human beings are capable of creativity as a bringing forth (externalising) something of internal self in parts of creation. By this the self might be mediated to those in times and spaces other than the one to which we are present bodily.

1.6 Possessing this capacity, humans have long found ways to extend their presence beyond the physical limit of the body. Seeking ways to be with those from whom they are absent. Seeking ways to be, as it were, in two (or more) places at once. The leaps in particular forms of technology have only intensified and expanded the capacity for this extension of the self. From lovers carving names in tree trunks, to sending letters spritzed with their perfume, to falling asleep with the phone on the pillow, to now being able to appear – moving and speaking on a screen – in front of their beloved from nearly anywhere in the world. Each of these methods indicate both the desire to be present to one absent and the experience of this presence by the one absent through various forms of mediation.

1.7 And yet, as lovers know, despite the intimacy of such forms of connection, and how fulfilling they might be in their own right, they remain distinct from the experience of bodily presence in one space and time. Importantly, however, these mediations draw their significance and power not from the technology (or the way – as technology increases – simulacrum becomes increasingly close to the real thing) but from their anticipatory and/or recollective relationship to collective embodied presence. For there is always a horizon (ahead and/or behind) which defines the mediation, which endows it with the potential or echo of the times when two were one. In other words, the human capacity to be present through mediation is a reflection of presence in absence, where we are caught between the times of recollected and anticipated bodily presence.

1.8 Considerations of church, personhood, and sacraments in light of the digital age ought to seek to honour both the way mediated connections and communication (be that of the more digital or analogue varietal) are distinct from collective embodied presence, but also can be grounded in prior or anticipated presence and so are not discrete from them.³ To say

² However one understands the nature of this mediation.

³ It is necessary to acknowledge the way in-person gatherings have and are mediated still. One example will prove illustrative: During holiday services when the main sanctuary space is full, churches have often directed further attendees to the adjoining or downstairs hall where the audio from the worship space is played. This

it another way, the manner in which a person can be felt, experienced, or present to a community (and vice versa) through digital mediation cannot be conflated with the bodily encounter in a singular time and space; and yet, it shares the significance (and reality) with the bodily encounter, by virtue of the experience of bodily encounter providing its horizon in recollection or anticipation. To use the theological example of the sacraments, there is a distinction between the presence of Christ in the eucharistic act and the present Christ who established the feast with his disciples in a particular time and place. And yet, the presence is not discrete, it remains Christ's real presence insofar as it draws significance from the horizon of recollection (do this and remember me) and anticipation (the promised end).

1.9 Should a further, biblical model be sought to illustrate mediated presence constituted through recollected and anticipated embodied presence, one can appeal to the epistles. The presence of the apostle is mediated to the community through the written (and read) word. And yet, such mediated presence is grounded in either (or in some cases both) the memory of their presence in the embodied collective, or their anticipation of being together (again or for first time; as is the case with Paul's letter to the church in Rome). The absence of the apostle is further mitigated (and perhaps mediated) through remembrances and appeals to those who have been present to the apostle and are now present to the community receiving the letter. While the apostles yearn to be more fully present with those they write, they nonetheless write as part of the *ecclesia*. The horizon of recollection and anticipation permits them to offer encouragement, teaching, and rebuke, because while their presence (and authority) is, by virtue of distance, distinct, it is not discrete.

1.10 In another way, one might appeal to Horeb. On the fringes of the Promised Land, Moses addresses the people and recounts the giving of the Law. To the people he says, The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire (Deut 5). And yet, the covenant was made with their ancestors forty years earlier, when Lord spoke to those of the wilderness generation now buried in the desert. However, despite this distance, the new generation are included in the assembly at Sinai. Though the Law is mediated to them by Moses (who stood between the Lord and the people) their experience of the presence of God is made one with those in the embodied collective at the foot of the mountain.⁴ The assembly gathered before Moses hearing his address is remembered back into the assembly at Horeb, such that they might be one.

1.11 Digital expressions of faith communities or congregations might then be considered *ecclesia* to the extent that they occur within the horizons of recollected and/or anticipated presence of embodied community in one time and place. To provide an example of the recollective horizon constituting digital engagement as an act of church: older members of a congregation, who continue to access the worship service via the mediation of livestreaming

is one service, one community, one *ecclesia*, and yet the experience of some members is mediated via technology providing a distinct, but not discrete experience from those 'in-person.'

⁴ Indeed, classical, medieval, and contemporary Rabbis and Jewish Scholars pick up this emphasis in tense to teach that the covenant made directly with the wilderness generation at Horeb, is made directly with all future generation of Jews, all were present, face to face with the Lord, despite the historical and geographical distance.

or recording, should rightly be considered part of the *ecclesia*, because while their engagement with the service is distinct from others gathering in one time and place, it is not discrete, for the horizon of recollection (their own recollection of embodied presence in the congregation, and other's recollection of them) constitutes and connects the digital experience with the collective embodied presence.

1.12 To develop an example of the anticipatory horizon: an individual who has found a faith community through the internet, and has connected with its worshipping and social life through digital mediation, but is awaiting the end of a health crisis, global pandemic, or an upcoming relocation to be in one time and space for worship, might be rightly considered part of the *ecclesia* through their mediated involvement by virtue of an expectation of fuller, future presence. Even if this anticipation is never in fact realised.

1.13 The question then turns to communities meeting entirely online. Or those individuals who have found meaningful connection with a congregation that meets in another country or state and thus in no meaningful sense anticipate that they will be able to ever shift the mode by which they engage. It is important that we do not cling too closely to the strictures of historical possibility when devising the anticipatory horizon. For the individual might hope against hope that God might make a way for them to join the congregation in person (if not permanently, then once). Similarly, for those digital communities, even when the likelihood of a gathering of all members might be unfeasible, there are possibilities of smaller gatherings where two or three might come together in Christ's name, and in such a meeting there is Christ's presence. Thus the anticipation of more modest gatherings can nonetheless constitute the mediated gatherings as occurring before this horizon. Finally, even if the possibility of embodied presence in one time and space eludes an individual or community, the eschatological horizon may be anticipated. The great and glorious day in which we shall all rise bodily and gather round the banquet table before the unmediated presence of God, constitutes digital engagement and communities (as it does our imperfect in-person gatherings) as forestates of that which is to come, thus making it a recognisable form of *ecclesia*.

1.14 Given these considerations of how mediated engagement or relationships still share in that which constitutes the collective embodied presence as real, the question now becomes, when doesn't it? When does a distinct form of engagement become discrete? To state it simplistically: *it is when the horizons of recollection and anticipation are absent*. Without this the social is reduced to the para-social and we enter the realm of the educational and edifying, rather than the assembly. Without the horizons of recollection or (even hoped for) anticipation of collective embodied presence then an online service or discussion group becomes more categorically akin to a worship CD, devotional book, or study bible. This is not to denigrate such things, for they can be worthy, commendable, and Spirit-empowered gifts to shape and sustain the faith. But such a categorical distinction is important, because there is no remembered or anticipated connection which would close the circle between those in the assembly and the receptive individual or community.

1.15 The Basis of Union expresses that,

“The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world. The congregation will recognise the need for a diversity of agencies for the better ordering of its life in such matters as education, administration and finance.” (Basis para. 15)

That it is the Congregation which is defined in terms of “embodiment” gives the Congregation a particular place within the Church’s theology and practice of ecclesia. At the same time, that Congregations have a particular place by virtue of their embodiment does not undermine the gift and joy of the spiritual communities formed by Presbyteries, Synods, or Assemblies, or other forms of Christian community (including online). Nor does this anchoring of the ecclesia in embodied communities deny diversity: the Basis clearly envisages the need for Congregations to contain “a diversity of agencies,” in order to truly be the ecclesia.

1.16 In concrete terms this leads to the conclusion that purely digital communities can be seen as a wonderful, Spirit-filled gift to the life of the Church, places where God’s presence can be felt and known. At the same time, we should be wary of too easily labelling every good form of Christian community as an expression of the fullness of Christian assembly (ecclesia). Christian ecclesia is grounded in God’s being with us, and our being with one another, always seeking the fullness of presence together as our full, differentiated, embodied selves.

2. How we understand humanity and personhood

2.1 The above discussion of embodied presence and digital community raises, rather than solves, a range of questions about the nature of humanity and personhood. Important questions which the Assembly might turn its attention to include:

2.2 A renewed theology of the body. What renewed theology of the body do we require? What are the boundaries of bodies? In what ways are bodies inscribed with social, political, and historical meanings? How do we share with God in our own bodily co-creation?

2.3 A theology of posthumanism. With the advent of technological integrations with human life, what new accounts of the human person may be required? How do we understand the relationship between the givenness of human identity, and the growing capacity for human self-making? What limits and possibilities exist in the open future of human integration with new technology?

2.4 This report does not have the scope to address these questions in significant depth, and much of the theological work (particularly on the questions in 2.1.2) remain in early

infancy.⁵ There is significant insight to be gained from feminist and queer perspectives on questions on bodies, personhood, and their theological implications.

3. The theology and practice of sacraments

3.1 To say a further word about sacraments specifically. To what extent does the immediacy, intimacy, and identifiability of the forms of mediation that mark the digital age allow for sacramental practice to occur in more than one place (or time) at once? During the covid lockdowns, the decision to practice online communion can be seen as a recognition that though the practice was distinct from its previous form in the embodied collective, it was not discrete from embodied presence. Online communion is recollective, for it draws on the memory of prior presence at the table. This assembly was one, and thus by the power of the Spirit, remains one even when dispersed. Online communion also points to anticipation and hope for the time when the assembly shall find their way to one table again.

3.2 Online communion requires navigating between two opposing tendencies: the over-emphasis on (in)vulnerable bodies; and the commodification of the sacrament.

3.3 Arguments against digital communion during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic rested on strong accounts of Christ's incarnate bodiliness. To celebrate communion online was, it was argued, a kind of denial of Christ's embrace of bodiliness, vulnerability, messiness, concreteness. Thus only in-person communion was a faithful act to an incarnate Christ. The challenge here is that the relationship between embodied presence and vulnerability was precisely inverse when it came to the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, the most vulnerable were the least bodily present. An overemphasis on embodied presence in communion could be interpreted as privileging the least vulnerable in the community as the community seeks a sacramental encounter with the presence of Christ. Even now, "post-covid" or at least, post covid restrictions, in-person communion should be added to early (and continuing) Church practices of ministry to and with a community which extends beyond the weekly gathering. In this way they reflect Christ's ministry with those who are vulnerable and thus excluded from normal patterns of communal gathering.

3.4 In the light of what was said above (section 1) about Christian ecclesia, the norm of the embodied presence as the horizon for Christian assembly allows us to hold together the primacy of embodied presence while recognising that Christ's own ministry privileged the inclusion of the (bodily) vulnerable and excluded. It is appropriate to emphasise the embodied nature of the sacraments, and so pursue the norm of embodied presence in sacramental celebration. At the same time, this embodiment is not grounded in a general, undifferentiated privileging of physical bodies as such. Rather, embodied presence derives its significance from Christ's body, who offers his body as the culmination of his earthly ministry to the vulnerable, impaired, and excluded. The particularity of Christ's embodiment

⁵ An edited volume on Wesleyan approaches to posthumanism was released only a few months ago, edited by a Uniting Church Minister Rev. Dr. Glen O'Brien. Arseny Ermakov and Glen O'Brien (eds.), *A Curious Machine: Wesleyan Reflections on the Posthuman Future*, Wipf and Stock (Eugene, OR: 2023).

may helpfully lead us to an openness towards mediated forms of gathering within the recollected and anticipated horizon of being together in our embodied fullness.

3.5 At the same time as digital sacraments can enable forms of gathering which are disembodied and yet faithful to the particular embodiment offered by the incarnate Christ, digital sacraments can also reduce the sacraments to a commodity. There have been, and continue to be, many places in history when Christian communities could not gather in person to celebrate the sacraments because of events in the world: persecution, plague, poverty, illness, and so on. This is part of the incarnated reality of the Christian tradition that it is not separate from, but part of the unfolding of the world itself. When we sanitise the sacraments by using technology to make them ever accessible to us, so that they are always at our disposal, we risk removing sacramentality from its embeddedness within the unfolding of the world, risk, we might say immunising the sacraments the stress and story of the church and its neighbours in a particular time and place. The sacraments are a gift. In McCaughey's commentary on the Basis he talks about waiting on God in receiving the sacraments: sacraments are always received (even by the presider), and given only by God. Enabling sacraments through digital means should never be an attempt to make sacramental participation a matter of simple convenience, or a commodity which the Church can freely dispense by its own human power.

3.6 The norm of the Christian tradition has been that sacraments should be celebrated in the context of a Christian assembly (ecclesia), within the horizon of embodied presence. This gives scope for digital means of celebrating sacraments: livestreaming a baptism, online communion during a pandemic, but these should always be seen as exceptions within the horizon of embodied presence. Where a community does not exist within the horizon of embodied presence it is not an example of the fullness of Christian ecclesia, and so any celebration of the sacraments is diaconal in nature.

3.7 In the UCA diaconal celebration of sacraments is valid. The celebration of sacraments in digital communities beyond the ecclesia offers an opportunity to clarify and refine the UCA's understanding of diaconal celebration of sacraments. Questions worth posing include: what is the place of diaconal celebration of sacraments in the UCA? What role does the presider play in a community where it is ambiguous whether they still function as the representative voice of the whole assembly at prayer? Does diaconal celebration of the sacraments imply a more priestly account of the diaconate than the UCA otherwise holds about ordained ministry? Is now the time for the UCA to consider formally adopting an open table?

3.8 Beneath these considerations lies a pressing issue: what is said of communion must also, in some way, be able to be said of baptism. For the sacraments are two visible gifts, not one. Practicing communion but not baptism during lockdowns broadly reflected practical demands rather than theological conviction – with baptism being either not required or perceived as able to wait. A theology of sacraments in the digital age needs to address the possibility of a mediated form of baptism, distinct but not discrete from the practice in the collective, embodied assembly. For instance, if a member of an entirely online faith community wished to be baptised can this be done? Can the words be said by the minister in their manse, over the candidate in their home, who pours water over their own head, while the assembly watches on from their homes? If geographical realities allow, could the

minister and candidate meet outside by a body of water and perform the act there alone?⁶ It may be possible that contextually sensitive, but theologically rigorous practices for mediated baptism could be developed, with the test of its legibility being found in the questions of distinction and discretion, and recognition of recollective and anticipated horizons. However, should it be deemed impossible, then this should trouble the presumption that another sacrament can be practiced this way.

Conclusion and Summary

4.1 In many ways the particular questions posed to the church by the digital age are not new questions, as what the digital age allows (the mediation of a person's presence into a place they are not bodily) is something numerous analogue tools have also supported. However, the issues are intensified because the digital tools at our disposal are able to make the mediated presence feel increasingly close to embodied presence. The horizons of recollection and anticipation are less relied upon (as there is less need for memory to bring the fullness of the person into mind), and the ability to see and speak with a live, moving image has the possibility to better satiate the desire to be in one time and space together. The question then posed to the church is not how does the existence of zoom, face-time, or VR shape the theology and practice of ecclesia and sacraments, or understandings of the human person, rather we are asked to what extent are mediated communication and relationships constituent of the collective embodied assembly?

4.2 Grounded on a confession that God's presence can be mediated in a way that is distinct but not discrete from God's full presence, and that this ability to mediate one's presence is shared with the human by virtue of their being created in the *imago Dei*, this reflection has drawn on the example of sacraments, epistles, and Horeb to argue that a mediated expression or engagement with the worship, witness, and community might be considered a distinct, but not discrete, form of the ecclesia when it is shaped and understood as existing between a recollective and/or anticipatory horizon of embodied presence. For this is the proper posture of the Church, which *lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring*.

4.3 Examining the theology and nature of the Church as ecclesia in the digital age in turn gives rise to significant questions about the nature of embodiment, and personhood, in dialogue with technological advances. So too in examining the sacraments in the digital age we are invited to consider afresh the UCA's understandings of the sacraments themselves, and their place within the orders of ministry and the Church's common life.

⁶ Biblical precedent might be drawn from Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, where the two find nothing wrong with the water they came upon, despite the absence of a worshipping community.