

26. Online Church and Online Communion

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	<p>26/1. The Conference receives the Report.</p> <p>26/2. The Conference extends the period of discernment on online celebrations of Holy Communion adopted by the Conference of 2021 until 31 August 2026.</p> <p>26/3. The Conference agrees to establish a task group to consider the recommendations of this report and to bring appropriate proposals to the Conference of 2026.</p>

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	Work to be done to make provision for predominantly online churches
Main points	<p>Introduction and background</p> <p>Online celebrations of Holy Communion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The significance of a lasting decision • Proposal to extend the period of discernment <p>Mission and predominantly online churches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to support mutual learning and development for online mission • Considering issues of inclusion and exclusion for predominantly online churches <p>Ministry and predominantly online churches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What office holders would a predominantly online church need? • What are the training needs? • What are good approaches to pastoral care online? <p>Safeguarding and predominantly online churches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding training for online contexts • Policy review, including safer recruitment

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	<p>Faith and Order and predominantly Online Churches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecumenical matters • The ways in which predominantly online churches embody the marks of the Church <p>Making provision for predominantly online churches</p>
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	<p>Holy Communion and Online Worship (2021) Online Church (2023)</p>
Consultations	<p>Open consultation throughout the Connexion Formal conversations with the Mission, Ministries and Safeguarding Committees</p>
Impact	<p>High – significant amounts of work are needed to produce and implement provisions for predominantly online churches</p>

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The 2023 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to consider what work would be needed in order to enable predominantly online churches to be recognised in our polity and to propose appropriate resolutions to the 2024 Conference. To enable this, it also requested all connexional and district committees and other relevant entities to consider the implications for them if such provision were made and to submit observations and comments to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee. We are grateful to the Ministries Committee and the Mission Committee for making time in their meetings for a discussion on this topic and to the Safeguarding Committee for the paper they prepared. We are also grateful to those who have offered individual responses.
- 1.2 At the same time, the period of discernment on Online Celebrations of Holy Communion initiated by the Conference of 2021 is nearing its end. The Faith and Order Committee is mindful of that Conference's direction to report to the 2024 Conference with further recommendations. In response to the Online Church report of 2023, the Conference noted that the questions of online celebrations of Holy Communion and predominantly online churches were closely related. The Faith and Order Committee is therefore addressing these questions together in this report.

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1.3 Throughout this work, we have generally sought to use the terms 'onsite' and 'online'. These are chosen to attempt to be descriptive and to avoid implying any value judgment between the contexts in which events and activities take place. To speak of holding activities 'onsite' is not intended to imply that a predominantly online church has a particular site. A predominantly online church may use a variety of sites for any onsite occasions. In theological terms, we recognise that we are still physical and embodied persons when we engage online and therefore we aim to avoid the language of 'in person' or 'physically'. However, there are occasions when such terms are needed for legal purposes. Language in this area will undoubtedly continue to develop and attention to terminology will continue to be needed as this work progresses.

2.0 Online celebrations of Holy Communion

2.1 The report *Holy Communion and Online Worship* which introduced the period of discernment was written against the background of the global Covid pandemic and recognised that this had 'brought into focus in a new way questions which were already being asked about what it means to be the Church and what it means to worship, particularly to worship online.'¹ The *Online Church* report noted that the Covid lockdown accelerated the Church's engagement with online work and made the resulting questions much more prominent. While this continues to underline the importance of the questions relating to online celebrations of Holy Communion, and online church more broadly, it does not answer them.

2.2 The Faith and Order Committee is grateful to all who have engaged with the period of discernment and is thankful for the responses that have been submitted, although notes that it is a relatively small number (around 20, including some more recently) in the context of the Connexion. These demonstrate a range of perspectives and experience: from those who had struggled with not having provision for online celebrations during lockdown and now feel themselves blessed by it to others who cannot see an online celebration as being Holy Communion in the same sense as an in-person gathering. In the course of conversations in response to the implication of predominantly online churches, it is clear that some consider 'the genie is out of the bottle' and we are not effectively in a period of discernment any more.

2.3 The nature of Holy Communion is of serious significance for the Church. In celebrating Holy Communion, the Church is seeking to be faithful to the command of Jesus to do this in remembrance of him. The *Methodist Worship*

1 *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, p. 551

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Book affirms that Holy Communion is the 'central act of Christian worship'.² The *Deed of Union* declares that it is the 'duty and privilege of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves'³ of Holy Communion. Although there are challenges relating to the mutual recognition of celebrations of Holy Communion between different churches, the affirmation that this sacrament is duly celebrated in the Methodist Church is an important building block of many of our ecumenical relations. To make a lasting decision about this matter is therefore an issue of some weight. It is, as *Holy Communion and Online Worship* identified, a decision which 'is likely to have some implications for Church unity both within the Methodist Church and with ecumenical partners'.⁴ The Methodist Church is able to make its own decisions, but where we do take a different path to our ecumenical partners we should do that confidently and for clear and well-considered reasons.

- 2.4 In this context, the Faith and Order Committee has reflected on the period of discernment and on the responses received and does not consider there is yet sufficient basis of discernment to enable it to make a recommendation to the Conference regarding a lasting decision with regard to celebrations of Holy Communion online. At the same time, it is conscious that the questions of predominantly online churches put the significance of the issue into an even greater context.
- 2.5 The Faith and Order Committee therefore proposes that the current period of discernment be extended for a further two years and that a piece of research be conducted to gather quantitative and qualitative data regarding the practice of online celebrations of Holy Communion across the Connexion, the range of understandings of the nature of such celebrations and their relation to onsite celebrations.

3.0 Mission and predominantly online churches

- 3.1 As the *Online Church* report noted, there are many ways in which Methodists are already engaged in mission in the online space. Within this, as part of the *God for All* strategy (see elsewhere in the Agenda), digital presence is one key aspect. Predominantly online churches are not the only way in which such presence can be developed but they may be right for some contexts. Insofar as online is 'where people are', there will be a missional imperative for online engagement.

2 *Methodist Worship Book*, p. 114

3 *Deed of Union*, clause 4

4 *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, p. 555

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- 3.2 Mission in online contexts raises a variety of questions on which we will need to continue to reflect. At one level, this is no different from mission in onsite contexts and we should always aspire to be reflective practitioners, attentive to the effects of our work and constantly seeking improvement. The Methodist Church has recognised that to be an 'inclusive church' is part of its mission and to that end has adopted the strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity. Predominantly online churches, like onsite churches, will raise questions of inclusion. We may speak of digital poverty and note that not all of our society has equal access to online engagement: they may not be able to afford the equipment, they may lack the necessary skills, or they may not have access to an adequate internet connection. As noted in *Online Church*, there may be a temptation to think online provision will suffice when onsite has had to close and this may be correlated with marginalisation in other forms, including economic deprivation and the challenges faced by rural communities. There may also be particular questions relating to the participation of children and young people, particularly children and young people whose family do not participate in the church. Further work would be needed about effectively resourcing predominantly online churches to facilitate the involvement of children and young people. Attention is drawn to the Equality Impact Assessment tool which may assist in reflection on all these challenges.
- 3.3 At the same time, predominantly online churches can enable the participation of those for whom participation in onsite gatherings is difficult or impossible, including disabled people and those who are housebound, those for whom large gatherings are problematic and those who may be unable to travel to an onsite gathering.
- 3.3 Across the Connexion, there is a number of people engaging with mission online in a whole variety of ways and there is already some working together for mutual support and to share learning and best practice. It would be highly beneficial for this to continue and to be developed further. As online work develops, it would be helpful to engage in further reflection on what it is not simply to do church online but to be church online, as an expression of the whole Church.
- 3.4 It should be recognised that although they may present in a different form, these questions are not fundamentally different from those that arise for mission onsite. The principle that *Holy Communion and Online Worship* set out that barriers should not be raised for online work that are not applied to onsite work should continue to be borne in mind.
- 3.5 The ecumenical question is also of significance in a mission context. The Methodist Church may determine that it is willing to take this step as a

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development of its mission. But mission may equally imply participating as fully as possible in the wholeness of the Church catholic. To introduce predominantly online churches will create some opportunities but may also raise challenges.

- 3.6 It is recommended that appropriate means be sought of encouraging mutual support and the sharing of learning for online work and in collaboration with the JDS Committee, to explore and seek appropriate responses to the questions of inclusion and exclusion that arise for online contexts.

4.0 Ministry and predominantly online churches

- 4.1 If provision for predominantly online churches is made by the Conference, there is a range of implications for ministry. Some of these will need immediate attention, others will need to be kept under review as the implementation of those provisions develops. In some areas, basic initial provision will need in time to be replaced by more thorough structures, depending how prevalent predominantly online churches become in our Connexion. These areas include stationing and itinerancy, oversight, and accountability. Alongside this are questions around appropriate resourcing of predominantly online churches, including how they are funded.
- 4.2 Ministry in the online context already involves a need for particular skills and aptitudes, only some of which overlap with those for more traditional contexts. Work is already taking place to support theological reflection and practical experience and to resource those ministering in these areas. This will need to continue to be provided and to be developed further as time goes on.
- 4.3 Often online communities within the Methodist Church begin as projects or NPNP initiatives within a Circuit or District. For many this may be a helpful structure which enables their work. This work is concerned with the next step, when such communities seek to become churches in the formal sense. Within our polity, a predominantly online church, like any other church, will need to belong to a Circuit and to have a presbyter in pastoral charge. It will, by those means, relate to a superintendent minister and to a District Chair and be part of the Connexion in the same way as any other church. Some Districts are experimenting with non-geographical Circuits, and these may provide a suitable context for predominantly online churches to belong. In other situations, at least in the short term, predominantly online churches would need to be part of a geographical circuit. Where the online work has arisen out of work in a geographical Circuit, this may in any event be a natural relationship.

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- 4.4 It will be necessary to give attention to how such appointments can be included within stationing profiles. In the longer term, there will be questions around how best to enable 'moving on' from predominantly online churches and the relation within a particular minister's station of predominantly online and onsite aspects.
- 4.5 As predominantly online churches develop, further work will be needed in relation to how they relate to the broader structures of the Connexion. Broader use of non-geographical Circuits may be a helpful way forward. In time, it may be necessary to consider similar questions in relation to Districts. On the other hand, the view could be taken that such approaches would tend to separate onsite and online work in unhelpful ways and to create unnecessary division and barriers within the Connexion. Careful thought and reflection will be needed to create the most appropriate structures.
- 4.6 A predominantly online church, will need office holders. Some roles will clearly be needed as for onsite churches, for example church stewards and a safeguarding officer. Others may not be necessary, for example communion stewards. The way in which pastoral care is exercised may a different approach than the formal appointment of pastoral visitors and class leaders will be needed. Further consideration will be necessary to determine what is most appropriate.
- 4.7 Financial resourcing of a predominantly online church will also be a question. While some may initially benefit from support as NPNP projects or under other missional criteria, in time they will need to be able to support themselves and to pay a circuit assessment in the same way as other churches. Consideration will need to be given to ways in which this can be facilitated, including through financial giving from their members.
- 4.8 The *Online Church* report noted that different models are available for pastoral care online. However, further reflection about the nature of appropriate pastoral care online as part of the ministry of the church would be beneficial together with guidance as to good practice.
- 4.9 While worship online is no longer new to many Methodists, predominantly online churches would raise questions in relation occasional offices. There may, in the future, be provision for online weddings and it may be appropriate for some aspects of funerals or memorial services to be held online. At the same time, this is where predominantly online church may be helpful and creative models of hybrid approaches to such services can be developed.

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4.10 In the short term, it is recommended that the attention be given to what office holders a predominantly online church would need. The provision of appropriate training and support for online work should continue and be further developed. Particular attention to the nature of online pastoral care and appropriate good practice is also needed. Work will be needed in the longer term as to the relation of predominantly online churches and stationing.

5.0 Safeguarding and predominantly online churches

5.1 In common with onsite church, online church services or events can never be risk free but they do raise a range of questions to be considered. At the same time, it is imperative that any guidance, policies and procedures are not unduly risk averse, thus hindering the flourishing of any potential online churches. In addition, it is important to note that any relevant safeguarding guidance, policies or procedures that are introduced will need to be evolving due to the rapid development of technology and emerging new online communities.

5.2 Online work in the name of the Methodist Church – whether or not constituted as a predominantly online church – needs to have clear lines of accountability and appropriate consideration of safeguarding questions. Risk assessments and equality impact assessments should be undertaken as part of the planning process.

5.3 Appropriate protocols need to be in place relating to the holding of official accounts on behalf of the church. The Safeguarding Committee has produced a draft set of considerations:

Managing and Monitoring Online Church

1. A decision would need to be made in relation to who should 'hold' the church social media account(s), for instance would it need to be an office holder and/or include the minister or a church member etc. The account holder should be 18 years of age or older.
2. The account should be specifically for public online worship and/or other church related activities and not from a personal account. Church staff should have a separate professional/work device particularly when storing data and/or capturing images of under 18s.
3. The church Wi-Fi service should be filtered and monitored to block harmful content and prevent access to certain websites while on the church network. Settings should be checked to ensure they are appropriate.
4. Ratios of those joining online to those who monitor the services should be considered to ensure effective monitoring and management.

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5. Participants should be required to register prior to the event and a password should be set and a waiting room enabled. There should be clear instructions prior to people joining informing them of the following:
 - Expectations during the online event which should include expected standards of behaviour or a code of conduct.
 - Consequences of this if not adhered to, eg removal from the event and being prohibited from future events.
 - A note to advise parents or carers of those under 18 years of age that they are responsible for their child or young person's welfare during the online event.
6. The above instructions should include an area for consent to be given to allow photographs or film footage to be taken. If someone does not consent, steps need to be put in place to ensure their wishes are respected. There should be a mechanism in place for people to later withdraw consent and this should also be made clear beforehand. Clarity would be needed in relation to where the recording would be used, distributed and how long it would be kept. However, it may be that the decision is made so that participants can only see and hear the speakers or presenters which would eliminate the need for consent.
7. Facilities such as screen sharing for participants should be disabled and people muted on entry. There should be 'virtual stewards' and a safeguarding contact who could then decide whether these restrictions were lifted and if the chat function could be used etc. There are different types of online church communities and chat via video or on the chat function can be important to many participants to help build and strengthen their church communities.
8. Consideration should be given to how the virtual steward/safeguarding contact would stop/remove someone when needed and at what point they should intervene. There should be a clear protocol in relation to how they respond if there were immediate safeguarding concerns that should be in line with Methodist safeguarding policies and procedures.
9. Decisions would need to be made around whether the account holder and/or those who facilitate online services should be DBS checked. The requirements should meet the same standards as for face-to-face events.
10. The training needs for those involved in facilitating online events would need to be contemplated. At a minimum, they would need to complete foundation module training and perhaps also the advanced module level.
11. Thought needs to be given as to whether people join online services from any geographical area and how this could be monitored and sustained. For example, those who wish to join online services could complete a simple

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pro-forma to include their address and/or postcode prior to being sent the link. Clearly however, this would not ensure that geographical boundaries were adhered to and consideration would need to be given to those who may want to join from another geographical area for genuine reasons, for instance, if they moved to another location and wanted to keep links with their old church community.

12. A brief log should be made of each service with any issues noted and action taken or 'none identified' stated if this is the case.
13. The District Safeguarding Officer (DSO) should be consulted as soon as possible if there were any issues around safeguarding.

5.4 In connection with pastoral care of participants (see also paragraph 4.6 above), the Safeguarding Committee offers the following guidance:

Wellbeing of Participants

1. Pastoral care and/or a chaplain should be available for online participants during and after the service. This should be the case via the minister during a face to face church service and should be replicated online whenever possible. However, it might be difficult for the minister to be the sole person who provides this. Therefore, consideration should be given to other suitable persons who might fulfil this role.
2. Basic rules should be stipulated that participants would understand eg ensure your background is appropriate, be respectful to others, do not share any content etc. This could be contained in the expected standards of behaviour or code of conduct as described above in number 5. However, a reminder shortly before joining the online event would be recommended.
3. Participants would need to be informed how and who to contact if they had any safeguarding concerns or felt they need support. This should also include contacts/support specifically for children and young people.
4. Consideration around who would deal with more urgent safeguarding situations would be needed. This should be the role of the safeguarding contact who was monitoring the service. However, there might need to be a more senior safeguarding person on duty who was available for advice and support. The provision of specific people or a service to accommodate this might be more appropriate in the longer term.
5. A decision around whether children of a certain age could join on their own (without their parents/carers) would need to be made, and if so what the minimum age would be and who would monitor their welfare and deal with the consent issues. There could, for instance, be a children or youth worker to fulfil this function who liaised with parents or carers and looked after their welfare when online.

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6. If participants were allowed to interact with each other away from the main group, including using the chat function this should be closely monitored by the safeguarding contact and virtual steward, otherwise these functions should be turned off.
7. If needed children and young people could be put into break out rooms with trusted adults for group work/worship or chat utilising the features of the relevant app.
8. Those on safeguarding contracts should have clear guidance written into their safeguarding contract which covered any restrictions with online worship or events. This should be reviewed as needed with the Monitoring and Support Group (MSG). Consideration should be given as to who might need to be informed of their presence online eg those monitoring the online event.

5.5 Safeguarding policies and procedures need to be reviewed and amended to reflect the changes needed for predominantly online churches. However, it may be more appropriate for a standalone online safeguarding document to be produced, rather than adding to and amending the existing policy since some of this will not be relevant to predominantly online churches. Any such policy should be reviewed annually in line with the existing safeguarding policies and procedures.

In addition, a review of Safeguarding Standing Orders should take place if needed to ensure that these are reflective of the new and/or amended policies and procedures.

- 5.6 It is important that all, in particular victims and survivors, feel confident and safe during worship online. In addition, there may be those who may not identify as a victim or survivor, but have suffered online abuse and/or bullying or be in an abusive relationship. It is vital that the aforementioned are consulted and their views are sought and considered to help inform the implementation of safeguarding during online church events. It would be helpful to establish what would make them feel safe and secure during online events and what would need to occur to ensure this happened.
- 5.7 Wider consultation needs to take place, which should include victims and survivors to ensure that any online safeguarding guidance and policies are rigorous, not too restrictive and fit for purpose.
- 5.8 It is recommended that the production of an additional training module relating to safeguarding practice in online contexts be considered, and that safeguarding policies and procedures be reviewed for any changes needed for predominantly

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online churches (including safer recruitment for roles in online communities). Further work, in collaboration with others, is also needed on safe practice in online pastoral care.

6.0 Faith and order and predominantly online churches

- 6.1 While many of the faith and order questions were identified in the *Online Church* report, there remains further theological exploration in connection with Online Church in addition to the work on online celebrations of Holy Communion discussed in section 2 above.
- 6.2 It would be appropriate to give further attention to the ecumenical questions and implications of making provision for predominantly online churches in our discipline, including reflection on the experience of ecumenical partners who have such provision, those who do not have it and those who may be considering it. Consideration should be given to consulting ecumenical partners formally as to their response to any decision by the Conference to make provision of this kind.
- 6.3 In connection with online celebrations of Holy Communion and with online worship more generally, further reflection could be beneficial regarding synchronous and asynchronous (ie at the same time and at different times) interaction and the relation of that to the formation of Christian community. How can interaction outside of the time of formal services and meetings contribute most fully to the development of Christian fellowship?
- 6.4 As this work proceeds, the way in which predominantly online churches grow fully into the marks of the church should be a topic of continual reflection.

7.0 Making provision for predominantly online churches

- 7.1 The recommendations outlined above give a range of work which could be done in the short-term to enable predominantly online churches to be part of our discipline and function appropriately. Alongside this, a new Standing Order should be drafted to provide for the functioning of predominantly online churches. This would define which roles were required, and make provision for the application of existing local church Standing Orders in such cases. Such a Standing Order would rely on the provision in Deed of Union 1(xv) to create an exception to the requirement for a 'Local Church' to be connected with a particular place of worship.
- 7.2 In the longer term, more thorough provision will be required giving more detailed attention to the questions of Circuits (including non-geographical Circuits) in

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which predominantly online churches might be placed and to more detailed policy provision relating to stationing, ministry, safeguarding, pastoral care and the whole area of the church's ministry. This provision should be developed reflectively as predominantly online churches develop within the Connexion.

- 7.3 If the Conference is in agreement, we recommend that a task group, able to draw on the wisdom of the various committees of the Church, be created to give attention to the matters raised here over the course of the next two years and that a report be brought to the Conference of 2026 enabling provision to be made for predominantly online churches within our discipline. Following that ongoing reflective work would be needed to shape and embed that provision as a normal part of the life of the Connexion.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 26/1. The Conference receives the Report.**
- 26/2. The Conference extends the period of discernment on online celebrations of Holy Communion adopted by the Conference of 2021 until 31 August 2026.**
- 26/3. The Conference agrees to establish a task group to consider the recommendations of this report and to bring appropriate proposals to the Conference of 2026.**