

13. Online Celebrations of Holy Communion

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Resolution	13/1. The Conference receives the Report. 13/2. The Conference adopts Option A set out in paragraph 7.3 above. <i>If resolution 13/2 is passed, resolutions 13/3, 13/4 and 13/8 will then be considered and resolutions 13/5 to 13/7 and 13/9 to 13/11 will be withdrawn. If resolution 13/2 is not passed, resolutions 13/3 and 13/4 will be withdrawn.</i> 13/3. The Conference permits presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together at a common time through electronic means. 13/4. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to consider whether amendments to Standing Orders are needed in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion and to report to the Conference of 2028. 13/5. The Conference adopts Option B set out in paragraph 7.3 above. <i>If resolution 13/5 is passed, resolutions 13/6 to 13/8 will then be considered and resolutions 13/9 to 13/11 will be withdrawn. If resolution 13/5 is not passed, resolutions 13/6 and 13/7 will be withdrawn.</i> 13/6. The Conference permits presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when serving communities which have been holding such celebrations as part of the period of discernment in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion, to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together through electronic means at a common time.

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	13/7. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to create a process for authorising online celebrations of Holy Communion, including appropriate Standing Orders, and to report to the Conference of 2029. <i>If neither resolution 13/2 nor 13/5 is passed, resolution 13/8 will be withdrawn.</i> 13/8. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to update the guidance for celebrating communion online. 13/9. The Conference adopts Option C set out in paragraph 7.3 above. 13/10. The Conference adopts the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are not permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present with the presiding minister to receive the elements. 13/11. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation as appropriate, to consider the missiology and ecclesiology of online Methodist communities and to report to the Conference of 2029.
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Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To conclude the period of discernment in respect of online celebrations of Holy Communion and to enable the Conference to make a decision as to the lasting position of the Methodist Church
Main points	• Introduction • Theological arguments for and against • Research project on online celebrations of Holy Communion • Ecumenical Consultation • Discussion • Options

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Background context and relevant documents (with function)	Holy Communion mediated through Social Media (2015) Report of the Faith and Order Committee (2018) Holy Communion and Online Worship (2021) Online Church and Online Communion (2024)
Impact	In either direction, the decision to be made by the Conference has significant implications theologically, ecclesiologically and ecumenically as set out in the report.

Online Celebrations of Holy Communion

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The question of online celebrations of Holy Communion has been much debated over the years. Following a memorial from the South East District in 2011, the Faith and Order Committee brought the report *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media* to the Conference of 2015, which recommended that presbyters not be permitted to conduct services of online communion. The Conference resolved only to receive this as an interim report and requested further consideration. The Faith and Order Committee offered this as part of its General Report to the 2018 Conference and the position proposed was adopted by the Conference. Following a Notice of Motion considered in 2020, the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to ‘undertake further reflection on Holy Communion, and to bring a report and recommendations regarding “online communion” to the 2021 Conference’. *Holy Communion and Online Worship* was the resulting report which instituted a period of discernment regarding online celebrations of Holy Communion, in which such services would be permitted and feedback sought. Originally due to conclude in 2024, the Faith and Order Committee proposed that the period of discernment be extended until 2026 due to the limited amount of feedback. An academic research project exploring the experience of Methodist communities engaging in online celebrations of Holy Communion was started in partnership with the University of Roehampton and with the generous support of the Southlands Methodist Trust through the Susanna Wesley Foundation. In addition, during this time, ecumenical partners have been formally consulted about their views in relation to potential lasting provision for online celebrations of Holy Communion in the Methodist Church.
- 1.2 It is for the Conference this year to determine the outcome of the period of discernment and to resolve what the discipline of the Methodist Church should

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be in this matter. The current period of discernment ends on 31 August 2026¹ and permission for online celebrations of Holy Communion will therefore lapse unless the Conference makes further provision. This report seeks to offer the Conference the fullest possible basis on which to make that discernment. In considering the different material presented, it is helpful to be attentive to the four voices of theology:

Operant: the theology embedded in the practices of a group.

Espoused: theology drawn from the group's own articulation of its beliefs.

Normative: theology from sources which the group considers authoritative.

Formal: the theology of the academy²

The material presented here includes examples of all of those voices. This report offers summaries of the two Faith and Order reports previously presented, which give theological arguments for and against online celebrations of Holy Communion. These are summaries only and members of the Conference are encouraged wherever possible to remind themselves of the original reports in full, which are available online. It presents the outcomes of the theological action research project which explored the experience of Methodists sharing in communion online. It offers a summary of the responses of ecumenical partners. Members of the Faith and Order Committee themselves have a divergence of views on this matter. The Committee has concluded that it should not make a recommendation to the Conference as to the way forward but offer options to assist the Conference's discernment. The Committee emphasises the theological, ecclesiological and ecumenical weight of the decision that is before the Conference.

2. **The Theological Argument of *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media* (HCSM)³**

- 2.1 HCSM declared that 'the primary authoritative source for addressing this question is Scripture as interpreted by tradition in the light of applied reason and affirmed by Christian experience.'⁴ From a study of the essential features of

1 Resolution 2024/26/2

2 Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins. 2010. Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology. London: SCM Press, pp 53-56

3 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2015-37-Communion-Mediated-through-Social-Media_ItOWpRq.pdf

4 *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media*, 3

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Holy Communion⁵ discovered in Scripture, it sought to engage the question of online celebrations of Holy Communion. From scripture, the report emphasised Holy Communion as something which had been received and transmitted and consequently is celebrated in accordance with and in obedience to the divine will. It highlights that the significance of Holy Communion is more than simply eating and drinking bread and wine in memory of Jesus. The discernment of the body required by 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 implies a sharing in the one body. In considering Scripture, the report concludes:

Jesus' sign-actions in relation to the bread at the Last Supper correspondingly give rise to a fourfold action at the Lord's Supper: when at table with the Twelve, Jesus took bread, gave thanks or a blessing, broke it, and gave it to each of them with accompanying words that declare the significance of the action. Likewise, Jesus' sign-actions in relation to the wine at the Last Supper correspondingly give rise to a threefold action at the Lord's Supper: afterwards, Jesus took a cup of wine, gave thanks and gave it to each of them with accompanying words that declare the significance of the action.⁶

- 2.2 To consider the church's tradition, HCSM noted that the Methodist Church received the sacrament from the wider apostolic tradition and recounted the Deed of Union's recognition of Holy Communion as one of the two sacraments which are 'of divine appointment and perpetual obligation [and] of which it is the duty and the privilege of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves'.⁷ It argued that this is a key part of the Methodist Church's inheritance of the apostolic faith and that, accordingly, is it the duty of the Conference to regulate its celebration to the extent necessary to ensure its essential features are preserved and continued. Variations in local custom are perfectly normal and acceptable, provided that they do not compromise the integrity of the sacrament itself.
- 2.3 HCSM also considered the wider ecumenical dimension of the question, arguing that the Methodist Church does not have nor claim the right to alter its essential features and emphasised the corporate nature of the eucharistic celebration, which 'leads to a deepening experience of "communion" with God and with one another'.⁸ The report argues:

5 To emphasise that it was working with a received tradition with British Methodism, *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media* used the term 'Lord's Supper'. However, for clarity, this report will use Holy Communion throughout.

6 *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media*, 11

7 Deed of Union, Clause 4

8 *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media*, 15

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[T]heological dialogue in recent years, notably in the World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order Commission, has established a significant degree of ecumenical convergence in understanding the Lord's Supper. Since the Conference is committed to the pursuit of visible unity among Christians, innovation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Methodist Church at the present juncture should only be considered for the gravest of reasons and in consultation with ecumenical partners. In particular, having entered into an Anglican-Methodist Covenant, the Methodist Church is bound not to introduce sacramental practices that would create a further obstacle to visible unity.⁹

- 2.4 To safeguard the integrity of Holy Communion, HCSM identified three categories needed to be considered: 'the gathering of the people of God; presiding at the Lord's Supper; and the body and blood of Christ.'¹⁰ Having considered the nature of gathering electronically and gathering in one place, HCSM argued that electronic gathering did not fully reflect the incarnational, embodied, nature of the Church and expressed a concern that 'the absence of a physical gathering [...] would suggest that [Holy Communion's] benefits are primarily individual, thereby compromising the essentially corporate nature of holy living.' As regards presidency, the report highlighted the way the presiding minister represents the person of Christ through enacting the sign-actions of Holy Communion (see paragraph 2.1 above). It noted those sharing in an online celebration of Holy Communion would, in fact, perform three of the four actions for themselves, diminishing the meaning of presidency and making the celebration more individual. The report also highlighted the significance of sharing eucharistically in one bread and one cup. It noted the ideal that this is literally one loaf and one cup, but even where that is not possible sharing from one table and of the same bread and wine still signifies that same reality. In the case of online celebrations, it expressed the concern that a sense of sharing in one bread and one cup would be entirely lost.
- 2.5 Considering the arguments of HCSM further, the Faith and Order Committee's report to the Conference of 2018¹¹ highlighted the ecumenical significance of any potential change regarding online celebrations of Holy Communion and affirmed that such consideration should be carried out alongside ecumenical partners. The resolution passed was that 'the Conference adopted the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper

9 *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media*, 14

10 *Holy Communion mediated through Social Media*, 24

11 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2018-31-Faith-and-Order-Committee_RBf00aq.pdf

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are not permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present with the presiding minister to receive the elements.¹²

3. The Theological Argument of *Holy Communion and Online Worship (HCOW)*¹³

- 3.1 HCOW began by considering the context in which the Conference had asked the Faith and Order Committee to do further work. As the country emerged from lockdown, but with the reality and consequences of the Covid pandemic very present for the church and the world, the Faith and Order Committee considered once more the possibilities for online celebrations of Holy Communion. It recognised Methodist history as offering examples where those who went before us were called to worship or serve in new and previously unexpected ways. However, it also cautioned against a simplistic assumption that easy parallels can be made or that because early Methodists innovated, all innovations are to be welcomed. It recognised the profound range of issues at play for theology, ecclesiology, mission and much more.
- 3.2 The lockdown meant that many more Methodists than previously had experience of some form of online worship. HCOW recognised the benefits and the challenges inherent in online forms of worship, the variety of perspectives as to the experience and the reality that these developments would shape the life of the church in coming years. HCOW noted that 'a key question was whether there was a danger of objections to Holy Communion online [...] which represent a barrier which is not imposed when the service is held with the congregation in one physical location.'¹⁴ Not to impose such barriers has since become a principle in this work. For example, in an onsite celebration of Holy Communion, a worshipper may attend who is unknown to the congregation and effectively participates anonymously. As another example, it is perfectly possible for persons attending onsite services to be passive observers of what takes place.
- 3.3 HCOW highlights that the question about online celebration of Holy Communion goes to the heart of the nature of the sacrament, and is related to our understanding of the Church and of who we are as human persons before God. Rather than seeking to offer a definitive 'yes' or 'no', the report sought to raise questions for reflection and invited the Church to discernment about these developments.

12 Resolution 31/2 (2018)

13 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2021-39-holy-communion-and-online-worship_JOTB7Rq.pdf

14 *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 1.3

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3.4 HCOW centred its discussion around three theological issues (1) what it means to be the Church (ecclesiology), (2) understandings of the sacrament and theologies of Holy Communion and (3) what it means to be human in a digital world (theological anthropology).

3.5 HCOW's exploration of ecclesiology drew out the significance of the relational nature of the Church as arising from the credal marks of church (one, holy, catholic, apostolic), the biblical witness and the Methodist tradition. Its exploration of the potential for online celebrations of Holy Communion demonstrated the importance of seeing Holy Communion in this relational context:

[...] there is continued emphasis in a Methodist understanding of the Church on interdependence as shaping an individual's discipleship. While Holy Communion is rightly seen as an opportunity to deepen individual discipleship, it is not an individualistic act of devotion, but one shared with a gathered community. There will be some Methodists for whom online worship does not sufficiently evoke the gathered, corporate nature of the Church and Eucharist. For those who believe it can and should do so, there will be some important questions to face around what it means to gather online.

3.6 The theme of gathering and what it means truly to be gathered continued as a significant one through HCOW's consideration and remains perhaps the most significant for the present consideration. The questions for reflection offered by HCOW invited participants to consider in what way the people were gathered for any online celebration of Holy Communion. In reflecting on this, it can be easily observed that different approaches to online worship will provide different experiences of what it is to be gathered.

3.7 The relational nature of the church and its worship also highlights that commitment and shared responsibility to one another are part of what it is to participate in a gathered worshipping community. This will, of course, vary through life and be experienced differently in different contexts and at different stages of a person's journey of discipleship. This is no less true in an online context although the ways in which it is experienced and demonstrated are reimaged.

3.8 HCOW summarised its consideration of ecclesiology in this way:

A Methodist understanding of the Church, particularly in relationship to our understanding of the Lord's Supper, encourages us to think of the Church as a community which bears witness to the whole history of salvation (and does so in celebrations of the Eucharist, although not exclusively so), is gathered

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and interdependent, and is open and inclusive. Online Holy Communion invites us to consider once more how this understanding of the Church may be reflected in all of our worship.

- 3.9 HCOW recalled the breadth of Methodist understanding of Holy Communion and the way that that variety was expressed in practice, hymnody and liturgy as much as in formal doctrinal statements. The Conference has commended reports relating to Holy Communion which include theological exploration, especially *His Presence Makes the Feast*, but these are careful to honour the breadth of understandings among Methodists. The *Deed of Union* declares Holy Communion to be 'of divine appointment and perpetual obligation' and Methodist discipleship has always included the frequent reception of Holy Communion as one of its commitments. It should be noted that different understandings of Holy Communion may well tend to lead to different conclusions about online celebrations of Holy Communion. One of the challenges in the present discernment is to continue to honour the breadth of Methodist understandings.
- 3.10 HCOW cautioned against a minimalist approach to understanding Holy Communion which would seek to answer the question by reference to a series of 'essential' features. Rather, it said, what was needed was attention to the fullness of Holy Communion. It noted that Methodism does not make use of concepts such as 'valid' in its sacramental theology. Very properly, Holy Communion is a mystery and the Methodist Church has been reluctant to define too precisely exactly what occurs, what is necessary or its consequences.
- 3.11 The question is sometimes raised about different considerations in relation to baptism and Holy Communion and in light of the work on predominantly online churches, a similar consideration arises in relation to confirmation (notwithstanding that confirmation is not one of the two dominical sacraments). HCOW addressed this point:

The proposals for online Holy Communion should not be taken as a model for the sacrament of baptism – we note that the Church has never assumed that what can be said of one sacrament must be applied to the other; for example baptism is to be received once in a lifetime whereas Christians are urged to receive the Eucharist on a regular basis.¹⁵

- 3.12 The key theological themes identified by *His Presence makes the Feast* were considered: thanksgiving (Eucharist), life in unity (koinonia), remembering

¹⁵ *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 2.16

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(anamnesis), sacrifice, presence, the work of the Spirit (epiclesis), anticipation (eschatology), mission and justice and personal devotion. HCOW identified a critical question to be addressed in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion:

It is important to note the breadth of the themes explored in *His Presence Makes the Feast* and the importance that all acts of Holy Communion embody them, whilst recognising that is not possible to guarantee their presence in all onsite Methodist celebrations of Holy Communion. The question, therefore, is not whether online communion can meet some minimum legalistic definition of Holy Communion, but whether in celebrating the Lord's Supper, the breadth and ultimate mystery of the Eucharist can be expressed.¹⁶

- 3.13 Summarising its considerations in relation to the nature of the sacrament in relation to online celebrations, HCOW said:

[...] reflecting on what it will mean to celebrate the Lord's Supper with a community which gathers online is an opportunity for all Methodists to ponder once more our understanding of the Eucharist. The issues to which Local Churches who celebrate online will need to give particular attention are as follows:

- The question of presence, so that Christ's presence in the gathered community and in the eucharistic celebration is clearly celebrated.
- The question of participation, so that the community participates in worship together and is not reduced to observing the actions of the person presiding.
- The question of breadth and fullness, so that the Lord's Supper is not reduced to issues of the minimum necessary but rather creatively celebrated in ways which highlight the richness of Methodist understandings of Holy Communion.¹⁷

- 3.14 Finally, HCOW turned its attention to the question of being human in a digital world. Online engagement raises some new questions about being human while also presenting existing ones in a new form. At root, persons engaging online are just as much persons created in God's image and for whom Christ died as persons engaging in any other context. Online contexts may present particular

¹⁶ *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 4.8

¹⁷ *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 4.20

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questions of authenticity of presentation and interaction, but these are not, in principle, different from similar questions in onsite contexts. Given a reality that we are all, in one way or another, engaged to some extent in digital contexts (and that will increase not decrease), the questions of what this means for worship and discipleship as well as more apparently mundane matters cannot be avoided.

3.15 Summarising its consideration of digital anthropology, HCOW commented:

[...] the digital world has become one more context in which we both present and understand ourselves as human beings and which shapes our living both online and offline. While online life does raise issues of authenticity and the ability to present false versions of ourselves, this is not an exclusively online issue. Celebrating Holy Communion online will challenge the gathered community to ponder what it means to bring our whole authentic selves into worship, just as onsite worship does. Equally, the online world stands in need of the renewal of Christ in the same way as every other arena of human activity. Methodists have proudly emphasised that all without exception are offered the opportunity to experience God's freely given grace. To celebrate the Eucharist is to celebrate the redemptive work of Christ for all, including the world online.¹⁸

3.16 *Holy Communion and Online Worship* did not reach an ultimate conclusion about communion online but recognised that further work was needed to discern the right way forward. The report observed that 'Methodists hold a breadth of understandings of the nature of Holy Communion and will reach different conclusions about whether it is possible to participate with integrity in an online celebration of the Lord's Supper.'¹⁹ The proposal was therefore that the Conference initiate a period of discernment in which online celebrations of Holy Communion would be permitted and during which experience could be gathered and reflected upon. The Faith and Order Committee expressed the hope that the tone of this period would be one of trust and exploration and intentionally offered only limited parameters and boundaries as to what should be permitted.

4. The Research Project

4.1 As the three years of the period of discernment began to draw to a close, the Faith and Order Committee observed that the level of feedback received in relation to the period of discernment was relatively low. Given the high

¹⁸ *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 5.9

¹⁹ *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 6.4

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significance of a lasting decision in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion, the Committee did not feel able to make a positive proposal to the Conference in either direction: the feedback that had been received tended to suggest that there should be some form of lasting provision but there was not enough for such a proposal to be well-founded. The Committee therefore proposed to the Conference of 2024 that the period of discernment be extended by two years and that a research project be undertaken in collaboration with academic partners to allow for a more thorough exploration of the experience of Methodists participating in online celebrations of Holy Communion. In this way, there would be a more substantial basis for discernment by the Conference as to a lasting position for the Methodist Church.

- 4.2 The Faith and Order Committee is extremely grateful to the Southlands Methodist Trust for its financial support in making this research work possible, to the Susanna Wesley Foundation for its assistance in creating the project and to the researchers, Drs Ashley Cocksworth and James Butler of the University of Roehampton. The research project worked with sites around the Connexion and the Committee is equally grateful to worshippers and ministers who have given freely of their time to share and reflect upon their experience of online celebrations of Holy Communion. Local Methodists who participated in the research project expressed their joy at the learning and the growth they had experienced through the process of intentional sharing about and reflection upon their practice of communion online. The Committee encourages Methodists to make opportunities for such reflection on their experience of Holy Communion, in whatever form they participate in it.
- 4.3 The full report of the research project, *Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church*, is included as an appendix to this report and is also available online.²⁰ Members of the Conference are strongly encouraged to engage with it. In this report itself, a brief summary of the research method and key findings is offered.
- 4.4 The project sought to attend to the theology embedded in the words and practice of the different sites celebrating Holy Communion online. Through a collaborative and participatory approach, based on a series of developing conversations between the Roehampton and Faith and Order Committee team and each local team, an account of the theology of Holy Communion online emerging from their practice and experience was developed. The project does not aim to speak comprehensively of the scope or diversity of theological positions on the matter

²⁰ <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/online-communion/>

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of Holy Communion online within the Methodist Church but to learn from the lived theology and experience of the practice of communion online in particular Methodist communities. The learning which comes out of each of the sites feeds into both the wider reflection of the project and the research site's own on-going work of discerning the practice of online church and Holy Communion online.

- 4.5. Alongside the qualitative work with the sites and the theological reflection emerging from these, the project also arranged for some basic quantitative data to be gathered via the Superintendents' conferences in 2025. Attendees were asked to raise their hands in response to questions:

Please raise your hand if there has ever been an online celebration of Holy Communion whether over a platform such as Zoom or a streamed onsite service or in any other way, within your circuit to the best of your knowledge. Please keep it raised while the hands are counted.	101 hands raised (56%)
Please raise your hand if there is currently a regular online celebration of Holy Communion in your circuit, whether streamed, through a platform such as Zoom or in any other way. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.	83 hands raised (46%)
Finally, please keep your hand raised if the regular online celebration of Holy Communion is an onsite service which is streamed or which others can join via a platform such as Zoom. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.	78 hands raised (43%)

- 4.6 While more detailed and precise quantitative work could be done, these results demonstrate that during the period of discernment more than half of the Circuits of the Connexion have engaged with online celebrations of Holy Communion and a significant proportion still do so regularly. They also highlight that the most common form of online celebration is when an onsite service is made available for others to join online.
- 4.7 From the shared experience and theological reflection, key themes emerged which are discussed thoroughly in the research report. In each case the report offers a summary statement in relation to the theme, and those summary statements are included here.

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4.8 Intensification: A deepening in meaningfulness of Holy Communion²¹

Across all five sites, participants consistently described Holy Communion online as a genuine and meaningful experience of Holy Communion – for themselves personally and together as a community gathering online. While people acknowledged that Holy Communion online felt ‘different’, it was not perceived as ‘less than’ Holy Communion onsite. For some, those differences meant their preference was for Holy Communion onsite, but others described a preference for Holy Communion online. We identified an ‘intensification’ of the meaningfulness of Holy Communion for a number of people engaging in Holy Communion online, particularly among those participating in Zoom services.

4.9 Gathering: a renewed emphasis²²

The gathering of the people of God through confession, prayer, hymn-singing, the ministry of the Word for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper has always been integral to Christian worship. In celebrations of Holy Communion online, however, these practices of gathering took on newly intensified significance. If the celebration of Holy Communion onsite is seen to emphasise a dynamic of being gathered in order to be sent, Holy Communion online seemed to give a renewed emphasis on different sorts of gathering: gathering people from and within ordinary life and everyone also gathering their own elements and bringing them to Holy Communion.

4.10 Reimagining Holy Communion and everyday life²³

The emphasis celebrating Holy Communion online places on both the gathering of the people of God from (rather than sending into) the world and the (literal) gathering of the elements revealed a different perspective on how God is encountered in everyday spaces and patterns of life. More specifically, we saw how Christ’s table became less associated with a physical table in the church building and instead identified as a ‘virtual table’ which ‘spans all time and space’.

4.11 The liturgy does the work of the liturgy²⁴

It was striking how many of the reflections were about how the liturgy still worked in the online setting. Moving to Holy Communion online changed the

21 *Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church*, 2.1

22 *Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church*, 2.2

23 *Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church*, 2.3

24 *Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church*, 2.4

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emphasis and reception of the liturgy, and although there was discussion about what needed to change within the liturgy, on the whole the conclusion was that less needed to be changed than was anticipated. There were some changes needed around specifics of where people and the elements were, and there was a need for help with guidance of the changing choreography of the communion when it is online/streamed.

4.12 In reflecting on the experience and reflection, the research report highlights a range of topics where questions emerge and invites further reflection:

- The theology of Holy Communion online
- Differing experiences between video-conferencing and streaming
- Not 'othering' church online and Holy Communion online
- The elements and their preparation
- Presidency in Holy Communion online
- The implications for liturgy
- Discovering mission online
- The significance of space to reflect

4.13 The research report concludes:

It has been powerful to work with churches who have been celebrating Holy Communion online in their worship together. To collaborate with them in this journey of listening and reflection has brought a depth of theological insight and practical wisdom. This report recognises those insights, explored in the themes above around intensification, gathering, Holy Communion in everyday life and the work of the liturgy. These themes do not result in simple recommendations, or clear theological positions and in fact in many ways they complexify the questions around the celebration of Holy Communion online. This complexity comes from the fact that lived practice is always complex and has developed through navigating multiple perspectives, voices and experiences. Theological questions about Holy Communion online arise precisely because it is an emerging practice here and now. Because of this, this project does not seek a final conclusion but offers ways to continue to navigate these questions drawing on the theological insights which emerge from practice and with the expectation that these practice-engaged theological perspectives contribute to ongoing conversations.

We began the process with two broad questions posed by the Faith and Order Committee: 'How do Methodists understand their participation in online celebrations of Holy Communion?' and 'How is this similar/different to their understanding of participating in onsite celebrations?'. These questions have led us into a theologically rich engagement with the practice of Holy Communion

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online and revealed the ways in which those participating have experienced Holy Communion online as Holy Communion, and for some, as an intensification of it. Some of the assumptions based in comparisons between Holy Communion online and Holy Communion onsite have been challenged, and what we have seen is a need to see Holy Communion celebrated online as a development in Holy Communion in a new context, which can be navigated in similar ways to any new context. Emphasis, the nature of participation, and the way people relate to Holy Communion may have shifted, but what is not being discussed is a new thing: it is about seeking to be faithful to God in holy practice. This is not to say that the sites we have looked at and their developing practices are inherently right and good but reveals that, as they are reflected on and discerned, they have important insights to offer the continuing development of Holy Communion, and indeed faithfulness to God.²⁵

- 4.14 As the conclusion identifies, the nature of the project is not that it will answer the discernment question for the Conference. Rather, the deep sharing of experience and theological engagement with it – both by participants and researchers – is offered to help to resource the Conference's discernment.

5. Ecumenical Consultation

- 5.1 Holy Communion is a sacrament of the universal Church and, while different denominations have a variety of disciplines in relation to it, it is important to recognise that it does not belong to any one tradition. It is therefore important to consider the ecumenical implications in relation to any proposed change in relation to our discipline concerning Holy Communion, especially if that change does not have precedent in the wider tradition of the Church. Accordingly, working with the Connexional Ecumenical Officer, the Committee engaged in an ecumenical consultation in relation to the question of online celebrations of Holy Communion. Letters were sent to a range of ecumenical partners which set out information about the Methodist Church's current period of discernment and invited partners to respond to three questions:

1. Has your denomination published any formal statement relating to online celebrations of Holy Communion?
2. How might lasting provision for online celebrations of Holy Communion in the Methodist Church affect the ecumenical relationship between us?
3. What would your denomination wish us to take into account in reaching a decision on this?

²⁵ Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church, 5

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- 5.2 Responses have been received on behalf of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, the Church in Wales, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland and the Congregational Federation.²⁶ The Baptist Union and the Congregational Federation highlighted the significance in their polity of the authority of the local church, which precluded any national level ruling on the questions. However, the general position in Baptist churches is in favour of online celebrations of Holy Communion and the possibility was noted that failure by the Methodist Church to make lasting provision could cause problems for some Baptist-Methodist LEPs. The Catholic response noted the importance of the live-streaming of Mass, especially when during the Covid pandemic it was not possible for many people to attend in church buildings. It confirmed the Catholic teaching that reception of communion is not possible via livestream but affirmed the possibility of spiritual communion by which the graces might be received.²⁷ Our Catholic friends encourage us to 'see technology as a gift from God that can be used in good and positive ways to evangelise, spread the Gospel and encourage more people to come to church and be part of the community that is the church.' The Church of Scotland has not prohibited online celebrations of Holy Communion and its Theological Forum published initial reflections²⁸ upon it during the Covid pandemic. The production of this guidance was reported to the General Assembly, but the Assembly has not been invited to take a view nor to amend the Church of Scotland's discipline.
- 5.3 The Methodist Church is part of covenant relationships with the two Anglican Churches which have responded, namely An Anglican-Methodist Covenant with the Church of England, and as part of the five-way Covenanting for Unity partnership in Wales. The responses from both Anglican partners express significant concern that any move by the Methodist Church to make lasting provision for online celebrations of Holy Communion may undermine the affirmations on which those covenants were built. Both draw attention to the document *Virtual Communion and the Covid-19 Pandemic*²⁹ produced by the Inter-

26 This section of the report summarises these responses. Members of the Conference may access the full responses as well as the letter inviting them and the list of partners contacted in the Representatives' Hub: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/structure-and-governance/the-methodist-conference/conference-2026/representatives-registration/>.

27 Spiritual communion is not widely known in the Methodist Church but a form was made available for use during the pandemic: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/spiritual-communion_kdLhZ8n.pdf

28 <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/departments/faith-action-programme-committees-and-departments/committees/theological-forum/reflections-on-online-communion>

29 https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/493612/Virtual-Communion-and-the-Covid-19-Pandemic_220322_IALC.pdf

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Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order which included in its suggestions for a way forward:

In relation to virtual celebrations of the Eucharist, we do not believe the concept of remote consecration to be consistent with Anglican theology and practice, and therefore it should not be recommended. Indeed, we would go as far as proposing that it should be discouraged as far as possible. We also consider that the practice of the president alone receiving the consecrated elements should be discouraged.³⁰

5.4. The Church in Wales's response concluded:

For the sake of clarity and brevity, in conclusion we summarise the theological convictions that lead the Church in Wales to express reservations concerning the Methodist Church's proposed trajectory with respect to online celebrations of Holy Communion.

- Christian belief in God's work of redemption is focused on the enfleshed work of our Lord Jesus Christ, in his life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and continued work of heavenly intercession.
- With that incarnational focus in mind, we believe that the Eucharist involves the fully focused participation of the people of God as bread and wine are taken, thanks is given, and the consecrated elements broken and shared.
- This, we believe, is a sacramental action which requires the embodied presence of worshippers who receive together, in the same place, the tangible, life-giving signs of Christ's saving work through Holy Communion.
- This also ensures that correct procedures are followed, both with respect to the choice of elements, and also the reverent consumption of any consecrated gifts which remain.
- Moreover, the church's eucharistic action enables us to share fully in the body and blood of Christ and thereby become one body in him (1 Cor. 10.16-17). So, rather than merely strengthening and nourishing its individual members, the local expression of the body of Christ finds itself corporately re-energised and reconfigured for the task of mission, ministry and witness
- Hence, sacramental practice leads to ever-deepening ecclesial formation and onward to shared mission, in proclamation of the gospel, rooted in

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service to the wider community. We contend that remote participation and reception diminishes that process of building up the Church.

- In addition, it could trigger the inadvertent consequence of encouraging a somewhat individualistic sense of personal discipleship which is untethered from the broader, corporate vocation of the church as a whole and the costly, sacrificial life of the local eucharistic community.
- We are also concerned that remote participation and reception could lead to negligence within the wider church in relation to the pastoral care of those unable to receive the sacrament in church due to infirmity or some other circumstance. We wish to affirm the importance of allowing those who wish to receive Holy Communion at home through the pastoral visit of an ordained minister, or authorised eucharistic minister, rather than assuming that such pastoral provision can be covered by an online celebration.

Whilst voicing our misgivings concerning the proposals, we nevertheless assure the Methodist Church of Great Britain of our prayers as the discernment process proceeds. May the Spirit of Christ lead you into all truth that you may continue to glorify God in your words, actions and the richness of your sacramental life together.

- 5.5 The Covenants in both England and Wales have faced significant challenges in recent years in making progress towards greater unity. In the light of the Conference's commitment to the fuller unity of Christ's Church, any development which may make that journey more complex should be considered very carefully.

6 Discussion

- 6.1 The material presented here aims, taken together, to help resource the Conference in its discernment as to the way forward for the Methodist Church in Britain in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion. The Faith and Order Committee is not itself of one mind on this matter and has agreed to offer options to the Conference. It emphasises that it is for the Conference to make the determination as to any future provision. There are within this material arguments both in favour of and against making such provision.
- 6.2 Methodists have different understandings of Holy Communion and, as *Holy Communion and Online Worship* observed, different understanding of how Christ is present in Holy Communion may lead to different conclusions in relation to communion online.³¹ Within our existing practice and discipline, there may be

31 *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, 2.11-2.12

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practices (eg extended communion and the authorisation of persons other than presbyters to preside) with which not all Methodists are fully comfortable. Part of our life together as a Connexion is to live together as a diverse community.

- 6.3 The Church believes Holy Communion to be a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ and celebrated in obedience to his command. There is an important unity to be recognised and preserved: while celebrations of Holy Communion can take a wide variety of forms, at the heart of it, it is the same sacrament being celebrated and the same command being obeyed. While this diversity can be a cause of rejoicing, it is also an invitation to be attentive to the limits of this unity. At what point is the variation so great that what is being celebrated may no longer be recognisable as a celebration of Holy Communion?
- 6.4 The evidence of the research project is that those Methodists who are participating in communion online are experiencing a deeply meaningful engagement with the sacrament which in many cases is comparable to or more intense than their experience of onsite celebrations. While the experience and reflections revealed in the research raise many questions that invite further exploration, they do not, in general, point to an account of doing something fundamentally distinct from the sacrament of Holy Communion. There are many examples within the research data of the way in which participants related their practice and experience to their discipleship and obedience to Christ. It is clear that, for those who participate in it, communion online is a means of grace.
- 6.5 It should also be recognised that, necessarily, the experience reflected in the research is that of those who are part of communities which celebrate communion online. In some cases, participants reflected on having been unsure about communion online but finding through experience that their doubts were assuaged. It is not the case that only those who were already in favour of it were part of the research. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that there are Methodists who will take a different view and will have been continuing to engage only with onsite celebrations throughout this time. The theological perspectives set out in the two Conference reports referenced above demonstrate different ways Methodists might approach the question of communion online.
- 6.6 The question has been raised in various contexts as to the way in which access to online celebrations of Holy Communion, and indeed online worship more generally, is a matter of justice. In the course of the work, and elsewhere, it has often been observed that online provision makes the Church's worship more accessible to people for whom attending onsite is very difficult or even impossible, including disabled people. This is not just in relation to physical disability but also in relation to matters such as mental health and

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neurodivergence. There would undoubtedly be an equality impact were access withdrawn to online worship in general or online celebrations of Holy Communion specifically. Online provision is not the only response for people for whom it is difficult to attend onsite and home visits, extended communion and celebrations of Holy Communion at home are also important provisions. However, online worship offers access to a broader fellowship of God's people and in many cases a more regular experience than is possible through other means.

- 6.7 The ecumenical responses add to the complexity of the picture. Holy Communion is a rite we share with the Church catholic and we do not have full freedom to reimagine it. At the same time, there are points of Methodist discipline and custom where we do diverge from some of our ecumenical partners (for example, in the use of non-alcoholic wine or grape juice and in the practice of authorising persons other than presbyters to preside). Is the nature of the question we are considering comparable to such examples? Or does it go more fundamentally to the nature of the sacrament? On the one hand, our ecumenical partners in the Church of England and the Church in Wales have raised concerns on this point that should be considered seriously, while, on the other hand, our Baptist partners have highlighted that **not** making provision could cause challenges for our joint work. In addition, the Methodist Church has a deep partnership with the United Reformed Church who also have provision for communion online.
- 6.8 A very noticeable feature of the research project data was the variation in experience between those who shared in communion online via a video-conferencing platform and those whose experience was of a streamed service. In general, video-conferencing was reported to be a comparable, if not more profound, experience to onsite communion. By contrast, there was a wider range of experiences of streamed services. In cases where intentional steps were taken (eg addressing the online participants directly), participants reported a more profound sense of engagement than when such steps were not taken. However, some reported a sense of streamed services as less good than attendance onsite but nevertheless affirmed its importance against a potential alternative of not having access to participation in Holy Communion. Streamed services also raise questions as to whether and to what extent the congregation is gathered. Further consideration could be given as to whether different provision should be made for streamed services than for video-conferenced services.
- 6.9 During the period of discernment, the permission given required celebrations at a common time. This is related to the significance of gathering: in a traditional onsite service, the congregation is in the same geographical place at the same

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time. In an online service, the people are gathered by electronic means at the same time. When a recorded service is watched later, a sense that the people are meaningfully gathered is lost. It is proposed that this requirement be retained in any lasting provision.

- 6.10 In any situation where there is a divergence of views, questions of conscience arise. If continued provision is made for online celebrations of Holy Communion, a decision needs to be taken about how conscience is to be addressed. In some contexts, for example baptizing infants, the view is taken that a divergence of practice is not permitted.³² In other contexts, for example marriage, there is conscience provision for ministers and others who lead such services. A question of conscience may also arise for congregants in a service where some participate by online means, especially in services where there is requirement to be present, for example, Presbyteral Sessions of the Synod, the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order and ordinations. If further provision is made for communion online, it is recommended that the question of conscience be considered as part of the updating of the guidance. In the meantime, every effort should be made to respect the reasonable conscientious positions of ministers and members.
- 6.11 In both online and onsite celebrations of Holy Communion, it is vital that all participating are attentive to the need for everything to be done as well as possible. This relates to a number of different aspects: presidency, liturgy, rubrics, elements and so on. In this way, the integrity of the sacrament is safeguarded. If further provision for communion online is made, there will be further work to do to update the current guidance in relation to online celebration and to ensure that all reasonable steps are taken so that the integrity of the sacrament is maintained.
- 6.12 Methodists have long sought to discern the will of God through conferencing – that is, conversing – together. In a sense this period of discernment, and indeed the many considerations that came before it, have been an extended period of such conversation. As the Conference receives and confers upon this report, the different voices of the conversation need to be weighed up. The voice of experience needs to be heard with the more formal and normative theological voice and with the perspectives of our ecumenical partners. In all of this, the Committee prays that the Methodist people will know a deepening experience of Christ's presence, which indeed makes the feast.

32 Standing Order 520(3) provides that 'it is the duty of presbyters in Full Connexion to be willing to baptize infants in appropriate circumstances.'

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7 Options

- 7.1 As indicated at the outset of this report, the Faith and Order Committee is not of one mind on the matter of the online celebration of Holy Communion. This section of the report therefore offers three options to the Conference as possible ways forward. Alternative options could also be considered by Notice of Motion. The Committee reminds the Conference that the period of discernment ends on 31 August 2026. Unless a resolution is passed providing for the continuation of online celebrations of Holy Communion, permission for them will cease effective 1 September 2026.
- 7.2 The Faith and Order Committee has been glad to see the deep fruits of reflection on Holy Communion in the groups participating in the research project. Whichever way forward the Conference may adopt, the Committee strongly encourages the Methodist people to reflect and share together on their experience of participating in Holy Communion.
- 7.3 Three options (A, B and C) are offered to the Conference.

Option A: Online celebrations of Holy Communion become a normative part of Methodist discipline

- That the Conference pass a resolution providing for continued permission for online celebrations of Holy Communion
- That this provision should continue to be for celebrations at a common time
- That the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, consider whether any changes are needed to Standing Orders and report to a future Conference
- That an updated version of the guidance for celebrating communion online be produced, including guidance in relation to questions of conscience

Option B: Limited provision is made for online celebrations of Holy Communion, with a process of authorisation

- That online celebrations of Holy Communion should be made possible for particular contexts, with a process for granting authorisation in each case
- Such permission would be for celebrations at a common time and with such other provisos as were deemed necessary

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- That a temporary resolution be passed granting authorisation for communities currently celebrating communion online to continue to do so
- That the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, develop a process and guidance for authorisation for online celebrations of Holy Communion, including consideration and drafting of appropriate Standing Orders
- That an updated version of the guidance for celebrating communion online be produced, including guidance in relation to questions of conscience

Option C: Online celebrations of Holy Communion should cease in the Methodist Church

- The Conference concludes that the outcome of the period of discernment is that online celebrations of Holy Communion should no longer be permitted
- A resolution is passed to confirm the Methodist Church's discipline
- In the light of the implications for predominantly online churches and other online Methodist work, that further work is done in relation to missiology and ecclesiology of Methodist online communities

7.4 Option A offers a clear decision, which affirms the experience of participants in the research project and honours the existing widespread incidence of communion online. It allows a parity of esteem in relation to communion onsite and online. It allows for the continued inclusion of people for whom attending onsite is difficult or impossible. This option would enable the related work on predominantly online churches to continue and allows for a positioning of the Methodist Church in relation to a society in which digital participation is highly significant. It embodies a theological emphasis that the work of the Spirit cannot be contained and that in worship we always participate with 'a great multitude' beyond our immediate context. In ecumenical terms, it will be helpful for our relationship with URC and Baptist Churches. As the report has set out, this option would have significant implications for some ecumenical partners and create further challenges particularly in relation to Anglican partners. It may test the limits of the breadth of Methodist theology of Holy Communion.

7.5 Option B will allow continued communion online for communities that wish it. For some ecumenical partners, it may be more defensible as an 'exceptional provision' rather than a normative practice. In ecumenical theology, concepts such as exception and dispensation can provide a way in which differences of practice can be negotiated. The related work on predominantly online churches could continue. This option carries significant implications in terms of additional

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work in implementing it and in operating a new process on an ongoing basis. Given the prevalence of communion online, there would potentially be significant numbers of applications to be prepared by circuits and processed by the body entrusted with that.³³ Such a provision may still not be acceptable to ecumenical partners for whom communion online is not recognisable. This option would carry the potential implication that communion online (and, by extension, predominantly online churches) were second class.

- 7.6 Option C provides a clear decision which maintains the greatest level of continuity with previous Methodist practice and would be helpful for some ecumenical partners. It would have a significant, perhaps devastating, impact on communities which celebrate communion online. Predominantly online churches would not be able to be recognised in our discipline. There would be a potential adverse ecumenical impact on relations with partners who do celebrate communion online. This option would potentially limit the possibilities for Methodist work on digital engagement and the ability of the Methodist Church to respond to the changing context in which we seek to serve God.

***RESOLUTIONS

13/1. The Conference receives the Report.

13/2. The Conference adopts Option A set out in paragraph 7.3 above.

If resolution 13/2 is passed, resolutions 13/3, 13/4 and 13/8 will then be considered and resolutions 13/5 to 13/7 and 13/9 to 13/11 will be withdrawn. If resolution 13/2 is not passed, resolutions 13/3 and 13/4 will be withdrawn.

13/3. The Conference permits presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together at a common time through electronic means.

13/4. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to consider whether amendments to Standing Orders are needed in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion and to report to the Conference of 2028.

33 See paragraph 4.5 above.

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13/5. The Conference adopts Option B set out in paragraph 7.3 above.

If resolution 13/5 is passed, resolutions 13/6 to 13/8 will then be considered and resolutions 13/9 to 13/11 will be withdrawn. If resolution 13/5 is not passed, resolutions 13/6 and 13/7 will be withdrawn.

13/6. The Conference permits presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when serving communities which have been holding such celebrations as part of the period of discernment in relation to online celebrations of Holy Communion, to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together through electronic means at a common time.

13/7. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to create a process for authorising online celebrations of Holy Communion, including appropriate Standing Orders, and to report to the Conference of 2029.

If neither resolution 13/2 nor 13/5 is passed, resolution 13/8 will be withdrawn.

13/8. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to update the guidance for celebrating communion online.

13/9. The Conference adopts Option C set out in paragraph 7.3 above.

13/10. The Conference adopts the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are not permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present with the presiding minister to receive the elements.

13/11. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation as appropriate, to consider the missiology and ecclesiology of online Methodist communities and to report to the Conference of 2029.

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APPENDIX:

Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church: A Theological Action Research Project Final Report

**Dr James Butler
Dr Ashley Cocksworth**
April 2026

1. Background

1.1. Purpose of the research

In this project, we seek to surface and reflect on the theology embedded in the practice of online celebrations of Holy Communion [hereafter: 'Holy Communion online']³⁴ in the Methodist Church in Britain. It contributes to a broader and ongoing process of discernment currently underway within British Methodism concerning the question of lasting provision for the celebration of Holy Communion online. A collaboration between the University of Roehampton and the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church and funded by the Southlands Methodist Trust through the Susanna Wesley Foundation, the research begins from the conviction that within the practice and understanding of Holy Communion online there is theological insight which needs to be heard in conversation with more formal theological accounts, including existing reports produced by the Faith and Order Committee and ongoing ecumenical consultation with partner denominations. It employs a 'theological action research' approach, which is collaborative and participative in its research practices and has involved working with several research sites as co-researchers to explore with them their practice of celebrating Holy Communion online. Taking this participative and qualitative approach means that we focused on depth rather than breadth or representation.

34 We have adopted the term 'Holy Communion online' rather than 'online Holy Communion' to reflect one of the core concerns that emerged early in the project: many participants were keen to emphasise that they saw themselves participating in Holy Communion that happened to be taking place online rather than doing something that was substantively different from Holy Communion onsite. In other words, what was key was not *where* they were celebrating Holy Communion but *that* they were celebrating Holy Communion. We are using 'onsite' to refer to celebrations of Holy Communion that take place in a church building and 'online' to refer to celebrations of Holy Communion that take place either 'only online' (i.e. through a platform such as Zoom) or 'also online' (i.e. streamed through a platform such as YouTube) to enable online participation in an onsite celebration of Holy Communion.

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We have been guided by the following initial research questions:

- How do Methodists understand their participation in celebrations of Holy Communion online?
- How is this similar/different to their understanding of participating in celebrations of Holy Communion onsite?

1.2. Broader context

Debate over the possibility of celebrating Holy Communion online has persisted for many years within British Methodism. It was first prompted by a Methodist minister proposing to conduct the sacrament on Twitter (now 'X'). Following a memorial from one of the Methodist Districts calling for clarity on whether such a form of Holy Communion is acceptable within Methodist discipline and practice, the 2011 Conference instructed the Faith and Order Committee to establish a group to discuss the issues related to 'the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the internet or video-conferencing', including the question of whether 'such a form of Holy Communion is acceptable within our discipline and practice'.³⁵ The resulting report, Holy Communion mediated through Social Media, recommended to the 2015 Conference that presbyters should not be permitted to conduct services of online communion. The specific theological grounds for the decision were the following:

- 'The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the Church, celebrated corporately by the people of God with an authorised president, and the physical gathering of Christians (normally around the Lord's table) is an essential feature of its corporate celebration.
- Presiding at the Lord's Supper is a distinctive role that involves, among other things, specific sign-actions. When one or more of these sign-actions is performed separately at a location physically remote from the gathering of the people of God then the integrity of presiding at the Lord's Supper, and hence the integrity of the sacrament, is compromised.
- The communion bread and wine symbolically represent the body and blood of Christ, and also symbolically represent the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ. This symbolic representation fails in the case of separate quantities of bread and wine, as when groups or individuals at a location physically remote from the celebration of the Lord's Supper use their own elements.'

35 Paper 37 of the 2015 Methodist Conference, 'Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media'. Available at: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2015-37-Communion-Mediated-through-Social-Media_tOWpRq.pdf

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Following debate, the Conference directed that further work should be undertaken and should report back to the Conference no later than 2018.³⁶ At the 2018 Conference, the recommendations of the 2015 report were finally adopted. However, following a Notice of Motion considered in 2020, the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to 'undertake further reflection on Holy Communion, as to bring a report and recommendations regarding "online communion" to the 2021 Conference'.³⁷ As the country emerged from COVID-19 lockdowns, the Faith and Order Committee considered once again, with new urgency, the possibilities for online celebrations of Holy Communion. The resulting report, Holy Communion and Online Worship, taken to the 2021 Conference, softened the 2015 recommendations and invited 'a period of discernment during which the Methodist people are invited to experience services of the Lord's Supper online'.³⁸ Originally due to conclude in 2024, the Faith and Order Committee proposed that the discernment period should be extended until 2026. As mentioned above, this project forms part of this ongoing work of discernment. A version of this report has been considered by the Faith and Order Committee as part of their considerations and it is a counterpart to the Committee's report, 'Online Celebrations of Holy Communion', which is tabled for debate at the 2026 Conference.

1.3. Related literature

Just as the Methodist Church was compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic to reconsider its position on celebrating Holy Communion online, since 2020 there has been a resurgence of theological attention to the topic. However, while the COVID-19 pandemic raised the question with new urgency and debate, the idea of online Holy Communion has long been of interest to theologians and sociologists of digital religion. In *Creating Church Online* (2017), Tim Hutchings has explored ethnographically the cultures of online churches – from virtual worlds to video streams – including the 'highly contentious' idea of offering sacraments online.³⁹ He cites as an example the 2002 Vatican report *The Church and Internet* which

36 Paper 31 of the 2018 Methodist Conference, 'Faith and Order Committee Report'. Available at: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2018-31-Faith-and-Order-Committee_RBf10aq.pdf

37 Resolution 32/4 of the 2020 Methodist Conference. Available at: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2020-daily-record-complete_bFd2839.pdf

38 Paper 39 of the 2021 Methodist Conference, 'Holy Communion and Online Worship'. Available at: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2021-39-holy-communion-and-online-worship_JOTB7Rq.pdf

39 Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (Routledge, 2017), 36-40 (36). Following an incident of online Holy Communion in 2013 in The United Methodist Church, Hutchings reports of the formation of an 'Online Communion Task Force'. See Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*, 38.

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declared that although online church might offer Christians a great deal, it cannot 'substitute' for real community and the sacraments, which can only be experienced face-to-face. 'There are no sacraments on the Internet', the Vatican report concluded.⁴⁰ Even among churches that do celebrate Holy Communion online, Hutchings found widespread differences in practice, especially regarding the handling of the elements. Likewise, in Teresa Berger's influential *@Worship*, which argues strongly against falsely dichotomising what is 'virtual' and what is 'real', she assesses the 'arguments pro and con' online communion, noting that the practice dates back to the 'exceedingly early' example of the 'Cyber-Eucharist' of 1997.⁴¹ Agreeing with a point Hutchings makes and engaging with some of the debates and reports within British Methodism cited above, the main argument Berger says is cited against online communion is that 'the Christian faith is deeply incarnational, and that means wedded to physicality and matter'.⁴² Fundamentally, celebrating Holy Communion online is a problem of embodiment. The main argument for online communion Berger presents is through the position of Gregory Neal of the United Methodist Church, who holds that 'God can mediate grace through any means'.⁴³ Berger concludes by observing that, in many ways, these theological struggles over sacramental mediation are nothing new: 'They are the bread and butter ("wine"?) of the life of the church on its journeying through time.'⁴⁴

At the time of both Hutchings's ethnography and Berger's study, Holy Communion online was mostly experimental and largely confined to isolated pockets of the internet. All this changed in 2020 when churches around the world were plunged into lockdown and the question of Holy Communion became both mainstream and urgent.⁴⁵ During the pandemic, the topic was vigorously debated in theological journals across different church traditions. From a Baptist perspective, Steve Holmes argues that although online Holy Communion is in many ways 'sub-optimal', it does not 'violate the esse of the sacrament'.⁴⁶ While he cites arguments from current Baptist practice, Holmes develops his 'positive theological case' for online Holy Communion through a discussion

40 Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002. 'The Church and Internet' (2002), para. 9 Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-Internet_en.html

41 Teresa Berger, *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (Routledge, 2018), 83-90 (84).

42 Berger, *@ Worship*, 84.

43 Berger, *@ Worship*, 87.

44 Berger, *@ Worship*, 89.

45 For example, Richard A. Burrige, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds* (Wipf and Stock, 2022).

46 Stephen R. Holmes, 'Can the Eucharist Be Celebrated in an Online Gathering? A Theological Analysis', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023), 87–106 (92).

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of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982), showing that the practice is not inconsistent with the broad theology of the Eucharist affirmed in this landmark ecumenical text. As we shall see, for many of the participants involved in our project, it was not the case that online experience of Holy Communion was 'sub-optimal' – for some, in fact, it seemed to encourage a deeper, more intensive form of engagement. Notable across this literature is not only the primacy of the 'validity' question, but the way the pandemic encouraged a rethinking of the question of embodiment – long recognised as one of the key arguments against early experiments with online forms of Holy Communion. From a Lutheran perspective, Deanna Thompson, a self-confessed sometime 'digital sceptic', is now convinced we should take seriously 'that our bodies are involved and engaged in worship streamed through our computers, and that it's still possible to be gathered with other embodied participants of the assembly that is done online', and that it is 'possible to interpret virtual communion as an embodied way of connecting to the real, bodily presence of Christ'.⁴⁷ It was not the pandemic that changed Thompson's mind, but being diagnosed with incurable cancer. She writes movingly about the 'life-giving possibilities of virtual connectedness' during her periods of quarantine. 'These virtual connections were not simply poor substitutes for real interaction; they nurtured my broken body and filled my soul at a time of despair. I wouldn't have survived my cancer quarantine without them.'⁴⁸ As we shall see, the question of inclusivity and indeed the broader theme of embodiment features in our research. Thompson's positive theological case draws on the normative voices of her own Lutheran tradition, namely Luther's eucharistic theology. And, from a Catholic perspective, Vivencio O. Ballano's argues in favour of online masses and calls for the Catholic Church to 'update and redefine its sacramental theology to better respond to the needs of the times'.⁴⁹

Perhaps the closest existing literature to our project is Sarah Kathleen Johnson's ethnography of Canadian practices of online Eucharists during the first Holy Week of the pandemic.⁵⁰ Examining Free Church, mainline Protestant, Anglican

47 Deanna A. Thompson, 'The Virtual Body of Christ Post-Pandemic: Called to Continue Offering the Sacrament of Holy Communion in Online Worship', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023), 19-23 (21). See also Deanna A. Thompson, 'Christ is Really Present, Even in Holy Communion via Online Worship', *Liturgy* 35, no. 4 (2020), 18–24 (18).

48 Thompson, 'Christ is Really Present', 18.

49 Vivencio O. Ballano, 'COVID-19 Pandemic, Telepresence, and Online Masses: Redefining Catholic Sacramental Theology', *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Global Studies* 16, no. 1 (2021), 41–53 (41).

50 Sarah Kathleen Johnson, 'Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism: A Holy Week Ethnography During COVID-19', *Studia Liturgica* 50, no. 2 (2020), 188–210.

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and Roman Catholic practice through a broadly receptive ecumenical approach, she 'asks what gifts Christians from various traditions can receive from one another in relation to online communion both during and beyond times of crisis'.⁵¹ While the focus of our research is more on the 'beyond' than the 'during' times of crisis in its aim to contribute towards a lasting decision for the post-pandemic church, like Johnson, our project seeks to give (albeit through a different qualitative methodology) particular voice to the experiences of practices of online communion rather than examining formal or normative theological voices. And, like Johnson, our primary question is not the validity of the practice of online Holy Communion. We are not setting out to make another case for or against the practice; instead, our aim is to explore with those engaged in the practice what Holy Communion means to them.

1.4. Summary of the research project

The project was funded by the Southlands Methodist Trust for 18 months beginning from February 2025.

1.4.1. Research sites

We identified three research sites to work with as co-researchers.⁵² Two of the research sites are churches that had met in church buildings but now gather together principally online through Zoom. The third research site is a church that gathers in their church building and also streams its Sunday service via streaming platforms such as YouTube.

1. **Site A** began worshipping online during lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic. There were already questions over whether their chapel should close before 2020 and it became clear that transitioning to an online community (gathering on Zoom) would enable them to gather without the pressures of a maintaining a church building. They have been practicing Holy Communion online regularly since permission was given by the Conference.
2. The story of **Site B** is similar. They were discussing what to do about their building when the COVID-19 pandemic began. They began gathering online and did not return to the building, continuing instead with their now regular

51 Johnson, 'Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism', 188.

52 Ethical approval was granted by the University of Roehampton Ethics Committee [HUM-25-030]. We have pseudonymised the names of the research sites involved in the project as Site A, Site B, Site C, etc; we have also pseudonymised the names of the participants involved in the project.

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Zoom service. The group has grown from the founding group coming from the closed church with people joining the gathering from a number of places around the UK and one or two international participants. We began reflecting with Site B just as they had made the decision to start celebrating Holy Communion online for the first time.

3. **Site C** is a church which streams its Sunday service. Again, they began streaming in lockdown and continued to stream their service when they returned to their building once the lockdown restrictions had lifted. They have invested in the technology to do it well and have reflected on ways to give those streaming from home the best and most engaged experience they can. Once permission was given by the Connexion, the presiding minister began encouraging those joining the service via the streaming platform to participate in Holy Communion online if they wished.

During the research process we decided to supplement the reflections from these three research sites with insights from two further research sites. This was mainly due to a realisation that we would benefit from hearing from those who had experienced being part of a streamed service (**Site D**) rather than 'only online' service. In turn, this led to the discovery of **Site E**, which had a more hybrid approach to Zoom (as discussed below) and which we also included in the project as this seemed an interesting addition to the reflections. Rather than setting them up as research sites, following the pattern of work with the three sites named above, we engaged with these sites through more conventional research methods, such as interviews. The process and rationale is laid out more fully below.

4. **Site D** is a large, town centre church, which streams both of its Sunday morning services. One a 'lively and modern' service with a worship band, the other a more formal service with choir. The services are streamed through Facebook and YouTube.
5. **Site E** had to sell their building around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when it became clear it was unsustainable due to repair costs. While they considered purchasing a new building, they decided to embark on a 'voyage of discovery' and remain online. Their weekly service is Zoom based and they have invested in the technology to allow them to run hybrid services with other churches in the circuit. They often join other churches for their onsite service and stream these services using their technology. They also have a larger monthly worship service which draws a group of people (30-40) and a study group of about 20 people – both take place predominantly online.

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1.4.2. *Research process*

1.4.2.1. **The Roehampton and Faith and Order Committee team**

A team from the University of Roehampton led the project. They were responsible for setting up the research sites, coordinating data collection, organising data reflection and overseeing dissemination. The team consisted of:

- Dr James Butler
- Dr Ash Cocksworth

James and Ash worked with representatives of the Faith and Order Committee to form a 'reflector team' with a responsibility for designing the project, reflecting on the data and, with the teams from each of the research sites, identifying the theological learning emerging from the sites. The representatives from the Faith and Order Committee were:

- Ms Anna Clough
- The Revd Jo Rand
- The Revd Dr Judith Rossall
- The Revd Dr Mark Rowland

1.4.2.2. **Site teams**

Each theological action research site has a local team who worked with the project team to design and carry out the research and to reflect on the data collected. Each site was asked to identify members of its own team, typically made up of the Presbyter and lay members from the local church. The local team from each site worked with the wider reflector team (normally represented by James, Ash and Mark) to design the project within the site. This involved identifying together the key questions they brought to the project, the best way to gather and reflect on the data and finally discerning the learning emerging from the data and reflector conversations.

1.5. **Research approach**

The project sought to attend to the theology embedded in the words and practice of the different sites celebrating Holy Communion online. Through a collaborative and participatory approach, based on a series of developing conversations between the Roehampton and Faith and Order Committee (hereafter: Roehampton/F&O) team and each local team, we were able to

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develop an account of the theology of Holy Communion online emerging from their practice and experience. The project does not aim to speak comprehensively of the scope or diversity of theological positions on the matter of Holy Communion online within the Methodist Church. Rather, we sought to contribute to the Faith and Order Committee's work by learning from the lived theology and experience of Holy Communion online practice in particular Methodist communities. The learning which comes out of each of the sites both feeds into the wider reflection of the project and the research sites' own on-going work of discerning the practice of online church and Holy Communion online.

1.5.1. *Theological action research*

It is helpful to give a brief account of theological action research and highlight some of the terminology that appears in the report. Theological action research is a participative and collaborative method of practical theological qualitative research which seeks to attend to the theology embedded in practice and people's articulation of their beliefs as well as those sources of theology more commonly recognised such as the formal theology of theologians and the normative theological sources and traditions of the church denomination. It does this by working with a team from each of the research sites as co-researchers.⁵³ The process is designed by the two teams working together. Members of both teams are involved in decisions around data collection and importantly the data is reflected on together.

One of the key characteristics of theological action research is that it is 'theological the whole way through'. This means that at every step of the way, theology is at the heart of the conversation. This theology is recognised as having several 'voices'. These include the formal theology of the academy and the normative theology of the tradition; it also recognises the theology of how people express their faith (the espoused) and the theology embedded in how faith is lived in practice (the operant). The conviction of theological action research is that these voices – the formal, normative, espoused and operant – are present in varying ways within the sites in the research; and that through engaging in actual conversations, and attending to voices in the room and heard through the data,

⁵³ For those looking for a more detailed summary of the dynamics of theological action research, see James Butler, 'Researching the Grassroots Experience of Faith Learning: Introducing the Learning Project and Theological Action Research', *Anvil* 39, no. 2 (2023).

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new insights emerge and new ‘theological disclosures’ are identified. These new connections, fresh insights and revelations that come amid the conversations open up new possibilities, renew practice and contribute to wider theological developments. Each team is encouraged to identify their learning through the project, and this is what is captured in this report.

1.5.2. Survey

Our approach has been to take a close look at the particular practice of three sites. Alongside this, we wanted to gain a broader sense of the prevalence of Holy Communion online across the Connexion. To do this we asked the connexional Superintendents’ conferences to respond to the following three questions by show of hands. In total between the two gatherings there were 180 superintendents taking part.

Please raise your hand if there has ever been an online celebration of Holy Communion whether over a platform such as Zoom or a streamed onsite service or in any other way, within your circuit to the best of your knowledge. Please keep it raised while the hands are counted.	101 hands raised (56%)
Please raise your hand if there is currently a regular online celebration of Holy Communion in your circuit, whether streamed, through a platform such as Zoom or in any other way. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.	83 hands raised (46%)
Finally, please keep your hand raised if the regular online celebration of Holy Communion is an onsite service which is streamed or which others can join via a platform such as Zoom. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.	78 hands raised (43%)

This is a rough poll but gives an indication that Holy Communion has probably been celebrated online in more than half of circuits in British Methodism and that large number of those still practice it regularly. It also highlights that the most common form of Holy Communion online is when an onsite service is made available for others to join via a streaming platform.

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1.5.3. *The process with each site*

Each of the three research sites operated as its own mini research project. A typical pattern for a theological action research project contains the following stages: planning, data collection, reflecting as individual teams and a final joint meeting to identify our joint learning. This pattern was adapted in different ways to suit the site.

- **Site A** followed the typical theological action research pattern most closely. A planning meeting identified a key focus around the experience of belonging, how people grow as Christians, how the online space is experienced and particularly the experience of Holy Communion online. The data was collected through recording some discussion times led by the minister during the service of Holy Communion and in the local preachers' meeting. Two focus groups were organised, one with members of the community and another with others connected to the community. Then two interviews were organised with ministers who had led Holy Communion services for the community. The data was reflected on by the local team and by the Roehampton/F&O team and learning identified in the join reflector meeting to finish the process.
- **Site B** had been worshipping together over Zoom for a number of years, but had only experienced Holy Communion together in a member's house, not online. We journeyed with them as they planned their first two online Holy Communion meetings and reflected on them. The basis of the research was regular meetings with the Site B team to reflect together on their experience and what they had heard listening to others in the church. These were recorded and reflected on by the Roehampton/F&O team. We met for a final joint reflector meeting with both teams to identify learning.
- **Site C.** After meeting with the local team, we decided to listen to the experience of those who had participated in the streamed service. They were particularly interested in how people had experienced the streamed service and how they could build online community. We used a short survey to recruit people. We had 12 responses to the survey and spoke to four people who had experienced the streamed service, two of whom regularly streamed at the time of the data collection. The data was reflected on by the Roehampton/F&O team, and a joint reflector meeting was held to reflect with the local team and identify learning.

Given that streamed services seemed to be most prevalent, we decided to engage with a further site to hear about the experience of streaming. **Site D** also sent out a short questionnaire during their streamed service and received 11 responses of which only one person who mainly attended online was willing to be interviewed.

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Site E offered a hybrid service which allowed people to join via Zoom with those gathered in onsite. We included a focus group to engage with Site E. Data has been reflected on by the Roehampton/F&O team and our reflection have been shared with Site D and Site E.

2. Exploration of themes

The project developed a wealth of insights around the theology and practice of Holy Communion online. On the basis of our conversations, we have developed the following four key themes.

2.1. Intensification: A deepening in meaningfulness of Holy Communion

Across all five sites, participants consistently described Holy Communion online as a genuine and meaningful experience of Holy Communion – for themselves personally and together as a community gathering online. While people acknowledged that Holy Communion online felt 'different', it was not perceived as 'less than' Holy Communion onsite. For some, those differences meant their preference was for Holy Communion onsite, but others described a preference for Holy Communion online. We identified an 'intensification' of the meaningfulness of Holy Communion for a number of people engaging in Holy Communion online, particularly among those participating in Zoom services.

Participants did not question whether what they were celebrating counted as anything other than 'Holy Communion'. For them, to celebrate Holy Communion online was described in ways which indicated that it was experienced as a means of grace through which they encountered God. Many expressed a strong desire for the wider Methodist Church to understand how meaningful this practice was to them, and some expressed concern at the prospect that provision might be withdrawn. Kathleen was particularly concerned about this. In a telling slip, she referred to the Faith and Order Committee as the 'Law and Order group', emphasising her concern that Holy Communion online might be taken away from her.

I can't be physically present in my own church anymore, but I can feel that I'm physically present in a church which is meeting, in communion and in communion with the Lord. And this. It is very significant. I would be very sad to hear, I know I'm not a member of your church, but I'd be very sad to hear that the Law and Order group don't understand the real value of having communion together in this way. It is a really genuine communion. It isn't ... It isn't it sort of optional extra. (Kathleen, Site A)

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One person in Site D, who only attended via the live stream, felt the invitation to participate in Holy Communion made them feel valued.

When we are given the invitation to share in the communion, personally it makes me feel a part of the service and I have greatly valued this. Before this was allowed it felt like something was missing not been able to share in communion felt like I wasn't good enough to receive. (Survey participant, Site D)

Most participants involved in the project had been Christians for many years and carried long and deep experiences of participating in Holy Communion. These experiences shaped how they approached Holy Communion online. Holy Communion was already a meaningful practice for them, and its meaning was being worked out in new ways as it moved online. In this sense they saw the development of Holy Communion online as a new way doing an old thing. It was part of the ongoing task of making sense of their Christian lives in a changing world and as part of Methodism's own history of adapting the practice of communion. One participant likened the emergence of Holy Communion online to his memories of the introduction of the peace into the liturgy in the 1970s. The particular forms communion takes are passing forms in this sense, they come and go as they evolve with the world around them. The move from celebrating onsite to online did not appear to be considered by the participants as a move away from Methodist tradition and practice.

Gloria, from Site A, spoke of how she has had 'the same feeling, a wonderful feeling, when I took it on Zoom or stream that I've had when I've sat in church'. In fact, we heard multiple accounts of what might be called 'communion +' – that Holy Communion online for some people intensified the meaning and experience of Holy Communion. One such form of intensification concerned the way celebrating communion online seemed to cultivate more intensive relations of intimacy together.

Seeing it on the screen makes you feel like a family. [Patricia, Site A]

I personally feel that the ties are stronger here than they would have been in the building. [Keith, Site A]

This sense of intensified intimacy was largely stimulated by the ability to 'have eye contact' through the Zoom gallery and to know everyone by name throughout the service in ways that are more difficult to achieve in an onsite context.

When you go to the communion rail, you don't see anybody other than the person that's ministering the communion. Online you see everybody and you

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feel as if you really, really share and it's a more special experience I find for me personally. [Penny, Site A]

For Penny and others, there was significance not only in taking communion together at the same time but seeing each other taking communion together at the same time. Others highlighted the contrast with the choreography of Holy Communion onsite. One participant described onsite communion as sometimes feeling like a 'production line', with individuals approaching the communion rail one by one.

One of the ways in which intimacy is advanced by our sort of Zoom service is that we are making eye contact with each other far more than we did when we were meeting in person. And so there's a different kind of specialness or contact, which is streets away from, uh, you know, being on a production line. Some communion services are like a production line where you follow on from, and it's more about traffic control than, than anything else. So I think we shouldn't beat ourselves up with the idea that because we're not together physically in in one place, it can't be special and intimate because I think it can. [Yvonne, Site B]

Online, with everyone facing each other and consuming the bread and the wine together, the 'you' in 'body of Christ given for you' seemed to be more readily experienced as pluralised, the community gathered together.

Although Holy Communion online is not without its technical tasks (getting words on the screen, monitoring the waiting room, distributing the Zoom link and muting or unmuting participants at the right moments), the general posture felt more contemplative than active. Freed from the need to shuffle to the altar rail and the low-level anxiety about where to kneel or how to fall into line, participants told us that they were able to engage in a deeper, more reflective mode of worship. And being freed from having jobs related to the church and the building also enabled them to participate more fully in the service of Holy Communion without having other things distracting them. Holy Communion online was also identified across the sites as enabling greater inclusivity: those who struggled to attend church for various reasons found Holy Communion online more accessible and less exposing. They did not have to navigate the church building or risk being singled out as needing special assistance.

One participant suggested the screen itself was a 'sacred object' in worship. It was through the screen that they connected more intensively with their church community. This led the Roehampton/F&O team into a conversation about a theology of mediation – how people encounter God through material and

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technological means. We drew a parallel between the screen and theological ideas of the icon, often described as a 'window to the sacred', which suggests a link to another theme raised later: the way the screen brings the sacred into the home and everyday life. This also intersected with our discussion of the presence of Christ in Holy Communion. Many participants spoke as though Christ's presence was mediated less through the elements themselves and more through the faces appearing on their screens. While Methodist theology affirms the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements and in the people of God gathered (and in the word proclaimed and in the presiding minister), we noted the change of emphasis in experiences of Holy Communion online. Charlotte expressed this vividly:

Seeing all the faces on the screen for me... there's something about that, the image of God. Have you ever seen that pixelated image of Jesus? I don't know... whenever I log on, it's in my head that actually this is Christ's body, just meeting online. (Charlotte, Site A)

While experiences differed across the research sites, particularly between 'only online' and 'also online' forms of Holy Communion, there was a shared sense of meaningfulness. In Site C, for example, where Holy Communion was streamed, participants distinguished between watching communion online (as spectators) and participating in it. Those who felt they were participating rather than spectating found meaning in the familiarity of the words, in the familiarity of the person leading the service, in the sense of togetherness that comes from the awareness of others around the world doing the same thing, and in the sense of communion with Christians who have gone before them. Practical factors helped shape this sense of participation. These included the angles of the camera, the footage being screened, how they are being 'seen' or acknowledged by those onsite and the extent to which they are engaged with by those onsite. In Site D this was highlighted by one person's comments on their negative experience.

It was very noticeable that when taking communion online, the live feed stream moves from an image of the church and what's happening, to a still image of the flowers or a window. I then felt disconnected from the act of communion and worship as I could hear what was happening but not see. (Survey response, Site D)

Even the experience of simply being able to type into the chat at the beginning and end of the service in the live stream helped Gloria (Site D) to feel welcomed and included.

Emily (Site C) offered a distinctive perspective on streamed services: she valued the ability to pause the service and to catch up with it later. 'That's what I find

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beautiful about the online. The online worship is I can pause it. Yeah. And I can go and get what I need. Yeah. Because I it won't register ahead of time.' Because of chronic fatigue, she often watched the service later and still found communion deeply meaningful. Her practice raised important questions about communion 'on catch-up'. We wondered what it means for communion to be 'communion' when it is done at a different time. On Zoom, Holy Communion is synchronous, it is happening at the same time but not in the same space and with different elements. Extended communion happens at a different place and time but with the same elements. Communion 'on catch-up' involves different elements in a different place and at a different time. We asked whether this starts to lose a sense of togetherness. However, we noted that this was not Emily's experience. 'I still get that. Yeah, but only if it's being led by somebody that I know. Yeah. Not if it's being led by somebody I don't know.' Emily felt a sense of togetherness because she knew the people leading it, and when it wasn't someone she knew, she wouldn't watch it. There remains a sense, however, that 'also online' hybrid streaming (whether asynchronous or synchronous) as distinct from 'only online' Holy Communion was less an experience of 'communion+' and an experience of 'It's not as good, but it's it is good and it's a heck of a lot better than nothing' and enables you to 'still [feel] part of the church family' [Rachel, Site C].

The intensification of the experience of Holy Communion we saw in the different sites surprised us. For this reason, it was one of the most significant themes to emerge from the research. It drew us as a team into new questions about Holy Communion online, pushing the theological conversation beyond questions of validity (i.e. whether this was or wasn't Holy Communion) into questions of what is being learnt about the practice and theology of Holy Communion more generally from this particular experience of the practice of Holy Communion.

2.2. Gathering: A renewed emphasis

The gathering of the people of God through confession, prayer, hymn-singing, and the ministry of the Word for the celebration of the Lord's Supper has always been integral to Christian worship. In celebrations of Holy Communion online, however, these practices of gathering took on newly intensified significance. If the celebration of Holy Communion onsite is seen to emphasise a dynamic of being gathered in order to be sent, Holy Communion online seemed to give a renewed emphasis on different sorts of gathering: gathering people from and within ordinary life and everyone also gathering their own elements and bringing them to Holy Communion.

Celebrations of Holy Communion often focus on gathering in order to be sent. Those 'who gather around the table of the Lord are empowered for mission: apostles, sent out in the power of the Spirit, to live and work to God's praise and

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glory'.⁵⁴ Celebrations of Holy Communion online seemed to involve a different dynamic. As people were scattered in their homes, the focus tended to be on the gathering rather than the sending.

Some of the communities gathering online intentionally set aside time before the formal 'start' for practices of gathering – for people to exchange news and stories about their week, update each other on health issues, offer prayer requests, share their encounters with God since they last met and have time for the ordinary chit chat of life. Of course, these are important forms of church life however and wherever it meets, but the participants identified how these conversations taking place in the open of the 'round', where people could see and be seen by others face-to-face in the specific context of Holy Communion made these practices of gathering especially meaningful. What was being gathered was not only their bodies, but their stories too, their full personhood. Alison expressed this with reference to John 6.

In a communion service generally the biblical picture, if you like, along with other things, it really is remembering the Last Supper, isn't it? And the events and the events there. Whereas in online communion, personally, as somebody who's presiding, I feel that whilst it's important that obviously we remember the events of The Last Supper, actually maybe the picture in John 6 is [...] a picture that feels more relevant. I can't really describe it any more than that at the moment. I'm still musing over all of that. [Alison, Site B]

The theme of gathering involved not only the bringing together of people, but the literal gathering (and therefore preparation) of the elements. In Holy Communion online, each participant needed to gather their own bread and wine, bring them to the service, offer them for blessing and then take for themselves the bread and the wine. Yvonne, a long-standing member at Site B, particularly drew attention to this reflecting on how the elements felt different in this context.

They would come together, wouldn't they? So instead of it being it's all here and it's going out. We each prepare our own and bring it in together. And it is made together. And there won't be waste. Because we each bring just enough. [Yvonne, Site B]

Alison, the minister, developed the insight further.

I'm really struck Yvonne by what you said a few moments ago actually, because it was just real for me, that was so helpfully put about how when

54 *Orders of Service for Holy Communion from the Methodist Worship Book* (2021), 114

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we're, when we're doing communion, generally, on site, in person, physically, all together, um, it's the table and it goes out from the table. Whereas that focus shifts in online and actually it's, it's where people are and, and, and we're bringing it all together. [Alison, Site B]

Similar dynamics are already present in the liturgy. The Methodist Worship Book encourages the people of God to bring the bread and the wine to the table, but in practice the elements are often already on the table and are simply uncovered having been placed there beforehand by the communion steward.

Holy Communion online, then, required what one participant described as an extension of the theology of communion stewarding. Roy called this extension the 'priesthood of all communion stewards', in which each person assumed responsibility for a task normally carried out by a single individual on behalf of others. Each person became their own communion steward, bringing their own gifts and raising them for blessing. In doing so, they were entrusted with roles usually reserved for the ordained president – for example, holding up the bread for all to see. Some articulated the sharing of 'priestly' responsibility in terms of Methodist non-conformism. Alison reflected on this having presided at Holy Communion online:

I think I found quite moving that when I asked people to hold up their elements that they had in front of them, there was something in that about the care that people had taken. I mean, you know, it wouldn't have taken people long to get those things together, I'm sure. But there was just something. Well, I think I even said in the reflections on the John 6 reading, when it was like the boy presenting the loaves and fishes almost it, you know, that people had brought something to this gathered table. [Alison, Site B]

In light of the way the roles within Holy Communion seemed to be shared differently, it was interesting to us that there wasn't more reflection on who breaks the bread within the conversations with participants; and nor did the theme develop into a particular focus of conversation in the reflector meetings with the sites.

Within the theme of gathering we noticed an increased emphasis placed on practices of preparation. Preparing the elements became theologically significant in ways that are not always apparent in Holy Communion onsite. Participants spoke about gathering bread and wine from their kitchens, shops, care homes, or whatever is to hand. In this sense, preparation itself took on a liturgical quality, a sort of 'church before church'. Having sought out and prepared their own bread and wine, whether taken from the daily bread used for sandwiches, or bought

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especially for the occasion, or even baked by hand, participants took to the preparation of the elements as preparation for communion itself. When it came to the service, people often felt more prepared, more ready to receive the love of God on account of these practices of preparation. In our reflector meetings, we explored the longer theological traditions surrounding the materiality of the Eucharist: the histories of bread-making, wine production and the liturgical actions bound up with them. Much of this rich liturgical and symbolic tradition has faded from contemporary practice, yet Holy Communion online seemed to return to these longer traditions by reconnecting participants with the origins and materiality of the elements they brought to the table.² This, we felt, was a significant 'good' to be received from online practice.

2.3. Reimagining Holy Communion and everyday life

The emphasis celebrating Holy Communion online places on both the gathering of the people of God from (rather than sending into) the world and the (literal) gathering of the elements revealed a different perspective on how God is encountered in everyday spaces and patterns of life. More specifically, we saw how Christ's table became less associated with a physical table in the church building and instead identified as a 'virtual table' which 'spans all time and space'.

The image of Christ's table received significant attention in the different conversations. For some it appeared that when they thought about the table in Holy Communion it was the table in the church building on which the elements were placed. This meant that for Hazel, when planning to preside at a service of Holy Communion online, she assumed that references to table needed to be removed from the liturgy.

The first time I thought it doesn't make sense to say that we're gathering round the table because we're not, because there's not, you know. ... But in the end I put that in. I left it in and actually in the service there was a real sense I felt of people being gathered around a virtual table, which was really interesting. I wasn't expecting that to happen. [Hazel, Site A]

Having decided to leave it in the liturgy she was struck by the significance of the table, and had her imagination drawn away from the physical table in the building to a 'virtual table' around which everyone was gathering.

I was watching what other people were doing on the [Zoom] gallery. So there was a sense of us all preparing to take bread and wine together. So seeing other people was quite important, I think. But also the sense was reinforced

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by the comments afterwards when people said that they feel as though they're gathering around a table, a virtual table. Well, they didn't use that word, but they said it's it feels almost more that we're gath[ering]. ... Because I asked them afterwards to feed back a bit to me how it had felt. They said it felt more as though they were gathering around the table because in the church you often just go and stand at the front. So it was. It was really interesting. I wasn't expecting that to happen. [Hazel, Site A]

What Hazel was suggesting was that the sense of gathering together around the table was enhanced by the experience of Holy Communion online, not diminished. Alison saw something similar, as already quoted above, when she identified how people brought their elements.

It was just something really profound about, um people had brought this to the table. I guess this table that spans all time and space and which again, I think was sort of in our liturgy somewhere, this, you know, the gifts that people bring. [Alison, Site B]

Here it felt natural for her to identify everyone coming to 'this table' as Christ's table which 'spans all space and time'. Terry shared a powerful moment in their communion service which did something similar for him.

I remember so vividly was we did a communion service, and, um, we drew the table afterwards - we did a ... we got Google Maps and drew the communion table that we'd all just gathered around. And it was this strange, sort of pointy, triangular looking affair that was about 3500 miles long, or about 1200 miles deep, and it tapered and that and that. The hairs are up on the back of my neck just thinking about it now, because when I think about what Jesus called for us to do and what Jesus called for us ... what communion would mean to us in the future, I don't think we could be more on the money. It didn't. The miles didn't matter. The borders didn't matter. We gathered around that one table and shared in that meal across the screen. And it was just it spoke for itself. [Terry, Site E]

This pointed to something already named in the reflections on gathering that there was a blurring of the boundaries between the worship service and the rest of life. As Roy, in Site A, expressed, 'We're in our own homes, and that's different'. People worship within their own homes, rather than going to a different building. People have brought their own elements, and those same elements were part of daily life – the bread was brought from the same shop and part of the same loaf as their lunchtime sandwiches. And Alison talked about how she presided over

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communion from the kitchen table. It was apparent to people that the worship service was deeply interwoven with their ordinary lives. Greg articulated this really clearly in Site E.

the thing that I was thinking of when, when these guys were talking just then was trying not to make this sound too like, uh, theoretical, but it's just something, I think, really beautiful about worshipping at home, about the, like, situated ness of worship. Um, which I think has been really good for my own, like, theology and, uh, even just the way I think about church, my own ecclesiology, just this sort of idea that church isn't, isn't any more a place I go to, um, and then leave again. It's a place I join and I'm part of, and I'm always in. And it's the, when we go to church as a family, we go to the same place that we either go to watch telly in the lounge, it's just in there, or we go to when I go to work and sit at this desk here, and sometimes the whole family gather around round by my little desk in the study, and that's church. And so you can't you can't leave church for Sunday morning or for a building. [Greg, Site E]

The space in which Holy Communion was taking place was not being imagined as a sacred space online, a virtual church building, but as a connection between people in their houses, interacting more obviously with their everyday lives. The result is that Holy Communion, and indeed church, is not imagined as separate from the world as it might be when you have to walk through the doors into a building but as both scattered and gathered at the same time. In this sanctification of the domestic, the space in which they spent much of their lives would become holy as the virtual table of communion extended into their spaces and their physical environment was being drawn into the communion. The same screen was being used for Holy Communion as it was for doing online shopping, or watching telly, or for work purposes. In the Roehampton/F&O reflector conversations we made connections to images of Mary at the annunciation, where the angel visits her in what is often pictured as a domestic space – in her house, sometimes engaged in the domestic tasks of homelife. As with the scenes of Mary, there was also a sense the ordinariness of life being taken up into the life of God. Responding to a suggestion that the meaningfulness of communion was in gathering and fellowship, one person in Site A said that it is 'also about everyday life, because Jesus is in our everyday life'.

Although we were exploring Holy Communion online, physicality mattered. Not only the materiality and physicality of the elements and their preparation, but the place and space of communion – which tended to be people's homes. Some of the participants, if say they were part of the same family or residents

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in the same care home, would meet in the same room. Others would join from their own 'places' with a sense of these everyday places and spaces becoming more connected and helping them to discover the life of God present in the ordinariness of life. The screen functioned as a window into the divine, but also as a window into the homes of those they were worshipping with. Worship and Holy Communion were being practiced and found meaningful not in a specific place set apart for worship but within the material ordinariness of life. Greg's story and others suggested that this offered a new imagination for how the things of God relate to ordinary life – discovered within the everyday, not physically separated from it.

A recurring question for many in the different sites concerned mission. In particular it was about online communities finding ways to engage in mission. It struck us in the conversations at the start of the research that mission was being imagined as something you had to do 'out there' in the world with the Zoom service was being imagined as a closed group separated from the world. However, the reimagining of the relationship between church and world discovered in celebrating Holy Communion online, as both gathered and scattered in ordinary life, offered a renewed perspective on mission. What we heard, in light of this, was the way in which church engaged with people's lives in different ways. In Site A it had led to multiple connections across a supported living complex. For Emily in Site C the streamed service and other online content connected her with people in her local area in a different way as they recognised her from online videos produced during lockdown. She also talked about the conversations which emerged as she streamed the online service on her phone when out at the coast while her husband was fishing. The reimagining of church and world, and the domestication of the sacred highlighted very different ways mission was already happening. This view of the church as simultaneously gathered and scattered helped to challenge the assumption that Zoom services were a closed off experience. We heard how these services had allowed people to remain connected who had moved away, had help people to remain part of the church when experiencing illness or could not physically get to church, and had opened up ways that people who would be unlikely to walk through a church door could try church anonymously, from the safety of their own home before deciding whether to venture onsite.

2.4. The liturgy does the work of the liturgy

It was striking how many of the reflections were about how the liturgy still worked in the online setting. Moving to Holy Communion online changed the emphasis and reception of the liturgy, and although there was discussion about what needed

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to change within the liturgy, on the whole the conclusion was that less needed to be changed than was anticipated. There were some changes needed around specifics of where people and the elements were, and there was a need for help with guidance of the changing choreography of the communion when it is online/streamed.

We noticed that the move to Holy Communion online via Zoom made by Site A and Site B had opened up rich reflections on the meaning and practice of communion. A number of times it was reflected in the Roehampton/F&O team that most churches have not thought about the theology and practice of communion in the way these groups had. It was likened to the time in the Methodist Church when decisions were being made to enable children to participate in communion and the rich reflections which had emerged at that point. We feel it was partly for this reason that there was a lot of reflection on the words and practice of the liturgy.

Already in the themes discussed above the importance of the liturgy had been emphasised in the significance of the familiar words and the changing choreography of communion when moved online. Similarly, the renewed emphasis on gathering in the liturgy, and how the table was not lost but became primarily understood metaphorically also foreground the liturgy. For Site B in particular, one of the things they identified as an unexpected learning was that rather than needing to write a whole new liturgy for Holy Communion online, what was needed was minor tweaks, as you might make in any changing context of communion, and some guidance on how things work in an online or streamed setting around the choreography. As one person commented in the Roehampton/F&O team, 'the liturgy does the work of the liturgy'.

In the conversations with Site B, we began to recognise the kinds of shift which took place in moving to Holy Communion online. Some things, such as the bringing of the elements, became more literal when moved online.

the fact that people had got [their elements] there to hand and held [them] up. And everybody's looked slightly different, didn't it? [...] which again, I think was sort of in our liturgy somewhere, this, you know, the gifts that people bring. [...] where there's actually a designated stage direction that says about the gifts are brought forward [...] but in actual fact that that never really happens in it, because the gifts have been brought forward before the service began by the communion stewards, and it's already all there on the table and covered by the time your service begins. [Alison, Site B]

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And other things, like the table, became more metaphorical.

And that's interesting because we've talked about the table, haven't we? And of course, it's not one table at the front like it is if a if we're doing it physically all in the same space. But actually when we say, Lord, we come to this, your table trusting in your mercy and not in any goodness of our own, that table takes on a different, um, resonance, doesn't it? It's the table that people will have their elements on, but then it's the shared table that all of creation is invited to. [Alison, Site B]

Similarly, there was a change in how active and passive those celebrating communion were and where that activity was focused. Each member now had responsibility for gathering the elements, not a single communion steward. The lifting up of the elements became a communal exercise. The activity involved in going up to the rail or the front to receive was gone, and in its place was a quieter space for contemplation and reflection. There was some concern that moving to Holy Communion online pushed people to be spectators and consumers, but there was plenty of evidence that people experienced a high level of active participation. The teams from Sites A and B where the service is on Zoom reflected on how they had noticed that active participation in the service was greater than it would have been in the building. More voices were heard during the service as a whole and were able to participate through readings etc. Again, seeing one another was an important part of this. As a Roehampton/F&O team we felt we were seeing a democratisation of worship and Holy Communion, where roles were being shared across the whole people of God.

Perhaps it is not surprising that there would still be a strong sense of participation in a Zoom service, but we also heard stories of how people were able to move from feeling like a spectator to active participation within the streamed services. This brought different insights into participation. Eye contact from the person presiding was one way people felt included as a participant and when the person presiding was known to them they felt more involved. Emily, in Site C, talked about the need to make an effort.

And when you're in church and you're doing it, it's almost like you're going along with it a bit. And yet God still brings you to that place. Yeah. When you're doing it at home, it's you're making yourself engaged with God that way rather than God leading it. Yeah. [...] You have to put the effort in. Yeah. There's no there's a way to cop out. [Emily, Site C]

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This in turn inspired Rachel to try Holy Communion online too.

I just find it better in church. I feel more, I get more when I am there, but actually listening to Emily, maybe I opt to give it a go. [Rachel, Site C]

In Site D, Gloria, responding to the suggestion that some might think Holy Communion online is an impoverished experience said something similar.

I think it's what you give to it in the first place. If you just go and think I'm receiving the bread and wine and not actually think, why are you receiving the bread and wine, then I think you can think that. But to receive the bread and wine, knowing that you're receiving the bread and wine and the reason why you're doing it, then you can feel inclusively involved with it. (Gloria, Site D)

For Roy, in Site B, the prayer of humble access was 'the absolute knock out of communion' and it was 'meaningless' if they couldn't say it together. The team from Site B reflected that Zoom made it hard to say things together, but they also noticed that the more they did it the better they became at it and they found ways to participate together in the liturgy that worked.

Initially we try and all say the Lord's Prayer together. And it was cacophonous, wasn't it? And we gave up. And gradually, over time, we've started saying the Lord's Prayer together, saying responses in intercessions, uh, saying the grace. And there's a way in which by following the leader, if you like, and seeing the speed at which they are going and timing your responses with them is a sharing, isn't it? Yeah. And it's a, a recognition of, of a relationship. [Yvonne, Site B]

These kinds of reflections drew attention to the liturgy as a practice, not just words, and the ways in which the meaningfulness of communion for many people seemed to be held within the liturgical practice. This was highlighted in Rachel's account from the streamed service that despite the fact that she hadn't chosen to participate in Holy Communion online she had still found it meaningful because of the liturgy.

And being listening to the comfort and security and, and everything of having listened to that all your life kind of thing is there's, there is comfort in it and safety and security and it just. Yeah, it's a good feeling. [Rachel, Site C]

It is also helpful to note some more practical elements around liturgy. Despite an initial feeling from Site B that they needed to write new liturgies for Holy Communion online, and an instinct from Site C to move towards less formal

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ways of sharing communion, both sites began to notice the ways in which the liturgy was important to participants and enabled a level of participation. What began to be suggested was more of a commentary and additional direction for the common communion liturgy, rather than developing a distinct 'Holy Communion online liturgy'. This common liturgy would be able to accommodate different practices, such as everyone bringing their bread and wine and lifting it up, encouraging the person presiding to identify that people online would be participating and to look into the camera. This would also have effect of emphasising the commonality between online and onsite communion, which is theologically beneficial.

Connected to the insights around the work of the liturgy was the way choreography was adapted. In Site C we had a detailed conversation about the position of the communion table and the positioning of cameras to allow those online to see and have a sense of participation. There is plenty to think about around choreography, but it was pointed out that these are perennial questions in the life of the church. The question of where the communion table should be and how the person presiding should stand in relation to it has a long history. This emphasises another more general observation, that while it is easy to get drawn into thinking that the questions we were coming up against were about online and onsite, we realised that these are questions that are dealt with in any move of context of communion. Moving from a small group of 10 people to a larger church has many of the same challenges and questions involved as our participants were wrestling with. We became increasingly keen to emphasise how the questions being raised by Holy Communion online, were relevant to Holy Communion onsite too. This also led us to ask the question, given all that has been reflected above: how might the experience of Holy Communion online enrich the experience of Holy Communion onsite?

3. Emerging areas for further reflection

3.1. The theology of Holy Communion online

The research has sought to do more than simply identify and explore experiences of Holy Communion online. It has sought to engage with those experiences and the developing reflections on those experiences as theological in their own right. The fact that many people experienced Holy Communion online as an intensification of their experience of Holy Communion, and that theological themes such as gathering became emphasised is theologically significant. According to the theological underpinning of theological action research, it is when the theology embedded in what people do and say is heard in conversation with the formal and normative sources of theology that new insights and

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theological disclosures emerge. In such an important theological discussion around Holy Communion online, experience of participants do not simply override all other considerations, but neither can they be sidelined as simply people's experience. Theological action research provides a way for these accounts and emerging insights to be taken theologically seriously as part of a broader, ongoing and unfinished process of discernment. It would be beneficial to reflect on how these voices from experience and the theological insights arising can continue to be heard with the more formal and normative sources within and beyond Methodism as British Methodism continues to discern the place of Holy Communion online.

3.2. Differing experiences between video conferencing and streaming

The research has indicated that different mediums of engagement in Holy Communion online create different experiences. Where many engaging on Zoom found that their experience of Holy Communion was deepened, those streaming very often found it good, but not as good as participating onsite. Given that our indicative survey of prevalence suggested most Holy Communion online in the Methodist Church was offered via streamed services rather than 'online only' services, there is work to be done around promoting and sharing the best practice of streaming Holy Communion. For example, the reflections emerging from this project suggest that there are practical ways in which eye contact (looking into the camera), camera angle and addressing online participants can deepen the experience of those participating online. It suggests that small changes can make a real difference and encouragement to do the necessary reflective work into good practice will pay off. The research also suggests that there are some experiences around the Zoom service which could be incorporated into the streamed service which might also be beneficial. As many of the participants reflected, gathering people engaging with Holy Communion online to share their learning with one another could be a good way to do this.

3.3. Not 'othering' church online and Holy Communion online

One theme we noticed through our reflector team conversations was the way many of the areas of reflection were applicable to church onsite as much as church online. This led to identifying the importance of not judging church practice online by different standards from which church onsite might be judged. One example was how the highly relational experience of church on Zoom would be affected by it growing significantly and noticing that this would be the case for any small church, whether gathering online or onsite. It suggested that it would be beneficial to have further reflection on how to talk about online church and Holy Communion online which didn't identify it by its difference and 'otherness' but

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was able to also identify its continuity and commonality. It suggested to us, that rather than seeing Holy Communion online as a different entity, that seeing it in continuity might help to highlight the ways in which reflection already undertaken on Holy Communion might help to navigate some of the different questions emerging, such as the challenges of recognising different eucharistic theologies, different groups engaging together, different ages of people, differing numbers of participants and even the complicated question of the kinds of elements drawing from cross cultural mission reflections.

3.4. The elements and their preparation

Each of the sites in the research were finding ways in which they navigated questions around the elements. We felt the suggestion of everyone being their own communion steward might offer some guidance on how to prepare. Groups were finding ways to advise participants how to prepare the elements and themselves for online communion and beginning to think about encouraging them to pray as they did it. There were some helpful questions raised about how those who were unable to prepare their own elements or don't have those elements immediately available might be helped. Finally, there were some more theological complex questions raised around whether in the privacy of one's own home it is acceptable to use alcoholic wine, and what kinds of elements are most appropriate.

3.5. Presidency in Holy Communion online

The research raised interesting questions about presidency which were being navigated by the different sites. While some of those presiding at online communion in the research felt that it was becoming natural for them, others had less experience and found it less familiar. In identifying the need for those presiding to be a non-anxious presence and to create spaces for participation we felt that further reflection was required to explore what that support might look like. There were a number of suggestions emerging in the research about enabling participation through the invitation offered, through tweaks being made into the way the liturgy and choreography of Holy Communion online is practiced and in the way the technology is used. Simple guidance could be developed from what has been identified and learnt from the sites.

3.6. The implications for liturgy

One of the emerging insights from the research is the way that the existing liturgy is reinterpreted and reimagined through the celebration of Holy Communion online rather than needing a whole new liturgy (which would risk 'othering' Holy

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Communion online in unhelpful ways). Drawing on the ways in which liturgy is already adapted by the presiding minister in Holy Communion when moving between different church buildings and different numbers of participants, the liturgy could be similarly adapted for Holy Communion online. This might include a number of optional or alternate phrases, and some particular direction for Holy Communion online.

3.7. Discovering mission online

One of the main insights around mission was the blurring of public and private and the blurring of sacred and everyday. Moving away from an understanding of mission as what goes on 'out there', this more blurred account, seeing church as simultaneously gathered and scattered, opens up the possibility of a different imagination about mission and to notice different ways mission is enabled in the ordinary and everyday. Added to this the increased emphasis on gathering also offers ways in which the missional patterns of Holy Communion can be reimagined, not simply feeding to be sent, but the gathering taking place in the world.

The research also identified the ways that Holy Communion online can facilitate the inclusion of those who are unable to get to church because of various disabilities, those who live too far from a worshipping community, those whose life routines restrict them from attending and those who may feel unable to attend due to negative or traumatic experiences. In these ways church online and Holy Communion online, particularly in its streamed variety, allows a way to participate from a safe distance. There may well be ways that this inclusion can be broadened and further developed. We also recognised, however, that any form of online activity can introduce new forms of exclusion and this also needs to feature on the inclusivity agenda. These include problems around digital poverty, accessibility of highspeed internet, and the potential invisibility of the 'church door' when online.

3.8. The significance of space to reflect

As with many theological action research projects, one of the things identified by site teams as valuable was the way in which the process itself offered a space for reflection. We also noticed the ways in which the change from Holy Communion onsite to Holy Communion online naturally encouraged reflection to take place. At the same time, we noticed that some groups were less inclined to this reflection, and that those who volunteered to participate in the research were, by nature, more likely to be those who wanted to reflect. Changing practice offers

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good opportunities to reflect as people navigate a familiar practice in new way. The experience of engaging with Holy Communion online enabled participants to notice the things they take for granted, the things that are most important to them, and to see new ways of participating which offered meaningfulness in different ways. In the sites in this research, this seemed to have naturally led many into conversations reflecting on the meaning and theology of Holy Communion.

4. Conclusions

It has been powerful to work with churches who have been celebrating Holy Communion online in their worship together. To collaborate with them in this journey of listening and reflection has brought a depth of theological insight and practical wisdom. This report recognises those insights, explored in the themes above around intensification, gathering, Holy Communion in everyday life and the work of the liturgy. These themes do not result in simple recommendations, or clear theological positions and in fact in many ways they complexify the questions around the celebration of Holy Communion online. This complexity comes from the fact that lived practice is always complex and has developed through navigating multiple perspectives, voices and experiences. Theological questions about Holy Communion online arise precisely because it is an emerging practice here and now. Because of this, this project does not seek a final conclusion but offers ways to continue to navigate these questions drawing on the theological insights which emerge from practice and with the expectation that these practice-engaged theological perspectives contribute to ongoing conversations.

We began the process with two broad questions posed by the Faith and Order Committee: 'How do Methodists understand their participation in online celebrations of Holy Communion?' and 'How is this similar/different to their understanding of participating in onsite celebrations?'. These questions have led us into a theologically rich engagement with the practice of Holy Communion online and revealed the ways in which those participating have experienced Holy Communion online as Holy Communion, and for some, as an intensification of it. Some of the assumptions based in comparisons between Holy Communion online and Holy Communion onsite have been challenged, and what we have seen is a need to see Holy Communion celebrated online as a development in Holy Communion in a new context, which can be navigated in similar ways to any new context. Emphasis, the nature of participation, and the way people relate to Holy Communion may have shifted, but what is not being discussed is a new thing: it is about seeking to be faithful to God in holy practice. This is not to say that the

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sites we have looked at and their developing practices are inherently right and good but reveals that, as they are reflected on and discerned, they have important insights to offer the continuing development of Holy Communion, and indeed faithfulness to God.

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