

# The pandemic and worship notes

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## Timeline

- JAN 30: The Diocese of Brandon began its first pandemic response with a letter to clergy and wardens. This communication reminded people of hygiene measures that were instituted under the SARS pandemic, and reminded the church that intinction was no longer permitted. There was some resistance to people for whom intinction was their preferred method of receiving communion, but the overall response was positive.
- FEB 25: Pastoral letter for Lent, referencing COVID-19 and pandemic fear.
- MAR 12: First case of COVID-19 in Manitoba. Non-contact version of “the Peace” and withdrawal of the Common Cup.
- MAR 15: Suspension of public worship until further notice effective Monday March 16th.
- MAR 16: Statement of the Bishops of the Province of Rupert’s Land
- MAR 17: Cancellation of the Northern Confirmation Tour (May 7-18)
- MAR 19: Bishop’s video message to the Diocese
- MAR 22: First Sunday Eucharist broadcast (via YouTube)
- MAR 23: Video of Prayers before Bed
- MAR 24: Another statement: encouragement and announcement of YouTube and internet resources as well as material for online Easter Vigil and materials in Cree.
- MAR 30: At home Easter Vigil promoted again
- APR 2: Reflection on COVID-19 and Palliative care published online
- APR 7: Easter Letter

- APR 20: Extension of the suspension of public worship and encouragement.
- MAY 1: Summer camp suspended
- MAY 4: Province opens medical, retail and some recreation. Gatherings still limited.
- MAY 14: First moves toward reopening—first statement about how we might accomplish it—parishes told to plan
- MAY 20: Province raises public gather number to 25 including worship
- MAY 22: Statement and protocols issued for reopening on May 31
- MAY 31: About half of diocesan churches reopen for modified worship.

From the moment that public worship was suspended, I began to celebrate the Eucharist once a week from the Lady Chapel at the Cathedral, and post it to YouTube, along with published prayers for Spiritual Communion. This paper's purpose is to detail the decision making process, theology, context and resources the Diocese of Brandon used in this circumstance. There has been a great deal of debate and much writing on the matter of "remote" or "virtual" or "digital" communion. None of these things was the purpose of continuing the liturgy online when public worship was suspended.

Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, some definitions follow.

## Definitions

In the cultural differences between Dioceses in Canada, one glaring difference stands out. The use of the words "Holy Communion" and "Holy Eucharist" as well as simple "communion" and "eucharist". For clarity in parts of the church, "Holy Communion" is a part of a larger service of Holy Eucharist. It is the act of receiving Communion. Holy Eucharist is the full liturgy by which the church makes possible the act of holy communion. Therefore lay persons may be called upon to lead services of "The Public Distribution of Holy Communion" which happens in isolated communities.

*Virtual Communion:* receiving bread and wine at home as part of a celebration that has happened on a video feed of some kind.

*Digital Eucharist:* celebration of the Holy Eucharist, recorded or live, which is then viewed remotely

*Remote Consecration:* the idea that the priest, by directing their intention in the celebration of the Eucharist being recorded for viewing later, or transmitted live, can effect the consecration of the elements of the Holy Eucharist remotely, even when they are not present to the celebrant. The idea being that one's own bread and wine would be set in

front of the television or computer screen and the priest could “consecrate” that bread and wine for consumption digitally.

## Context

The Diocese of Brandon encompasses roughly half of the civil province on Manitoba, from north to south on the west side of the lakes, with a corridor of parishes to Thompson and Churchill. The parishes are half indigenous and half settler. The north is the Boreal forest and its culture and industry with its reserves. The south is predominantly rural and agrarian. At no time since 1924 has the Diocese of Brandon had enough clergy to accomplish its mission. Our parishes are served by a mix of clergy and lay leaders. The Lay Readers of the Diocese are an integral part of the ministry of the church, and serve in genuine hardship and isolation to teach, preach and lead services of the word and in some cases, the public distribution of holy communion in parishes that have no clergy.

Consecrated elements are supplied to these parishes by a rotation of clergy who visit to celebrate the Eucharist about every 4 to 8 weeks (weather and other circumstances permitting).

Since the parish communion movement took hold in the Anglican Communion, and was transmitted to Canada through a long process of reception (in our particular case by generations of English clergy who came to Canada and served in the assisted Dioceses), there has been an extension of the weekly Sunday communion into many of our churches, so much so that it is considered the norm.

But the celebration of the Eucharist and the reception of communion at every liturgy is not necessarily the norm across the church or even the whole diocese. In certain portions of the church, eucharistic piety and discipline is at odds with assumptions that:

- There will be a priest at every service,
- every service will be a celebration of the Eucharist, and
- that everyone will be assumed to receive communion at that service.

In a diverse diocese like Brandon, the discipline of who can or will receive holy communion is not universal. Parishes which invite children at younger ages through a first communion program live a different reality than those parishes whose tradition waits until the day of confirmation to receive communion for the first time. Therefore in some churches, nearly everyone present receiving communion weekly, and in

others a regular smaller group who receive communion and others who wait, or have not decided to come forward.

Add to this the positive development of ecumenical relationships, and anglicans have gone so far as to welcome other christians who are communicant in their own churches, to receive communion within the Anglican church when they visit.

Having made those steps, further pressure to expand the invitation to communion to those who are unbaptized as well has developed. This is not the subject of this paper, but is mentioned in passing as a pattern that has developed: if you are present, your full, conscious participation in the liturgy *requires* that you receive communion, and to fail to do so is to make you an outlier.

Anecdotally this is born out by the number of people who make a conscientious choice not to receive communion at a liturgy but are badgered by others, sidespersons and clergy to come to communion. We must be vigilant so that the idea of inclusion does not morph into a sense of compulsion.

This idea is less prevalent in the rural and northern parishes as well as I have observed in Indigenous parishes and communities. Depending on local tradition, Holy Communion is reserved for those who have been confirmed, and at a liturgy in some cases only about half those present would present themselves at the rail to receive Holy Communion. In cases where the Eucharist is celebrated sparsely due to a lack of clergy, there are numerous Morning and Evening Prayer services, but the concept of Spiritual Communion, the use of prayers and devotions when unable to receive the physical consecrated elements, is not a foreign concept to Anglicans in the Diocese of Brandon.

Because of our context and geography, it is a model of devotion that is still alive and still understood.

The Diocese of London, in the Church of England reminded the church in a recent communication:

*There is a benefit to be had for those who are ‘present’ at a celebration of Holy Communion, yet unable physically to partake of the elements. Because the sacrament is “given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner” (Article 28), even if a person cannot physically receive, their faith and love can still be strengthened by seeing, even if not tasting or feeling the gifts of bread and wine that signify the body and blood of Christ. As an example, the rubrics at the end of the order for the Visitation of the Sick in the 1662 Prayer Book envisage a situation in which someone might be in such grave or advanced sickness that they are unable to receive*

*the Sacrament at a bed-side celebration of the Holy Communion. In such circumstances (and for a number of other causes), the sick person may, by associating him or herself with the benefits of the Sacrament which is not being physically received, nevertheless receive the gifts and graces which it brings.<sup>1</sup>*

This is an important point to raise due to a particular ministry within the Diocese of Brandon.

For years now, for several parishes in the south the local cable company records Sunday services of our churches for broadcast to shut-ins on the local access cable channel. That cable channel is shared through half the Diocese, and in certain regions of the north. This theology of Spiritual Communion has underpinned this ministry for years. It is watched regularly as it is often commented on to me through the week. “Thank you for your sermon on Sunday” is a regular greeting from people I know who could not have been with me as I visit parishes that recorded the service. It often startles me, as I will hear this from people who live hundreds of kilometers away from one another. In this particular pandemic time, the local access channel has begun showing the bishop’s celebration from Brandon until the regular services are restored.

The continuance of the celebration of a Eucharist with recorded sermon is a matter of continuity for those who are isolated or not able-bodied. It should not be withdrawn from them. To put it another way, if watching a Eucharist Service without receiving communion is a bad practice (even though it is years old here), should we stop this ministry when the able-bodied are permitted to return to church and what does that decision say about the shut in and infirm?

### A note on extraordinary vs. ordinary circumstance

It is a general principle that one draws best practice from ordinary circumstance. Deviations from best practice are the result of extraordinary circumstance. In law, a “Force Majeure” is defined as an external situation beyond control or foresight which affects the ability of an organization to function normally. This intervention, be it storm, war, pandemic can modify practice for a time, until things return to ordinary practice. The withdrawal of the common cup, or the introduction of a “non- contact” Peace are two simple examples. But the caution is this:

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<sup>1</sup> [www.london.anglican.org/articles/the-eucharist-in-a-time-of-physical-distancing](http://www.london.anglican.org/articles/the-eucharist-in-a-time-of-physical-distancing)

This note regarding the text of Article 28 and the rubrics of the Ministry to the sick are the same in the Canadian Book of Common Prayer (1962).

the church normally has not formed ordinary best practices from extraordinary circumstances.

Much of the debate online and speculation for the future of the church is centered around how this will change the church or change how we worship. My firm belief remains that we must not fashion best practices from extraordinary situations. We certainly can innovate *for* extraordinary circumstances, but they cannot nor should they announce the new norm. We must learn from this experience, and fit that learning into our theology and ecclesiology, not the other way round.

### An ancient model

The Bishop gathering the Diocese together around a single table for teaching and sacramental feeding is among the most ancient models from our history. It goes back so far as to be representative of a time before Sees expanded and became regional land holdings as a function of empire. This is the model chosen for Brandon when restrictions began. When the suspension of public worship was announced, the decision to offer worship services online was quickly made and arranged. Daily Morning Prayer is posted every morning. Gospel Based Discipleship is also recorded and broadcast every morning. Hymn singing and readings in Cree are regularly posted for and by the communities in the north. But the Eucharist is being celebrated and a sermon for the Diocese of Brandon is supplied once a week by its bishop. Here the model is much older - though mediated by technology - that the bishop gathers to teach and pray for his diocese in the Eucharist on Sunday. Yes, this is an extraordinary circumstance because the social isolations leave us separated, but the practice of prayer and spiritual communion in our context makes this a reasoned response.

### “Remote or Virtual Consecration”

I received two inquiries about remote consecration. I refused both on the following grounds:

1. The theology of the priesthood and sacraments required to make remote consecration a reality were expressly rejected by the reformers. There is an element of magical thinking that makes the priest’s words a powerful incantation to consecrate bread and wine through a computer broadcast or digital recording. God doing our bidding remotely because we say so. The alternative is to contradict the formularies of the church and to imply that there is no consecration of the elements to instantiate

the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, so there is no point to the discussion in the first place.

2. The prayer book makes it clear that inability to receive the sacrament in time of sickness or trouble is not a barrier to receiving the benefits and good which the sacrament may give to the soul. Even observing or being present to the service without being able to receive in times of trouble is a benefit to the people of God (BCP, 583-584)
3. The four fold action as Take, Bless, Break, Give - is present only in a virtual form. A divorce from the action of the whole church. People who follow rubrics slavishly will also note that consecration is impossible because the prayer book clearly directs the priest hands on the vessels that contain that which is to be consecrated.
4. The sign of unity the Eucharist is meant to signify is obfuscated and perhaps even pointing toward that which was not meant to point toward - separateness.

## Prayer and sacrament

Prayer and sacrament are two things which are intertwined in such a way that often in our day to day thinking about these things, they can almost be indistinguishable. Prayer can be done remotely, praying for those far from us and those close by. It can transcend time and space and joins with the whole communion of saints when it is engaged. Sacraments cannot be done remotely. The prayer portion of the sacramental act is always tied to an action of some kind as it incarnates the speech-act of the prayer. The essential and incarnational matter and form of the eucharist are at play here. To be glib, matter matters, and so does form. The outward and visible signs are present to us...not just to one. It is many olives which give us holy oil. Many grapes are crushed to make wine. Many grains who are gathered into one bread. That matter which is touched and prayed over by the priest who represents the many who will receive it. To put it still another way, the “gatheredness” matters too. This is why in Brandon’s celebrations there is always at least one or two others (appropriately distanced) with the bishop in the celebration.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The question is further clarified by the necessity of gathering to consecrate a bishop during the pandemic. If remote consecration of the eucharist is possible, why bother with the laying on of hands by three bishops to consecrate another bishop? If virtual consecration works for the Eucharist, why not for Holy Orders? My point here is that while I (as a bishop) prayed in concert with the other bishops during a consecration, I was not a consecrating bishop. I could pray those prayers remotely, but I was not present to the sacramental action.

Communion is supposed to be an act that is horizontal - with other Christians with whom I am committed to Christ's ministry of Reconciliation - and vertical to God. The act of receiving communion in the Church, or a hospital room or a nursing home or a fireside pit in a summer forest implies the presence of another person at the least as well as the guarantee of the presence of God. We therefore run the risk of doing something meant to signify togetherness and unity in a time of crisis and instead signifying separateness and lack of presence. The attempt to supply that which is lacking simply amplifies the lack that it was meant to cover up.

### **“Virtual” communion, “Virtual” community**

Virtual as a modifier is a form which in essence means “not the thing it is meant to be”. Virtual Reality is not reality - it mediates an experience like a reality, but it does not exist in an incarnate form. It may signify reality, it may imitate and even make our senses believe it to be reality, but it is not a reality. Virtual Reality is a construct of bits and bytes mediated by electrons moving about. One might argue that we are all masses of atoms moving about, but our non-virtual reality has the bonus of having had God choose to have his only Son incarnate into this particular storm of atoms and free will.

It follows simply that “Virtual” communion is “not” communion. It has nothing to do with our feelings, though our senses are engaged - it is by definition, not the thing that it emulates. The virtual community then, while it is a helpful and sometimes valuable tool to gather and maintain contact is not a community in the sense that the Body of Christ, gathered together in its form in a particular place and time in a particular parish is a community. It can be a substitute in order to maintain mental health and connection, communication and comradery and even comfort, but its essential unity it Christ is signified by its gathering and witnessing together to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the instantiation of that reality in concrete human lives with water, oil, bread and wine and human touch. Therefore the virtual community fails as community in this sacramental sense, of contact with matter and form that is touched and distributed by the body: taken, blessed, broken, given. Particularity is a feature of how this God has dealt with the people from the beginning, and if particularity is God’s way, then God gets to be God.

### **Theology of the Body of Christ**

Finally, St. Paul’s theology of the body makes it clear that when one suffers, all the members of the body suffer, and when one cries, all weep. It also follows that access to communion as it occurs in situations of

peril is not a function of privilege, but rather a expression of the Body of Christ being the thing that it is constituted to be: one can receive so that all may be part of that miracle of Christ's real presence in a time that we are restricted. It is actually a necessity that the Eucharist be celebrated and communion received even if only by a few as a commitment to the whole body. There may come a time when I as a bishop, because of extreme sickness and infirmity, cannot receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. *I will need you to receive him so that I might be nourished as well.* I am connected to you in Christ in ways that will mystically feed me. The Holy Spirit will supply me what I lack because I am part of the body that is doing what the Lord has asked it to do.