

# Our attempt at faithful worship during COVID-19

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**W**hen the doors to church buildings were closed back in March we, along with countless other churches, were confronted with a challenging question, “How are we called to be church in the midst of this new and (within our context) unfamiliar time of exile?”<sup>1</sup> Since all aspects of church life are nurtured by, reflected in, informed and inspired by worship, it was necessary to discern this essential piece first, maximizing the potential for important ministries such as Christian education, pastoral care, mission and outreach, etc. to be supported, empowered, and encouraged to thrive accordingly.

For this parish, Zoom has been and continues to be an essential vehicle through which ‘being church’ in the midst of COVID-19 is possible. Three primary areas of focus have arisen and remain works-in-progress: (1) Worship as communal; (2) The purpose and place of lament; (3) Exploring potential alternative Eucharistic experiences.

## Communal worship

We quickly determined that this parish was longing for an interactive, communal experience, so decided to offer worship through Zoom. Initially this was an experiment, although surprisingly, it quickly became clear that this approach serves us best. It is, however, far from ideal. After some glitches, our director of music ministry adjusted his settings and found specific equipment in order to maximize the quality of musical sound. We cannot all sing together as the format can only accommodate one voice at a time. Said liturgical responses are assigned to lay leaders

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful resource and guide has been, and will continue to be N.T. Wright, “God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath,” (Zondervan Reflection, 2020).

each week; they articulate the responses on behalf of the worshipping community as other participants join in while muted. We are not together physically. Occasionally the screen freezes, disrupting a seamless flow for worship. Indeed, this is far from ideal.

Why, then, have we maintained this weekly experience? We have done so because it is currently the most effective way to accommodate this parish's expressed need for communal worship: to worship interactively, and share refreshment time afterwards, together.

At a time when personal lives are and the world in which we live is immersed in isolation, confusion, unpredictability, loss of control and personal freedom, fear, grief... In the midst of all this, we have gathered together for worship every Sunday morning at 10:30, experiencing the communal nature of worship. Folks start to arrive at about 10:10 during which time there are enthusiastic greetings, catching up, sharing news of events that cover a wide spectrum: (1) from joy to heart wrenching sadness (births of grandchildren out of Province and grandparents unable to visit them) (2) loss of loved ones through deaths and moves, with insufficient opportunities to mark the occasions; (3) opportunities to hear and respond to the real-life stories of people who are searching for a sense of connection, comfort, and support (in particular, supporting folks as they prepare for and recover from surgery); (4) searching for ways to place all this into God's hands in the company of one another; (5) searching for strength, comfort, and hope. For those who have the necessary type of device, Zoom worship has made this possible. For this parish, this has been and continues to be a gift beyond measure. (Although the majority of parishioners do have the necessary technology to be included, not everyone does, so we have established other strategies to remain connected with those who do not. Sadly, at the moment, this cannot, and does not, include corporate worship. It is important to remember that some of these realities are out of our hands. COVID-19 is the cause, we're simply striving to establish the most effective practices in the midst of a less than ideal reality.)

This approach has also made it possible for people to worship together with family and friends well beyond Winnipeg; that is, from numerous locations throughout Canada and the U.S., England, Australia, Kenya, South Africa. Those who have extended the invitations make sure that their guests are introduced as folks arrive prior to 10:30, and further, more in-depth conversations occur during refreshment time after worship. We have experienced the realities of this global pandemic through the presence of these individuals, hearing their stories, and responding to their specific requests for prayer and support. In addition to this, a

number of parishioners who have moved away over the years have returned to worship with St. Peter's. At a time when loneliness and isolation is a significant reality, people have chosen to embrace this opportunity to connect.

Some specific, additional experiences with communal worship through Zoom are:

1. One Sunday during refreshment time we received the news that one of our beloved parishioners, that afternoon, was required to make a decision about removing her husband (also a parishioner) from life support. With this announcement, we sat in silence together, for perhaps a full minute. Then we prayed. The rest of the afternoon was upheld by that prayer. Peter died that afternoon at 3:30 with his wife Ellen by his side, and two members of our clergy team who were present at worship that morning, close by.
2. During the past six months two St. Peter's families have moved out of Province. While they were unable to enjoy the usual going-away parties, etc. we were able to maintain our usual practice of a ritual, celebrating their presence among us along with the ministries they have shared over time, and while gathered together, sending them off with God's blessing. These same families, once moved, have logged onto Zoom to return to worship with St. Peter's.
3. Liturgical leaders have continued their ministries among us in worship: presiders, preachers, readers, intercessors, director of music ministries, cantors.
4. During the past six months, St. Peter's has generated tremendous support and outreach to organizations such as our local St. Matthew's Maryland Community Ministry and the PWRDF Grow Hope Project. This has largely been possible because of the ways they have been promoted while together on Sunday mornings, with lay leaders effectively promoting, and preachers highlighting such opportunities as Scriptural texts permit.

Through the gift of Zoom technology, and with God's help, we have managed to maintain our essential need to worship together, while offering comfort, support, and hope in the midst of these challenging times.

### **The purpose and place of lament**

Intrinsic to the culture in which we live, is a denial of pain, masking it with countless methods of self-medicating. In the midst of this painful and challenging COVID-19 experience, we are attempting to offer a

prophetic voice into the void that comes with denial. Throughout the Old Testament (particularly the Psalms) and the New Testament (perhaps culminating in Rom 8:22-27)<sup>2</sup>, our tradition is rich with calls to lament. Rooted in and informed by this tradition, Jesus cries out from the cross these words from Ps 22, “My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me?” This, and other similar cries need to find utterance in the midst of a global pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, we recognize this as a time to become reacquainted with the practice of lament. This COVID-19 moment offers an opportunity to rediscover this long forgotten gem. We need to rediscover the spiritual value in (1) naming the pain and the grief; (2) crying out to God; (3) asking for God’s help; (4) remembering God’s faithfulness in the past; (4) discovering a sense of trust, and (5) praising God for remaining steadfast with us in the midst of all that we may endure.

Specific ways in which we have promoted and facilitated this call to lament:

1. We are committed to expounding on this through preaching and teaching.
2. An evening liturgy of lament was created and offered for those who expressed an interest in praying this and learning more about it.
3. Although we are not currently practicing Spiritual Communion, we include a prayer of lament in our Sunday worship which is associated with this practice.

The following is one example of such a prayer, to be included at that point in the liturgy when (prior to March of this year) we would be receiving Communion.<sup>4</sup>

*In union, blessed Jesus, with the faithful gathered at every altar of your Church where your blessed Body and Blood are offered, I long to offer you praise and thanksgiving, for creation and all the blessings of this life, for the redemption won for us by your life, death, and resurrection, for the means of grace and the hope of glory.*

*...We believe that you are truly present in the Holy Sacrament, and, since we cannot at this time receive communion, we pray you to come into*

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this theme, please refer, again, to N.T. Wright, “God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath,” (Zondervan Reflection, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, Erika Moore, “The Psalms as Christian Lament: Historical Commentary,” (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014) This has been informative, especially during this past six months.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Saint Augustine’s Prayer Book, Chapter on Spiritual Communion (Revised edition: Forward Movement, 2014).

*our hearts. We unite ourselves with you and embrace you with all our hearts, our souls, and our minds. Let nothing separate us from you; let us serve you in this life until, by your grace, we come to your glorious kingdom and unending peace. Amen.*

Following the Lord's Prayer...

*Come Lord Jesus, and dwell in our hearts in the fullness of your strength; be our wisdom and guide us in right pathways; conform our lives and actions to the image of your holiness; and, in the power of your gracious might, rule over every hostile power that threatens or disturbs the growth of your kingdom, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.*

We have received feedback from some folks who suggest that this prayerful expression of lament has opened the gateway for them to identify their own deep sense of loss, pain, disappointment, confusion, and grief. Previously *unnamed*, *unidentified* 'groanings'<sup>5</sup> have been identified and found expression through the *absence* of the Sacrament, and accompanying prayers. While these worshipers do not, cannot, speak for the whole of St. Peter's, I think it is prudent to seriously reflect on this feedback. Is a rush to quickly provide alternative Eucharistic experiences at risk of perpetuating a sense of denial regarding the pain associated with this COVID time? Is this potential 'quick fix' at greater risk of masking the pain we're feeling, than empowering us to find strength? Is there a need to explore deeply a sense of sacramental theology that inspires this perceived longing for the Eucharist? While I do not at present have answers to these questions, it seems clear to me that we need to engage in them together.

### **Potential alternative Eucharistic experiences: Spiritual communion and/or virtual communion**

While this has been unfolding at St. Peter's, we are aware of alternative approaches (particularly relating to the Eucharist), currently being explored and offered elsewhere. This seems to be motivated by such perceptions as: (1) the church failing to be innovative during this COVID time; (2) the church withholding the Sacrament at a time when people

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<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, "God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath," (Zondervan Reflection, 2020), 38. "...when the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be *people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain*. Paul puts it like this, in a three-stage movement: first, the groaning of the world; second, the groaning of the Church, third, the groaning of the Spirit – *within* the Church *within* the world."

are particularly longing for it; and (3) the Anglican church losing sight of the centrality of this Sacrament. While this is not a widespread expressed desire at St. Peter's thus far, there are a couple of individuals who have raised the subject with me, so the dialogue continues within this small circle, for now.

One potential solution to these concerns that has been suggested, and one that seems to be occurring at various places during this time, is Spiritual Communion, where a presider offers the Eucharistic Prayer, and viewers accept Jesus spiritually, even when they can only be as present as a computer screen allows. Although this practice is complex and involves theological principles that require significant unpacking, (more so than time and space in this paper as well as my understanding currently permit) suffice it to say that (according to my understanding) it is based on the premise that: (1) it is good enough to simply desire Communion at times when it is not possible to receive (ingest) it; and (2) to see Communion (although unable to receive) increases the desire. So, in part, according to this practice, we receive, spiritually, through viewing it with our eyes. (Ocular Communion)<sup>6</sup>

Another potential solution that has been suggested at St. Peter's and is currently being practiced elsewhere, is Virtual Communion, which is a gathering of individuals online, during which participants place a piece of bread and wine in front of their computer screen while a priest recites the prayer of consecration. The gathering then eats the elements and describes the service as a celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>7</sup>

1. Both emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist.
2. Both could (for some) potentially assist with a sense of longing for the Sacrament. (S.C. intentionally leaving the longing unfulfilled; Virtual Communion attempting to satisfy it.)
3. Both could potentially save the church from the perceived stigma of failing to be innovative at such a crucial time.

That said, the dialogue continues at St. Peter's, and for now our practice is to continue worship without Communion until we return to the building, and/or the complexities surrounding online options are

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<sup>6</sup> Since this practice (popular particularly within the context of the mediaeval Church) has come to my attention only recently, I found this online article informative and helpful: Bernhard Blankenhorn, Dominican Friar, "A Short History and Theology of Spiritual Communion" (<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-theology-and-history-of-spiritual-communion/>, April 08, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> This practice has also come to my attention only recently, and this article has been helpful and informative: Christopher Craig Brittain, "On Virtual Communion: A tract for these COVID-19 Times (Part II)" ([www.anglicanjournal.com](http://www.anglicanjournal.com), May 25, 2020).

worked through adequately. Our goal is to, “listen for the purpose of understanding.”<sup>8</sup> Currently we share insights with each other as time and resources permit. These conversations have inspired me to explore more deeply and gain a clearer understanding of the two virtual Communion options being explored elsewhere at the moment. For now, it seems to me that a decision to move in this direction is premature, without having worked through the potential long term consequences. Meanwhile, I find myself with critical, unanswered questions that we will continue to explore together:

1. Is it possible that each of these two forms of Communion may create scenarios that err on the side of clericalism? It seems there is a remarkable focus on the role of the priest, with little or no emphasis on the participation of the gathering.
2. Or, conversely, does the practice of Virtual Communion potentially serve as a step toward lay presidency at the Eucharist? Maybe this would be a positive step, maybe not. However, more to the point, is it wise to proceed without a clear understanding of such a potential underlying shift?<sup>9</sup>
3. Is it possible that each of these options supports the notion of individualism, rather than a unified understanding that we are all bound together, in and through the Triune God? Are these options at risk of promoting individualistic personalized, piety?

*“...Sacraments are not geared chiefly toward personal internal piety; instead, they are integral to the church’s communal nature as the gathered people of God. Rowan Williams argues, “Sacramental practice... speak(s) most clearly of loss, dependence and interdependence, solidarities we do not choose.” Such an understanding does not encourage the idea that Holy Communion should be offered on the basis of an individual desire for it, or the presumption that the church cannot exist if the Eucharist is not currently being conducted.”*<sup>10</sup>

4. Again, Scripture and tradition present the Eucharist as being inherently communal. Have we reflected on these alternative options through that lens?

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, “Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most” (Penguin Books, 2000)

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Craig Brittain, “On Virtual Communion: A tract for these COVID-19 Times (Part II)” ([www.anglicanjournal.com](http://www.anglicanjournal.com), May 25, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

*“It is not something one watches passively but it requires the active participation of those who have gathered (which is why most churches do not permit communion by watching a liturgy on television). Moreover, as Paul emphasizes, there can be no divisions among participants over who has access to it (for example, excluding those without reliable internet access, such as the poor and marginalized).”<sup>11</sup>*

5. Is it possible that with this eagerness to facilitate the Eucharist online we neglect to work through, theologically, the notion of this Sacrament within the context of a physical gathering, as opposed to being physically apart? Are there key elements of the Eucharist that are missed when we are not physically together?

*“If one recalls that the Eucharist not only unites participants with the sacrifice of Christ’s death on the cross but also with the table fellowship that Jesus shared with outcasts and sinners, then a substantive limitation of virtual communion comes into view. It would be one thing for Jesus to chat with the Samaritan woman over Skype; it is quite another thing for him to violate social boundaries by meeting directly with her at the well (Jn 4:4-26). Similarly, while the disciples of Jesus might find it curious that Jesus has Zacchaeus as a Facebook friend, they cannot misunderstand the message that is communicated when Jesus agrees to eat with this tax collector at his home (Lk 19:1-10). Virtual communion makes it easier to diminish such key dimensions of celebrations of the Eucharist than do in-person gatherings.”<sup>12</sup>*

6. Is it helpful to imply that God is not able to feed God’s people if they don’t have access to the Eucharist? What about other central ways in which our faith is nourished, such as through God’s Word, and prayer? Is the work of the Spirit really so restricted?<sup>13</sup>
7. Since these alternative forms of Communion are (in part) prompted by an attempt to fulfill an expressed pastoral need, might we wonder if such needs or desires need to be delivered exactly as requested?
8. Have we and our theological leaders had sufficient time and opportunity to explore more fully the place of Christ within a Eucharistic celebration where the gathering is not physically together?

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

I believe these are essential questions as we reflect on emerging practices for Communion during this COVID time, especially if positive cases rise to the point that we are required to return to isolation. I am grateful for the guidance of the Anglican Church of Canada, Faith, Worship, and Ministry team, particularly in the midst of this COVID time. Their direction and wisdom is essential as we continue to discern ways forward within the context of this unfamiliar terrain. I am also grateful for this opportunity to share St. Peter's experience with the wider Church.

Meanwhile, St. Peter's remains committed to worship that is communal, with ample opportunities for lament based on the biblical model. That is:

1. naming the pain and the grief;
2. crying out to God;
3. asking for God's help;
4. remembering God's faithfulness in the past;
5. discovering a sense of trust, and
6. praising God for remaining steadfast with us in the midst of all that we may endure.

A recent parish survey indicated that a number of people (possibly the majority) remain uncomfortable with returning to the building for worship this fall. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, St. Peter's will continue to worship each Sunday morning at 10:30 through Zoom. At the same time, a sufficient number of individuals did say that they will return to the building when it reopens for worship. Therefore, depending on government and diocesan regulations when the time comes, we are preparing to reopen our doors for worship (with Eucharist) on Sunday, September 27. All government and diocesan protocols will be in place. This will be offered weekly, in addition to Sunday morning Zoom, with regular reviews going forward.