

Virtual is real: Some preliminary reflections on Eucharistic worship in a pandemic

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What is ‘real’?

During my second year in seminary I experienced a crisis of faith, vocation and self. As I look back on that crisis from the distance of forty years, I realize that it was a crisis about personal integrity and authenticity. For years I had been pursuing a vocation, deeply rooted in my religious upbringing and sense of self, that had brought me into theological formation for leadership in the Church’s ministry. But something had happened to cast doubt on all this.

One of the ways that I earned some extra money while in seminary was through babysitting and childcare. One evening, as my vocational world was in danger of collapse, I was taking care of the children of the seminary’s librarian. The children wanted a story and they brought me a well-known book from my own childhood. So we settled down to read and I found myself reading these words.

“What is real?” asked the Rabbit one day, when [the Rabbit and the Skin Horse] were lying side by side near the nursery fender.... ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.”¹

¹ Margery Williams Bianco, *The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toys Become Real: The Classic Edition* (Kennebunkport, ME: Applesauce Press, 2012), 8.

And in that moment I realized that who I was and what I was doing was ‘real’. Shaken, uncertain, questioning but real. For years afterward I kept a hand-written copy of this passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit* in the pocket of my cassock. Just reaching into my pocket and touching it reminded me that I was real, what I was doing was real and that the God who had called me into this ministry was real.

“What is *real*?” is one of the questions we are addressing these days about eucharistic worship in a pandemic. We sometimes distinguish between ‘in-person’ and ‘online’ or ‘virtual’ participation in worship. But I have come to believe that there is only ever ‘in-person’ worship exercised in ‘online’ and ‘on-site’ modes. While the ‘on-site’ mode of worship is at the heart of historical understandings about Christian community, we cannot ignore the fact that the ‘online’ or ‘virtual’ mode is one that has been developing since the first time someone broadcast worship over the radio waves one hundred years ago. Television and the internet have simply added a visual component to this means of engaging people in eucharistic worship.

So it’s an old question we’re addressing right now. Can ‘virtual’ worship be ‘real’? Because Christian discipleship involves life-long discernment of where God is leading us and how we participate faithfully in God’s mission, we need to explore the authenticity of online worship, whether eucharistic or not.

How do we determine the authenticity of liturgical developments?

Worship is a phenomenon of human behaviour. It is shaped by the circumstances in which communities of faith find themselves in given times and in given places. As members of a religious tradition that believes God is active in time and space, we attempt to give meaning to or find meaning in these circumstances through our liturgical rites.

The complexity of human life frequently makes it necessary for pastors to make decisions about how best to serve individuals and community through sacraments. Rarely are completely ad hoc judgments best in such cases. How do you decide whether a eucharist is appropriate at a certain wedding? How do you determine whether a specific adult is ready for baptism? How do you decide whether to conduct a public service of reconciliation? Norms will not answer any of these questions, but they will help one make better-informed judgments than if left to one’s own devices. Thus, norms are a great asset in decision making.²

² James F White, *Sacraments as God’s Self Giving* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983, 2001), 140.

So, in order to decide whether ‘virtual’ or ‘online’ worship is ‘real’, we can examine this phenomenon by using three sacramental norms: pastoral, theological and historical.³

Is ‘virtual’ or ‘online’ worship pastoral?

Before describing what the pastoral norm is, let me explain why I believe that it is our beginning point. Anyone who is engaged in the leadership of worship and in making decisions about the shape that this worship will take has to acknowledge from the outset that we are not dealing with abstract matters. This is the ancient debate between those who prefer to move from universals to the particular and those who prefer to move from the particular to the universal. Since worship is a human phenomenon, moving from the particular to the universal, from actual situations to general principles, can be more genuine is speaking to human realities.

James White defines the pastoral norm as this: “... worship must be shaped to fit the needs of actual people in a specific time and place.”⁴ This means that we need to engage in what I’ve sometimes called ‘congregational hermeneutics’, diving into the context to determine who are these ‘actual’ people, what are their needs, what are the specifics of their times and places.

While Anglicans of my generation tend to be ‘print-oriented’ and have to be trained to listen rather than be linked umbilically to their prayer books and hymnals, my children, born between 1980 and 2000, are not. The young people of my congregation, born after 2000, are more likely to communicate by social media than by the telephone function of their smart phones. Even when these two groups gather in a physical location, it is rare to see them without a mobile device in hand or near by. My children have coined a new term, ‘Techno-Boomer’, to describe ‘Baby Boomers’ who have embraced newer digital and social technology and see its potential, if used well and appropriately, to ‘Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still’.⁵

Now that we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic and facing the probability of future pandemics that test our communities, the use of digital and social technology as a medium for liturgical worship is not a time-limited approach to this crisis. Many congregations are discovering that the use of digital and social media are connecting them to people who would otherwise be reluctant to cross the threshold of a parish church.

³ White 2001, 141.

⁴ White 2001, 141.

⁵ Gordon Light, ‘Draw the Circle Wide’ in *Common Praise* 418.

This ‘online’ community would be highly unlikely to describe their participation as anything other than ‘in-person’.

A recent survey of my congregation undertaken by the Rev. Tasha Carrothers, our Assistant Curate, discovered that our Tuesday and Thursday ‘A View from the Vicar/the Curate’ are highly valued by our congregation as pastoral ministry. Our livestream liturgies on Sundays and Wednesdays have many more online participants than onsite. The inclusion of a prayer for spiritual communion for use by anyone who is not on-site for the eucharist has been well received.

Worship at Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral in the foreseeable future will continue to ‘both/and’. On-site and online worship will continue. We will make improvement in our technical infra-structure to do all we can to lower any barriers that prevent online worship from being experienced as less than on-site.

Is ‘virtual’ or ‘online’ worship theological?

But responsible liturgical leadership cannot simply justify a particular response because it is pastoral. We are called to proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed, so a further test needs to be applied: “The theological norm for sacramental action is that *what we do must reflect Christian faith.*”⁶

*Ultimately, sacraments reflect our understanding of how God works in this world. At the theological checkpoint, questions are raised as to whether any contemplated action accords with the way Christians generally perceive the work of God.*⁷

In ‘The Catechism’ of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1962), there are a series of questions that apply directly to the sacraments and to the eucharist in particular.

Catechist: *What do you mean by this word Sacrament?*

Answer: *I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.*⁸

Catechist: *What is the outward part of sign of the Lord’s Supper?*

Answer: *Bread and Wine, which the Lord has commanded to be received.*

⁶ White 2001, 142.

⁷ White 2001, 143.

⁸ The Book of Common Prayer 1962, 550.

Catechist: *What is the inward part, or thing signified?*

Answer: *The Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper.*⁹

In this exchange the Catechism expresses an Augustinian theology of the sacraments that stresses the link between *signum* (the sign) and *res* (that which is signified). At the heart of the Anglican reformation was a commitment to celebrate liturgically this unity between the sign, bread and wine, and that which is signified, the body and blood of Christ, received for '[the] strengthening and refreshing of our souls and bodies unto eternal life by the Body and Blood of Christ'.¹⁰

This stress on the link between the sign and that which is signified is not limited to the Prayer Book. In 'Concerning the Liturgy', a set of rubrics preceding each rite in *The Book of Alternative Services*, the importance of physical reception of the elements is repeated.

Care should be taken at the time of the preparation of the gifts to place on the holy table sufficient bread and wine for the communion of the people....¹¹

Opportunity is always to be given to every communicant to receive the consecrated bread and wine separately.

Communion should be given at each celebration of the eucharist from bread and wine consecrated at that liturgy.¹²

A *prima facie* reading of these texts might imply that the livestreaming of a eucharistic liturgy is antithetical to the Anglican ethos.

But such a *prima facie* reading of the tradition needs to be expanded to include other aspects of the Anglican liturgical tradition. For example, Article XXVIII states that "[the] Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after *an heavenly and spiritual manner* [emphasis added]. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is *Faith* [emphasis added]."¹³ At the conclusion of the eucharist the so-called 'Black Rubric' quotes the Article in explaining the Anglican practice of kneeling for communion.

Whereas it is ordained in this office for the Administration of the Lord's Supper, that the Communicants should receive the same kneeling; (which order is well meant, for a signification of our humble and grateful

⁹ The Book of Common Prayer 1962, 551.

¹⁰ The Book of Common Prayer 1962, 552.

¹¹ The Book of Alternative Services 1985, 184.

¹² The Book of Alternative Services 1985, 184.

¹³ The Book of Common Prayer 1962, 710.

*acknowledgement of the benefits of Christ therein given to all worthy receivers, and for the avoiding of such profanation and disorder in the holy Communion, as might otherwise ensue;) It is here declared, that thereby no Adoration is intended, or ought to be done, either unto the Sacramental Bread or Wine there bodily received, or unto any Corporal Presence of Christ's natural Flesh and Blood [emphasis added]. The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.*¹⁴

Later in the Prayer Book the rites for ministry with the sick address the question of the communicant status of a person who, for one reason or another, is unable to receive communion.

*But if a man, either by reason of extremity of sickness, or for want of warning in due time to the Curate, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood: he shall be instructed that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefor; he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.*¹⁵

To be sure these texts presume that the normative practice of the Church is the consumption of the consecrated bread and wine as what it means to participate in the eucharist. However, they also express a degree of faithful caution in too close an association between the physical elements and communion with God in and through Christ. It also begs a question: What is 'any other just impediment'?

Here, I think, we face an area that requires deeper theological reflection by the church on how the use of digital and social media can be a means by which God works in the world: the operation of the Holy Spirit in and through the sacraments. Throughout the millennia the Church has struggled to understand the work of the Spirit. Historians of the creeds will acknowledge that any credal statement on the Spirit tends to be short and developed later than the articles on the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. We believe in the Holy Spirit, but we are less articulate in our understanding how the Spirit works.

¹⁴ The Book of Common Prayer 1962, 92.

¹⁵ The Book of Common Prayer 1962, 584.

At this time we are in the midst of a shared theological exploration of how the Spirit works in the worship of the Church. As we work through this communal act of theological reflection, we might do well to adopt the attitude of Gamaliel.

*But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"*¹⁶

This does not deny the holiness of the material nor the normative practice of gathering together in one place to share in the bread broken and the wine poured. It is to acknowledge that the Spirit works in mysterious ways to unite the disciples of Christ in one Body across time and space.

Is ‘virtual’ or ‘online’ worship historical?

The final checkpoint is the historical norm: “The historical norm is that we cannot make decisions independently from the worship experiences of millions of Christians around the world over the course of twenty centuries.”¹⁷

*Knowledge of history can set us free from our own cultural captivity so we can glimpse or invent other possibilities that might prove most meaningful in our circumstances. Without such knowledge, we are captive to the familiar.... History helps us to discern what is essential so we can expend our efforts where they are most fruitful.*¹⁸

Here we must wrestle with the reality that the use of digital and social media is a relatively new phenomenon in the experience of the Christian communities. Even those responsible for the creation of our current liturgical resources in the Anglican Church of Canada, produced within the

¹⁶ Acts 5:34-39 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹⁷ White 2001, 143.

¹⁸ White 2001, 144.

last forty years, did not envision a situation in which, by entering a few words into an online search engine, one might gain access to a treasury of good and bad liturgical texts and rites.

What liturgical history teaches us is that the Christian community responds to social and cultural contexts by adopting, adapting and creating liturgical rites, texts and practices that seem at those times and in those places to be faithful pastoral and theological responses. Scrolls were replaced by codices. Manuscripts were replaced by printed books. The use of the vernacular in worship was replaced by hieratic languages in some places such as Latin or Slavonic and, in subsequent centuries, replaced by the vernacular again in both Western and Eastern Christian traditions. Leavened bread, the normative practice in East and West for centuries, became unleavened in the West. Baptism by immersion for all candidates became pouring or sprinkling in some traditions. The list of such adoptions, adaptations and creations will fill many bookshelves and digital storage devices.

What liturgical history also teaches us is that when a tradition of worship engages its culture, the community relates to that culture in four ways: transculturally, contextually, counter-culturally and cross-culturally.¹⁹

- Worship is transcultural, the same substance for everyone everywhere.
- Worship is contextual, varying according to the local situation, both nature and culture.
- Worship is counter-cultural, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture.
- Worship is cross-cultural, making possible sharing between different local cultures.²⁰

When Christian churches were established in the Southern Hemisphere, they did not stop celebrating Christmas and Easter (transcultural), but they did begin to develop liturgical texts that related these events in the liturgical calendar with the natural environment (contextual). When Gentile Christian communities emerged in the first and second centuries ce, they adopted Hebrew phrases and words such as ‘hosanna’ and ‘amen’ into their own rites (cross-cultural). When civil governments and social customs

¹⁹ http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Can_We_Talk_Engaging_Worship_and_Culture.pdf accessed on 16 September 2020. See also www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/Liturgical-Principles-and-Agenda.pdf.

²⁰ The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture 1996, 1.3.

tolerated or encouraged racial and gender segregation in worship, congregations and dioceses refused to comply (counter-cultural).

Our task in the current climate and for the years ahead is to engage the digital Christian culture in these four ways.

- How do we ensure that Anglican digital worship provides the same substance for all worshippers regardless of how they participate?
- How do we take into account the differing contexts where Anglicans worship?
- How can Anglican digital worship challenge internet culture with the demands of the Gospel?²¹
- How can Anglican digital worship facilitate sharing between different cultures wherever and however they are ‘present’?

This is a proactive response to a phenomenon that will not disappear, even after vaccines become available and communities are able to engage in more on-site activity.

Virtual online worship is *real* and *personal*

Almost forty years of ordained ministry have taught me many things. One thing I have learned is to distrust ‘either/or’ responses to the challenges faced by the Church in these or any other times. Online worship is here to stay and our current task is to develop ways that build community between our online worshippers and our on-site worshippers. We need to reduce the barriers and create relationships. We need to avoid disparaging online participation as something less than on-site. It is different, but different does not necessarily mean less authentically Christian and personal.

Online worship is real. Online worship is personal. Online worship is a way that people can be nurtured into genuine Christian discipleship. There are still questions that I have regarding the physical elements of Christian worship: water and oil, bread and wine, touch and proximity. But I am committed to exploring these not simply ruling them out of bounds for discussion. Why? Because I want the Church to continue to become *real*. Why? Because I think all disciples of Jesus, regardless of how they participate in worship, want to become *real*. So let’s work on making that happen, trusting in the Spirit who moves among us in many and mysterious ways bringing God’s purposes to fulfilment.

²¹ See Nona Jones, *From Social Media to Social Media: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Zondervan, 2020).