

The presence of God in all things

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It is a pleasure to be invited as an ecumenical partner to reflect on questions of worship and sacraments with a long-time denominational partner. As a past co-chair of the Anglican Church-United Church Dialogue, we spent many days and nights together investigating, discussing and reflecting on issues of ordination, sacraments and liturgy. I think it's fair to say that this kind of dialogue often reveals to us as much about our own denomination as it does about our partners. I continue to learn about, and consider the assumptions inherent within, my own church's theology of worship as a result of those fruitful experiences.

In reading the documents concerning *Eucharistic Practice and Sacramental Theology in a Time of Pandemic*, there were a number of questions which persisted for me, which I would broadly characterize as questions of practical theology, and which I have tried to represent here. These are all questions which remain active in United Church circles, as well, though the responses of clergy and congregations to the question of how to worship and celebrate sacraments remotely have varied.

My personal interest in asking these questions is as one of two ordained ministers in a team ministry, in a suburban, multi-generational congregation near Moncton, New Brunswick, where I've been for nine years. I have also been teaching liturgy, theology and pastoral studies at Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax, NS), primarily online, for the past ten years. In short, I believe these questions are very important, and I will be interested to see what results from the Anglican Church's discussion of them.

What is our understanding of God's sovereignty?

Our celebration of the sacraments, like our reading of scripture, has always been asynchronous. For example, we describe the Eucharist as *anamnetic*: not simply a memorial of an historical moment, but an enactment

of it which gathers all other enactments of it together, across time and space. We, gathered with the saints, *participate* in and are transformed by the Eucharist, not simply because of our celebration of it, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit who is with us at all times and in all places.

If it is the Holy Spirit who is operative within the Eucharist – who gathers, blesses and transforms us – then, as a colleague and friend said to me, “Who are we to say that God cannot do a good thing” through a remote/asynchronous sacrament?

I would amplify this question by breaking it into two related questions. First, can God make use of the gifts of grace, to our transformation, when they are shared remotely/asynchronously? Second, if the consecrated elements convey reverence for the material world which God has created and blessed, can gaps in time or space (which God has also created and blessed) deconsecrate them?

I know how these would be answered by most United Church theologians, but I offer them here without presuming to know – and without any judgment concerning – what the answers would/should be for our sister church.

What constitutes a rightly administered sacrament?

In the United Church, while there are some who believe that an ontological change occurs at ordination, it is not clear that this is a widely held belief. It is widely agreed, however, that while only those who are ordained or specially licensed can administer the sacraments, their authority to do so is not theirs, but rests with the body that serves the function of *episcopate* (which in the United Church is now the Region).

In addition to *administering* the sacraments, the ordained or licensed minister is also called to *instruct* the faithful about the sacraments through Word and Pastoral Care. So, the sacraments are rightly and duly administered not only at the table, but also in teaching, which occurs through preaching, faith formation and congregational life. This notion of what is sacramental is focused at the table, but also includes other moments in the life of faith which contribute to the sacrament’s transformational power.

In relation to online sacraments, then, I find I am less concerned about whether a remote/asynchronous sacrament is still valid and more concerned about whether the one who presides at a remote sacrament is still able to teach and to shape the community’s understanding of the sacraments in an online environment.

What does it mean to be gathered online?

This leads me to the question of whether we are truly gathered – as a congregation and with the presider/priest – if we are not physically present

with each other. The online environment is not what most of us are used to, and we can't be certain about how engaged the congregation is in worship if they can fast forward, turn off the video or mute the audio at will. I tend to think that people can be distracted in person, as well, and that physical presence offers no guarantee of constant engagement.

Despite physical remoteness, online worship still calls on us to deeply listen, to respond with grace and love, to connect with and pray for each other. We are still able to pray, sing, hear the Word proclaimed, approach God in humility and seek reconciliation, and to hear God's promise of the restoration of all things. We have also had to trust that God is present in our worship despite the absence of our traditions and our absence from familiar places of worship. Of necessity, online worship (and ministry) focuses our energy on being present *to* each other, even when we can't be present *with* each other.

To what is the Holy Spirit inviting us?

I believe that the Holy Spirit is inviting us and equipping us to broaden how we participate in God's mission. Having been almost forcibly migrated to worship online, we've had to innovate and find different ways of being a community. For people who were already physically or socially isolated, or who had significant health concerns or barriers to access to church buildings, virtual worship has been a welcome way to engage in the life of faith and, in some cases, is preferable to returning to the church building. Not only are we discovering how to reach out and to serve groups within the congregation who had previously been underserved, marginalized or forgotten, we are also reaching people who had not formerly been connected to our congregations.

I don't believe, nor would I advocate for the position, that the physical church will disappear. I would certainly mourn the loss of hope, comfort and invitation to a deeper faith experience that being together to worship in one place brings to so many. Especially for those raised in the church, the experience of worship online is still dependent upon – still *refers* to – our experience of worship in person. The virtual experience has not yet – and may never – replace the in-person experience.

Yet, I also have great concern for the financial and human resources being devoted to “getting back into” our buildings. I do appreciate the very natural and healthy desire to be with each other, and the deleterious effects of isolation, particularly for those who live alone. I believe that it is a well-intentioned and pastoral concern for people that has led most churches, following the initial shock and grief of isolation, to focus their attention on how and when to return to our church buildings for worship.

Our understanding of worship can, at times, be too deeply rooted in our buildings; and this can encumber our discernment of how we are being called into God's promised future. This time of isolation, which we initially saw as a time of restriction, has also been a time of experimentation. Churches will need to continue to explore online worship/ministry not simply as a delivery method, but as an opportunity to explore how we participate in God's mission.