

Discerning the Body: Reflections on worshipping on Zoom

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On March 18, 2020, an episcopal directive to cease in-person worship was issued in the Diocese of Kootenay and St. Andrew's moved the worship of our two congregations online. For the first few weeks, our Sunday congregation visited the pre-recorded services of some of our Anglican Communion's greatest cathedrals. We then moved to worship on Zoom. This brief reflection paper offers a summary of the lived experience and learnings of our Sunday morning and Messy Church congregations thus far.

The choice to use Zoom as the online platform for worship was both theological and practical. The novelty of visiting Cathedrals quickly wore off and many Sunday congregants expressed the oddity of being liturgical observers, while some, including the Incumbent, named the further theological and liturgical oddity of being Eucharistic observers. The Eucharist is not a performance rather it is a communal action. Our Messy Church congregation needed a participatory platform with which families would already be familiar. Zoom was well known to anyone in the school system and was the most participatory platform that could be run well and easily with the technological resources already at hand in the parish. Our weekly, Sunday Eucharist became Morning Prayer in which the Prayers of the People became a time of free, extemporaneous prayer, and, with the sermon sent out by email before hand, the sermon time became communal discussion on the readings. Our monthly Messy Church Eucharist service became a bi-weekly liturgy of the word through story telling, song, and a simple craft that families could do with what was on hand during quarantine (imagine Holy Week in Lego!).

For the first time, our Sunday congregation can see each other's faces as they worship. There is even a glimpse inside each other's homes. To watch each other's faces while praying is making worship a much more

vulnerable and intimate experience than it ever was in our church building. As one parishioner Kenneth describes it, “Despite the fact that we are not physically present with one another, in some ways we experience one another much more physically than we did before.” Anglicans from the UK, the Yukon, Nova Scotia, Ontario and other places in the BC interior Zoom in to worship with us weekly delighting us and expanding our understanding of church. Creating both the liturgical space for, and the expectation of participation in, extemporaneous prayer and scripture discussion is changing how we see liturgy. As another parishioner Alida said: “I am struck by the courage of our parish to assemble in such new ways ...and that if liturgy is indeed the work of the assembly...we are asked to be ready [for that work], not just to show up.” And another parishioner Terry explained: “The Zoom format removes any comfortable passivity I remembered from ‘real’ church” and asks us to recall the “importance of being part of a Christian community and the responsibility it brings.”

Something similar is happening in our Messy Church Community. In the Messy Church model, the activities, crafts, liturgy and dinner are all prepared and provided by the Sunday community. We had seen small signs of Messy Church beginning to take ownership of its communal life but we were struggling to encourage this within the traditional Messy Church model. Once on Zoom, families took turns providing the music, each family was responsible for their own craft and a snack, and by the end of the summer, the community was able to design a pattern of Zoom worship to respond to a call from rural churches needing help with their children’s ministry during COVID-19. All of a sudden, (Messy) Church is bigger than St. Andrew’s and rather than being just consumers of liturgy and community, there is now a new mission forming in providing those things for others. Heading into this fall, Messy Church will meet bi-weekly with one Zoom Bible lesson and craft with families from other churches (paired in ‘buddy-families’ to support each other over the kilometers) and then once for a COVID-safe, outdoor event with local families to get the kids moving. Our families who do not have an Anglican background have been most anxious to return to the Eucharist, offering creative suggestions: “Can’t we just consecrate a small bottle of wine and then pour it out for each family pod from there? We can even bring our own cups!” These families have been ready to engage the theological reasons of why we do what we do at the Eucharist inviting them even further into the Anglican tradition.

We miss the Eucharist acutely – it has been 24 weeks and counting- yet this time has drawn us into a discernment of the body of Christ which we would not have entered with such experiential clarity otherwise. We are

being challenged to mature in our lives as disciples and take responsibility for our communal worship. As our understanding of worship, and our responsibility within it and for it, renews so does our understanding of ourselves. We are, as Paul wrote, ‘discerning the body’ (1 Cor 11:29). Biblical scholars and theologians have debated the meaning of the word ‘body’ in this passage for years asking whether Paul is saying an essential part of the Lord’s supper is knowing the gathered church as the body of Christ or an essential part is discerning Christ’s Body in bread and wine. The Rev. Pam Wilson, St. Andrew’s locally trained priest, shared during one Zoom service that, “it feels like the living bread Jesus promises has become each other”. We are being drawn into the Eucharistic mystery even in its absence. When we return to the Table, we pray that this time of discerning the Living Bread abiding in community will enable us to eat of that Bread with deeper joy and understanding.

All of this learning is happening in the context of St. Andrew’s Vision distilling work. The Team tasked with discerning where God is calling us for the next three years worked faithfully through COVID-19 on Zoom as well. The Team distilled a call to: ‘Celebrate, Cultivate and Connect, grounded and growing in Christ’. Celebrate our Anglican tradition, cultivate each one us as disciples and leaders, connect in relationship across generations with our wider community. The Team set up a visual, guided tour of the distilling process in the church and the congregation was invited in very small, COVID-safe groups, to come back “not to the way things were but to the heart of who we are”. The return to the heart of who we are and the return to our building (but not to worship) has been deeply moving for many both in the hope it proclaims and also in the loss it highlights. Tears have been shed before the altar we cannot yet gather around. It has been very difficult to remain in the rhythm of the liturgical year through these months and we have struggled in the absence of this formative and familiar steward of our seasons.

Morning Prayer on Zoom has drawn us more quickly than we could have asked or imagined into mission priority of cultivating discipleship and leadership. Our next question is to ask what elements of Zoom worship we bring with us when we do return to in-person worship. The absence of the Eucharist has drawn us into a richer understanding of ourselves as the body of Christ and enabled us to feast more deeply on the living Word in scripture. Our next question is how to intentionally integrate these learnings with our (eventual) return to the Table. Changing the way we do everything has given us the gift of returning to the unchanging heart of who we are in Christ. Through both loss and hope we are deeply grateful for the work of the Spirit among us: *Deo gratias!*