

TICIF 5 ONLINE COMMUNION

Origin: Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee

The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee proposes that the Executive of General Council:

Receive the report of the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee on Online Communion and commend it to the church.

Report - Online Communion

The General Secretary and Executive of General Council asked the Theology and InterChurch InterFaith Committee to provide advice on the following questions:

Is the celebration of communion to an extended online community theologically appropriate? What circumstances would allow communion to be appropriately celebrated through virtual connections or community?

This question was raised through the decision to reconvene the 41st General Council in an online meeting, and to begin the meeting as required by the Manual with the celebration of communion. Was this appropriate and should it be repeated with the 42nd General Council?

There is however a related question about changing forms of congregational life: What forms and expressions of online community are acceptable to United Church polity? And what means of blessing and consecrating elements are appropriate to welcome the participation of people in new virtual expressions of community life?

In summary, the Theology and InterChurch InterFaith Committee offers the following response:

In United Church polity, the Session (or its equivalent) has final authority for the worship life of the congregation. There are however limitations. For example the Session is not free to change the baptismal formula. The Theology and InterChurch InterFaith committee believes that authorizing the practice of online communion does fall within the authority of the local church session or its equivalent. The implications of online communion, for example, are not so critically significant to ecumenical relationships nor to the integrity of worship within the United Church that the authority of the session in this matter can be limited.

Therefore the advice of the Theology and InterChurch InterFaith Committee is that the final decision on the practice of online communion rests with the Session or its equivalent.

However, the Theology and InterChurch InterFaith Committee believes that it would be appropriate to offer guidance to the church concerning the practice of online communion and by implication the practice of communion during meetings of the General Council.

The United Methodist Church (USA) has done extensive work on the issue of online communion and published a series of papers following a major consultation.¹ Their papers and summary documents can assist congregations in understanding the issues involved in considering whether to approve online communion. United Methodist policy currently calls for a moratorium on the practice of online communion and is based on the following key points:

- Historically, the Church has understood a service of Holy Communion to be a celebration within a physically gathered community. The emergence of interactive digital media raises new questions about the meaning of gathered community and requires further thinking about our beliefs and practices.
- We affirm the church's exploration and use of interactive digital media in the fulfillment of its mission.
- Participation in the Lord's Supper entails the actual tactile sharing of bread and wine in a service that involves people corporeally together in the same place.
- For the sake of the unity in the Body of Christ, the establishment of unprecedented sacramental-like practices (such as online communion) should be worked through in conversation with ecumenical partners, and especially with those partners with whom we already have covenants.

The collected papers of the consultation provide some compelling arguments against online communion practices. For example:

- Communion as "remembrance" of the self-giving of Jesus reflects God's incarnational action. The incarnation is symbolized in bread and wine and words ("this is my body") and in the gathered community.
- Communion is not primarily about "consuming" but about "sharing." Online communion overemphasizes the consuming of the elements and fails, especially in solitary communion, to lift up the sharing aspect of the celebration.
- Communion is God's gift to the gathered community. It is based in a communal ethic rather than an individualistic ethic. Its purpose is to "build up the church in love" so that it might be a witness to the world of genuine community. A fundamental characteristic of the communion meal is that the elements are received, i.e. not taken. Communion is fundamentally about sharing a meal. The communal aspect is not incidental.
- The use of "sacramental elders" and the Methodist practice of circuit riders offer an alternative. (They also provide a Protestant option to the Roman Catholic tradition of "reserved sacrament.") The history of once of month communion (or quarterly) in part came from the tradition of circuit riders who visited communities periodically to conduct

¹ These materials can be found at: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-united-methodist-view-of-communion>

the sacraments. Would it not be better to choose a path which emphasized personal contact and sharing?

- The global consensus on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM 1982) is significant. It is important to commit to ecumenical accountability in these foundational characteristics of the universal church. The forms of celebration of the Lord's Supper need to pay attention to the larger ecumenical consensus.

The Theology and InterChurch InterFaith Committee explored these arguments in depth. They also noted other arguments that support online communion.²

The Presbyterian Church in Canada for example, has considered online communion and through its Committee on Church Doctrine offered guidelines for its conduct. In particular the report suggests that:

- Virtual communion should always be built on the foundation of pre-established face to face relationships.
- At least one ordained elder (member of session or elder) normally needs to be present recognizing that some exceptions might apply.
- Communion should be part of a service of the word and part of public worship.
- Use of media needs to be carefully considered (e.g. are the elements clearly visible?)

Their conclusion; "it is the opinion of the Committee on Church Doctrine that such a celebration of communion via various communication media is proper within the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In exploring arguments in support of online communion, the Theology and InterChurch InterFaith Committee affirmed the following insights:

- Experiments in online communion give priority to the mission of the church over and above established practice. This option for mission is grounded in the Methodist experience but it also has roots in our other predecessor bodies.
- The ethos and the polity of the United Church give freedom for worship and encouragement for liturgical innovation.
- The church needs to offer opportunities for nurturing faith in new ways for those not willing or able to enter a church building or a traditional worshipping community. With care and caution, as will be noted below, the Committee feels that experiments in ministry and mission using online worship and communion are appropriate, in our time and context.

² <http://www.umcmedia.org/umcorg/2013/communion/offer-them-christ-celebrating-the-eucharist-online-langford.pdf>

The Committee believes that communion is fundamentally a remembrance of the incarnational action of God in the life of Jesus and is meant to be celebrated in the gathered community. As such, its practice must be directed towards strengthening and gathering the community of faith. In other words, online communion should not be seen solely as a personal spiritual experience. While receiving communion online can invite people into deeper experiences of the divine, this experience should be directed towards fuller participation in the life of the community of faith. The Committee believes, in consensus with the Methodist consultation, that a fundamental characteristic of the communion meal is that the elements are received, not taken. This means that whenever possible online communion experiences take place with others physically present. The intention is that the elements are not “taken” but are offered. The Committee recognizes that there must be exceptions to this, in the case of remote or isolated individuals or in experiments in mission outreach.

An example of this would be the situation of elderly shut-ins. It would be preferable for such individuals who wished to watch the communion service of their church online and participate, to be accompanied by a member of the church. The member would be with them, and would serve (and be served, if possible) the elements. If this is not possible however, then the desire for participation in communion should take priority.

Online communion for members of the community unable to be present for communion (perhaps due to illness or travel) can also provide a sense of deep ongoing connection with the community. In this situation again the committee believes that participating with another Christian is always preferable. However priority should be given to the desire to experience and maintain communion with the community of faith.

In respect to the actions of the General Council, in reconvening the Council with the celebration of communion, the Committee believes that the same principles apply. It notes that the *Manual* is clear that General Council be convened in a service of worship and communion that is public and open to all. Therefore, if the General Council is convened online in between full sessions, care should be taken that the opening worship be as broadly accessible as possible within the church. An option for this would be to invite all congregations to gather and participate with the members of the Council in the online worship and communion.

Whenever possible, members of the Council should gather in clusters for the celebration of communion, rather than join in isolation. Again, the exceptions of remote or significant challenges in gathering should not prevent an individual from participating.

The Committee welcomes the exploration of new forms of online sharing of worship between congregations. In particular it provides an opportunity to share the gifts of leadership between congregations with differing ministry resources. Whenever possible, the committee believes, the online sharing of communion between gathered communities should be accompanied, in the remote congregation, by a sacrament elder. For example, the fraction and distribution of the elements in the main site of worship should be accompanied with similar action by a sacrament elder in the remote site. If a sacrament elder is not appointed or present the action should be undertaken by a session member or, failing that, someone acting on behalf of the gathered group.

Care should also be taken in the positioning of cameras to ensure that the communion elements remain clearly visible.

Finally, the Committee notes the long practice of the Methodist roots of the church in what were once called circuit riders. The intention was to ensure that small and remote communities had access to periodic services and the sacraments. Online forms of ministry, the Committee believes are new expression of this old pattern. However, some expressions of the older patterns are important to preserve, in particular the emphasis on personal contact and sharing. Online initiatives, in other words, should be accompanied by renewed efforts of exploring how personal presence and sharing can accompany and support all experience of online communion.