

37. Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media

Contact Name and Details	The Revd Nicola Price-Tebbutt Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee price-tebbutt@methodistchurch.org.uk
Status of Paper	Final
Resolution	37/1. The Conference receives the report as an interim report and directed that the further work be undertaken (including the involvement of those set out in the original response to the M13 (2011), young people involved with 3Generate, CODEC and others with broad, in- depth expertise in this fast developing area) and that a fuller report be presented to the Conference no later than 2018.

Summary of Content and Impact

Subject and Aims	To reflect on the issues regarding the suggested practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the internet or videoconferencing.
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of the Church, celebrated corporately by the people of God with an authorised president, and the physical gathering of Christians (normally around the Lord’s table) is an essential feature of its corporate celebration. • Presiding at the Lord’s Supper is a distinctive role that involves, among other things, specific sign-actions. When one or more of these sign-actions is performed separately at a location physically remote from the gathering of the people of God then the integrity of presiding at the Lord’s Supper, and hence the integrity of the sacrament, is compromised. • The communion bread and wine symbolically represent the body and blood of Christ, and also symbolically represent the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ. This symbolic representation fails in the case of separate quantities of bread and wine, as when groups or individuals at a location physically remote from the celebration of the Lord’s Supper use their own elements. • It is not possible theologically to recognise ‘remote communion’ (as described in the Memorial) as being truly the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as this has been received in the Methodist Church. For the Conference to permit such practice by Methodist presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the Lord’s Supper would compromise the integrity of the sacrament.
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	Memorial 13 (2011) (see Appendix) The Deed of Union (1932) The Methodist Worship Book (1999) Called to Love and Praise (1999) – Conference Statement His Presence Makes the Feast (2003) – Conference report
Consultations	Ecumenical partners.

37. Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media

Introduction

1. This report of the Faith and Order Committee offers a formal response to Memorial 13 to the 2011 Conference from the South-East District Synod requesting the Conference “to instruct the Faith and Order Committee to form a policy regarding the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the Internet or video-conferencing”. The Memorial envisaged a “form of remote communion” in which “a minister in one location would be permitted to preside over a celebration of Holy Communion with a gathered group of fellowshipping believers consisting of groups or individuals residing in disparate locations who provide their own elements to be blessed by the person presiding”. The Memorial asked whether such a form of Holy Communion would be “acceptable” within Methodist discipline and practice. (See the Appendix for the text of the Memorial together with the reply of the Conference.)
2. This report does not assess the merits of using electronic means of communication, such as the internet or videoconferencing, for the general purposes of Christian worship, education and mission. It is taken for granted that electronic means of communication provide an effective way of participating to varying degrees in all of these activities. Likewise, it is taken for granted that the use of electronic means of communication in Christian worship, education and mission will create ‘online’ or ‘virtual’ communities, though the precise nature and ecclesial status of such communities must await future treatment. The question addressed in this report is whether the Methodist Church might recognise the kind of ‘remote communion’ envisaged in the Memorial to be truly the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper since this will determine whether or not it is ‘acceptable’ within Methodist discipline and practice.
3. As in all matters relating to the faith and order of the Methodist Church, the primary authoritative source for addressing this question is Scripture as interpreted by tradition in the light of applied reason and affirmed by Christian experience. Therefore the theological method followed in this report starts with Scripture and the received tradition in order to discern the essential features of the Lord’s Supper. Only then will it be possible to determine theologically whether ‘remote communion’ is compatible with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as this is understood and celebrated in the Methodist Church.
4. Constraints of space preclude an exhaustive study of all relevant aspects. In particular, it is not possible here to articulate a theology of information and communications technology or even to consider what is now technically possible in relation to the use of such in Christian worship, education and mission – fascinating as this would be. It is taken for granted that technological developments have always influenced forms of Christian worship, education and mission, and doubtless will continue to do so. Nevertheless, the paragraphs that follow make the key points on which the Faith and Order Committee bases its recommendations to the Conference concerning the use of electronic means of communication in relation to participation in the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.
5. Whereas the historic and foundational documents of British Methodism classically refer to the ‘Lord’s Supper’, the *Methodist Worship Book* (1999) refers to services of ‘Holy Communion’ in which the Lord’s Supper forms a particular part. In ecumenical texts, the term ‘Eucharist’ is generally employed. Following the example of the Deed of Union (1932) and the annual *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, this present report adopts the term ‘Lord’s Supper’ in order to emphasise that there is a received tradition within British Methodism concerning the sacraments of the Church.

The Lord's Supper in the New Testament

6. The earliest references in the New Testament to the Lord's Supper are found in St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written several years before the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper. Two short passages, in particular, are useful in understanding the nature of the Lord's Supper:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

7. The Gospel accounts of the Last Supper before Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified, similarly associate Jesus' actions with the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. For example,

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.' (Matthew 26:26-29; cf Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20)

8. These and parallel passages of Scripture provide an early and remarkably consistent witness to the words and sign-actions of Jesus, which constitute the essential features of the Lord's Supper. (The term 'sign-action' is used throughout this report to denote the fact that Jesus' actions at the Last Supper signify the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection.) The setting and context of Jesus' words and sign-actions (in relation to the Passover meal, the gathering of the Twelve, table fellowship, etc) are also significant in understanding the Lord's Supper, though only a few aspects will be discussed here.
9. Jesus' commandment, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24) is a constant reminder that the Church celebrates the Lord's Supper in accordance with the divine will. In this regard, St Paul's account of the Lord's Supper is instructive – not merely as a description of a common practice in the churches of the New Testament but as a formal tradition (*paradosis*) which he had received (ie had been taught) and was bringing to the attention of the church in Corinth once again because of their failure to 'discern the body':

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

10. These and related Scripture passages provide the primary source for theological reflection on the Lord's Supper. For the purposes of this present report, however, it is necessary only to note the key implications of the narrative and sign-actions that together constitute the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is not simply about eating bread and drinking wine as some kind of memorial of Jesus: it is about 'sharing' in 'one bread' and 'the cup of blessing' in a certain way, according to Christ's own example at the Last Supper. Participation in the Lord's Supper today equally requires discernment of 'the body'.

11. Jesus' sign-actions in relation to the bread at the Last Supper correspondingly give rise to a fourfold action at the Lord's Supper: when at table with the Twelve, Jesus took bread, gave thanks or a blessing, broke it, and gave it to each of them with accompanying words that declare the significance of the action. Likewise, Jesus' sign-actions in relation to the wine at the Last Supper correspondingly give rise to a threefold action at the Lord's Supper: afterwards, Jesus took a cup of wine, gave thanks and gave it to each of them with accompanying words that declare the significance of the action.

The Lord's Supper as a Sacrament of the Church

12. The Methodist Church has received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper from the apostolic tradition as transmitted in the particular circumstances created by its historical, theological and liturgical origins in the Church of England during the eighteenth century. The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church, though reticent about endorsing any particular theology of the sacrament, seek to preserve the integrity of the Lord's Supper as it has been received.
13. "The Methodist Church [in Britain] recognises two sacraments namely baptism and the Lord's Supper as of divine appointment and perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves" (Deed of Union, §4). In claiming and cherishing its place in the Holy Catholic Church, the Methodist Church in Britain has a responsibility to ensure that the Lord's Supper is 'duly administered' (to use the classical Protestant expression) according to what the Deed of Union calls "the inheritance of the apostolic faith" as interpreted by the "fundamental principles of the historic creeds and the Protestant Reformation" (§4). For this reason, the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Methodist Church is regulated by the Conference insofar as its essential features are concerned (see below). Local custom concerning the manner of receiving the elements has its proper place in the Lord's Supper, provided that the resulting diversity does not compromise the integrity of the sacrament.
14. Since the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the universal Church, the Methodist Church does not claim the right to alter its essential features. On the rare occasions when it has introduced significant changes (such as the admission of children), the Conference has sought to remain faithful to its received tradition. Historically, the Lord's Supper has been a focus for disunity among Christians as a result of theological disagreement about the nature of the Church, its ministry and sacraments. Yet theological dialogue in recent years, notably in the World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order Commission, has established a significant degree of ecumenical convergence in understanding the Lord's Supper. Since the Conference is committed to the pursuit of visible unity among Christians, innovation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Methodist Church at the present juncture should only be considered for the gravest of reasons and in consultation with ecumenical partners. In particular, having entered into an Anglican-Methodist Covenant, the Methodist Church is bound not to introduce sacramental practices that would create a further obstacle to visible unity.
15. As a sacrament of the Church, the Lord's Supper is essentially a corporate act of the Church, locally and universally. As a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), the entire assembly actively participates in celebrating the Lord's Supper with an authorised president. Whilst participating in the Lord's Supper is a deeply meaningful personal event, the corporate nature of the sacrament means that the spiritual experience is not solely between the individual and God (still less is it simply between the individual and the person presiding) but involves the entire assembly. The term 'Holy Communion' aptly expresses the relational aspect of the Lord's Supper. The corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper by the people of God leads to a deepening experience of 'communion' (*koinonia* in the Greek New Testament) with God and with one another. As a means of grace, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper leads to the corporate and

personal transformation of the gathered people through growth in grace.

16. The Church, as the body of Christ, is most fully and visibly itself in the corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper, which signifies communion with God and among all the members of the body. *As Called to Love and Praise: the Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (1999) explains, "In this typical act of Christian worship the Eucharist strengthens, and, in a sense, makes the Church" (§2.4.8).

The Lord's Supper in Methodist Tradition and Experience

17. *A Catechism for the Use of the People called Methodists* (2000) neatly outlines the Methodist understanding of the Lord's Supper without attempting to articulate a detailed theology:

In the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ is present with his worshipping people and gives himself to them as their Lord and Saviour. As they eat the bread and drink the wine, through the power of the Holy Spirit they receive him by faith and with thanksgiving. They give thanks with the whole Church for Christ's sacrifice of himself once and for all on the cross. The Lord's Supper recalls Christ's Last Supper with the disciples. It proclaims Christ's passion, death and resurrection, unites the participants with him so that they are a living sacrifice in him, and gives them a foretaste of his heavenly banquet (§49).

18. In 2003, the Conference received *His Presence Makes the Feast*, which was a significant Faith and Order report on "Holy Communion in the Methodist Church". *His Presence Makes the Feast* articulates nine key themes that must feature in a comprehensive theology of Holy Communion. Briefly, these themes draw attention to the Lord's Supper as: an act of thanksgiving; an act of fellowship and unity; an act of remembrance, making present the saving power of Christ's death; a pleading of Christ's completed and eternal sacrifice, in which the participants offer themselves anew to the Father through the Son; a participation in the mystery of Christ's dynamic presence; an invocation of the Holy Spirit, who alone can make the benefits of the sacrament effective; a foretaste of the heavenly banquet; an invitation to a eucharistic lifestyle involving mission and justice; and a place of nourishment for the pilgrim, who receives the bread of life for the Christian journey (§§147-194).
19. *His Presence Makes the Feast* observed that Methodist doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper "has received little official formulation and remains an undefined (or under-defined) tradition" (§6). Instead, "the theology is implicit in the liturgies, hymns, and the practical arrangements for Holy Communion" (§6). Certainly, the received Methodist tradition concerning the Lord's Supper is under-defined, though Methodist doctrine on the subject is not wholly lacking in definition since, as noted above, the Deed of Union says some quite important things about sacraments. Nevertheless, it remains true to say that the authorised liturgies and hymnody, as well as the "practical arrangements for Holy Communion", are an important source for understanding the Lord's Supper in Methodism.
20. These "practical arrangements" are particularly useful for the purposes of the present report. To ensure that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is 'duly administered' in the Methodist Church, the Conference regulates its celebration in important ways. Most obviously, presidency at the Lord's Supper is exercised by ordained presbyters and other named persons authorised by the Conference. The Conference provides authorised liturgies in the *Methodist Worship Book* (MWB) (1999), as well as "Guidance for Ordering a Service of Holy Communion" (MWB, p. 221f). The Introduction to the "Orders of Service for Holy Communion" (MWB, p. 114f) and the Guidance are intended to safeguard the integrity of the Lord's Supper.
21. The Introduction explains that "The shape of the Lord's Supper follows the record in scripture of Jesus' characteristic sharing with his disciples, especially after the final meal on the night before

the crucifixion.” A service of Holy Communion comprises three elements: “The Gathering of the People of God”; “The Ministry of the Word”; and “The Lord’s Supper”. Significantly, the Guidance envisages this same structure in every service of Holy Communion.

22. According to the explanatory Notes (*MWB*, p. 115f), “The presiding minister [a presbyter or other authorised person] should begin and end the service.” Moreover, “She/he should also greet the people at the Peace and preside over the fourfold Eucharistic action by taking the bread and wine, leading the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, breaking the bread, and presiding over the sharing of the bread and wine.”
23. The Notes also regulate the use of bread and wine: “The juice of the grape shall be used.” Unless bread and wine are to be “set apart” for the purpose of “Extended Communion” (*MWB*, pp. 229-34), “What remains of the elements should be reverently consumed, or otherwise reverently disposed of, at the end of the service.” Additionally, Standing Order 922(2) specifies that “In the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper the wine used shall be non-alcoholic.”

Safeguarding the Integrity of the Lord’s Supper

24. This brief survey of the Lord’s Supper in Scripture and in Methodist tradition and experience reveals certain essential features that safeguard its integrity as a sacrament of the Church. For convenience, these can be grouped into three categories: the gathering of the people of God; presiding at the Lord’s Supper; and the body and blood of Christ. These three categories provide appropriate headings under which to consider whether ‘remote communion’ fulfils the criteria to be recognised as a true celebration of the Lord’s Supper.
25. It should be acknowledged that the way in which Methodists and others ordinarily celebrate the Lord’s Supper may not always or even consistently manifest its essential features as conspicuously and unambiguously as ideally would be desired. The use of communion wafers instead of bread, unfermented wine instead of fermented wine, and individual communion cups instead of the common cup can each be said to constitute an impaired representation of what it is supposed to signify. However, the integrity of the Lord’s Supper is not necessarily compromised by a degree of impairment in some of its essential features, and Methodists have resisted being overly prescriptive in such matters. Similarly, while it is fitting to celebrate the Lord’s Supper wherever possible using a communion table for the bread and wine, the absence of such (for example in a home or hospital) does not of itself compromise the integrity of the sacrament.
26. There is, however, a qualitative difference (and not just a difference in degree) between an impaired representation and that which entirely fails to represent what it is supposed to signify. For example, the integrity of the Lord’s Supper would be compromised by the gratuitous use of pizza and Coca-Cola instead of bread and wine. Such an occurrence would not be the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in accordance with the Lord’s will. Bearing in mind this qualitative difference in symbolic representation, it is necessary now to assess theologically the possibility of ‘remote communion’ in relation to the essential features of the Lord’s Supper.

The Gathering of the People of God

27. As a sacrament of the Church, the Lord’s Supper not only points towards but also participates in the reality that it signifies. Among the various aspects of this reality is ‘communion’ (*koinonia*) with God and with one another in the body of Christ. From its origins, the Lord’s Supper has involved what the *Methodist Worship Book* refers to as “the gathering of the people of God”. This gathering or assembly (the Greek word is *ekklesia*) itself visibly expresses the unity and communion signified by the Lord’s Supper and is therefore an essential feature of the

sacrament.

28. Granted that technological change has always contributed to the development of worship, the question arises: does the gathering of the people of God require a physical presence or would it be possible for some or all to 'gather' by electronic means of communication? Much has been written on the nature of 'presence' in the sphere of electronic communications, when people in locations physically remote from one another may nevertheless be 'present' to one another, but the idea of a 'sacrament' requires a physical, embodied presence, which is therefore visible and tangible.
29. In the sphere of electronic communication, the idea of 'presence' is essentially cognitive and disembodied; though it may be clearly visible in one sense, such visibility is intangible. The term 'social media', often used to describe certain forms of electronic communication, is somewhat ironic since the ability of such means to establish what might concisely be termed 'social presence' is inherently limited. The capacity to assume a false identity is an extreme example of the way in which social media facilitate 'social absence' at least as much as 'social presence'. This is not to deny the usefulness of social media for maintaining networks that link people for numerous purposes of a genuinely social nature. However, social presence is only fully possible in a physical, embodied encounter in which people establish a relationship in numerous ways through verbal and non-verbal communication.
30. So far as the Church is concerned, social presence is most fully evident when people physically gather to worship in the name of Christ, confess their sins before God and before one another, exchange a physical sign of the Peace and share together in "one bread" and "the cup of blessing" before being sent into the world to live and work to God's praise and glory. Social presence of this kind does not exist when groups or individuals, physically remote from one another, gather by electronic means. The corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper is visibly represented by the physical gathering of the people of God. Whatever value there is in gathering the people of God by electronic means – and again it is taken for granted that there is value in this – it does not signify the visible unity and communion of the people of God.
31. The theological significance of physical embodiment and presence still holds even in an age of advanced electronic communication where physical location no longer constrains participation in numerous activities. Physical embodiment and presence is central to God's mission in the world. At the Incarnation, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Jesus was fully human and fully divine, physically embodied, visibly present in the world and tangible. As the risen Lord, the embodied Jesus invites the disciples: "Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see" (Luke 24:39). He continues to eat with them (Luke 24:42-43) and invites the absent Thomas: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side" (John 20:27).
32. The Church, as the body of Christ, is a mysterious union of the human and the divine since Christ is really present among his people. As such, it must also be physically embodied and visibly present in the world. The Church is most fully and visibly itself when the people of God physically gather in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In contrast, the use of electronic means of communication to participate in the Lord's Supper does not constitute a representation of the unity and communion of the people of God.
33. The physical exchange of a sign of the Peace, normally by shaking hands, demonstrates and reinforces the unity and communion that is signified in the sharing of "one bread" and "the cup of blessing" in the Lord's Supper. It is a liturgical expression of the New Testament injunction to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (eg Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Peter 5:14). Exchanging the Peace is an ancient feature of the Lord's Supper, even though its recovery in Methodism results from the Liturgical Movement of the 1960s and 70s and is still not universally

observed. Exchanging the Peace was always more than a mere formality as it signified the reconciliation of Christians within the body of Christ and thus the resolution of disputes among members of the community. The use of electronic means of communication to participate in the Lord's Supper excludes the possibility of a meaningful exchange of the Peace as a sign of reconciliation.

34. A further consideration is the link between the gathering of the community to celebrate the Lord's Supper and holy living. "Those who gather round the table of the Lord are empowered for mission: apostles sent out in the power of the Spirit, to live and work to God's praise and glory" (*MWB*, p. 114). The community gathered at the Lord's Supper is called to holy living in the Church and in the world. Such holiness is never a solitary pursuit, and Methodists have always emphasised the corporate nature of holy living. The physical gathering of the people of God and their dismissal at the conclusion of the Lord's Supper manifests and strengthens the corporate nature of holy living in which, in the words of Charles Wesley, Methodists "kindly help each other on" (*Singing the Faith* 620). In contrast, the absence of a physical gathering of the people of God at the Lord's Supper would suggest that its benefits are primarily individual, thereby compromising the essentially corporate nature of holy living.
35. What of those who are unable to be physically present at the celebration of the Lord's Supper? In the Methodist Church, anyone prevented from attending the Lord's Supper in a Local Church as a result of infirmity or some other good reason may appropriately participate in the sacrament by current provision for "Holy Communion in a Home or Hospital" (*MWB*, pp. 223-8) or else "Extended Communion" (*MWB* pp. 229-34). A few exceptional cases of deprivation by reason of isolation hardly make a case for departing from the received tradition of the Methodist Church in Britain, where it is the policy of the Conference to ensure a sufficient number of presbyters and other authorised persons so that none need be deprived of receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper reasonably frequently.

Presiding at the Lord's Supper

36. The role of the 'presiding minister' (ie a presbyter or other authorised person) is essential to the corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper according to Methodist tradition and experience. In the sign-action of the Lord's Supper, the presiding minister represents the person of Christ as head of his body, the Church. The presiding minister gathers the people of God for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, leads them in the confession of sin and pronounces a general absolution. He or she takes and prepares the bread and wine for use, gives thanks over the bread and wine by offering what the *Methodist Worship Book* calls "the great prayer of thanksgiving", leads the distribution of the bread and wine, and at the conclusion of the service dismisses the people with a blessing. Together, and inseparably, these sign-actions constitute 'presidency' at the Lord's Supper – inseparable because they symbolically represent Christ's own actions at the Last Supper.
37. Whether and how a 'blessing' can be conferred by electronic means (and this is an open question in the Methodist Church), it is incorrect to conceive the celebration of the Lord's Supper in terms of the consumption of bread and wine upon which a presbyter or other authorised person has conferred a 'blessing'. To envisage 'remote communion' via electronic means of communication would result in the disintegration of the role of the presiding minister as the fourfold action of presidency would be undertaken by different people. Specifically, those in physically remote locations would perform three of the four acts of presidency for themselves – taking (their own) bread and wine and preparing them for use, breaking the bread, and distributing it. To regard this as unsatisfactory is to show concern not for the ecclesiastical status of the presiding minister but for the integrity of the sign-actions of the Lord's Supper. These sign-actions are not about participants serving or helping themselves to the bread and wine but about them being given and receiving the bread and wine from the Lord's table as if from the

Lord himself.

38. The question of who may preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not addressed here since it has been explored before on numerous occasions and is not immediately relevant to the issue presently under consideration. Only presbyters and others specifically authorised by the Conference may preside at the Lord's Supper. What is relevant to note, however, is that Methodist tradition and experience requires that presidency at the Lord's Supper is properly exercised by one person enacting the sign-actions of Jesus at the Last Supper. It would not be appropriate for these sign-actions to be shared among several people, whether physically present at the Lord's table or else remotely using a separate supply of bread and wine.

The Body and Blood of Christ

39. As noted above, the Lord's Supper does not simply involve the eating of bread and the drinking of wine in memory of Christ, which practice might conceivably be ritualised in any number of ways according to changing historical, cultural or technological circumstances. Besides the gathering of the people of God and the distinctive role of the presiding minister, among the essential features of the Lord's Supper are those sign-actions that relate to the consumption of the bread and wine, which, in a sense that Methodists have not sought to define theologically, symbolically represent the body and blood of Christ, and thus his real presence.
40. Personal experience of participation in the Lord's Supper is often so deep that familiar forms become indistinguishable from the essential features, and unfamiliar practices can be disturbing. Fortunately, it is unnecessary here to attempt to evaluate or influence the variety of sacramental practice in Methodism, which tends to reflect cherished custom and experience. Sensitive to the variety of such practice among Methodists, this present report need only consider whether the integrity of the Lord's Supper is compromised when groups or individuals, in a location physically remote from its celebration but participating by electronic means of communication, consume a separate supply of bread and wine, apparently as part of the distribution of the elements.
41. The body and blood of Christ are appropriately signified at the Lord's Supper by the use of a single loaf and a common cup. A single loaf, broken and distributed following the great prayer of thanksgiving, signifies the unity and integrity of Christ's body, which is given for his people. The common cup, shared by those present following the great prayer of thanksgiving, signifies the unity and integrity of Christ's blood, which is shed for his people. The Joint Implementation Commission under the Covenant between the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England in its interim report *In the Spirit of the Covenant* (2005) commended the use of a single loaf (rather than individual communion wafers) and a common communion cup (rather than individual communion cups) (§5.3.6; §5.4.16).
42. For practical reasons, however, it may not always be possible or desirable to use a single loaf and a common cup at the Lord's Supper. Separate provision may be needed for those who have a particular allergy. The presence of a large number of participants may indicate the desirability of using individual wafers or else breaking some of the bread prior to the service in order to facilitate its smooth distribution. Similarly, it may be desirable to have more than one common cup. In any case, among Methodists, it is normal to use individual communion cups for the distribution of the communion wine, though the presiding minister might also make use of a common cup during the prayer of thanksgiving. In such circumstances, the unity and integrity of Christ's body and blood are signified by the bread and wine being taken and prepared together on the Lord's table prior to the prayer of thanksgiving being said over them and their subsequent distribution.
43. The unity and integrity of Christ's body is further represented symbolically in the distribution and shared consumption of the communion bread: "Though we are many, we are one body,

because we all share in one bread" (*MWB*, pp. 182, 194; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). St Paul deliberately uses these words in his account of the Lord's Supper not merely to describe a typical practice but to interpret the sign-action of sharing in "one bread" and thus to explain why it is an essential feature of the Lord's Supper. Sharing in "one bread" signifies unity in the body of Christ.

44. Likewise, the unity and integrity of Christ's blood is further represented symbolically in the distribution and shared consumption of the communion wine: "The cup of blessing for which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ" (*MWB*, p. 208; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). St Paul deliberately uses these words in his account of the Lord's Supper not merely to describe a typical practice but to interpret the sign-action of sharing in "the cup of blessing", and thus to explain why it is an essential feature of the Lord's Supper. Sharing in "the cup of blessing" (whether using a common cup or individual communion cups) signifies unity in the blood of Christ.
45. The Reformers insisted on the importance of receiving both the bread and the wine at the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ has important pastoral implications for the administration of communion to those with medical conditions. As the "Notes" to "Holy Communion in a Home or Hospital" explain: "For pastoral reasons, it may sometimes be desirable to give communion by dipping the bread lightly in the wine or to give only the bread or the wine" (*MWB*, p. 223). A person who receives only the bread is not thereby deprived of receiving the blood of Christ. A person who receives only the wine is not thereby deprived of receiving the body of Christ.
46. For many Methodists, the experience of gathering around the Lord's table with others to receive the communion bread and wine is deeply meaningful. In contrast to methods of continuous administration, distributing the bread and wine to successive 'tables' of communicants gives visible expression to the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper. In some churches, the usual practice is for such 'tables', or even the whole congregation, to eat the communion bread at the same time and drink the communion wine at the same time. This similarly demonstrates the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper. While particular methods of distributing the bread and wine are not essential features of the Lord's Supper, nevertheless they often demonstrate and reinforce the corporate nature of the sacrament.
47. What, then, is signified when groups or individuals, in a location physically remote from the celebration of the Lord's Supper but participating by electronic means of communication, consume a separate supply of bread and wine, apparently as part of the distribution of the communion elements? Manifestly, the physical remoteness of this separate supply from the bread and wine on the Lord's table during the celebration of the Lord's Supper contradicts the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ. The failure to share together in eating "this bread" contradicts the essential unity and integrity of the body of Christ. The failure to share together in drinking "the cup of blessing" contradicts the essential unity and integrity of the blood of Christ. Altogether, it compromises the integrity of the Lord's Supper.
48. In the case of "Extended Communion", those who were not present at the celebration of the Lord's Supper receive bread and wine from that service, which is now 'extended' to include additional recipients, as the opening declaration states:

I bring these holy gifts that you may share in the communion of [the Lord's] body and blood. The bread and wine which we share in this service come from a celebration of the Lord's Supper at N ... Church on (date). We who are many are one body, because we all share in one bread (*MWB*, p. 230).

Extending communion in this way is an ancient practice in the Church, preceding any particular theology of the way in which the body and blood of Christ are (and continue to be) present

under the particular signs of bread and wine. Extended Communion safeguards the integrity of the Lord's Supper, whilst extending its benefits to those who have been unable to attend. Its restoration in the Methodist Church in Britain has been in response to a pastoral need.

Summary Conclusions

49. The following summary conclusions proceed from the foregoing sections and form the basis of the Faith and Order Committee's specific recommendations in the final section of this report. It is possible to be unequivocal in stating these conclusions.
50. Scripture and tradition (Methodist and ecumenical), affirmed by the experience of Methodists over many generations, provide clear norms as to how the Methodist Church may continue to be faithful to the Lord's commandment in relation to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me." Although the Methodist Church has not endorsed any particular sacramental theology, its doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper, as expressed in the doctrinal standards and authorised hymnody and liturgy, combined with its regulation of sacramental practice, reveals an intention to ensure that Methodism remains faithful to the Lord's will.
51. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the Church. It is celebrated corporately by the people of God with an authorised president. The physical gathering of Christians (normally around the Lord's table) is an essential feature of the corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper. Such a gathering embodies and makes visible the communion with God and with one another that is signified in the Lord's Supper. Exchanging a physical sign of the Peace further demonstrates and reinforces visible unity and communion among the gathered people of God. An electronic means of communication, by its very nature, does not physically gather Christians together to celebrate the Lord's Supper and so fails to represent symbolically what the sacrament signifies.
52. Presiding at the Lord's Supper does not simply involve being a leader of worship or even saying certain words. Presiding at the Lord's Supper is a distinctive role that involves, among other things, the fourfold sign-action of taking bread, giving thanks, breaking and giving the bread (and the threefold sign-action of taking the cup of blessing, giving thanks, and then giving the wine) to the gathered people of God. The integrity of presiding at the Lord's Supper, and hence the integrity of the sacrament, is compromised when one or more of these sign-actions is performed separately at a location physically remote from the gathering of the people of God.
53. The communion bread and wine symbolically represent the body and blood of Christ. For this reason, they also symbolically represent the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ. This symbolic representation fails in the case of separate quantities of bread and wine, as when groups or individuals at a location physically remote from the celebration of the Lord's Supper use their own elements. Furthermore, sharing together in "one bread" and "the cup of blessing" is an essential feature of the Lord's Supper. This symbolic representation of sharing together in the body and blood of Christ also fails where groups or individuals remotely use their own bread and wine. For this reason, using an electronic means of communication to invite groups or individuals at locations physically remote from the celebration of the Lord's Supper to participate using their own communion bread and wine compromises the integrity of the sacrament.
54. Since unity in the essential features of the Lord's Supper is necessary for unity in the Church, radical innovation in the way that the Methodist Church permits the Lord's Supper to be celebrated would have very significant negative implications for relations with ecumenical partners at a time when the Conference is committed to working towards the goal of visible unity. By the claims made in its own doctrinal standards, the Methodist Church is constrained both by a general responsibility towards the universal Church for the guardianship and right use of the sacraments, and by its specific responsibilities under an Anglican-Methodist Covenant, to

preserve and extend the existing unity in the essential features of the Lord's Supper as a necessary step on the way to visible unity.

55. To return to the original Memorial to the Conference from the South-East District, it must be emphasised that this present report has not argued that 'remote communion' is 'irregular', 'invalid' or 'contrary' to the 'rules', 'practice' or 'discipline' of the Methodist Church. Such terms are often interpreted pejoratively as being prohibitive in a legalistic sense. Instead, the Faith and Order Committee has demonstrated that it is not possible theologically to recognise 'remote communion' (as described in the Memorial) as being truly the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as this has been received in the Methodist Church. For the Conference to permit such practice by Methodist presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the Lord's Supper would compromise the integrity of the sacrament.

Recommendations

56. The Faith and Order Committee recommends that the Conference adopt the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper may not be permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or videoconferencing, in order to invite those not physically present at the celebration of the sacrament to participate by using their own communion bread and wine.
57. The Faith and Order Committee recommends that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper make full use of current provisions in the *Methodist Worship Book* for "Holy Communion in a Home or Hospital" and for "Extended Communion" as part of the Local Church's regular pastoral visitation and care of those who, for good reason, are prevented from attending services in church.
58. The Faith and Order Committee recommends that the Methodist people continue to engage in theological investigation concerning the use of electronic means of communication in relation to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in consultation with ecumenical partners. A short resource list for further reading will be placed on the Faith and Order section of the Methodist Church website.

*****RESOLUTION**

- 37/1. The Conference received the report as an interim report and directed that the further work be undertaken (including the involvement of those set out in the original response to the M13 (2011), young people involved with 3Generate, CODEC and others with broad, in-depth expertise in this fast developing area) and that a fuller report be presented to the Conference no later than 2018.**

Appendix

Memorial M13 (2011)

M13 Communion mediated through social media

The South East District Synod (M) (Present: 80. Voting: 72 for, 8 against) requests the Conference to instruct the Faith and Order Committee to form a policy regarding the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the Internet or video-conferencing. In this form of remote communion, a minister in one location would be permitted to preside over a celebration of Holy Communion with a gathered group of fellowshipping believers consisting of groups or individuals residing in disparate locations who provide their own elements to be blessed by the person presiding. Synod asks that clarity be given by the Faith and Order Committee as to whether such a form of Holy Communion is acceptable within our discipline and practice.

Reply

The Conference thanks the South East District for its memorial, and notes that the Faith and Order Committee was asked to explore the theological and liturgical basis for a celebration of the Lord's Supper through the use of social media in the summer of 2010. In its advice to those members of the Connexional Team dealing with the enquiry, the Committee pointed to the previous statements of the Methodist Church on the celebration of the Lord's Supper which emphasise the corporate nature of this celebration. The Committee discussed the suitability of a love feast as an appropriate alternative to a celebration of the Lord's Supper remotely using social media. The Committee raised considerable concerns about the concept of 'remote' sacraments.

It is clear, however, from the initial and subsequent discussions at the Faith and Order Committee and from the comments made in the memorial that further consideration should be given and a formal response or clarification given on the issue of Remote Communion or, more preferably, Communion mediated through social media.

Although the Conference notes the specific nature of the memorial in outlining a particular liturgical practice, the Conference instructs the Faith and Order Committee to establish an appropriate group to discuss the issues related to this memorial and to report back to a future Conference at the earliest opportunity. This group should include members of the Faith and Order Worship and Liturgy Resource Group, CODEC*, and appropriate members of the Connexional Team (eg Discipleship and Ministries, Youth and Children/Youth Assembly, Communications, Evangelism Spirituality and Discipleship). If possible, the group should have representation from the Joint Implementation Commission or the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, from Fresh Expressions, and from the United Reformed Church, in order to assist in the ecumenical exploration of the issue and any potential impact on the Anglican-Methodist Covenant of any potential outcomes proposed, as well as drawing on the experience of other Churches currently exploring this issue.

*CODEC is a research initiative at St John's College, Durham University which is exploring Christian Communication and Identity in a Digital Age