

27. Online Church

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Resolutions	27/1. The Conference receives the Report. 27/2. The Conference recognises the close relation of the questions of online celebrations of Holy Communion and predominantly online churches and, subject to the outcome of the connexional period of discernment, affirms in principle the possibility of predominantly online churches. 27/3. The Conference requests all connexional and district committees and other relevant entities to consider the implications for them if provisions for predominantly online churches were to be made by the Conference, and to submit their observations and comments to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee by 31 January 2024. 27/4. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee. to consider what work would be needed in order to enable predominantly online churches to be lawfully recognised within the <i>Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church</i> and to propose appropriate resolutions to the Conference of 2024.

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Summary of Content and Impact

Subject and aims	The issues involved in establishing and operating online churches
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predominantly online churches, which conduct the majority of their activities online, could be recognised theologically. • Predominantly online churches appear to be legally possible. • The outcome of the (ongoing) connexional period of discernment on Holy Communion and Online Worship is critical to this. • Some activities would always need an onsite element. • The implications of enabling predominantly online churches could be wide ranging and connexional, district and other appropriate bodies are requested to consider the effect on them and to send comments.
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	Holy Communion and Online Worship (2021) Oversight and Trusteeship (2022)
Consultations	Broad consultation with connexional, district and other bodies proposed.
Impact	Multiple bodies need to respond to consultation. Longer term impact to be determined by consultation.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Conference of 2022 'directed the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees to consider the issues involved in establishing and operating an online church, and to report to the Conference of 2023, together with any recommendations for any necessary amendments to the Deed of Union and Standing Orders.' A working party of the Faith and Order Committee has considered the theological questions, while the Law and Polity Committee has considered legal questions that arise. There are many expressions of Christian discipleship, worship and mission taking place online in the name of the Methodist Church or in which Methodists share. This piece of work is directed to the more specific question of whether it is possible to have a 'local church' or 'society' which operates predominantly online and to explore the implications of that. Not all online mission and ministry will need to be an online church but in

some cases that may be appropriate and we here seek to understand how that would operate within our theology and polity.

- 1.2 We have reflected on how to understand 'online church'. By it we imagine a community which conducts the majority of its activity online, including regular worship, meetings to transact the church's business and gatherings for fellowship and study. Just as onsite churches can conduct some activities online, we recognise that online churches can also conduct some activities onsite, as appropriate. In particular, we have identified certain activities that will always need some kind of onsite aspect, even if the majority join online. To make this clear, we have used the language of 'predominantly online' throughout this report.

2. Current situation

- 2.1 Methodists have been engaging in online expressions of Christian faith and discipleship for many years, including meeting for worship and fellowship, engaging through social media and producing content to share Christian faith through videos, blogs and other means. During the Covid lockdown this was greatly accelerated as onsite gathering was forbidden. Questions as to how the church relates to the online space which were already at large have been brought into very great prominence as a result.
- 2.2 At present, Methodist churches can gather online for worship and fellowship and can engage in evangelism and mission online. There are also online expressions of the ministry of pastoral care. The 2021 Conference adopted a period of discernment to last until 31 August 2024 in which services of Holy Communion may take place online. Temporary provisions have been in place since 2020 to enable governance meetings and meetings to transact church business to take place online and more permanent provisions are being worked on. There are therefore very many aspects of the church's life that already can, and do, take place online. However, the presenting issue for this report is that the definition of 'Local Church' in the Deed of Union would seem to exclude the possibility of predominantly online churches:

1 (xv) 'Local Church' and 'Society' are equivalent expressions and mean (subject to any exceptions provided for by Standing Orders) the whole body of members of the Methodist Church connected with and attending one particular place of worship.

Predominantly online churches would have no necessary connection to 'one particular place of worship' and aspects of their life that did occur onsite might be in varying locations, arranged according to need. While there could be reflection

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on the meaning of 'place' and the extent to which online contexts can be regarded as 'places', we have instead chosen to consider the question more broadly and to build on the reflection that informed the report on *Holy Communion and Online Worship*¹ (hereinafter HCOW).

3. Considering context

- 3.1 The question here does not arise simply in the abstract, but is a product of particular missional work in different parts of the Connexion. Pressure of time has meant that an extensive consultation process has not been possible, but we have sought to gather relevant examples through conversation with those ministering in these contexts.
- 3.2 The experience of lockdown and the possibilities of online worship, fellowship and meeting that emerged in that time have inspired many across the connexion with new possibilities that had previously been unimagined or only suitable in very particular situations. One of the insights of lockdown was the way in which online church could include people for whom onsite gathering had been difficult or impossible. Alongside sometimes challenging situations relating to property, online communities can be an attractive option. Many of the usual requirements of a local Methodist church can be provided online including regular worship, a Church Council, stewards' meetings and so on.
- 3.4 Following the Conference's decision on online celebrations of Holy Communion, services of Holy Communion can be celebrated online and often participants can create a sense of sacred space in their own homes for these services. Baptisms must take place with the person administering baptism and the person being baptised in the same place but there are possibilities including a small gathering onsite with others joining online as well as celebrating baptism during a particular and special gathering, for example a retreat.
- 3.5 There are different models for pastoral care online. One example is triplets where groups of three can meet via Zoom for support and accountability. Messaging applications such as WhatsApp can provide for groups to keep in close contact and share news and concern.
- 3.6 A frequent question was about the way in which safeguarding policies apply in a predominantly online context and how applicable current forms of training are. If the Methodist Church were to authorise predominantly online churches, it is

1 <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21765/conf-2021-39-holy-communion-and-online-worship.pdf>

recognised that further work would be needed with regard to safeguarding in such communities.

- 3.7 Further, in order to be a Methodist church, a community must belong to a Circuit and be within a District, which in most cases are currently geographically based. Initially it seems likely predominantly online churches will have a geographical centre of gravity, but as the work grows they are likely to draw people from a much wider area. Key questions include: when the minister moves appointment, what happens? Can a community move with the minister? How is moving on and good transition enabled?

4. Anthropology

- 4.1 The Christian understanding of what it means to be a human being is deeply rooted in our understanding of salvation and resists the individualism which is so much a part of modern life. We become our truest selves when united to Christ and to be united to Christ is to be part of the church which is his body. Our sense of who we are is shaped by the contexts in which we live and move and we are increasingly finding that online life has become one of the environments through which many people both understand and express themselves².
- 4.2 Christians celebrate the Incarnation as central to our faith remembering that, in Jesus, God lived a human and bodily life. We therefore celebrate the physical aspects of our experience. When gathering online, it is important that we remember that we still gather as 'enfleshed' human beings. It is the meeting which is virtual, not the people who share in it, and we therefore understand that an online gathering is an appropriate way to celebrate and nurture our incarnational faith.
- 4.3 Although all churches would wish to be welcoming to all, expressions of church vary and individuals may feel more at home in one church context than another. Ways of worship and the culture of an individual church can unintentionally exclude those who are 'not like us'. In discussing the possibility of an online church, it is worth bearing in mind what Palfrey and Gasser referred to as the difference between "digital immigrants" and "digital natives." In 2008, their book *Born Digital*³ studied the first generation of digital natives. It is already (in 2023) out of date because digital technologies and associated behaviours develop at such a rate - the opening observation of the number of people carrying iPods on a

2 HCOW §5.1-5.2

3 Palfrey, John, and Urs. Gasser. *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. New York: Basic Books, 2008, 1.

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subway train and later discussion of “MySpace” is proof enough. However, many of their observations around digital natives (those born after 1980) remain true despite the particular platforms changing.

- 4.4 They draw a distinction between digital immigrants, who had to learn how to use email and computers but remember how to use a Walkman, and digital natives, who grew up with digital connected technology developing alongside them. In their view, ‘unlike Digital Immigrants, Digital Natives live much of their lives online, without distinguishing the online and the offline... Instead of thinking of their digital identity and their physical-space identity as separate things, they just have an identity...they are joined by a set of common practices... [and are] constantly connected.’⁴ It is important, therefore, to remember in all discussions that while the concept of Digital Church might be alien for some, for others it will be their natural place of connection. Pete Phillips draws on Hine as he writes that ‘the internet is now embedded, embodied and everyday’⁵ – that is true but, of course, while for many people digital experience is now very much “everyday”, for others it continues to feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. However, for digital natives, digital *is* life. For some, the digital connectivity that the church and wider society embraced through the Covid-19 pandemic came naturally and brought a desperately needed place of connection, worship and spiritual growth. Others of course, longed to return to physical places of connection and experiences having found digital connection strained or false.
- 4.5 When considering the issue of online celebrations of Holy Communion, the 2021 Conference report noted:

those who have prepared this report realised that a key question was whether there was a danger of objections to Holy Communion online which are based purely on assumptions or which represent a barrier which is not imposed when the service is held with the congregation in one physical location. There is a parallel here to the early discussions on children receiving Holy Communion, when there was a lot of concern about whether or not children understood what was happening despite the fact that adults are not expected to prove a level of comprehension before being invited to share in the sacrament. One challenge in all discussions was the need to be alert to what is a genuine theological

4 Palfrey and Gasser, *Born Digital*, 4-5.

5 Phillips, Peter M, *The Bible, Social Media, and Digital Culture*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020, 20.

argument and what is an assumption based on prior experience, recognising that many opinions will naturally be a mixture of the two.⁶

- 4.6 We might add a further question when it comes to the possibility of predominantly online church. We might instinctively bring assumptions and experiences that lead us to start by asking ‘is predominantly online church possible?’ One way to bring our own assumptions to light, particularly if we are not digital natives, is to turn the question around: ‘What theological objections exist which would prevent a church from usually gathering online?’
- 4.7 As the report noted,

Digital theological anthropology therefore asks not simply ‘who are we when we are online’ but also ‘who are we because it is possible to go online’. Increasingly, as technologies advance, we will be pointed forward to an even more integrated world. As our everyday life is impacted more and more by digital possibilities and the digital world becomes further integrated into our life, our relationships with others and our assumptions about living, Christian theology will need to address this new context and ask ‘how are we to be renewed in the image of God?’⁷

At root, if the church is to be where people are, then the changing patterns of our lives and the prevalence and extent of our digital interaction and living will need to be taken into account in our understanding of what it is to be the church.

5. Ecclesiology

- 5.1 HCOW summarised its section on ecclesiology as follows:

In summary, therefore, a Methodist understanding of the Church, particularly in relationship to our understanding of the Lord’s Supper, encourages us to think of the Church as a community which bears witness to the whole history of salvation (and does so in celebrations of the Eucharist, although not exclusively so), is gathered and interdependent, and is open and inclusive. Online Holy Communion invites us to consider once more how this understanding of the Church may be reflected in all of our worship.⁸

6 HCOW §1.3

7 HCOW §5.7

8 HCOW §3.11

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- 5.2 The Committee also considered the description of church in the Joint Anglican-Methodist report on the ecclesiology of emerging expressions of church⁹ which was received by the Conference of 2012:
1. A community of people who are called by God to be committed disciples of Jesus Christ and to live out their discipleship in the world;
 2. A community that regularly assembles for Christian worship and is then sent out into the world to engage in mission and service;
 3. A community in which the Gospel is proclaimed in ways that are appropriate to the life of its members;
 4. A community in which the Scriptures are regularly preached and taught;
 5. A community in which baptism is conferred in appropriate circumstances as a rite of initiation into the Church;
 6. A community that celebrates the Lord's Supper;
 7. A community where pastoral responsibility and presidency at the Lord's Supper is exercised by the appropriate authorized ministry;
 8. A community that is united to others through: mutual commitment; spiritual communion; structures of governance, oversight and communion; and an authorized ministry in common.
- 5.3 While that report went on to note that 'a Christian community that lacks some or all of these essential ecclesial elements is not a church', it also noted that Methodists are generally reluctant to 'unchurch' particular communities. However, in the context of discerning what communities are capable of being 'Methodist churches' it recognised that all these elements would certainly be essential. Each of these might look different in a predominantly online context, and would be more possible in some online contexts than others (eg in what way are worshippers watching a service on Youtube 'assembled'?). It is certainly possible to imagine predominantly online communities that would embody, in ways appropriate to their context, each of these elements.
- 5.4 The second point of this list highlights a rhythm of the church's life that is significant to our understanding of the church's worship and mission. We gather as God's people in worship and are sent out in mission: this cycle of gathering and dispersing can be seen as the 'breathing' of the church, necessary to maintain its healthy life. While it may look different, we suggest that predominantly online churches would have a similar kind of rhythm of gathering and dispersing. Gathered in worship or fellowship in an online context such as

9 *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church: Report of an Anglican-Methodist working party*, Church House Publishing, 2012, 181.

Zoom, church members are then 'sent out' to be Christians in their own place and local communities and to engage in mission and service where they are.

- 5.4 At root, the Reformers' marks of the church (where the word is faithfully preached and the sacraments duly administered) are the key questions and if those are present, then in principle, a community should be recognisable as a church. At one level, if we can recognise that Holy Communion can be celebrated online then the possibility of a church community existing online may follow. HCOW also recognised this point:

The question of the nature of [the] Lord's Supper and the question of what it means to be a church are closely related, firstly because the Methodist Church understands that Holy Communion is the worship of the gathered Church, not simply an individual act of devotion. In addition, some have argued that it is not possible to be a church unless the sacraments are celebrated, which raises an important question for any Local Church which intends to gather for worship mainly online. Can such a gathering be a church, as Methodism understands being a church, without some form of online Holy Communion? A Methodist understanding of online Holy Communion is, therefore, related to a Methodist understanding of the Church itself.¹⁰

We note in this regard that the Connexion is currently in a period of discernment on that question and therefore any action in response to the direction of the Conference for this piece of work will need to be aligned with the conclusions of that discernment.

- 5.5 A Methodist church must be able to baptise people, confirm them and receive them into membership or it cannot be a Methodist church. Both baptism and confirmation have a necessary physical element: in baptism the one administering the sacrament must pour water over the person or dip them in water. In confirmation, laying on of hands by a presbyter is needed. Provided that an appropriate person is able to visit the person being baptised or confirmed so that baptism and/or confirmation can be administered, while others join the service online, then both these rites are possible. Reception into membership (for those who are already baptised and confirmed) involves offering the 'hand of fellowship'¹¹ which is representative of relationship and belonging and we suggest that suitable online versions of this gesture could be developed.

¹⁰ HCOW §3.1

¹¹ See, for example, *Methodist Worship Book*, p. 83

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6. Mission

- 6.1 The connexional *God For All* (GFA) strategy has as its aim 'to present a contextual, coherent, and coordinated Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth'¹² and it names one of its five core areas of focus for change as 'Digital Presence: Mission for the Digital Age.'¹³ As a Church we have begun to understand the role that digital increasingly plays in the larger mission of God through the Church. One outworking of GFA is the increased investment in 'digital' as a place of mission for the church. The 2022 Christmas and Advent campaign through social media reached around 1.4 million people with the video content being viewed more than 250,400 times. However, beyond a passive engagement the videos drove 5,660 clicks through to the Methodist Church website where in the digital space we were able to introduce this particular subset to the Christian faith through a message of inclusion and welcome.
- 6.2 The Methodist Church aspires to be 'justice-seeking' and the strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity is part of enabling us to be 'a Church in which God's unconditional love is expressed in word and actions, where all are fully able to play their part in the Church's life'¹⁴. For some, online provision is a key part of enabling them to play their part in the Church's life. During the lockdown, many observed, for example, that housebound members were able to be more actively involved in worship and church activities because of online gathering. At the same time, for others, online provision raises challenges around availability and ability to use the relevant equipment and software. Looking more generally, in a context in which church buildings are being closed in many areas, it may be that online provision might assist in responding to that. However, the equality impacts of this should also be considered, particularly if onsite provision became primarily associated with areas that are more affluent. The concerns of Justice, Dignity and Solidarity should be kept at the forefront as practice develops.
- 6.3 We might reread Martyn Atkins' reflections of 2008 in light of the digital age. Atkins described the collective essence of the church as derived from the missionary God, and 'created to share in the *missio dei*.'¹⁵ At the time rather than "digital" (not surprising since Facebook was still in its infancy), he was reflecting on how Fresh Expressions were challenging the nature of the church; we have since then, seen within our own denomination and beyond the fruit that has

12 <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/19181/conf-2020-4-evangelism-and-growth.pdf>

13 GFA §32

14 *Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity*, Methodist Conference 2021, Agenda p. 756

15 Atkins, Martyn, "What is the essence of the Church?", in Croft, Stephen (ed.), *Mission Shaped Questions*, London: Church House Publishing, 2008, 17, 19.

been possible by including Fresh Expressions within the broader description of 'church'. Of course, all Fresh Expressions (Café Churches, Surfer Churches, Biker Churches or even Sticky Churches) have never intended to serve all people, but they have witnessed to and made space for individual subgroups of society that might find the inherited ways of being church alien. Whilst in the 1990s and 2000s we were able to expand an understanding of church to include Fresh Expressions, now in 2023, it is crucial we widen that understanding again to include digital as an expression of church.

7. Legal Considerations

7.1 The Law and Polity Committee has considered the legal requirements of operating an online church and offers its thoughts below.

7.2 In so far as the law of England and Wales is concerned:

1. There is no statutory requirement for a place of worship to be certified or registered as such;
2. If the worshipping congregation wishes to solemnise marriages in their place of worship, that place of worship must be both certified under section 2 of the Places of Worship Registration Act 1855 and registered under section 41 of the Marriage Act 1949;
3. There may be some limited advantage in being certified as a place of worship to allow business rates exemption for the physical 'office' of a church to be claimed;
4. Although there may be a practical necessity for a church to have a correspondence address (and/or addresses for the relevant trustees) there does not appear to be any legislative or regulatory requirement that an unincorporated body such as a Local Church must have a physical presence to be recognised as existing. Neither the Charity Commission (registration as a charity) nor HMRC (registration for Gift Aid purposes) appear to require the charity itself to have a physical presence, other than a correspondence address for the purposes of registration if required;
5. At the present time, until tested by a court case, physical and online places/spaces remain distinct in the eyes of the legislature and the courts.

7.3 The main advantages of maintaining a certified physical place of worship, as opposed to operating a wholly (or predominantly) online church, appear to be:

1. the ability for a congregation to register its certified place of worship for solemnisation of marriages;

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2. the potential ability to claim exemption from the payment of business rates for an 'office' which is associated with a certified place of worship (although as the exemption appears to flow from the fact that the place of worship itself is certified as such, if there is no place of worship to be certified because the church meets online, it seems unlikely that the 'office' exemption could be, or would even need to be, claimed); and
3. (for practical reasons) having a distinct correspondence address for the purposes of registration as a charity with the Charity Commission (if required) or to claim Gift Aid by reason of registration with HMRC.

7.4 However, provided that:

1. the online church has a correspondence address (which could be that of the minister's manse or circuit office); and
2. the online church is able to open a bank account with just a correspondence address; and
3. the online church has some managing trustees who have physical addresses which can be provided to the Charity Commission and other official bodies if required; and
4. the governance structure of the Methodist Church permits a Local Church to exist without a physical presence;

there does not appear to be any reason why a Methodist congregation which meets entirely or predominantly online cannot be operated or registered as a charity and enjoy the benefits (eg Gift Aid) which a congregation meeting onsite can do.

7.5 It should also be noted that a CCLI licence is required for a congregation to play music and/or use other media in any act of worship, which includes online worship. However, provided the online church has a correspondence address, obtaining a CCLI licence for an online congregation ought not to be an issue.

7.6 In so far as the law of the other jurisdictions is different, further consideration will need to be given as to the impact of such differences on the requirements for certification and/or registration as a place of worship, and on the advantages and disadvantages which may flow from certification and/or registration. It is not anticipated, however, that any such differences will alter the basis and nature of any possible amendments to the Deed of Union and/or Standing Orders referred to in paragraph 8.2 below.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 We recommend that, as a matter of theological principle, that if it is discerned that Holy Communion can be celebrated in online context, then churches which meet predominantly online can be recognised. By these we mean churches which carry out the vast majority of their activity online and will have no established onsite presence. Some activities, such as baptism and confirmation will continue to require some onsite aspects, as discussed in paragraph 5.5, and (under current law) solemnisation of marriages in England and Wales must take place in a validly registered building (see paragraph 7.2 above), but venues for these may vary and may be arranged on an as needed basis. In saying this, we note that the period of discernment regarding Holy Communion and Online Worship does not conclude until 2024. Any implementation of online church provisions would need to depend on and be consistent with the outcome of that discernment. The key question at this stage is whether the Conference agrees with this recommendation. If it does, then further work is needed on the practical consequences of that, which could be wide-ranging and have implications for many areas of the Methodist Church's work.
- 8.2 The first of these consequences would be that the definition of 'local church' in the Deed of Union, mentioned above would need attention. That definition allows for exceptions to be made in Standing Orders and we would recommend that an appropriate Standing Order to provide for predominantly online churches be drafted.
- 8.3 In conversations about this work, we noted that particular issues arise for predominantly online churches around a variety of areas including safeguarding, where there will need to be further work about how policies, procedures and training apply for this kind of online situation. Some guidance will be needed around financial management. It will be important in making any provision for predominantly online churches that proper arrangements are made for all the requirements that will need to be complied with.
- 8.4 In the longer term, consideration would need to be given to how a predominantly online church would relate to wider connexional structures: does it belong to a geographical circuit or district? Or do we need to consider online circuits and/or districts? How would stationing work? What does it mean for a minister to 'move on' from a predominantly online church? There are probably many other consequential effects. But at root these are practical considerations which follow from the theological discernment and not matters by which the point of principle should be decided. However, they will need careful consideration.

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8.5 We therefore recommend that further work is needed and propose that, during the period leading to the conclusion of the period of discernment on Holy Communion and online worship, all connexional and district committees, groups and teams give consideration to the questions that might arise for their work from provisions for predominantly online churches. Each such body should consider:

- How might this affect our work?
- What questions need considering?
- What existing policies, Standing Orders, procedures etc. may need changing?
- What new provision might need to be made?

Comments should be sent to faithandorder@methodistchurch.org.uk by 31 January 2024. This will enable the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to consider what work would be needed in order to enable predominantly online churches to be lawfully recognised within the Methodist Church's constitution and to propose appropriate resolutions to the Conference of 2024.

***RESOLUTIONS

- 27/1. The Conference receives the Report.**
- 27/2. The Conference recognises the close relation of the questions of online celebrations of Holy Communion and predominantly online churches and, subject to the outcome of the connexional period of discernment, affirms in principle the possibility of predominantly online churches.**
- 27/3. The Conference requests all connexional and district committees and other relevant entities to consider the implications for them if provisions for predominantly online churches were to be made by the Conference, and to submit their observations and comments to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee by 31 January 2024.**
- 27/4. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to consider what work would be needed in order to enable predominantly online churches to be lawfully recognised within the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* and to propose appropriate resolutions to the Conference of 2024.**