

Holy Communion: Responding Pastorally in the light of Covid-19

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Introduction

“The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments namely baptism and the Lord’s Supper as of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves.”¹

Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, is the central act of Christian worship, in which the Church responds to Jesus’s command, “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). As Methodists we, along with many other Christians, understand it to be an instituted means of grace, through which we encounter and receive the love and power of God. God is always with us, and it is with that understanding that Christians are encouraged to reflect on the sacrament of Holy Communion at a time when the worshipping life of the Church has been disrupted. In these days of social distancing and self-isolation, many Methodists and other Christians feel the lack of being able to share together at the Lord’s Table.

The patterns of worship of other faith traditions have also been disrupted, causing pain and a sense of deprivation. When the government announced in June that places of worship in England could reopen for individual prayer, Muslim and Jewish leaders said that the move was not appropriate for

¹ Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union*

the way they practise their faith. Leaders of those communities, respectively, said that mosques are “first and foremost used for congregational prayers”² and Jews “prioritise communal prayer rather than individual prayer”.³

Corporate prayer and worship is also central to Christianity. When Methodists celebrate the Lord’s Supper it is within the context of the gathering of the people of God. The Lord’s Supper is essentially a corporate act of worship and therefore something which most Christians have not been able to celebrate during lockdown.

The 2020 Conference encouraged Local Churches to reflect on their response to deprivation in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Deprivation is a term used in the Methodist church when there is not reasonably frequent and regular

celebration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper; but it points to the broader meaning of deprivation. To assist Local Churches in this, it directed the Faith and Order Committee, as a matter of urgency, to produce guidance on acts of Holy Communion in our current context, including reflection “on ways in which appropriate online participation in services of Holy Communion might be encouraged”. This guidance therefore seeks to encourage reflection on deprivation and on the sacrament of Holy Communion, as well as providing practical guidance and suggestions so as to enable Holy Communion to be celebrated in safe and appropriate ways. Further and current practical guidance in the light of government guidelines can be found on the Methodist Church website.

Throughout this document there are suggested readings and questions to help facilitate discussion and shared reflection in Local Churches.

In what ways does corporate worship nurture and express discipleship?

Reflecting on Holy Communion

Methodism inherited from John and Charles Wesley a deep appreciation of Holy Communion as a divinely instituted means of grace.

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.
(The Methodist Catechism)

² Qari Asim, The Chair of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board, *The Guardian*, 7th June, 2020.

³ Laura Janner-Klausner, senior rabbi to Reform Judaism, *The Guardian*, 7th June, 2020.

The sacrament of Holy Communion can also be called a mystery and there is a proper sense that it is not for us to try and define too closely how the grace of God operates through it. It is a gift given to us, not a thing we have created. We have received it from our forebears who in turn received it from theirs, as St Paul describes: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you..." The guidance the church gives does not define the sacrament of Holy Communion but aims to preserve the character of this gift so that we might in turn hand it on to those who come after us.

Methodists have always sought to base their belief and practice in respect of the Lord's Supper on thoroughly biblical foundations.

This has been with a variety of emphases and interpretations and Methodists, in general, have not tried to prescribe the nature of the Lord's Supper too exactly.

What does Holy Communion mean to you? What does it mean to other members of your Local Church?

Central to Methodist understanding, therefore, are the Biblical accounts of the institution of Holy Communion. Continuing with St Paul's description:

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.⁴

Texts such as this give rise to an understanding of the sacrament as involving taking, giving thanks, breaking and sharing, alongside a recognition of the importance of the repetition of Jesus' words. This understanding is found in the reports of the Conference and in our authorised liturgies.

...the Lord's Supper can be regarded as an acted sign, a dramatic representation of salvation history. It recapitulates the scene in the Upper Room, by doing, in remembrance of Jesus, what Christians have done since the earliest days of the Church, from whose understanding of these events the first accounts of that scene are derived. In this dramatic recapitulation, the believers are gathered together. A president, representing our Lord himself, takes the bread and wine, gives thanks to God, breaks the bread, and distributes the wine to the assembled company who eat and drink. This dramatic symbolism must be preserved; it links us with our fellow Christians across the modern world and across the Christian centuries and ultimately with Christ and his disciples in the Upper Room.⁵

The Church of God, to which we belong, has taken bread and wine and given thanks over them according to our Lord's command. I bring these holy gifts that you may share in the communion of his body and blood.⁶

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

⁵ The Methodist Conference, 1990, Faith and Order Committee report Part D, pp.106-114 - *The Sunday Service Great Prayer of Thanksgiving*, 19

⁶ Extended Communion, *Methodist Worship Book*, p. 230

From these biblical roots, the Methodist Church's understanding of Holy Communion has developed within a particular, Protestant, tradition. It has therefore shared this theological journey with other Christians, beginning with the western Reformation and the Book of Common Prayer and continuing through the liturgical renewal of the last century. Whilst maintaining those insights which have developed within Methodism, the Methodist Church wishes to remain faithful to the apostolic tradition shared by all Christians.

Although we have not, as Methodists, defined too closely our theology of Holy Communion, there are several themes that can be identified as belonging to it. It can be tempting to take one theme and build our practice only on that: "Communion is just sharing a meal together, so..." or "Communion is about remembering Jesus and..."; but it is important that our practice – and especially any changes we make to it – preserves the breadth given by this wide range of themes.

The Conference report on Holy Communion in the Methodist Church, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, identified nine essential components or themes of the Methodist Church's theology of Holy Communion⁷:

- thanksgiving (Eucharist)
- life in unity (koinonia)
- remembering (anamnesis)
- sacrifice
- presence
- the work of the Spirit (epiclesis)
- anticipation (eschatology)
- mission and justice
- personal devotion

How have you encountered these themes in your experience of Holy Communion? How has listening to the experiences of other members of your Local Church prompted you to think about Holy Communion differently?

It has been noted that Methodists "vary hugely in their attachment to Holy Communion. For some it is at the very heart of their discipleship, for some it is one treasured means of grace among others and for a small minority of Methodists Communion is not perceived as either desirable or necessary."⁸ Although there is diversity of belief and practice across the Connexion, Holy Communion is never just about the nourishment of the individual pilgrim but it "focuses and expresses the ongoing and the future life of the Church."⁹

Do you miss receiving Holy Communion? What aspects of it do you miss most?

⁷ The Methodist Conference, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 8

⁸ The Methodist Conference, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 3

⁹ The Methodist Conference, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.4.8.

Liturgies for services of Holy Communion do not only focus on the events of the night before Jesus died, but recount God’s mighty acts of creating the world, redeeming it and sustaining it. We proclaim that Christ has died, is risen and will come again. When we celebrate Holy Communion, we are in fellowship and communion with Christians in every time and place, and this is of course also true for other acts of worship and prayer. Even when we cannot gather physically we are profoundly connected to and in communion with one another: we are united in the communion of saints; we are united in the body of Christ.

Reflecting on a Response to Deprivation

The 2020 Methodist Conference passed a resolution encouraging “Local Churches to reflect on their response to deprivation in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic”, in the specific context of Holy Communion. These reflections, and some passages from Scripture, are offered to help in that process. The Church draws its understanding of Holy Communion from the foundational accounts of Jesus’s Last Supper with his disciples (e.g. Luke 22:14-30) and Paul’s discussion of how the Lord’s Supper may be celebrated but also abused (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). These may be familiar passages but are always worth reading again.

*Read and discuss:
Luke 22:14-30 and 1
Corinthians 11:17-34.*

Why “deprivation”?

In the current circumstances it has not been possible for Methodists and other Christians to participate in Holy Communion because of the closure of church buildings and of restrictions on gatherings, and even once they begin to open there will be many who because of their personal circumstances will continue to be unable to participate. Indeed, we may be becoming more aware of those for whom this has long been true, if frailty, caring responsibilities, or other reasons have prevented them attending public worship. The experience of online worship has increased some disparities because of the restrictions that many households have in accessing and using the internet. “Deprivation” as the Church understands it belongs to the whole local community and we explore it as a shared experience, and not as one of individual spiritual preference or as a cause for division. For Paul the Lord’s Supper should “proclaim Christ’s death until he comes” and be a witness to the unity of the body (1 Corinthians 11:26, 29).

For some the inability to share in Holy Communion embodies a greater sense of loss that is not easily put into words. Perhaps a loss of connection with God, especially of awareness of the mystery of God and God’s presence, of transcendence. There is also the loss of connection with others, with sisters and brothers in Christ. We are reminded through this of the importance of place, of physicality, of community, of body.

How has that loss of connection impacted on you and on others? Have you had new and different experiences of connectedness that could be nurtured?

Part of the uniqueness of Holy Communion lies in its use of a particularly wide range of the senses. For some, the lack of opportunity to celebrate Holy Communion is mainly an embodied expression of their wider sense of deprivation over these last weeks and months as they have been unable to participate in congregational worship. Even, or perhaps especially, while watching services on-line or listening through their phone they have experienced a “sensory deprivation” – the absence of the sensations of touch, of taste, of smell, even of the richness and variety of sight and hearing, which are part of worship for many people.

Think back to moments of such sensations in worship? What ways might there be of re-creating or re-imagining them?

This may be a symbol of the way that such “sensory deprivation” has been one of the most shared and fundamental aspects of these last weeks, perhaps in being unable to hold a newly-born grandchild and feel their utter dependence, or in being unable to hold the hand of a sick loved one, or to bid farewell to a family member on their death. These moments of loss are unrepeatably and irrecoverable and may remain with us for the rest of our lives.

Deprivation and exile: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137)

*Read and discuss:
Psalm 137*

This is a verse that many have quoted as they have reflected on these last weeks and months. The Psalm expresses the pain of God’s people who had been taken into exile into Babylon in the sixth century BC (586BC). The answer is that they cannot sing but they can lament: “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” Their lament is a determination to keep faithful and remember, but it also turns to

words of anger and vengeance with which we may feel uncomfortable: “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!”

But in letting the pain and anguish of those words speak we may also give voice to our pain and anguish, even if we replace “daughter of Babylon” with “Corona virus”. This may be a time to

Read and discuss: Psalm 22, in which the Gospel writers and Christian readers ever since have heard the voice and story of Jesus Christ and his death. Reading this prayerfully may be a new way of sharing in his death.

explore other Psalms of lament and anguish, and to mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15).

When the people of God were exiled to Babylon, their grief at the loss of Zion was grief for the loss of the Temple. The Temple was the place which acted as the supreme symbol of God’s presence with them, where God’s name dwelt, a true presence. The Temple was the place where sacrifice could be made, in celebration but also in penitence for sin; this was the means God had ordained for the experience of forgiveness and renewal, an ordinance of grace. To

live without it was devastating. Yet when the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the people in exile, he did not offer them an alternative Temple but told them to disregard competing claimants to provide

Read and discuss: Isaiah 56:1-8.

God’s presence; he urged them to settle down, “to seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you”, to remain faithful until they experienced again God’s blessing. It was perhaps in this period that the people

Read Jeremiah 29:1-14. In what ways does this passage resonate with your experience of deprivation in recent months?

discovered the riches of sabbath observance and of corporate prayer as new

ways of encountering God. It was while away from the Temple that they also discovered a new vision of what the Temple could be and stand for. However, even after the people returned from exile it took many decades before they could rebuild the Temple, and even then it did not match their memories. The prophet Haggai admits, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” and offers God’s encouragement, “Yet now take courage ... for I am with you. My spirit abides among you; do not fear” (Haggai 2:3-5).

In time they rebuilt their lives and community, and rebuilt a new and glorious Temple, but once again the Temple was destroyed in 70AD. Again, as the people of God the Jews learned how to reimagine the Temple in their lives by setting times of prayer that coincided with when sacrifices had been offered. They developed ways of reading the

Does the experience of the loss of the Temple during the exile help you reflect on what you have missed of shared worship and Holy Communion?

Scriptures, of meditating on them and describing how those Scriptures spoke to their circumstances. New forms of prayer and poetry and even of visionary experiences did not replace the Temple but gave them a transformed experience of the encounter with the God who is faithful. Perhaps this too is a time for us all to discover new ways of celebrating God’s presence and God’s grace in word and action and symbolism.

1 Peter uses the language of exile and dispersion to describe the experience of early Christians, an experience that was deepened by the trials they endured whether in outright persecution or in the circumstances of the day (1 Peter 1:1-2, 6-9, 17-21). In these circumstances he recalls them to the words of Psalm 34, “Taste (and see) that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2-3) – eucharistic language, but without the eucharist.

*Read and discuss:
1 Peter 1: 1-9; 2:1-3*

Choosing deprivation

One response of many Jews after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD was that of “fasting for the Temple”. Fasting has a long history as a religious practice with roots in the Bible; living at the same time as Haggai, the prophet Zechariah encouraged the people, calling their fasts “seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful festivals” in anticipation of the day when they would again say “Come, let us go to entreat the favour of the LORD, and to see the LORD of hosts; I myself am going” (Zechariah 8:18-23). In Matthew 6 Jesus talks about fasting alongside giving and praying as core responses to God (Matthew 6:2-18). Fasting can be a way of preparing oneself for a significant occasion or moment of worship; it can offer a pattern of self-discipline undertaken for a period (such as Lent) to help us focus on what God may be saying or calling us to; for some it is an act of sorrow and admission of having chosen the wrong way or made wrong choices. Modelled by John the Baptist

Have you any experiences of fasting as a part of discipleship? What might we learn from viewing our inability to enjoy certain normal and religious gifts as something we choose to do for the sake of our relationship with God and others?

and throughout Christian history (and in other religious traditions) some have found themselves called to a life of abstinence and self-denial as part of their response to God whether to enable prayer and worship or other ways of service. Self-denial is

understood as a choice; it is not imposed or demanded by others.

Methodists have been accustomed to talk of such self-denial, and some parts of the Methodist church observe a period, often a week, of self-denial as part of their commitment to and giving for mission. In this way “deprivation”, freely chosen and embraced, becomes a means of service and solidarity with others. Lent, recalling Jesus’s own setting aside time for preparation for his ministry, is one such period.

“I am now rejoicing in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (*Colossians 1:24*). These are not easy words, and Paul here does not mean that there was something missing from Jesus’s death for which he could make up. Yet he recognises that the struggles and suffering he faces in order to proclaim the Gospel are not just incidentals, or something he would be better without. They are a means in which he can embody the truth of the Gospel and enter into the saving work of Christ for all people. They are a proclaiming of Christ’s death and a sharing in it.

Solidarity in deprivation

Some feel very uncomfortable with the language of “deprivation” being used for our inability to participate in the elements at Holy Communion. They feel that it ignores where serious and damaging deprivation is being experienced, economic deprivation; the multiple forms of disadvantage that prevent people from participating to the full in the blessings of God’s bountiful creation.

What terms do you associate with “Deprivation”: for example weakness, vulnerability, isolation, powerlessness, broken relationships... Where do we see them around us? How are we called as a church to respond to these? How in our worship, in what we celebrate and in what we deprive ourselves of, can we stand in solidarity with the deprived?

The Covid-19 Pandemic has exposed the terrible cost of deprivation in our own country as well as throughout the world. It has brought home how poverty, limited access to health care, to education, to a balanced diet, to housing, to opportunity, but also to open spaces and fresh air, combine together; it has made all too evident how the multiple inequalities of society result in grotesque inequalities in susceptibility to disease and death; it has shown how pervasive throughout society, even in the Church, is a passive acceptance of the failure to treat all people as equally created in the image of God.

Living in hope

In Luke 22:18, before offering the cup to his disciples, Jesus says “I tell you from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes”. Jesus’s act of self-deprivation, before his self-giving in death as a sign of the love of God whose kingdom he proclaims, looks forward to the fulfilment of that kingdom (see again 1 Corinthians 11:26). The meal Jesus shares with his disciples, and that the Church shares, is an anticipation of what our services of Holy Communion call “the heavenly banquet prepared for all people”.

This hope draws on the vision that was given in Isaiah 25 to the people even while they were still in exile, when “the LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines”, when God “will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples and ... will swallow up death for ever”. That hope is our

*Read and discuss:
Isaiah 25:1-9*

hope even as we live under that shroud and share in the “tears the LORD will wipe from all faces”.

“This is the LORD for whom we have waited: let us rejoice and be glad in the LORD’s salvation”!

Celebrating Holy Communion with a Gathered Congregation

The celebration of Holy Communion is a corporate celebration of the Christian community. The services of Holy Communion in the Methodist Worship Book begin with the presiding minister and the people gathering in God’s name, and later they gather round the table to share in the bread and wine.

The Lord’s Supper is a shared meal, where the event of eating and drinking together is both a sign and a means of being in community. A key theological statement of the Methodist Church states that the Lord’s Supper “focusses and expresses both the ongoing and the future life of the Church. ... it prefigures and images the life of the kingdom of God. Christian people, in all their diversity, come together regularly to meet around the Lord’s table, celebrating in word and deed the risen presence of the Christ who gave his life, and sharing in a joint commitment to him in the world.”¹⁰ The gathered congregation is central to both the understanding and practice of Holy Communion as creating, sustaining and expressing intimate community in the Body of Christ.

As local churches are able to gather together for worship and may begin to celebrate Holy Communion again, it is likely that, compared to before the lockdown, a greater number of members will be unable to meet in community. For some time the gathered community is likely to be only a part of the Local Church. It will be appropriate to acknowledge this when reflecting on when and how to celebrate Holy Communion. For example, the Faith and Order Committee has produced a service to celebrate a return to public worship and this includes a celebration of Holy Communion. In some contexts it may not be appropriate to use this straight away, and some may choose to use it at a time when most of the congregation are able to gather together and share in Holy Communion again. (The service, *Beyond Exile*, can be found here: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/seasons-and-themes/worship-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>)

When might it be appropriate for your Local Church to choose not to celebrate Holy Communion? In what ways are abstinence from celebrating Holy Communion a witness to the good news of Jesus in our current context?

The profound isolation experienced by those who are unable to gather with the rest of the community is not new, and some Methodists, and other Christians, have experienced this for a number of years, and some will continue to do so.

¹⁰ The Methodist Conference, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.4.8

The Methodist Church has issued guidance to ensure that when Holy Communion is celebrated it is done so safely. The practical guidance itself describes a situation of deprivation. During a service of Holy Communion it is not possible to perform all the actions usually associated with that celebration and the symbolism is significantly impaired. For example, many of the precautions prevent things which would normally symbolise sharing during the service.

In what ways have the current restrictions on the conduct of a service of Holy Communion prompted you to think about the actions and symbolism differently?

Holy Communion is always more than particular words being spoken over bread and wine. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is a symbol as well as a sign, doing more than indicating or pointing to something else but establishing a connection between “the world of everyday sense experience and relationships and the world of meaning, significance and value, a world of the spirit.”¹¹ The symbols illuminate, extending our vision and stimulating our imagination and expanding our understanding. Limited and impaired symbolism impacts on the meaning and celebration of Holy Communion in our current context. Because sacraments are effective signs, those who share in them participate in the reality to which their symbols point

In the report *His Presence Makes the Feast*, the service of Holy Communion is likened to a performance, a creative re-enactment of the original act where there is:

“...an organic and intrinsic connection between the original creation and the current performance”. “The heart of the service of Holy Communion is an action or series of actions – the blessing, giving, and taking of bread and wine in a manner determined by our Lord. These physical actions symbolise both the occasion and the continuing process by which divine grace impinges on human lives and mysteriously enters them. The actions are given context, meaning and significance by symbolic words, spoken and heard before during and after the performance. In the Lord’s Supper, the original act of saving grace remains unique and unrepeatable but the language of the service recreates in words the original drama and allows the worshipper to become both participant and beneficiary in the saving act.”¹²

Extended Communion

As lockdown begins to be relaxed, those who are unable to attend services of Holy Communion in church may be able to receive Extended Communion. Extended Communion is an act of worship during which the participants receive elements previously set apart at a service of Holy Communion. It is an extension of the celebration of the Local Church to someone who is unable to attend the public service.

¹¹ The Methodist Conference, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 140.

¹² The Methodist Conference, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 145

If people are able to receive visitors it may be possible for Extended Communion to be shared using the liturgy in the Methodist Worship Book in much the normal way and the guidance on the Methodist Church website should be adhered to. The relationship of an act of Extended Communion to the celebration of Holy Communion at which the bread and wine were set apart is significant. For this reason, it is desirable that the service of Extended Communion takes place on the same day although this is not always possible, particularly with the current restrictions and concerns for safety.

When someone is unable to receive visitors, consecrated elements could be delivered to them. 'A Service for the reception of Communion by those who are isolated' (see the Appendix) responds to this pastoral need and is an act of worship during which those elements are received, saying words such as "The body of Christ given for me" and "The blood of Christ shed for me."

Home communion

If someone is able to receive visitors and a presbyter or someone with an authorisation to preside at the Lord's Supper is able to visit, then it is possible for Holy Communion to be celebrated at home.

Spiritual communion

As Methodists we, along with most other Christians, understand Holy Communion to be an instituted means of grace through which we encounter the love and power of God. Instituted means of grace are those commanded by Jesus in Scripture for the universal church, in every time and place. John Wesley taught about several means of grace including prayer as well as reading, hearing and meditating on the Scriptures.

Our Roman Catholic friends, as well as other Christians, have a tradition of "Spiritual Communion" as a means of grace for those times when they are not able to receive sacrament of Holy Communion. In the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves today, it may be that this is a tradition in which Methodists too may experience God's grace. Spiritual Communion is a practice where we entrust ourselves to God in prayer, pledging ourselves to God once more as disciples and praying that God might give us spiritually the same grace we share when we receive Holy Communion. In his sermon on the means of grace, John Wesley taught that God can give us grace with or without physical means: God can work through anything or indeed nothing. Wesley argued that we should make the fullest use of the means of grace we can, but in times when that is not possible, his acknowledgement that God is more than able to work in other ways is a comfort to us:

We know that there is no inherent power in the words that are spoken in prayer, in the letter of Scripture read, the sound thereof heard, or in the bread and wine received in the Lord's supper; but that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the Author of all grace; that the whole power is of Him, whereby, through any of these, there is any blessing conveyed to our souls. We know, likewise, that He is able to give the same grace, though there were no means on the face of the earth. In this sense, we may affirm, that, with regard to God, there is no such thing as means; seeing He is equally able to work whatsoever pleaseth Him, by any, or by none at all.¹³

¹³ Wesley's Sermon on *The Means of Grace*, paragraph II.3

The Faith and Order Committee previously prepared a short act of worship, available on the Methodist Church website,¹⁴ in which we pray that God's purposes may be fulfilled in us, even though we cannot at this time gather at the Lord's Table. This service is designed principally to be used by households, although it could be used collectively in online services.

¹⁴ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/seasons-and-themes/worship-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#spiritual>

Online Worship and the Lord's Supper

This section aims to offer some reflection on how 'appropriate online participation in services of Holy Communion might be encouraged' and offers some practical theological reflection on current possibilities.

Within the Methodist Church there is a diversity of deeply held views about whether there are ways of sharing the bread and wine during online worship which would constitute the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is a matter on which there are contradictory convictions, and where the reasons for those convictions vary. The real desire for some physical engagement during the online celebration of Holy Communion is recognised, but the questions involved potentially lead to a significant re-imagining of sacramental theology on which there would need to be shared understanding throughout the Methodist Church and with our sister churches.

The Conference has adopted the policy that:

... presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are not permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present with the presiding minister to receive the elements.¹⁵

The 2020 Conference also directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a further report on these matters to the 2021 Conference. It is envisaged that this work would probably include reflection on the nature of the sacrament of Holy Communion and also explore some key questions about the nature of online fellowship including the nature of Christ's presence, the meaning of koinonia, the importance of order, and the priority of faith.

When engaging with this topic, it is important to note that the issue is not primarily a matter of church rules and regulations but about the nature of the sacrament of Holy Communion. The church has traditionally held that sacraments are objective realities: not dependent on the worthiness of the minister or the experience or feelings of the recipient. Some days we may feel alive with the fire of the Spirit; on others that we are merely going through the motions, yet the assurance of the sacrament is that, irrespective of feelings, on both occasions we receive the grace of God. An important consequence of this for our reflections on sharing bread and wine whilst online is that our feelings are not determinative. That we have powerfully felt God's presence does not prove it was indeed the sacrament; that we have felt nothing does not prove it was not.

Have there been occasions when you have come 'unwillingly' to an act of worship and have been surprised by joy?

As we reflect on what might be appropriate ways to participate online in a service of Holy Communion, it will be important to bear in mind the nine themes, or components, of Holy Communion identified above (see page 4).

¹⁵ The Methodist Conference, 2018, Resolution 31/2

Modes of participation

Non-sacramental participation

It is to be encouraged that celebrations of Holy Communion with a gathered congregation can be shared online via a suitable streaming platform (e.g. Youtube) or by gathering a group of worshippers on a video-conferencing platform (e.g. Zoom). Worshippers participating in this way can share in worship through prayer and through hearing the scriptures read and expounded. It may be particularly appropriate to invite those participating in this way to lead certain parts of the service, for example reading scripture or offering the intercessions. As always, the presiding minister should lead the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving and should be physically present with the elements. Although the presiding minister cannot invite those not physically present to receive the elements, the 'value' of the celebration of Holy Communion is not only in the reception of the elements. In our worship, we are joined with the whole people of God across the centuries and across the world, and this is particularly expressed in the prayers of intercession. Together with the recalling and proclamation of Christ's death until he comes, these things are undoubtedly a spiritual benefit to those who share in them.

As discussed above (page 11), the Faith and Order Committee produced guidance on Spiritual Communion for use during these times when restrictions on public worship apply due to Covid19. It can be found here: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/16700/spiritual-communion.pdf>. As that guidance notes, "Spiritual Communion is a practice where we entrust ourselves to God in prayer, pledging ourselves to God once more as disciples and praying that God might give us spiritually the same grace we share when we physically receive Holy Communion." It is possible for an online act of worship to include an act of spiritual communion. Such an act of worship may be led by any person who is authorised to lead worship in a Methodist Church.

It is further possible for a streamed service of Holy Communion with a gathered congregation to include an act of spiritual communion which would take place at the point in the service where the participant would normally receive the bread and wine. It is suggested that those who are sharing in the act of spiritual communion online use one of the following prayers:

Either:

Jesus my brother, who brought divine Life out of human death, you are meeting me here and now in this place, in this moment. I pause to remember that the one thing I desire above all others is for you to be with me. Though I cannot receive you in bread and wine today, come into my heart and show me you were already there within me, by your love lighting my darkness from within. Open my eyes to your sacred presence in each thing you have created and in every moment you give. As each of your followers does their part where they are, may we all grow together in love and in richer, fuller communion. Make us one with you and with all who love you in every time and place. Help us to feel and to know that we are united as members of your body. With all your people, may I share your risen life, which renews all creation. I offer myself to you in service, as an act of spiritual worship. Amen.

Or:

O Lord Jesus Christ,
since I cannot now receive You in bread and wine,
I humbly pray that You would come spiritually to my soul.

Silence may be kept

Come, Lord Jesus, come and cleanse me,
heal me, strengthen me,
and unite me to Yourself,
now and for evermore. Amen¹⁶

Sacramental participation

Sacramental participation in an online service of Holy Communion would take place through Extended Communion (as described on page 10 above). The bread and wine are taken from the celebration of Holy Communion and distributed to those who could not be physically present.

The service of Extended Communion enables the participants to prepare themselves to receive the sacrament through prayer and the reading of scripture. It would be equally appropriate for this preparation to take place through sharing in a service of Extended Communion online or over the telephone. At a service of Holy Communion with a gathered congregation some bread and wine is set apart and taken from the communion table for distribution to those who will join in a subsequent service of Extended Communion, ideally on the same day. This service may be conducted online or over the phone with one or more households by a presbyter, deacon, someone authorised to preside at the Lord's Supper, or someone appointed by the Church Council to lead an act of worship of Extended Communion¹⁷.

The Love Feast

Another kind of table fellowship within the Body of Christ is the Love Feast. The Love Feast, or Agape, is a Christian fellowship meal recalling the meals Jesus shared with disciples during his ministry, and it continued to be practiced in the early church (Acts 2:43-47). The service expresses the koinonia or sharing, belonging and fellowship enjoyed within the body of Christ.

The Love Feast, in common with other acts of worship includes prayer, praise, scripture, preaching and mutual fellowship and an offering, but in addition the Love Feast contains a time of Prepared Testimony and the sharing of the Love Feast cake and the Loving Cup. If preferred, individual glasses or cups may be used. Such meals, whether conducted online or in the home, are not a celebration of Holy Communion: there is no question of action towards the food/drink that is shared, other than being thankful for it and consuming it. Guidance on holding a Love Feast online can be found here (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/16539/fando-holding-a-love-feast-online.pdf>).

Testimony is an important part of the Love Feast. In our current context it would be particularly appropriate for testimonies to be offered out of the experiences of wrestling with God's presence and action in situations of loss, grief, struggle and deprivation, or, perhaps, arising out of reflection on some of the questions in this document.

¹⁶ From the Oxford Movement Centenary Prayer Book 1933

¹⁷ Standing Order 609.

Continuing Reflection

The present circumstances have raised in a new way many questions about the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Faith and Order Committee will be giving more extended theological consideration to these in its ongoing work. There is much we can learn from the present situation about the celebration of the Lord's Supper at any time. We encourage deep reflection on our practices, as all members of the Church seek to respond to changing circumstances and the spiritual needs that emerge from them.

Author of life divine,
who has a table spread,
furnished with mystic wine
and everlasting bread,
preserve the life that you have given,
and feed and train us up for heaven.

Our needy souls sustain
with fresh supplies of love,
till all your life we gain,
and all your fullness prove,
and, strengthened by your perfect grace,
behold without a veil your face.

Charles Wesley (1770-1788)

Appendix

A SERVICE FOR THE RECEPTION OF COMMUNION BY THOSE WHO ARE ISOLATED

NOTES

- 1 This service is an act of worship during which the participant(s) receive elements previously set apart at a service of *Holy Communion*.
- 2 This service is for an individual or a household to receive communion when no-one is able to enter their home in order to preside at a service of Holy Communion or to lead a service of Extended Communion.
- 3 The setting apart of bread and wine in the service of public worship takes place when all have communicated. That which is set apart should be placed in a home communion set or other suitable vessels provided by the Church Council, before the cloth is placed over the rest of the elements, and should be taken from the communion table to a safe place where it can be kept until the time when it is to be taken to a home.
- 4 It is desirable that communion in a home using this Order should be received on the same day as the bread and wine have been set apart. When it is known that this will not be possible and there will be some delay, consideration should be given to the setting apart of some of the bread in the form of wafers for use in the home.
- 5 The presbyter in pastoral charge should have a pastoral conversation with those who will receive Extended Communion in this way explaining its significance and addressing practicalities. It may be appropriate for Extended Communion to be provided as bread, wine or both. The recipient may receive by dipping the bread in the wine, using the words "The body and blood of Christ given for me." Where wafers are used, another possibility is that, following the celebration of Holy Communion, a drop of the wine can be placed on them and allowed to dry. Careful attention must be paid to all relevant guidance and hygiene precautions when the elements are being set aside, stored and delivered to their recipient. Recipients should be advised that any elements remaining should be reverently consumed or otherwise reverently disposed of..
- 6 If there is more than one communicant, prayers such as those at nos. 4, 5, 10, 11, 13, and 14 may be said together, and the intercession at no. 9 may be said responsively.
- 7 The scripture reading(s) at no. 7 may appropriately be selected from among those which were used at the service of Holy Communion at which the elements were set apart. A brief exposition may be provided by the preacher at that service to be read at no. 8.

1 *The bread and wine are reverently set out.*

2 *Silence*

3 Loving God,
thank you that your Church has taken bread and wine
and given thanks over them according to our Lord's command;
thank you that *N* has brought these holy gifts
that I may share in the communion of Christ's body and blood;
thank you that we who are many are one body, because we all share in one bread.
Amen.

4 Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

5 *Silence*

Most merciful God,
I confess to you
before the whole company of heaven
that I have sinned
in thought, word and deed,
and in what I have failed to do.
Forgive me my sins,
heal me by your Spirit
and raise me to new life in Christ. Amen.

If we confess our sins,
God is faithful and just,
and will forgive our sins,
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

6 Generous God,
I come to this feast which you have prepared,
as a guest whom you have invited:
may I receive the bread of eternal life
which you provide for our healing and strength;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

7 *One or more short readings from scripture, including a passage from the Gospels.*

8 *Silence to meditate on the reading(s), or to read or listen to a brief exposition.*

9 *These or some other prayers of thanksgiving and intercession may be said:*

Praise be to you, O God,
for creating all things
and for sending your Son Jesus Christ
to be our Saviour.
Praise be to you
for the outpouring of your Holy Spirit,
for our life together in your Church
and for our calling to serve you in the world.
Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power,
the majesty and the splendour,
now and for ever. Amen.

Appropriate concerns may be recalled here, and may include reference to the life of the local church.

Lord God, make your ways known upon earth,
and your saving power among all peoples.

Renew your Church in holiness,
and help us to serve you with joy.

Guide the leaders of this and every nation,
that justice may prevail throughout the world.

Bless and strengthen the sick and the suffering,
and grant us your salvation.

Make us one with the apostles and martyrs,
and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting.

10 *The Lord's Prayer*

EITHER

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Save us from the time of Trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

OR

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

11 *EITHER*

We do not presume
to come to this your table,
merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up
the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh
of your dear Son Jesus Christ,
 and to drink his blood,
that we may evermore dwell in him
and he in us. Amen.

OR

Lord, we come to your table,
trusting in your mercy
and not in any goodness of our own.
We are not worthy
even to gather up
the crumbs under your table,
but it is your nature always to have mercy,
and on that we depend.
So feed us with the body and blood
of Jesus Christ, your Son,
that we may for ever
live in him and he in us.
Amen.

12 Lord Jesus Christ,
I receive this holy sacrament in remembrance that you died for *me* and for all,
and *I* feed on you in *my heart* by faith with thanksgiving.

Bread and wine are received with these or similar words:

The body of Christ, given for me. Amen.

The blood of Christ, shed for me. Amen.

13 I thank you Lord that you have fed me in this sacrament,
in company with all your people of every time and place,
uniting us with one another and with Christ,
and giving us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet
prepared for all people. Amen.

14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all. Amen.