

39. Holy Communion and Online Worship

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Resolutions	<p>39/1. The Conference receives the Report.</p> <p>39/2. The Conference commends the report to Districts and Circuits for study and reflection.</p> <p>39/3. The Conference adopts a period of discernment from 1 September 2021 until 31 August 2024, in which presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper be permitted to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together through electronic means, and directs all who preside at such celebrations to consider prayerfully the guidance in this report in their preparation and conduct of them and observe the parameters set out in paragraph 7.4.</p> <p>39/4. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to receive feedback on the period of discernment and to report to the Conference of 2024 with further recommendations.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aims	This report explores Holy Communion and online worship and recommends that there is a period of discernment during which the Methodist people are invited to experience services of the Lord's Supper online.
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduction and context ● What it means to be the Church ● Understandings of the Sacrament and theologies of Holy Communion ● What it means to be human in a digital world ● Practical considerations ● Recommendation for a period of discernment

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Background documents	<i>Called to Love and Praise, 1999</i> <i>His Presence Makes the Feast, 2003</i> <i>Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media, 2015</i> <i>The Methodist Worship Book</i>
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 In 2020 the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to “undertake further reflection on Holy Communion, and to bring a report and recommendations regarding ‘online communion’ to the 2021 Conference” (Resolution 32/4). Methodists hold a variety of views about Holy Communion, as is explored in the rest of this report. The Faith and Order Committee considered this breadth of understanding and other perspectives and the different theological questions involved. It was not possible to explore the issues fully in the time available. However, on the basis of the explorations so far, the Committee recommends that the Methodist people be invited, during a period of discernment, to experience services of the Lord’s Supper being held online and to feed back their reflections to a later Conference. The full recommendation can be found in section 7 of this report.
- 1.2 Within the Faith and Order Committee, as in the Methodist Church in Great Britain¹, there are different views on the theological questions raised by ‘online communion’ and some of these require further exploration. The Committee is agreed, however, that it is right for this report and its recommendations to be put to the Conference.
- 1.3 When considering this issue, 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 argument and what is an assumption based on prior experience, recognising that many opinions will naturally be a mixture of the two.

1 In the remainder of the report, the Methodist Church in Great Britain is generally referred to as ‘the Methodist Church’.

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- 1.4 Those who have worked on this report also realised that it matters to pay careful attention to the language used to describe both worship when people gather in a building and worship when people gather online. It is easy for language to betray an assumption that gathering online is a lesser experience. For example, for some time it was usual to refer to life offline as IRL (in real life). This implies that experiences online are somehow not real and also that life online and offline are somehow totally separate. Both of these assumptions are open to question. This report therefore refers to worship where the congregation gathers in a single building or place as 'onsite worship'. This is simply an attempt to use as neutral a term as possible. In order to reflect the breadth of the ways in which Methodists refer to gathering at the Lord's table, the terms 'Holy Communion' 'the Lord's Supper' and 'Eucharist' are used interchangeably throughout the report.

2. Context

- 2.1 Methodism was born out of an imaginative response to a new context. During the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century, George Whitefield drew his friend John Wesley into his practice of preaching in fields. Wesley was reluctant at first. Methodists ever remember that he described his first experience of field preaching as "submitting to be more vile".² However, Wesley found that his doubts disappeared as he recognised that field preaching reached people who did not normally attend a church. In seeking to care for these new converts, Wesley was soon adapting the established practice of religious societies and eventually created a Connexion of Methodist Societies.
- 2.2 It is always important to be careful and nuanced when making historical comparisons. It is too easy to fall into the simplistic argument that those who support a particular proposal are acting in the spirit of John Wesley and those who have questions or who oppose it are therefore cast as being somehow against Wesley. Wesley only took the step of preaching in fields after noting that the Sermon on the Mount gave him biblical precedent³ and he did not accept all the new and innovative responses to his context proposed by the lay preachers who worked with him (for example, several of them thought that they should preside at Holy Communion without being ordained). Nevertheless, like Wesley, Methodists today find themselves grappling with changing contexts, including those created by advances in digital technology, and seek a way forward as a Connexion. Like Wesley, we seek to be faithful to our theology and our tradition and exercise a fair dose of Methodist pragmatism, while we ask ourselves how

2 *Journal of John Wesley*, 2 April 1739

3 *Journal of John Wesley*, 1 April 1739

we might respond, and we may, like Wesley, find ourselves at times being pushed beyond the point where we feel comfortable. We will need grace to discern where our discomfort is based on good theological foundations and needs to be heeded and where it might be set aside in answer to the call of God. There are, therefore, questions for reflection provided at the end of this report and all members of the Methodist Church are encouraged to make use of them throughout the period of discernment.

- 2.3 The global pandemic of 2020 has brought into focus in a new way questions which were already being asked about what it means to be the Church and what it means to worship, particularly to worship online. For many Methodists lockdown meant suddenly being forced to experiment with worship online and discovering new things which could be done with technology; others were already immersed in online worship well before the pandemic. The closing of church buildings raised once more (and more acutely) the questions of what it means to be the Church when people cannot meet in the same building and, in particular, of whether it is consistent with Methodist theology and practice to offer the Lord's Supper during an online service. This is not simply a question to be asked during the pandemic, however: some Methodists were already exploring what a digital church or hybrid church might mean before lockdown and will continue to do so in the future.
- 2.4 Methodists understand Holy Communion to be an instituted means of grace and central to Christian worship. The Conference has considered the question of online Holy Communion previously; the 2015 Conference received as an interim report *Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media* which concluded: "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"⁴. This was reaffirmed at the 2018 Conference, which specifically 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."⁵ However, the Conference also directed that further work be done on both the specific issue of Holy Communion mediated through social media and the more general theological questions raised by online life.

4 *Holy Communion mediated through social media*, Conference Agenda 2015, paragraph 55

5 Resolution 31/2, 2018

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- 2.5 The 2020 Conference encouraged Local Churches to reflect on the current situation and the following resolution was passed: “The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to undertake further reflection on Holy Communion, and to bring a report and recommendations regarding ‘online communion’ to the 2021 Conference”⁶. For some, it was a matter of great pain that the Conference did not simply agree immediately that Methodists were permitted to hold services of the Lord’s Supper in the context of online worship. For others, it was a matter of great concern that encouraging Methodists to celebrate the Lord’s Supper online, or doing so too quickly and without careful reflection, might represent a fundamental change in our doctrine and practice. The Committee recognises that an inability to receive Holy Communion during a time of particular struggle and crisis has been painful for many. The Committee also recognises that the year since March 2020 has brought opportunities to worship in new ways which will continue after restrictions on social mixing have been lifted. This is not a question which will fade once the pandemic is over – the life of the Church is changing and reflection on what that might mean will continue.
- 2.6 Those who have prepared this report have increasingly realised that to ask, ‘should Methodists be able to celebrate the Eucharist online’, is to ask profoundly important questions about who we are as a Church, how we understand the mystery of Holy Communion and how our life and existence are being impacted by the increasing integration of digital technology into our everyday lives. The Committee resists, therefore, responding to the Conference resolution with a simple and legalistic ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Rather, the Committee invites the Methodist people, with reverence and joy, to a time of discernment, both experiencing and reflecting upon what it might mean to celebrate the Lord’s Supper online and to use this as an opportunity to discuss the issues raised in our churches thereby deepening our understanding of our life together. The Committee puts this recommendation, recognising that there will be many challenges ahead. There will be those who cannot, with integrity, participate and it will be important to be attentive to the theological understandings and needs of those who can only celebrate the Lord’s Supper onsite. Equally, as the rest of this report explores, celebrating online will raise very important issues and challenges; many of which are equally applicable to our celebrations of onsite Holy Communion. When the Methodist Church faced the question of whether children might be permitted to receive the elements, it became an opportunity for all of its members to reflect again on their own participation in this sacrament. The Committee prays that the same might be true on this occasion.

6 Resolution 32/4, 2020

- 2.7 This report, therefore, offers a reflection on some of the issues which need to be considered as this new way of worshipping together is explored. Such reflections can never be complete and there is continuing theological work on online life. They are, however, important and the Committee urges all members of the Methodist Church (not just those whose privilege it is to preside) to pray and to ponder as the whole of the Methodist Church learns together. The report offers some general reflections to frame the discussion and then groups these issues under three main headings before offering a proposal and some questions for reflection which are addressed to all those who may be involved in celebrating the Eucharist online.
- 2.8 Methodists will have different experiences and expectations of meeting online. For some gathering online is an inferior form of gathering forced upon them by the pandemic with worship onsite seen as either the only way or a far preferable way for the Church truly to gather. Others were advocating for so-called 'hybrid church', with a mixture of onsite and online worship before the pandemic and are committed to pursuing this into the future. Some argue that online worship and gathering is one part of the Church's multifaceted mission. Still others have discovered new possibilities in online worship during the pandemic and are keen to continue to explore them once the pandemic is over. The whole of the Methodist Church needs to recognise the breadth of these experiences. Considering possibilities for the Lord's Supper to be held online will therefore raise profound questions about what it means to gather and what it means to be present to each other when we remain embodied physical beings but cannot or do not gather in the same location. This in turn, raises questions about what it means to be a church when we do not meet in the same location.
- 2.9 During the COVID-19 restrictions, some have been able to join online gatherings by using the telephone to join, for example, a Zoom call. This is clearly an important way to broaden the number of people who can be included in online worship and this report assumes that the concept of an online gathering includes those joining by telephone.
- 2.10 For some gathering online is always less than a full gathering. For others, it opens up possibilities of meeting with others which did not exist in the pre-digital world or may be the preferred way to meet for any number of reasons. Meeting online can make it harder to have a sense of corporate worship, it prevents physical contact and the kind of clues gathered from body language as well as the indefinable atmosphere of worship which is possible when gathered onsite. At the same time, it is possible to be present in the same location but mentally and emotionally absent and it is possible for those meeting online to be attentive and

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open to each other. Some are becoming accustomed to fostering relationships partially offline and partially online. Learning what it means to celebrate the Lord's Supper online raises important issues about what it means to gather, and this issue is returned to later in the report.

- 2.11 There are also issues around the nature of Holy Communion itself and the fact that different Methodists understand this differently. It is possible to group such understandings very roughly under three approaches, whilst recognising that the Eucharist is a mystery and people's faith experience cannot always be categorised. Some Christians speak of the 'real presence' and see Christ's presence as being in some way embodied in the bread and wine. For others, the presence of Christ is understood more broadly and the emphasis falls on Christ's presence among the congregation and in the reception of the elements: Christ is understood faithfully to feed the believer who receives the bread and wine. The third heading is that of 'memorialism', in which the emphasis falls on the congregation's act of remembering Christ's sacrifice.
- 2.12 There is no single Methodist position about how Christ is present in Holy Communion; indeed the liturgies authorised by the Conference are carefully written so that the various understandings of Christ's presence may be heard, thus enabling those who understand Holy Communion differently still to worship together. Ultimately, the Lord's Supper is a mystery which is greater than our attempts to explain it. However, different understandings of Christ's presence can lead to different conclusions about the Lord's Supper online. This report, therefore, gives careful consideration to both the breadth and variety of how Methodists understand the nature of the Lord's Supper and the way in which previous Conference reports noted the different aspects of faith and experience which Holy Communion embodies and enables. This issue will require particular attention during the period of discernment, both in exploring together how our breadth of understanding is best celebrated and honoured while sharing in Holy Communion online, and in careful consideration of the needs of those who cannot with integrity take part in or preside at such a celebration.
- 2.13 Specific consideration has been given to online communion which involved both the person presiding and those in another location eating the bread and drinking the wine. Issues raised by such practices such as 'vicarious communion' (that is the idea the presbyter receives the bread and wine on behalf of the congregation) or 'spiritual communion' (that is when, unable to receive physically, we pray God might give us spiritually the same grace we receive through Holy Communion) were inevitably raised during discussions. It is the view of the Committee that 'vicarious communion' is in tension with Methodist understandings of the priesthood of all believers and neglects the significance of the gathering of

the people of God at the Lord's Table. As the report below explores more fully, Methodists believe in the shared priesthood of the entire faith community and believes that a gathered community is essential for the celebration of Holy Communion. It is not therefore Methodist practice for the person presiding to receive bread and wine on behalf of the congregation. Although 'spiritual communion' was not part of Methodist practice before the COVID-19 pandemic, guidance and reflection on 'spiritual communion' has already been made available in the Faith and Order document *Holy Communion: Responding Pastorally in the light of Covid 19*⁷.

- 2.14 Methodists emphasise that worship should be open to all and inclusive of all. Online worship raises issues of inclusion for many because it includes some who could not attend onsite worship and excludes others who could attend onsite worship. During the period of discernment, it will be important to be attentive to this issue and for each church community to reflect on who is being included and, more importantly, who is being excluded, in all acts of worship. We urge Local Churches to listen carefully to those who have particular needs, remembering that, for example, people with different physical disabilities or who live with neuro diversity have different experiences of, and needs regarding, the use of technology.
- 2.15 The Faith and Order Committee recognises that the recommendation in this report is likely to have some implications for Church unity both within the Methodist Church and with ecumenical partners. The Committee noted the multiplicity of our ecumenical relationships which includes being in covenant with the Church of England and the Covenanted Churches in Wales as well as working alongside other denominations. Some of our Local Ecumenical Partnerships and Local Ecumenical Areas are already working in a situation where the different denominations represented have reached different conclusions on this issue.
- 2.16 The Committee also recognises that the issues raised in this report are part of a wider debate. This report is focused solely on the issue of online Holy Communion and further work is already in progress on the wider issue of online life. The proposals for online Holy Communion should not be taken as a model for the sacrament of baptism – we note that the Church has never assumed that what can be said of one sacrament must be applied to the other; for example baptism is to be received once in a lifetime whereas Christians are urged to receive the Eucharist on a regular basis.

7 [f-and-o-holy-communion-responding-pastorally-covid-19-100720.pdf](#) (methodist.org.uk)

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3. Theological Issue 1: What it means to be the Church

- 3.1 The question of the nature of 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.
- 3.2 The Methodist Church has expressed its understanding of itself as a Church and its place within the universal Church in the 1999 Conference Statement, *Called to Love and Praise*. This statement remains definitive for British Methodism and informs its work with other denominations (for example, the 2012 joint Anglican-Methodist report, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*) as well as its own deliberations on issues of worship, mission and ministry. According to *Called to Love and Praise*, the Church (as Methodists understand it) is:
- Rooted in the biblical witness to God's triune mission, a mission reflected in creation, redemption and the promise of God's final reign.
 - Patterned on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - Formed and led by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness is a key Methodist principle and therefore the Church is called to be a holy people.
 - Related to the biblical accounts of God's covenant people, gathered by God from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and called to express God's love in worship, mutual love and mission.
 - Diverse by its very nature. In the New Testament we witness different theological emphases, different relations with Judaism, different forms of leadership.
 - Both the gathering of those, in a particular locality, who share a common Christian faith and mutual commitment and the entire body of Christ – the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' Church – throughout the world and throughout history. The report notes that the Greek word *ekklesia* which originally meant 'assembly' (2.2.1) is used of both the universal and the local church (2.1.12).
- 3.3 Theologically, both the local and universal Church are bound together through *koinonia*, that deep communion which binds us to Christ and to each other. Practically, this is expressed (for Methodists) in the principle of connexionalism,

through which different Local Churches bear each other's burdens and are accountable to each other.

- 3.4 *Called to Love and Praise* goes on to affirm the importance of the connexional principle in the Methodist understanding of Church, stating that connexionalism “witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God himself.”⁸ .
- 3.5 Those preparing this report noted how many of these characteristics, especially those named in paragraph 3.2 above, are celebrated in the Eucharist. *Called to Love and Praise* also noted that debate continues about what characteristics are essential to the Church and that Methodists recognise the centrality of the sacraments of both Baptism and Eucharist⁹. It further notes the variety of answers which have been given in the history of the Church to the question ‘when is a body, rightly called a church?’ and it is worth quoting the reflection given on this question:

“Some, notably in the Catholic tradition, have defined the Church and its boundaries with reference to a particular ministerial order: the Church is a body of people in communion with the Pope, or with the bishops. Many in the Reformation tradition have defined the Church as ‘wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution’. Others, again, have considered the Church to be the community of the baptised. There are difficulties with all these views. Many Methodists will find the Reformation view attractive, provided it emphasises, as it has not always done, that conduct, as well as belief, help to define the Church. There still, however, remains the question: how is ‘the Word of God’ to be defined? There is something to be said for a specific, but less tightly drawn criterion: wherever people join together to respond to Christ as Lord – there is the Church. Methodists, it may be added, have generally been reluctant to unchurch any body of professedly Christian believers, even where they may lack certain elements – for example, the celebration of the two gospel sacraments – which Methodists consider normative for the Church.”¹⁰

- 3.6 *Called to Love and Praise* was published in 1999. Since that time Methodists have continued to reflect on the nature of the Church, most notably in the context of discussions with the Church of England on Fresh Expressions of Church. This

8 The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise* 4.6.1

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

10 The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise* 2.4.9

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raised again the question of how a community of people might be recognised as Church, and the following quotation from Rowan Williams proved helpful:

“If ‘church’ is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other, there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style, so long as we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart of every expression of Christian life in common.”¹¹

- 3.7 *Called to Love and Praise* also reflected on how the four classic marks of the Church, *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*, are embodied in living relationships. New expressions of the Church have brought fresh challenge about examining the vibrancy and importance of a living relationship, thereby encouraging all forms of church to consider and deepen our corporate relationship with God (*holy*), each other (*one*), the wider Church (*catholic*) and our relational mission in, to and with the wider world (*apostolic*).
- 3.8 The Faith and Order Committee notes, therefore, that Methodists refuse to unchurch others but do consider the celebration of the two gospel sacraments as normative for the Church. Equally, there is continued emphasis in a Methodist understanding of the Church on interdependence as shaping an individual's discipleship. While Holy Communion is rightly seen as an opportunity to deepen individual discipleship, it is not an individualistic act of devotion, but one shared with a gathered community. There will be some Methodists for whom online worship does not sufficiently evoke the gathered, corporate nature of the Church and Eucharist. For those who believe it can and should do so, there will be some important questions to face around what it means to gather online.
- 3.9 Methodism has long emphasised both that the Church is to be open and inclusive and also that it invites commitment and shared responsibility. Online worship invites us to think again creatively about how both of these emphases can be maintained. Worship during the pandemic has allowed some to be included who were previously excluded, such as those who are housebound or shift-workers, and Local Churches are faced with the challenge of continuing to include such people in worship and not just in their pastoral care. In considering what it means to be an inclusive church serious consideration must be given to the needs of those who can only be present via online or other electronic means. It is always possible in worship for the congregation to become observers rather than participants and joining worship using a screen of some kind may make this

11 Foreword to *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. vii.

a particular issue, but such difficulties can be overcome with careful, creative attention.

- 3.10 Whether gathered electronically or in a building, in common with our ecumenical partners the Methodist Church emphasises the value of public worship which is open to anyone. Locking the doors once the ‘regulars’ are here or having a ‘private’ e-link only, both run contrary to the spirit of public worship. Although there are times when onsite Holy Communion can, in effect, be a private occasion, the Committee still affirms the principle that worship should be public if possible. At the same time, there can be real concerns around safeguarding which might encourage use of a link which is sent only to particular people. Encouraging an inclusive welcome, while practising good safeguarding policies, is an intrinsic necessity for any form of church gathering. The period of discernment will be an important opportunity to reflect on what is best practice in this regard.

3.11 Summary

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.

4 Theological Issue 2: Understandings of the Sacrament and theologies of Holy Communion

- 4.1 There is no one Methodist understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist. The Methodist Conference has recognised that a range of understandings is expressed in the Methodist Church’s hymns and liturgies and its practice as much as in its doctrinal statements. While the Conference has commended reports on Holy Communion which explore theological understandings of the Eucharist, most notably *His Presence Makes the Feast*, those reports have been careful to recognise and honour the breadth of understandings among Methodists.
- 4.2 The *Deed of Union* recognises two sacraments which are “of divine appointment and perpetual obligation” and of which “it is the duty and privilege of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves”; these are baptism and Holy

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Communion¹². John Wesley preached on the duty of constant communion and, although practice has varied over the years and in different traditions of Methodism, both Methodist history and the significance which the Deed of Union gives to Holy Communion reminds us that part of Methodist discipleship is regular reception of the Lord's Supper.

- 4.3 A simple approach to online Holy Communion might be to ask what is essential in order for the Lord's Supper to be shared and whether this can be done online. However, the danger of this question is that it implies that it is desirable to focus on the minimum which needs to be done, rather than on the fullness of what Holy Communion can mean¹³. This then risks a descent into petty legalism which does not reflect the grace, mercy and the mystery which is at the heart of the Eucharist. Methodism has never made use of the concept of a 'valid' or 'invalid' sacrament in order to specify the minimum conditions which need to be met for a service to be recognised as a Holy Communion. In order to be faithful to the Methodist way of doing theology, the Faith and Order Committee therefore seeks instead to set out a shared understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper and then to ask how this may best be demonstrated in *all* Methodist celebrations of the Lord's Supper, recognising that there is always room to improve our practice, however we gather, and that there ought not to be barriers to online communion which are not there for onsite celebrations.
- 4.4 The 2003 Conference Report, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, set out key elements of a Methodist theological understanding of the Lord's Supper. While much of this report was a survey of the range of understandings which existed at the time within Methodism, it also offered nine "essential components or themes of the Methodist Church's theology of Holy Communion."¹⁴ These are:
- **Thanksgiving (or Eucharist)** noting that while for some the Lord's Supper has been seen as a solemn memorial of the Lord's death, the trend in recent years has been to "stress the concept of thanksgiving for the totality of God's work"¹⁵.
 - **Life in Unity (koinonia)** while recognising the real tensions that exist as some branches of the Christian Church believe that it is only appropriate for those already united in faith and Church life to share in the Eucharist together, the report nonetheless notes the wide agreement that the Lord's Supper both

12 *Deed of Union*, clause 4

13 The Methodist Church, 1990, *The Sunday Service Great Prayer of Thanksgiving*, page 134

14 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 8 and 147-194

15 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 151

demonstrates the oneness of Christ and his people and also “creates and expresses the one communion and fellowship of all Christians”¹⁶.

- **Remembering (Anamnesis)** noting that ‘remembering’ can be seen as what is sometimes called a ‘bare memorial’ but that work on the biblical meaning of the word has reminded us that *anamnesis* is a “highly dynamic concept which involves bringing into the present the continued fruitfulness and efficacy of Christ’s saving work”¹⁷.
- **Sacrifice** noting that this has been a controversial issue in Christian history and concluding, “In Holy Communion Methodists plead the completed and eternal sacrifice of Christ, and we offer ourselves anew in and through the eternal sacrifice, but we do not in any way offer the sacrifice again. At Holy Communion what Methodists do is to make a memorial of and participate in the offering of Christ.”¹⁸
- **Presence** noting that when Christian talk about the ‘real presence of Christ’ at the Lord’s Supper this may carry a range of meanings, “the general presence of the risen and ascended Christ who is with us always, the presence of Christ as ‘invisible host’, welcoming us to His table, the presence of Christ in the action of ‘breaking bread’, the presence of Christ in the act of sharing in the consecrated bread and wine and the fellowship expressed and created by it, and the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements”¹⁹. While it is possible to agree on many of these understandings, there is continuing disagreement about whether Christ is present in the consecrated elements of bread and wine. This is not a particular issue for most Methodists who do not emphasise a particular moment or word in the liturgy as effecting an act of consecration.²⁰ The report concludes that “individual Methodists will have widely varying views on the concept of the ‘real presence’.”²¹
- **The work of the Spirit (epiclesis)** noting again that Methodists do not emphasise a particular moment or word in the liturgy as effecting consecration and that there has been some controversy about how appropriate it is to invoke the work of the Spirit on the bread and wine as

16 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 155

17 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 159

18 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 171

19 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 172

20 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 174

21 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 179

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inanimate objects. The *Methodist Worship Book* includes a standard form for the epiclesis which “contained the classical Wesleyan ambiguity in a prayer for the Spirit to descend on both the gifts and the people.”²²

- **Anticipation (eschatology)**, described in the report as a central eucharistic theme which has been dormant in the life of the Church but which has been revived in recent years.
- **Mission and Justice** noting both the biblical call to live justly and that from the earliest times, Holy Communion has been seen as implying a personal and corporate commitment to mission and justice.
- **Personal Devotion.** In almost all Christian traditions, receiving Holy Communion is seen as a very significant element in Christian devotion²³. When John Wesley saw Holy Communion as a ‘converting ordinance’, he did so in the context of a serious search for salvation. He believed that, within the context of experiencing the vividness of the sign, the ‘penny would drop’ for many and they would receive the necessary assurance that Christ had indeed died for them and achieved their salvation. Most Methodists would still feel that Wesley’s approach was valid and that whatever the Church’s discipline over eucharistic communion, it should never exclude those who come with the serious intention that Wesley assumed.²⁴

4.5 *His Presence Makes the Feast* also notes that the eucharistic prayer took on a traditional form in both East and West; while the order varied, these elements were common: the opening dialogue, thanksgiving for creation and redemption, the Sanctus (‘Holy, Holy, Holy ... ‘), the account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the proclamation of the memorial act, a prayer invoking the Holy Spirit on the people and the gifts, a brief act of intercession, a final doxology and a concluding ‘Amen’. In most versions there was a recital of the institution narrative using words and phrases drawn from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians.²⁵

4.6 The *Methodist Worship Book* also reflects many of the same themes in the introduction to the *Orders of Service for Holy Communion*, which is as follows:

22 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 184

23 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 192

24 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 194

25 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 201-202

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“Many of the themes of John and Charles Wesley’s Hymns on the Lord’s Supper (1745) are reflected in present-day ecumenical understanding of this sacrament. In communion with the people of God in heaven and on earth, we give thanks for God’s mighty acts in creation and redemption, represented supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this means of grace, the Church joyfully celebrates the presence of Christ in its midst, calls to mind his sacrifice and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is united with him as the Body of Christ. At the Lord’s table, Christ’s disciples share bread and wine, the tokens of his dying love and the food for the earthly pilgrimage, which are also a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, prepared for all people. Those who gather around 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. One of the keynotes of the Methodist revival was John Wesley’s emphasis on ‘The Duty of Constant Communion’ and it is still the duty and privilege of members of the Methodist Church to share in this sacrament.”²⁶

- 4.7 The *Methodist Worship Book* goes on to note that the services of Holy Communion are set out under two historic headings ‘The Ministry of the Word’ (a reminder that in a Methodist context, the ministry of the Word should always be included in a celebration of the Lord’s Supper) and the ‘Lord’s Supper’ and that, in the tradition of the Church, Jesus’ seven actions with the bread and wine have been given a fourfold shape ‘Taking, Giving Thanks, Breaking and Sharing’²⁷.
- 4.8 It is important to note the breadth of the themes explored in *His Presence Makes the Feast* and the importance that all acts of Holy Communion embody them, whilst recognising that it is not possible to guarantee their presence in all onsite Methodist celebrations of Holy Communion. The question, therefore, is not whether online communion can meet some minimum legalistic definition of Holy Communion, but whether in celebrating the Lord’s Supper, the breadth and ultimate mystery of the Eucharist can be expressed.
- 4.9 While noting the importance of all of these themes there are some worth highlighting, because they are particularly important to think through in the context of online Holy Communion.
- 4.10 In many Christian traditions it is the role of a priest to preside at Holy Communion. Methodists believe that the priesthood of Jesus Christ is shared with the whole Church and not focused solely in the person of the ordained presbyter. As the *Deed of Union* puts it, “the Methodist Church holds the doctrine

26 *The Methodist Worship Book*, page 114

27 *The Methodist Worship Book*, page 115

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of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs to a particular order or class of people, but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised. For the sake of church order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments.”²⁸

- 4.11 The 2020 Conference report *Ministry in the Methodist Church* noted the following:

“In the New Testament, understandings of priesthood relate to “the priesthood of the body of believers, rather than the priesthood of every believer, ... which stresses the inter-dependence of believers.”²⁹ Although Methodists sometimes struggle with the language of ‘priesthood’, it has been central in Methodist thinking and practice because it relates to the shared ministry of the whole faith community.”³⁰

- 4.12 In saying this, *Ministry in the Methodist Church* reaffirms the point made by *Called to Love and Praise* which also noted that the priesthood of all believers is often interpreted individualistically (as if each believer is therefore a priest) and that the Scriptures point us instead to the priesthood of the body of believers and stresses the interdependence of the Church. Thus, it is the Church as a whole which is priestly³¹ and Methodists have, therefore, been wary of placing too much stress on the role of the presiding presbyter at the Lord’s Supper. The role of the president is to represent and give expression to the priesthood which is shared with all.
- 4.13 This has important implications for all celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. Because Methodist thinking emphasises the corporate nature of the priesthood of all believers it conceives of the whole community celebrating Holy Communion and therefore does not envisage the presiding minister receiving the bread and wine on behalf of the people. Holy Communion is the corporate celebration of all taking part and the congregation ought not to be spectators of something which appears to be a private mass. For this reason, any celebration of the Eucharist at which only the presiding presbyter receives the elements does not represent a Methodist understanding of the sacrament. By extension, when Holy Communion is celebrated with the congregation gathered online, the offer to receive should be

28 *Deed of Union*, clause 4

29 The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.5.3

30 The Methodist Church, 2020, *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 4.2

31 The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.5.2

given to the community and not just those who are in the same physical location as the one presiding. Hybrid services (where some of the congregation is present in the building but which is also being streamed) will require particular attention to the issue of who is part of the gathered congregation.

- 4.14 When Holy Communion is celebrated onsite, the person presiding, as representative of the priestly community, has a particular role on behalf of those who gather for worship. They bear a particular responsibility for how the Lord's Supper is celebrated and for ensuring that the words and actions used express the fullness of the mystery of the Eucharist. The person presiding takes the bread and wine, gives thanks, breaks the bread and distributes the bread and wine to the assembled company. There is a powerful, dramatic symbolism to this service which must not be lost³². This will mean that in an online service of Holy Communion, particular attention needs to be given to the words of invitation and the point of 'distribution' to emphasise the shared and corporate nature of the act.
- 4.15 There is the question of the gathering or unity of the congregation. *His Presence Makes the Feast* speaks of Holy Communion "creating, sustaining and expressing intimate community in the Body of Christ"³³ but notes that this has been more and less prominent at different times in history. It highlights that there are different aspects of unity which are relevant: "For some the emphasis would be on the unity of the believers in an individual congregation; others would emphasise unity with the Universal Church across time and space"³⁴." Online Holy Communion may be a particularly appropriate opportunity to celebrate that the congregation is united in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit both with each other and with the universal Church.
- 4.16 *His Presence Makes the Feast* highlights the importance of both remembering (*anamnesis*) and expectation (eschatology) in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This suggests that there is a delicate balance to be reached in our understanding of sacramental time and how it impacts our celebration of the sacraments here and now. In the Eucharist there is (in a sense) a making present of that which has already happened (Christ's death and resurrection), as well as an anticipation of the eschatological kingdom. We participate both in the past and the future, but we live and worship in the present. Each celebration of Holy Communion is both a participation in the universal worship of the people of God, which transcends the boundaries of time and space, and the gathering of a particular group of people in their own context.

32 The Methodist Church, 1990 *The Sunday Service Great Prayer of Thanksgiving*, page 138

33 The Methodist Church, 2003, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 153

34 The Methodist Church, *His Presence Makes the Feast*, 155

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- 4.17 The question of Christ's presence is intimately related to the question of the unity of the worshippers. As we have seen, for Methodists Christ's real presence is not simply related to the elements, Christ is present in the gathered assembly and in the eucharistic action. Online celebrations may need to pay particular attention to the drama of the fourfold action.
- 4.18 The Methodist Church recognises a variety of understandings of how Christ is present. Wesley denied transubstantiation partly on the grounds that it attempted to explain a mystery and partly because it fostered a misplaced interest in the elements *per se*.³⁵ However, the elements were not simply symbols for the Wesleys. As the hymn puts it:

“Come, Holy Ghost, your influence shed,
and realise the sign;
your life infuse into the bread,
your power into the wine.

Effectual let the tokens prove
and made, by heavenly art,
fit channels to convey your love
to every faithful heart.”³⁶

- 4.19 It has always been Methodist practice to emphasise the importance that the elements be handled with respect as a sign of reverence in worship. Where the Lord's Supper is celebrated onsite, this raises questions of both preparation and how any remaining elements are treated after the service, an issue which often falls upon the communion steward working on behalf of the Church. Where the Lord's Supper is celebrated online, this will be an issue for every participant. The *Methodist Worship Book* notes that “the juice of the grape shall be used”³⁷ and assumes the use of bread. Worshippers at home may be encouraged to prepare the elements with due reverence, setting aside only the amount of bread and wine which is needed, and to give thought to where they will be placed during the rest of the service. The use of a traditional white cloth to cover the elements, perhaps with a candle on a small table, may be appropriate where possible and the person presiding may encourage a united uncovering of the elements as part of the preparation. Worshippers at home should be encouraged reverently to consume all the elements which have been used during the service.

35 Maddox, R L, 1994, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville, Tenn., Kingswood Books, p. 350

36 *Singing the Faith* 579

37 *The Methodist Worship Book*, page 116

4.20 Summary

In summary, reflecting on what it will mean to celebrate the Lord's Supper with a community which gathers online is an opportunity for all Methodists to ponder once more our understanding of the Eucharist. The issues to which Local Churches who celebrate online will need to give particular attention are as follows:

- The question of presence, so that Christ's presence in the gathered community and in the eucharistic celebration is clearly celebrated.
- The question of participation, so that the community participates in worship together and is not reduced to observing the actions of the person presiding.
- The question of breadth and fullness, so that the Lord's Supper is not reduced to issues of the minimum necessary but rather creatively celebrated in ways which highlight the richness of Methodist understandings of Holy Communion.

The Faith and Order Committee trusts that these issues will receive particular attention during the period of discernment, both in online and onsite celebrations.

5. Theological Issue 3: what it means to be human in a digital world

- 5.1 Put broadly, anthropology is the study of what it means to be human. All aspects of theology are interrelated and theological anthropology is no exception; it is deeply rooted in Christian convictions about who God is and the nature of creation and thus reminds us that our being is dependent upon God who created us *ex nihilo* or out of nothing. It is also deeply rooted in a Christian understanding of salvation, which reminds us that we are saved for and into the body of Christ and that we become our truest selves when united to Christ who was crucified, risen and ascended, who is head of the Church and whose coming again we look for. This means that, while some voices in society encourage us to see ourselves primarily in individualistic terms (I am my own creation and I am what I think I am or narrate myself to be), Christian anthropology encourages us to see ourselves as part of a social species whose inner life is interrelated with our outer life among others. Our sense of ourselves as human beings is unavoidably influenced by the contexts in which we live and move and have our being. Some of those contexts positively militate against the fullness of a life lived as humanity united to Christ, others are neutral or enable such life and a few positively bring into being our new humanity in Christ (traditionally the Church has named these as sacraments). Theological anthropology helps us to reflect upon and to navigate these different contexts, recognising their impacts upon our own sense of self.

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- 5.2 Digital anthropology, therefore, has to do with just one of those contexts and online life has become one of the environments through which many, if not most, people both understand and express themselves. This can be seen in the prevalence of internet-connected devices around homes and the use of social media and live streaming devices to facilitate everyday interactions. In order to access and navigate this online life people create digital identities, which vary in their complexity from a simple email address, through a fuller social media profile to something as complex as the virtual world of Second Life. While recognising that people, to some extent, project an image of themselves in all contexts (both online and offline), a concern for some is the point at which online identities cease to be authentically 'us' and enable both deception and fantasy about ourselves. This may again have safeguarding issues and Methodists need to be alert to issues of online identities used to deceive, while recognising that the same can happen offline.
- 5.3 The extent to which people are engaged in digital culture can be seen as a spectrum. On one end are those with a very limited (or perhaps non-existent) engagement who regard digital life as supporting a predominantly offline life. Others live a life which is increasingly shaped (either by choice or necessity) around a digital existence or online life. The multiple contexts in which people engage offline (home, work, church, community or specific social groups) are increasingly being matched by multiple online contexts (email accounts, social media profiles, engagement with forums and participating in online Church etc). There is a growing area of research in both Digital Humanities at large and Digital Theology in particular which seeks to understand what this means for our sense of self. This research is both descriptive in that it analyses how we make sense of living in digital contexts and constructive, in that it seeks to provide resources to help to better navigate the issues raised.
- 5.4 It is important to recognise that *digital* theological anthropology raises many of the same issues as *predigital* theological anthropology. As already noted, anthropology has always been concerned with the ways in which we are shaped by our context and digital media are just another way by which we both present and understand ourselves. Digital scholarship sometimes speaks of four revolutions in how we see ourselves (those associated with Copernicus, Descartes, Freud and now the digital world) and of four industrial revolutions (those associated with coal and mechanisation, with gas, with electronics and nuclear power, and with renewable energy and the internet), however, the language of revolution and recognition of the paradigm shift which is happening should not be exaggerated in a way which denies the continuities that remain. Popular notions that digital life is somehow unreal or immaterial need to be challenged. The digital world is based in the material, both because the devices which support it, such as smart

phones, webcams, network routers and data centres are themselves physical (and are produced from the mining of precious resources) and also because people remain physical beings even when interacting digitally. Live streamed worship may be mediated through the transfer of bits and bytes, but it still involves embodied human beings at both ends and is still a bodily activity of the senses. If Descartes encouraged us to ask, 'who am I when I am thinking' then digital anthropology encourages us to ask, 'who am I when I interact online?'. This is in some ways a similar question; however Descartes' version stimulated an introspective reflection on the self while digital anthropology asks questions about our interactions with other people. It could, therefore, be argued that digital anthropology is more social and more real than some other trends in how we understand ourselves.

- 5.5 While noting the many continuities, we should also note that the pace of technological advancement, and therefore the pace of new experiences and of new questions to be asked and answered, has increased. This raises the challenge of the varying engagement which Christians have with the digital context and acknowledging the range of experiences which will be present in the Church. For some there has been a shift in engagement which could be described as a shift from digital literacy (possessing the know-how which is necessary to navigate the online environment) to digital living (the so-called digital natives who engage habitually with digital culture and consider digital life to be an integral and even necessary part of ordinary life). Younger adults have grown up with the digital context and are more likely to be digital natives. Digital fluency creates new possibilities for ways of living which could be compared to the new patterns of life which became possible during Wesley's lifetime as part of the first Industrial revolution. Theologian James K A Smith has coined the phrase 'cultural liturgies'³⁸ to suggest that we learn both who we are and how to love at least partly through practices, particularly those we repeat often, such as shopping or TV watching. Such practices unobtrusively impact our sense of ourselves and the meaning which we make of our lives both when we are engaged in them and at other times. This can also be applied to digital life, depending upon the extent to which we choose to embrace it. The digital sphere is increasingly not simply a context into which we choose to move at some points as an environment which shapes us and our expectations of living both when we are online and when we are offline.
- 5.6 There is a popular view that the digital space is somehow more free and less franchised than the analogue world. In both worlds, however, it is important that

38 Smith has written a three volume work under the overall title of 'Cultural Liturgies'. The idea is introduced in the first volume. James K A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011) p25

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we are alert to the dynamics of power, who has access and who has a voice which is heard, who is valued and who is not. It is certainly the case that the digital revolution has provided access and opportunity to many who would otherwise have been disenfranchised. Others, however, have been disenfranchised, possibly by poor digital literacy or by unequal access to digital technology. Furthermore, we can name and take seriously the ways in which others have been positively harmed; this includes those damaged by the unjust practices involved in producing electronic resources, the impact of the consumption of the physical resources necessary (or by discarded electronic waste), those whose humanity has been denigrated by the misuse of electronic communication to bully or to distribute harmful images, often sexual in nature. All theological anthropology has to grapple with issues provoked by human behaviour which causes harm to others and has to recognise that not all human interactions are intrinsically good and digital anthropology is no exception. We need to be alert to the danger of blaming the technology for what is in fact human action whilst also realising that from the perspective of Christian theology, our digital life is no more redeemed than any other aspect of life; those who interact with others online remain enslaved, often unwittingly, to powers which draw us away from the love of Christ and continue to need both salvation and sanctification.

- 5.7 Theological anthropology takes seriously the ‘we’ who are being called by God and argues that who ‘we’ are today cannot be fully understood without reference to digital culture, where more and more of us interact with others and express something of who we are. Inevitably, there is a range of experiences, not least among Methodists, but increasingly our world is being shaped by digital infrastructures through which our identity is mediated, just as it was by previous technological advances (think for example of the advent of print). 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?’.
- 5.8 The description and analysis of human existence provided by digital theological anthropology deepens our understanding of what is at stake when we consider online worship and taking the Lord’s Supper online. Increasingly, the digital environment is no longer a discrete world from which people can exit at will. The reality of online interactions and the way in which they add to and influence life and relationships offline demonstrates that digital life is one more arena which

stands in need of the redemptive work of God in Christ and the transformation offered by the power of the Spirit.

5.9 Summary

In summary, the digital world has become one more context in which we both present and understand ourselves as human beings and which shapes our living both online and offline. While online life does raise issues of authenticity and the ability to present false versions of ourselves, this is not an exclusively online issue. Celebrating Holy Communion online will challenge the gathered community to ponder what it means to bring our whole authentic selves into worship, just as onsite worship does. Equally, the online world stands in need of the renewal of Christ in the same way as every other arena of human activity. Methodists have proudly emphasised that all without exception are offered the opportunity to experience God's freely given grace. To celebrate the Eucharist is to celebrate the redemptive work of Christ for all, including the world online.

6. Practical Considerations

- 6.1 It is sometimes suggested that there is a key distinction between a form of online *gathering* which encourages participation from the congregation (for example via a chat or comment function or because video conferencing allows all to speak) and an online *broadcast*, which may be more likely to be seen as a 'performance' rather than as something with which to engage. Equally it is often noted that it is possible to participate in worship synchronously (or almost synchronously), that is at about the same time as it being uploaded, or asynchronously, that is watching the recording at some later point. For some, therefore, the Church gathers online when it gathers synchronously and when the congregation is encouraged to participate. One question therefore is, is there something important in a live sharing in an act of worship?
- 6.2 In practice, there is some kind of time lag in all online worship, it may be so brief as to be imperceptible and it is possible to participate a few minutes behind those leading worship without realising this is the case. It is not possible to provide a legalistic definition of what constitutes an acceptable time lag. Instead, it is important that all churches reflect carefully on the importance of corporate, gathered worship and that we recognise that we may not reach complete agreement about what this looks like.
- 6.3 One of the gains of worshipping online during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the inclusion of those who had previously been excluded, for example by physical disability or because of shift work making it impossible to attend

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worship synchronously. As Local Churches and Circuits consider their future plans for worship, it will be vital that these needs are taken into account and the Committee encourages Local Churches and Circuits to consider carefully how online worship might become part of the Circuit's worshipping life.

- 6.4 As already noted, Methodists hold a breadth of understandings of the nature of Holy Communion and will reach different conclusions about whether it is possible to participate with integrity in an online celebration of the Lord's Supper. As with other issues in the Church's life, Methodists will need to work together to discern the way forward. The Committee urges all Local Churches to be alert to the possibility of different members and ministers coming to different conclusions and to pay careful attention to the needs of all worshippers. During the period of discernment no presbyter or person with an authorisation to preside at the Lord's Supper should be required or expected to preside at an online service which includes communion and only those willing to do so should be planned to lead such services. In 2006 the Faith and Order Committee brought to the Conference a report entitled *Living with Contradictory Convictions*. Much of what is contained in that report, and expressed in the following quotation from its conclusion, can helpfully be held in mind as the different approaches to thinking around 'online communion' are considered:

"As it 'contends with different and mutually contradictory convictions' the Church is committed to being the Body of Christ as a body of people who through the quality of their relationships and their theology of personhood delight in diversity and engage with it not fearfully, but with respectful love for the other. This necessitates a willingness to work with a dynamic tension of diversity, recognising that openness does not mean that 'anything goes' but is a desire to discern God's will in and for the other and the Church. The Church encompasses both a personal and communal response in Christian living."³⁹

- 6.5 The ministry of extended communion is an important one with an ancient tradition in the Church, authorised within the Methodist Church since 1984, and in which many Methodists have found benefit. It has an important function of allowing people to receive Holy Communion who are unable to attend the celebrations of the Lord's Supper in our churches and also allows for pastoral contact between the wider church congregation and those people. It will be important therefore to think carefully about any potential impact celebrating the Lord's Supper online might have on the practice of extended communion. Some guidance on offering

39 *Living With Contradictory Convictions*, 2006, 7.4

extended communion online has been offered in *Holy Communion: Responding Pastorally in the light of Covid 19*⁴⁰. Extended communion will continue to be part of Methodist practice.

7. Recommendation for a period of discernment

- 7.1 The Faith and Order Committee therefore recommends a period of discernment with regard to the practice of online communion to enable the Methodist Church to engage in further reflection on this vital area, informed by the lived experience of services of Holy Communion conducted online. If the Conference adopts Resolution 39/3 below then it would effectively rescind Resolution 31/2 of the 2018 Conference and, during a period of discernment, permit presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers participate through electronic means. The period of discernment would begin on 1 September 2021 and conclude on 31 August 2024. Further guidance, in addition to this report, on celebrating Holy Communion online will be provided.
- 7.2 The Committee further recommends that feedback be gathered during this period of discernment, in terms both of what has actually been done and of the response both of those leading worship and those participating in these services. The Committee will reflect on the feedback offered and make further proposals to the 2024 Conference. Section 8 outlines some questions for consideration when seeking to offer online communion, and to help continuing reflection and encourage feedback.
- 7.3 This period of discernment does not represent a free-for-all and it is still necessary to set some parameters and boundaries (see 7.4 below). However, the Committee wishes the dominant note of this period of discernment to be one of trusting Methodist presbyters and people to be seeking faithful and prayerful ways of celebrating Holy Communion in an online context. As has been outlined above, this will be about a fullness of what it means to celebrate Holy Communion rather than any sense of bare minimum requirements. Those participating are encouraged to consider key issues as expressed throughout this report. To assist in this reflection, the questions in section 8 are offered for consideration during the planning stages of a service.
- 7.4 The Faith and Order Committee recommends that services conducted in accordance with the provision established by Resolution 39/3 of this report be

40 f-and-o-holy-communion-responding-pastorally-covid-19-100720.pdf (methodist.org.uk)

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limited to participation at a common time (as opposed to, for example, viewing a recorded service later) and that all such services should have the permission of the Circuit Superintendent⁴¹ (eg through being appointed on the Plan) or, in the case of projects not directly linked to a Circuit, the District Chair. Furthermore, services of online communion should be in the context of public worship. No one should be required to preside at such a service against their own convictions and where there is disparity between the views and aspirations of presbyters and the churches of which they have pastoral charge, the circuit staff should consider together how this can best be managed, while respecting the convictions of all.

- 7.5 When significant new liturgies are produced for the Methodist Church, SO 330(9) requires that they are commended for experimental use for a period, with the opportunity for feedback and revision before the Conference authorises them. The process the Committee proposes is analogous to this. Arguably, as the Standing Order refers to “forms of worship”, it is required; in any event the Committee considers it a helpful procedure. Although this is not a liturgy as such, it carries much of the same weight, both as an expression of our doctrines and because our patterns of worship form our theology⁴².
- 7.6 It may be that, if services of Holy Communion held online become a normal part of a Circuit’s worshipping life, this will have implications for the provision of authorisations to preside at the Lord’s Supper. The Committee wishes to be clear that during the period of discernment, online Holy Communion services should not be included in the calculations which establish whether deprivation exists. Furthermore, there is ongoing work on the issue of authorisations to preside at the Lord’s Supper and the Committee is content to await the conclusions from this work before returning to the issue.
- 7.7 Feedback on this period of discernment should be gathered and sent to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee (onlinecommunion@methodistchurch.org.uk) by 31 January 2023. That feedback will be considered and a report prepared to enable the 2024 Conference to make further decisions in advance of the expiry of the period of discernment. While welcoming all feedback, the Committee particularly asks that Superintendents be given an opportunity to reflect together during District Superintendent meetings and provide feedback.

41 If there is doubt, the Circuit in question is the one in which the presiding presbyter is stationed or for which the authorisation to preside has been granted by the Conference.

42 The principle *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief) in other words.

8. Questions for Reflection for those participating in online Holy Communion

Community

- In what way is the community gathered, present to one another, and able to participate in this act of worship?
- Has careful attention been paid to the technology being used? Does it enable the congregation to gather as a community?
- Who is included? Who is missing? How can it be made more inclusive? Are different people included or excluded when compared with an onsite celebration of Holy Communion?
- If the service has participants both onsite and online, how can the act of worship be inclusive of both, so neither form of participation feels like spectating?
- If the service will be available as a recording, how have those who will share in that act of worship at a later time been sensitively and pastorally acknowledged and included?

God

- How is God present with us?
- How is the Good News of God's grace shared through this act of worship? How am I experiencing it? How is it shared with others?

The elements

- How has the congregation been supported in preparation of bread and 'the juice of the grape' in ways that are appropriately and not unnecessarily wasteful, setting apart a suitable quantity to be consumed by those present?
- Will any remaining elements be reverently consumed or otherwise reverently disposed of?

Reflection

- How has the congregation been encouraged in advance to reflect on whether/how they participate in this act of worship?
- If I am eager to participate in this way of celebrating Holy Communion, have I reflected on why? Am I simply accepting change without careful contemplation?
- If I feel uneasy about this, where does my unease come from? Am I simply resisting change or do I have theological doubts?
- If there are a range of views within the congregation, how is that being

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- acknowledged with pastoral sensitivity?
- If members of the congregation cannot participate with integrity, how will their perspective and needs be acknowledged?
- If one or more presbyters or persons authorised to preside in the Circuit cannot with integrity preside at a service of online Holy Communion, how will the Circuit respect their convictions while being attentive to the needs of the congregations they serve?
- How does the liturgy speak in this new context? Do any particular parts of the service jar, or resonate in new ways?

*****RESOLUTIONS**

39/1. The Conference receives the Report.

39/2. The Conference commends the report to Districts and Circuits for study and reflection.

39/3. The Conference adopts a period of discernment from 1 September 2021 until 31 August 2024, in which presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper be permitted to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together through electronic means, and directs all who preside at such celebrations to consider prayerfully the guidance in this report in their preparation and conduct of them and to observe the parameters set out in paragraph 7.4.

39/4. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to receive feedback on the period of discernment and to report to the Conference of 2024 with further recommendations.