

# Guidance for conducting services of Holy Communion online

## Introduction

Following the decision of the 2021 Conference to introduce a period of discernment regarding the celebration of Holy Communion online<sup>1</sup>, this paper seeks to encourage best practice and offers some guidance for those considering, planning and leading such services. It is very helpful to set this consideration in the context of broader Methodist teaching about Holy Communion and the report *His Presence Makes the Feast*<sup>2</sup> and the short booklet *Share this Feast* (available from Methodist Publishing) will be helpful resources for this. It may be appropriate to offer some teaching and discussion opportunities to Methodist congregations thinking about online Holy Communion to help them set their conversation in this broader context. In all cases, this Guidance should be read alongside the report to the Conference (*Holy Communion and Online Worship*,<sup>3</sup> hereafter HCaOW). Where there are specific requirements laid down in *the Methodist Worship Book, the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* or the decisions of the Conference attention is drawn to them by bold and italic text. As the period of discernment develops, it is to be hoped that a body of wisdom on the best ways of celebrating Holy Communion online is developed.

## When to have Holy Communion online?

Holding a service of Holy Communion online is one pastoral response among many possibilities. There will be situations where it is a potentially helpful approach and others where another way forward will be preferable. It will be important to be in conversation with the people affected: church members and adherents, those who have a part in preparing and leading worship as well as the circuit staff and the Superintendent.

Through the Covid pandemic, many churches and circuits have made worship available online in a variety of forms. Some of these will lend themselves to online celebrations of Holy Communion, while others may not be so suitable. The Conference report and the questions for reflection give some parameters for discernment in this area and more consideration is given to this below. In general, the worshipping life of a church should include both the preaching of the word (in a variety of forms) and the celebration of the sacraments. While the sacrament of baptism must be celebrated in person (ie with the person being baptised and the person baptising in the same place), the decisions of the Conference offer the possibility of celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion as part of an online service of worship. Where churches worship in these modes therefore, consideration should be given to whether including the celebration of Holy Communion as part of them is appropriate.

As the Conference report identified, there are a variety of views among Methodists about online communion. The Conference did not make a final decision but initiated a period of discernment. Some Methodists (ordained and lay) feel it clear that celebrating Holy Communion online is right and appropriate, others cannot see it as Holy Communion in its proper sense. When considering whether and how to offer celebrations of Holy Communion online, full account should be taken of the range of views in the relevant context. It is important to create opportunities for conversation and sharing

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this guidance, all references to service of Holy Communion online include services in hybrid form: ie where some participants are onsite with the presiding minister and some join by electronic means.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-holy-communion-in-methodist-church-2003.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21765/conf-2021-39-holy-communion-and-online-worship.pdf>

so that people can say freely what they feel and that no one feels pressured to act contrary to their own conscience. This, of course, includes those who preside at services of Holy Communion.

Particular sensitivity may be needed where churches have been accustomed to distribute elements set aside at a previous celebration of Holy Communion for consumption while watching a live-streamed or video-conferenced service. Worshippers should be helped to understand the difference between the two arrangements and responses to those who feel differently about the different arrangements should be pastoral and appropriate (including, if necessary, making different provision for them). As a matter of guidance, it is clearest if all participants in a particular celebration of Holy Communion receive elements set aside at that celebration (whether onsite or online) and those who receive Extended Communion do so separately. However, pastorally other arrangements may sometimes be necessary.

In addition to celebrations as part of the regular cycle of the public worship of the Church, online celebrations of Holy Communion may be appropriate in ministering to those who cannot, for whatever reason, share in the regular public worship of the church (whether onsite or online). This should be carefully considered with the person, alongside other possibilities (including extended communion and a celebration of Holy Communion in the home). The person's needs should be paramount and there should be no pressure to accept an online celebration 'to make things easier' if that would not otherwise be the most appropriate.

### Planning the service

Where it has been decided to hold a service or services of Holy Communion online, careful preparation and planning should take place, including sharing appropriate information with potential worshippers so that all can participate fully and feel comfortable in doing so. This is much guidance available about conducting worship online in general and this document presupposes that those planning services online are familiar with such guidance, including the precautions necessary to prevent disruption of worship or harm to those participating.

***All celebrations of Holy Communion online require the permission of the Circuit Superintendent, or in the case of projects not directly connected to a circuit, the District Chair. The Superintendent or Chair in question is the one for where the presiding minister is stationed or for where the authorisation to preside has been granted (HCaOW, paragraph 7.4 and resolution 39/3).***

Those considering holding a celebration of Holy Communion online should therefore have an early conversation with the Superintendent or Chair to seek their views. The key consideration in this conversation should be the appropriateness of an online celebration of Holy Communion for the context in question: personal views about online communion are very important in determining someone's engagement or not with online communion but should not be determinative for policy across a whole circuit or district. The Superintendent or Chair may wish to be involved in the planning – and this may be particularly appropriate where Holy Communion is being celebrated online for the first time. They should satisfy themselves that all appropriate preparations are in place before giving formal permission. Where several services are planned, permission can of course be given for them all at once.

The planning process should use the questions for reflection at section 8 of HCaOW (p575) and ensure that all the points have been considered. The question about how the community is gathered is especially important and this will govern the choice of platform for the service.

***The permission given by the Conference is limited to participation at a common time (HCaOW, paragraph 7.4 and resolution 39/3).***

Pre-recorded services are therefore not suitable for online celebrations of Holy Communion. Live-streamed services may be appropriate – particularly when those participating online can interact with one another – but there will be particular sensitivity about those who may watch it later but not be able to receive Holy Communion. It may be appropriate that live-streamed services of Holy Communion not be made available for watching later, for this reason. Video-conferenced services may be found best from the perspective of gathering but consideration should also be given to how public such worship is – is this public worship (as the regular worship of the church should be) or the worship of a private group?

Especially in the first celebrations online in a given context, it may be helpful to document initial responses to the questions for reflection to aid further reflection after the service and to allow for improvement in the future. It may be helpful to share a condensed version with worshippers to aid their preparation for the service.

Part of the preparation should be thinking about what it looks like to preside at the sacrament using the online platform that has been chosen. How is the presiding minister seen to be presiding? The Methodist Church definition of the person presiding is:

***‘The representative person who is authorised to preside in the Church gathered for worship and who on their behalf leads the actions of the Supper – principally giving thanks and sharing’ (The Sunday Service Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, Conference 1990)***

Hence it is important that reflection has taken place on how the community is gathered and how the presiding minister clearly leads that gathered community in giving thanks for and sharing the bread and wine.

### Practicalities

A celebration of Holy Communion online implies some practical preparations that may need more thought than a service onsite where the communion stewards can ensure that all that is needed has been made ready.

Participants online will need to provide their own bread and wine. It has not been the custom of the Methodist Church to specify in detail the nature of bread and wine that are acceptable to be used in the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is good for us to adopt the general principle that we offer to God of our best but beyond that we have few rules. The *Book of Common Prayer’s* approach that the bread be ‘such as is usual to be eaten’ is a good guide and in a contemporary context that would certainly include gluten-free breads as well as wheat breads. Recognising long custom, wafers (both wheat and gluten-free) are certainly acceptable. While it is inevitable that participants will not have identical bread, remembering the Biblical teaching that ‘we who are many are one body because we all share in one bread’ (1 Corinthians 10:17), the important thing is its *sameness* not its *difference*. We are sharing bread together.

The Methodist Church does have two stipulations regarding the wine at Holy Communion.

***The juice of the grape shall be used. (Methodist Worship Book, p 116)***

***In the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper the wine used shall be non-alcoholic. (SO922(2))***

The first of these is of particular importance because it links us to key Biblical imagery, especially Jesus’ statement ‘I am the vine’ (John 15:5) and his saying on the night in which he instituted this sacrament that he would not again drink of the fruit of the vine until he did so in his Father’s kingdom (Matthew 26:29, Luke 22:18). Alternative juices and drinks that are not made from ‘the

juice of the grape' are therefore not appropriate for use in Holy Communion. Pure grape juice or non-alcoholic wine is to be preferred (though it is not necessary to have a non-alcoholic wine specifically produced for communion – those available in supermarkets and other shops are suitable). As for the bread, because we are sharing, even if metaphorically, in *one cup* the important thing is its sameness not its difference.

This does create some practical issues as not many people routinely keep grape juice or non-alcoholic wine at home. It is available in many supermarkets and other shops. Unused juice or wine can be frozen using ice cube trays to provide small amounts available as needed. Pre-packed communion cups are available including juice and wafer, although the waste from these does create environmental concerns. Nevertheless, there may be contexts where they are a helpful option. Some churches may find other ways of safely providing suitable juice or wine.

SO922(2)'s stipulation regarding non-alcoholic wine applies in the same way to online celebrations of Holy Communion as to onsite ones. It is therefore not appropriate to use alcoholic wine for these services.

***What remains of the elements should be reverently consumed, or otherwise reverently disposed of, at the end of the service. (Methodist Worship Book, p 116)***

The simplest approach to the disposal of the elements is that only sufficient for the purposes of communion should be prepared so that they are all consumed as part of the service and none remain. For individual communicants at home this should not be difficult. However, where some does remain it is best consumed, immediately after the service. 'Otherwise reverently disposed of' is not defined though for some includes sharing with the birds or returning to earth. Disposal in the bin is not reverent! Appropriate guidance should be given to worshippers about disposal of remaining elements.

### After the service

Following any service, it is good practice to reflect upon the worship and to consider what lessons might be learned for future services. Check in with worshippers to hear about their reflections and experience of the service. If a team have planned and led worship it would be very helpful to have a reflective conversation about it. It may be helpful to keep a journal of online celebrations of Holy Communion so that as your practice develops to help you can identify points where improvement is possible and learnings that you can share with others. Please send feedback as part of the connexional period of discernment ([onlinecommunion@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:onlinecommunion@methodistchurch.org.uk) by 31 January 2023) to help resource the continuing conversation.