



# **One Bread, One Body: Celebrating Holy Communion within Online Worship**

A resource prepared by the Sacramental Theology Task Group  
of The United Church of Canada

May 31, 2022

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
1. A Theology of Gathering: What does it mean to be gathered as the body of Christ? .....	5
2. Sacramental Theology: How does our practice shape our faith story?.....	6
3. A Theology of Media: What ethical issues are related to our use of technology and social media platforms? .....	7
4. Faith Formation and Discipleship: Who is included or excluded by our practices, and how do we address this? .....	8
5. Pastoral Theology: How do we ensure that we are caring for all people as we migrate through technological and liturgical change?.....	10
6. Ecumenism: How might our ecumenical relationships help us to reflect on our practices?...	11
Epilogue.....	13
Appendix A: Online Communion in The United Church of Canada .....	14

© 2022 The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd) Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca>. Any copy must include this notice.

Cover photo: Andrew O'Neill

## **Introduction**

In scripture, an Ebenezer is a “stone of help” (1 Samuel 7:12–13). I have always known it as a marker of a turning point in our faith journey. When we “raise our Ebenezer,” we are declaring how God has helped us through a trying time, and when we put it down we are reminding ourselves that God will continue to help in times to come.

Many painful Ebenezers have been raised during the COVID-19 pandemic. Circumstances have required communities of faith to make critical decisions around how we worship. When public health and safety measures have prevented us from gathering in person, we have found other ways to worship together online—in streamed, pre-recorded, Zoom, or teleconference worship. Later in the pandemic we began to adapt our in-person practices, including worshipping outdoors or abiding by indoor protocols.

What was commonplace to only some communities of faith before the COVID-19 pandemic has become familiar to nearly all: ring lights, Zoom accounts, YouTube videos, and Plexiglass; social media accounts, new platforms, volunteers and staff members engaging with groups of people who interact with our communities of faith only online. These have become our Ebenezers, markers of where we have travelled by faith during this pandemic. These markers of hybrid—i.e., multimedia—worship are with us now. As communities of faith, our next step is to discern together what we have learned about our worship and where God’s Spirit is leading us.

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate and foster conversations that encourage communities of faith to explore how they understand the celebration of Holy Communion within online worship. The focus on only one of our church’s two sacraments is due to the fact that while baptism is a central sacrament in our communal life of faith, it is only celebrated once in a person’s life. Communion, however, is celebrated much more frequently during the church year and is, therefore, the focus of this resource.

Each section begins with the central question related to an aspect of celebrating communion within the context of online worship. After an introduction to the theological issues at stake, each section poses questions to help communities of faith reflect on how technology and social media are shaping their faith story now and into the future.

May the Spirit of God guide you in this work and in your continued ministry.

Sincerely,  
Alydia Smith  
on behalf of the Sacramental Theology Task Group

We offer worship

as an outpouring of gratitude and awe  
and a practice of opening ourselves  
to God's still, small voice of comfort,  
to God's rushing whirlwind of challenge.

Through word, music, art, and sacrament,  
in community and in solitude,

God changes our lives, our relationships, and our world.

We sing with trust...

In grateful response to God's abundant love,  
we bear in mind our integral connection  
to the earth and one another;

we participate in God's work of healing and mending creation.

To point to the presence of the holy in the world,  
the church receives, consecrates, and shares  
visible signs of the grace of God.

In company with the churches

of the Reformed and Methodist traditions,  
we celebrate two sacraments as gifts of Christ:  
baptism and holy communion.

In these sacraments the ordinary things of life

—water, bread, wine—

point beyond themselves to God and God's love,  
teaching us to be alert  
to the sacred in the midst of life.

—Excerpts from A Song of Faith (2006)

## **1. A Theology of Gathering: What does it mean to be gathered as the body of Christ?**

For almost 2,000 years, Christians have assembled to celebrate weekly worship in scripture readings, sermons, Communion, and gathering and distributing an offering for those in need.<sup>1</sup> Even before COVID-19, the church experienced disruption to this fundamental and embodied practice of faith. For example, in times of persecution and war, communities of Christians have been forced underground.

The central theological question raised by fractured experiences of worship concerns whether it is necessary for the body of Christ—the church—to be physically present together in order to celebrate worship and, specifically, the sacrament of Communion.

On the one hand, when we cannot gather together we are drawn deeper into trusting in God's sovereignty. God, who is the Creator of all things and is always present, overcomes our separation in time and space through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we have broadened our understanding of worship to include those who cannot or do not attend worship in the sanctuary.

On the other hand, God's revelation in Jesus Christ is at the heart of our incarnational faith. As Christ's followers we are called to an embodied faith, worship, and community life. Some people are concerned that the ability to remain at home for worship could result in a dislocation of the body, a kind of willing isolation, or avoidance of the messiness of communal life and worship. In an increasingly consumerist culture, perhaps online worship could become one choice within a marketplace of choices and ultimately the less convenient and therefore less frequent choice.

The following questions invite you to reflect on how the 2,000-year-old tradition of gathering for worship has evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic and how our communities of faith might be changed as a result.

### **Telling the Story of Your Faith Community**

1. How did your community of faith gather during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What challenges did you experience in gathering for worship during the pandemic?
3. What surprises or blessings did you experience during pandemic worship?
4. What changes made during the pandemic do you expect will last into the future?

### **Theological Reflection**

1. In the experience of your community of faith, what does it mean to "gather"?
2. Has that understanding changed as a result of the pandemic?

---

<sup>1</sup> Lucien Deiss, "The Witness of St. Justin," in *Springtime of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1967), pp. 93–94.

## **2. Sacramental Theology: How does our practice shape our faith story?**

The sacrament of Communion is a gift of God for the people of God. It is a symbol of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ, who embodied God's promises of peace through justice and unconditional love. Our sacraments teach us, shape us, and strengthen us in faith. We celebrate them within the context of worship, in the presence of God and the community, and in the power of God's Spirit.

While The United Church of Canada has forms of worship and historical practices, decisions about what form worship takes reside with the governing bodies of the community of faith (e.g., session, worship committee). Perhaps predictably, then, at the onset of COVID-19 communities of faith responded differently to the question of whether and how to celebrate sacraments online. At the same time, other Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, did not permit online celebrations of communion during COVID-19. In this context, many communities of faith within the United Church looked for guidance and theological consideration of this issue.

In April 2020, members of the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith (TICIF) committee reaffirmed a report prepared for the General Council Executive in March 2015, which asserted that celebrating Communion online can be authorized by the governing bodies of communities of faith (see Appendix A).

We encourage communities of faith to prayerfully discern how their worship reflects their living faith story as well as their context and character. We offer the following questions as a way to continue discerning how to worship into the future.

### **Telling the story of your community of faith**

1. How did you celebrate the sacraments during the pandemic?
2. Did this represent a change for you?
3. How did you arrive at this decision?
4. What specific questions and concerns were expressed during this decision-making process? Were any of these what you would call theological? How so?
5. What did you notice or learn about peoples' participation in worship, especially the sacraments (e.g., did people participate, did you hear critique/support)?
6. Did you learn anything about the sacraments that will shape how you celebrate them in the future?

### **Theological reflection**

1. Where is God when we celebrate the sacraments?
2. What is God doing when we celebrate the sacraments?
3. Who are sacraments for?
4. Who might be left out when we celebrate the sacraments in the sanctuary?
5. Who might be included or excluded when we celebrate the sacraments online?
6. Is it important to be physically gathered to celebrate the sacraments? Why or why not?
7. Is God equally present in person and online? Why or why not?

### **3. A Theology of Media: What ethical issues are related to our use of technology and social media platforms?**

The church has always used technology and media, including print media, to worship and to carry out God's vision. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many communities of faith were employing a mix of traditional technology, digital technology, and new media to share the gospel. Whether by bulletin or Facebook, hymnbook or projection screen, telephone tree or text, communities of faith make choices about which technologies and media they use to share their mission and message.

The pandemic, however, compelled many more communities of faith to offer worship online. This resulted in a unique set of challenges and questions, and also the discovery of new tools and possibilities for ministry online. The question that most communities of faith face today is not whether they will use new technologies and media to worship and share their witness, but which ones and why. Developing an approach to technology and media—especially social media—requires theological reflection and discernment.

For example, the Internet is not an inherently neutral medium for gathering and communicating. Over the past decade, companies like Facebook—creator and owner of the most commonly used platform for live-streaming worship—has faced considerable criticism for allowing racially motivated hate speech. Companies like Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom are large publicly traded corporations whose ultimate responsibilities are to shareholders. Our use of these platforms raises ethical questions for us as a church.

The questions below can help communities of faith reflect on what approaches to technology and social media they want to use.

#### **Telling the story of your faith community**

1. What technologies and media did you use before the pandemic?
2. Did your use of technology and media change during the past two years? How?
3. If you are using online worship, how did you decide on what platform to use? What are the ethical considerations of this decision?
4. What is your experience of online sacraments?
5. Is your community of faith mostly optimistic or pessimistic about using technology and media in worship and ministry? Why?

#### **Theological reflection**

1. Who might benefit from sharing sacraments online?
2. What might be lost in sharing sacraments online?
3. How might technology enhance the sharing of the sacraments?
4. What has your community of faith learned from using technology for sharing the sacraments?

#### **4. Faith Formation and Discipleship: Who is included or excluded by our practices, and how do we address this?**

Sharing sacraments in worship embodies our faith formation. Faith formation and discipleship are how we grow and help others to grow in the Christian faith, and how we teach and follow in the way of Jesus. The United Church of Canada remains committed to nurturing communities of faith where deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice are lived out in every aspect of our lives together. While this is primarily the work of communities of faith, many are doing it with fewer people and resources than in the past.

According to recent census data,<sup>2</sup> Canadians increasingly report having no religious affiliation. At the same time, as a country that continues to welcome people from the rest of the world, the Canadian religious landscape is becoming more diverse. The United Church of Canada also continues to repent for its colonial legacy and to pursue reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and others who have been oppressed by the church. At such a time, faith formation requires being aware of and open to the diversity of experience and perspective within our communities of faith and the denomination as a whole.

In this context, worship is one of the church's primary faith formation tools, as the rituals we share together shape and define us as Christians. The sacraments are not just historical traditions but also powerful moments during which we are invited to embody our faith and experience Christ's radical welcome in community with others.

Yet, while the technologies and access associated with online worship are widely available, they are not universally so, and come at a cost. Some people in our communities of faith, and even entire communities and geographic areas in our church, are unable to access or afford Internet service. Worshipping online remains a privilege of the majority.

#### **Telling the story of your faith community**

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect small group ministry and opportunities for faith formation in your community of faith?
2. What new opportunities for faith formation arose during the pandemic?
3. What were the biggest challenges to faith formation during the pandemic?
4. How did the pandemic affect your community of faith's pursuit of reconciliation, anti-racism, gender justice, and climate justice?

#### **Theological reflection**

1. How does celebrating the sacraments reflect our values and ministry?

---

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, "The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country's religious and ethnocultural diversity," *The Daily* (October 26, 2022), [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm)



2. How does celebrating the sacraments embody our ministry to both neighbour and stranger?
3. How does our online presence and engagement reflect our values and ministry?
4. Does our online presence and engagement help or hinder our efforts in faith formation?

## **5. Pastoral Theology: How do we ensure that we are caring for all people as we migrate through technological and liturgical change?**

While often described through the lens of a theology of worship, our celebration of the sacraments also has a strong pastoral dimension. Baptism and communion are gifts of God and symbols of God's grace: an unearned and unconditional love. At the table of Christ, presiders and congregants alike are beloved guests. At the font, we are reminded of our commitment not only to walk in Christ's ways but also to walk alongside our neighbours in that journey.

The COVID-19 pandemic made us realize how important it is for all of us to be part of a community and to be with that community in person. However, while the pandemic gave many of us our first experience of not being able to gather, many others faced this reality long before 2020. People living with physical disabilities, chronic health conditions, agoraphobia, and social anxiety had already had experienced exclusion from worship. People who work weekends or do shift work, single parents, and those caring for loved ones had already experienced not being able to participate in worship.

While we can celebrate that rediscovering our technological capacity gave us one way of gathering even in the midst of isolation, we discovered yet another way some in our communities continue to be isolated: a lack of Internet service. Additionally, there are those within our communities who, even given adequate Internet service, do not wish to worship online.

While almost three years of using technology may feel like a long time, it is only beginning to unearth the many ways our communities of faith experience diverse challenges and perspectives. Perhaps the greatest capacity we can develop in this period of change is empathy—the ability to imagine what life is like for someone other than ourselves—and a commitment to Christian community that cherishes all, especially the most vulnerable.

### **Telling the story of your faith community**

1. Before the pandemic, how did you include people who were isolated or absent from community worship?
2. During the pandemic, what pastoral opportunities and challenges arose, especially with worship and sacraments? Is there a specific story you can share?
3. What have you learned about ritual and pastoral care in light of pandemic worship life?

### **Theological reflection**

1. As communities of faith, who may be left out of our worship?
2. What fears and anxieties do people in your community of faith express?
3. What are the sources of strength for your community of faith in this time?

## **6. Ecumenism: How might our ecumenical relationships help us to reflect on our practices?**

In The United Church of Canada, we recognize and celebrate the two sacraments that Jesus instituted—baptism and Communion—in which we remember Jesus’ instituting them with his followers and participate in the holy mystery of God’s gracious love.

We also have agreements with other denominations on how we share and administer the sacraments. In 1975, we became part of an association of Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches in Canada (PLURA) in an agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism among the denominations. As a member of the World Council of Churches and as a participant in its consultative process that resulted in the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, we have joined our ecumenical partners in proclaiming “the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

As an example of how this shapes our sacramental practice, in addition to other formulas to refer to the triune God we continue to use the Trinitarian formula to baptize, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Thus, while we are free to determine how we will celebrate the sacraments, as a united and uniting church we are also called to seek ways to build relationships and trust with ecumenical partners so we can live out Jesus’ prayer “that we may all be one.” Reflecting on the sacramental practices of other Christian faith traditions is one way we work toward building such relationships.

In 2020 one of our closer ecumenical partners—the Anglican Church of Canada—made the decision to observe a “eucharistic fast”—that is, not to celebrate communion online during lockdown. Subsequently, in 2021, the Anglican Church published a collected volume of theological reflections on this issue by Canadian Anglicans and ecumenical partners.<sup>4</sup> In that volume, a diverse spectrum of perspective and opinion is shared. While there is no consensus on the opportunities and challenges of worshipping online, the actions and reflections of an ecumenical partner offer another perspective to help us reflect on our own practices.

### **Telling the story of your faith community**

1. Has your faith community had any experience with sharing sacraments in ecumenical shared ministry, or with inviting ecumenical guests to share in worship? If so, tell us about it.
2. If you are part of an ecumenical shared ministry, what is your experience of celebrating sacraments online?

---

<sup>3</sup> World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva, 1982), p. viii, [archive.org/details/wccfops2.118](https://www.wccfops.org/details/wccfops2.118).

<sup>4</sup> Eileen Scully, ed., *Eucharistic Practice & Sacramental Theology in Pandemic Times: Reflections by Canadian Anglicans* (Toronto: General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2021), [anglican.ca/faith/ministry/pandemic-times/](https://www.anglican.ca/faith/ministry/pandemic-times/).

**Theological reflection**

1. Has *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* helped shape your sacramental thinking or practice at any point? How so?
2. What impact might a spirit of ecumenism have on how we celebrate our sacraments, both offline and online?

## Epilogue

In these sacraments the ordinary things of life  
—water, bread, wine—  
point beyond themselves to God and God’s love,  
teaching us to be alert  
to the sacred in the midst of life.

—*A Song of Faith (2006)*

As communities of faith we aspire “to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.”<sup>5</sup> In our celebration of worship and the sacraments, we heighten our awareness of the Divine all around us and empower one another to “act with great boldness” (2 Corinthians 3:12) in proclaiming and living out our faith. It is a privilege, honour, responsibility, and great challenge to care for and lead communities of faith in worship. Thank you for your commitment to upholding the sacrament of communion.

We hope this resource has guided you in your ongoing theological exploration as we work to develop worship that fosters and supports deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice.

### **Task Group resource authors**

Rev. Andrew Macpherson

Rev. Dr. Andy O’Neill, Chair

Rev. Dr. Alydia Smith, Program Coordinator, Worship, Music, and Spirituality

Rev. Ralph Carl Wushke

### **Task Group consulting members**

Rev. Dr. Lloyd Nyarota

Rev. John Thompson

Cover photo: A. O’Neill (2022)

---

<sup>5</sup> The United Church of Canada, “Our Call and Our Vision,” 2021, [united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-our-vision](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-our-vision).

## **Appendix A: Online Communion in The United Church of Canada**

April 6, 2020

### **Online Communion Is Permissible**

In March 2015, the General Council Executive received a report from the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee on whether online communion was permissible in The United Church of Canada given our theology and polity. The committee, after studying the matter, concluded that online communion was certainly permitted in the United Church. While the General Secretary and the General Council Executive had asked the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee whether online communion was permissible in the context of a virtual meeting of the General Council, the committee considered the matter more broadly. The committee explicitly named “online sharing of worship” as an example of a time when online communion could be appropriate.

Some aspects of the committee’s thinking are particularly relevant for the present time, when the coronavirus and the resulting regulations by various levels of government restricting public gatherings and closing church buildings make it impossible for us to come together physically for worship. We think of communion as a time when we come together, as a community, to celebrate this sacrament. Indeed, celebrating the sacrament in community and as a community is an important part of the sacrament in United Church tradition. When a community of faith gathers in a livestreamed service, we remain a community. This is true even though we are not physically in the same space and are participating virtually, gathered as individuals or family groups.

While the context of the original request to the committee was an online meeting of the General Council, where the hope was that most people participating would be in groups, the committee made the point that while it is always better that one receives communion in the physical presence of others, the desire to participate in communion should be the priority. If an individual was unable to gather with others in a physical space, the person’s desire to receive the sacrament should take precedence over their ability to be in the same physical location as other members of the community. In our current situation, many of us are those “isolated individuals” who want to receive communion as part of the gathered community, even though our gathering with others is virtual.

Without question, it is always preferable to be able to receive the sacrament of communion in the context of the public worship of the community of faith rather than alone. **But when we cannot be together physically, we can still be a gathered community virtually, and within that gathered community, meeting together online, the celebration of communion is appropriate and can be authorized by governing bodies with authority over the worship lives of communities of faith.**

Rev. Daniel Hayward, Chairperson, Committee on Theology and Faith  
Rev. Dr. John H. Young, Executive Minister, Theological Leadership