

## Online Communion in The United Church of Canada

### 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