

REPORT OF THE PANEL ON DOCTRINE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2024

“The General Assembly recognising that the Covid-19 pandemic has raised issues of the nature of public worship and the role of Government remit to the Panel on Doctrine the matters arising from the pandemic and invite them to report to the General Assembly of 2022.”¹

“2. General Assembly ask the Panel on Doctrine to explore further the issues that arise from the Report.”²

Introduction

At the General Assembly of 2023 we presented an Interim Report as the Panel acknowledged its wrestling with the issue of online communion and agreed that we needed to take a step back and look at a doctrine of the Church that would help feed in to our understanding of the issues at stake. This was also felt to be necessary as we sought to look at the church situation Scotland-wide with an increasing lack of near at hand Biblically orthodox churches.

Although we also acknowledged that, of course we had a doctrine of the Church, set on our Reformed understanding, it needed to be looked at again in addressing the present questions and dilemmas. Until 2020, ‘online church’ was something of a fringe interest in our context. Post-covid, it has pressed on our consciousness in almost every way, for good or ill. There is also a sense that it is good for us to relook at our thinking on the church because we are always creatures of our prevailing culture whether or not we are aware of it. In a day of individualism we may need the correctives to thinking about church as more than something *I* go to; or church as a place where *I* consume the product of religious experience without recognising our role as part of a community; belonging to both the local church and the universal church – in Scotland and world-wide.

This will always be a crucial part of church, that we belong to a community of faith. Church, taken from the Greek *ekklesia* as a calling together of a community for specific purposes, is not simply the coming together, but also those who gather. The gathering is integral to what *ekklesia* means. But that simply begs the question of what *is* a gathering, and can it be done equally online as in person; or at least can they be viewed as broadly equivalent? What is the church?

Again, as we have argued (2022 Report) that the New Testament expects the church to come together (e.g. on the subject of orderly worship in 1 Corinthians 14:26 the apostle Paul says: **When you come together.**) Likewise Hebrews 10:25 instructs the Christians not to neglect, or give up meeting together. But, it might be argued, the 1st century church didn’t have laptops, so the meeting *had* to be physically. Can it be different now?

Some might well argue that online we can pray together; love one another; hear the preaching of the word – have *community* online. Perhaps opportunity for evangelism is easier online. Online people can chat and comment to others on the sermon in progress! However as we have argued before (2022 Report) the sermon is more than listening to

¹ Panel on Doctrine remit from General Assembly 2021

² Panel on Doctrine deliverance 2 from General Assembly 2022

information. There is, or should be some elements of *Thus says the Lord* in an encounter with God through His word. So church cannot be reduced to the word 'gathering'. So, what is the church?

What is the church?

Though we may assume that, of course we know what church is, we need to start by recognising that church is not something that dropped fully formed and without precedent into the world. Rather the fabric from which it is woven is stretched right through the Bible from the beginning.

If we were to ask the question: *where is God present?* We could answer in a number of ways. God is present everywhere by virtue of divine omnipresence, but while God is in every place, scripture also suggests that in addition to this there are forms of God's 'special presence'. 'Special' divine presence refers to unique places in which God acts in particular ways. For example, the Old Testament speaks of God's presence everywhere (e.g. Psalm 139:7-12) but also speaks of God being specially present on Mount Sinai, in a pillar of fire and a cloud, in the temple, and by virtue of his Spirit 'coming upon' the prophets. In the New Testament, some of the key modes of God's special presence are:

- He is uniquely present in the person of Jesus Christ.
- He is uniquely present ***in the believer*** by virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Paul: *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*³ And Jesus with His disciples: *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*⁴)
- He is uniquely present ***amongst the church gathered***.
- He is uniquely present when we partake of the Lord's Table (e.g. those who Paul warns about drinking judgment upon themselves do so because they do not 'discern the body of Christ' (1 Cor 11:29) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF) claims that the efficacy of the sacrament depends upon a particular act of the Spirit which makes Christ 'present to the faith' of believing partakers (WCF 29.7)).
- He will be uniquely present with remarkable intimacy with His people for ever in the New Jerusalem.

In each of these God is present in a different way, and we need to beware of confusing them. Sitting in there is the question of the universal over against the local church. Can we argue that since we are spiritually joined with all Christians everywhere through the indwelling Holy Spirit, then that means there is no need for a physical gathering?

To respond to that, we might ask: *does God meet with His people in a **placeless** manner?* The consistent biblical answer is – no! As we have just said, the fabric from which the church is woven stretches right through the Bible.

It is there in the Garden of Eden where God walks with Adam and Eve. It is there in both the tabernacle and temple. And it will be there in the New Jerusalem where the dwelling of God

³ 1 Corinthians 6:19

⁴ John 14: 16 - 17

is with His people. The church sits, as it were, in the middle as the fulfilment of the old and as the beginning of that eschatological temple.

Solomon as he dedicates the temple in 1 Kings 8, recognises the duality of God's presence with His people. That God not merely visits the temple, but in some sense *dwells* there. *Then Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell for ever."*⁵ And again: *"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open towards this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there.'*"⁶ The temple is the place where, so to speak, heaven and earth intersect in a like manner to Jacob's experience at Bethel when he fled from Esau: *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in **this place**, and I was not aware of it."*⁷

That same temple/tabernacle imagery is there in Revelation 21:3 where, as the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, we hear the voice: *Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.*⁸ This is more literally *the **tabernacle** of God is with men*. This is important because although we rightly say that the Holy Spirit is not constrained by time or distance, God continually *chooses* to focus on place. Eden; tabernacle; temple; church.

Again and again in the New Testament we find the use of temple imagery. In Jesus Himself; in the Spirit-indwelling of the believer; and amongst the people of God. And in these we are always being pointed towards the eternal temple in that paradox where the Lamb is the temple; and yet the New Jerusalem is the cube-shaped Holy of Holies. In Hebrews we find that as we gather to worship we are already beginning to participate in that ultimate gathering – no longer gathered as God's people at Sinai; but as His people in a heavenly Zion.

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

*But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*⁹

It is especially striking as Paul addresses the church in Corinth: *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*¹⁰ Striking because although we probably have the habit of applying this individually, the "you" is plural. It is to the *church* that Paul speaks. Likewise in Ephesians: *In him (Jesus) the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*¹¹

⁵ 1 Kings 8: 12 - 13

⁶ 1 Kings 8: 27 - 29

⁷ Genesis 28: 16

⁸ Revelation 21:3

⁹ Hebrews 12: 18 - 24

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3: 16

¹¹ Ephesians 2: 20 - 21

Possibly most striking of all is to the Corinthian church where we have both the phrase: *the church comes together* and as words of prophecy (or preaching) are heard by the unbeliever, the unbeliever will be convicted and exclaim: *God is really among you!*¹²

Place and cyber-space

The children's song *I am the church* has a verse that says: *The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place – the church is a people.*¹³ There is absolutely a right emphasis in that, and yet what we've been saying is that place is also important to thinking of church as where God in particular meets with His people.

Part of the biblical theology of "temple" is that in all three periods – the time before Christ, the new covenant, and new Jerusalem – God's presence, even though everywhere, dwells in a different, deeper, special sense in a *place*. In these "last days" that place is the local church. What we're seeing is that God's new "temple" is the local church and not merely the universal church.

What relevance does this have to a church gathering over a live video link or via a pre-recorded service? The point of this all too brief biblical theology of God's presence is to suggest that there is something more than God's general omnipresence and even more than the Spirit's indwelling which occurs in the church's gathering and at the Lord's table. In these events, God acts in a particular location, in a unique way, just as God acts in unique ways in particular locations throughout scripture. Is this biblical pattern of divine action, in which God acts and is present in special ways at particular locations, in some way undermined by an online church gathering in which there is no local proximity and thus no single location where the church gathers?

Being a body in the body

One of the distinctives of the Christian faith is that our spirituality is not compromised by our physicality. We are embodied souls. The incarnation of Jesus and His bodily resurrection, which presage our own bodily resurrections, are the evidence for how the whole person is important. In our 2022 Report we touched on some of the issues that arise from a video church model, whether Zoom, live-streamed, or pre-recorded.

What we see as we look at the nature of the church itself is how important physical place is in the physical community of God's people. God in the believer and God in the local church are connected, and as we've argued the pattern for the people of God is that place is important.

We are embodied souls, and so our connections have a distinctively physical aspect. We pick up signs from those with whom we interact in a way that a video link cannot do. It may be argued that of the one-another commands of the Bible, most can be done online – apart from greet one another with a holy kiss! That may be in measure true, but to what extent, as aspects such as serving one another and loving one another are only fully rounded in the physical interaction. In a slight comparison, Paul communicates and serves through pastoral letters to the churches, yet how often he expresses his longing to see them.

We live in an age that apparently values "authenticity" yet online interactions can lend themselves to a large degree of *inauthenticity*. That is true in the personal interactions of church and yet it is harder to not reveal truth about ourselves when we do have to interact in that way. It is also much easier to only interact with a particular favoured circle online, than in

¹² 1 Corinthians 14: 23 - 25

¹³ I am the church – Avery & Marsh

the physical presence of church when we see that crashing bore bearing down on us. We learn what it means to love one another as Christ loved us.

Underpinning this is the truth that just as Creation has Adam and Eve in the immediate presence of the Lord, so sin and the fall *disrupts* that presence. Indeed pulling on the temple imagery, the Babylonian exile and destruction of the temple are heightened examples of exclusion from the presence of God. The purpose of the incarnation is the tabernacling of God-in-the-flesh with us; and in that, that atonement would be made so that we are reconciled to God and may dwell in His presence for ever. Again we need to think of the physicality of the incarnation as a whole. It is Christ's whole life from conception to death (and resurrection) that atones; His active obedience through life as well as His (so-called) passive obedience on the cross. He, through all of this, goes to the Father as the pioneer and guarantor of our salvation.¹⁴

On a practical level if in our Reformed understanding, the church is a community called by the gospel and where the Word is rightly preached, the Sacraments properly administered and discipline is exercised according to God's Word¹⁵ then the issue of the exercise of discipline; the purity of the church becomes problematic in a video only connection.

It is important to recognise that what it means to participate in and as 'church', involves much more than participation in a worship service. It is about – at a minimum – an entirely remade communal life, representing Christ to the world by the Spirit in all that we do, and together enjoying the triune God now and forevermore. Our focus on particular questions related to the gathering of the church does not exclude this rich, broader understanding of church.

We also recognise the variety of differing experiences of online services and divergent perspectives on the integration of technology in church. We appreciate this diversity of experience and preference. However, in our church practice, we not only ask pragmatically what seems to 'work', much less simply what we 'prefer', but are guided by scripture and, in a derivative way, by the church's history and tradition to ask what forms of church practice most faithfully follow the pattern passed down by Christ and the apostles (this passing on or delivering over of the apostolic teaching is described in passages like 1 Cor 15:3).

The General Assembly's remit to the Panel on Doctrine was to examine the 'nature' of public worship. This is more than a practical question of whether God can 'be at work in' an online worship service with online communion. He can, because God can use the church regardless of whether the church is operating in an 'ideal' manner. Even if we conclude that online communion is not the best practice that follows in the pattern set by Christ and the apostles, this would not deny that God is and was at work in online communion services. Similarly, if one is a presbyterian, this often involves thinking something akin to a presbyterian mode of church government is the model of organising the church most faithful to scripture and the most expedient way of ordering the church's life in accordance with the gospel. However, this doesn't require denying that God is at work in churches with less than – what Presbyterian's consider to be – ideal modes of church government. Just so, we might conclude online communion is not best practice given the nature of the gathering of the church and the nature of the Lord's Table but nonetheless recognise God's freedom to work where and when it pleases him (a classical Protestant sacramental principle).¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Hebrews 2: 8 – 11; 12:2

¹⁵ Scots Confession 1560 Chapter XVIII; compare Calvin's Institutes 4.1.9; Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 25:4.

¹⁶ Augsburg Confession, 5.

In conclusion, our remit as a panel is to assess our denomination's theology of the nature of the church, and in particular church worship and the Lord's Table. With respect to our particular remit, the biblical theology of God's presence outlined above begins to suggest that local proximity is a key part of the way in which God orders and meets with his church.

Lord's Supper and the Mission of the Church

Where then does the Lord's Supper fit into this? The physicality of both the church and the Supper should be evident. Before dealing specifically with the Biblical texts we would also want to suggest that there is a particular missional element in both the church physically constituted and in the Lord's Supper as the church gathers. The church – the physical *ekklesia* – makes God's kingdom visible. It is noteworthy that when Jesus speaks of building His church ¹⁷ *ekklesia* was generally used, not in a religious context, but as the word for the civic public gathering. So Jesus uses the word *ekklesia* rather than fellowship or even synagogue. This is the visible City of God within the kingdoms of the world.

It marks itself as this outpost, where the assembly is then further marked by the sacraments of baptism (the entry) – and the Lord's Supper (the sustaining). The Lord's Supper is a visible display of the reality of the kingdom of God and that reality can be seen with particular clarity in the physical gathering where we share as one body. Outsiders to the kingdom can see and experience the nature of the church through what, after all, were often referred to as "love feasts". It is why there is such a plea and warnings from Paul in 1 Corinthians about unity among the believers.

Lord's Supper and the texts

The key texts that outline the theology of the Supper are found in 1 Corinthians chapters 10 & 11.

In the background is inevitably our Reformed (Calvinist) approach to the Lord's Supper, in which there is a vital connection between the sign – the physical bread and wine – and the thing signified – the spiritual feeding and refreshment. We don't confuse the two as though the elements had power in themselves; yet we do not separate them because they are received by faith and this is how God Himself has chosen to strengthen our faith. We can see this laid out in the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 29 especially paragraphs 5, 7 & 8.¹⁸ Indeed it could be argued that the sign is not merely the bread and wine as elements, but the whole action of the Supper in which these elements are shared. It is surely why in the Reformed understanding there is to be no separation of word from sacrament.

¹⁷ Matthew 16: 18

¹⁸ 5. The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that, truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before.

7. Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.

8. Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament; yet, they receive not the thing signified thereby; but, by their unworthy coming thereunto, are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore, all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table; and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto.

If so, it is not simply the elements that are important: it is that they are given in a particular context for the strengthening of the body of Christ, His church. We eat and drink *together*; we *share* the bread; we *share* the cup. 1 Corinthians 10:17 – *we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf* and we come as a covenant assembly. This key component of the Supper is lacking in a video link and to seek to engage in the Supper each with our own bread and cup obscures a central part of what we are celebrating. Video-link communion points to our physical separation at the very moment we should be emphasising this physical communion. It could threaten – at times – to visibly depict the congregation as if they were observers rather than mutual participants serving one another. That mutual service is itself a potent witness to our life in Christ.

In 11:20 likewise, the context is *when you come together*. More pointedly it speaks of everyone eating their own food and drink as a marked counterpoint to a true Lord's Supper. The oneness of the elements and the togetherness of the sharing are not peripheral features of the Lord's supper; they are central.

But if the argument comes back, surely it is the spiritual that is important, not the physical, Paul in 10:16 strikingly reverses that concept. *Is not **the cup** of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not **the bread** that we break a participation in the body of Christ?* The participation in the spiritual benefits is associated with the sharing in the physical. Just as in 10:17 it was partaking of a common loaf that evidenced one body, not vice-versa.

The Supper was instituted by our Lord and is given to us by God. There may be differing emphases at different times: to remind; to act as instruments of strengthened spiritual union; to offer a foretaste of the restoration of all things in the marriage supper of the Lamb. But a sacrament in the Reformed view is something *God* has given. One loaf, one cup, and the physically gathered act of sharing as the church. Indeed as we share, we share taking *this* bread; and *this* cup. Bread and wine are given and received – which is simply not possible in a video-linked sacrament.

Again, in the WCF chapter 29 paragraph 3: *The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to a holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants; but to none who are not then present in the congregation.* Not only does this raise the question of what being *present* means. It also raises the question of whether people in various locations gathering on computers are really 'present' with one another. Yes, they are engaging with one another, but are they 'present' with one another in the sense relevant to a church gathering and the partaking of communion? Or stated differently, is physical or local proximity irrelevant to being 'present' with another person and does claiming it is irrelevant fit with the line of biblical teaching outlined previously?

Interestingly, Paul can speak of being present 'in spirit'. For him, in the context of 1 Corinthians 5:4, being present 'in spirit' seems to indicate an intention to affirm and endorse what a particular church is doing. However, even though Paul speaks of being 'present in spirit', he contrasts this form of non-local presence with those who are not 'absent in body' and have locally 'assembled' (*synago*) (1 Corinthians 5:4). This is a common term in the book of Acts for a church gathering, and seems inseparable from local, bodily presence (e.g. Acts 14:27; 15:30). Acts 20:7-8 explicitly speaks of the congregation 'assembling' for the breaking of bread, thereby associating this sort of bodily presence, contrasted in 1 Corinthians 5:4 with being merely 'present in Spirit', with the partaking of the Lord's table.

This again, raises the question of on what biblical, theological or traditional basis one might think physical or local proximity is irrelevant to the 'coming together' (*synerchomai*) involved in partaking of the Lord's Table? (1 Corinthians 11:18)

Furthermore, for many of us – even those sympathetic to online communion – temporal proximity is considered essential for the best practice of partaking of the Lord's Table. Defenders of online communion often reject that one could watch a previously recorded church service whenever one wants, taking communion as often as one desires. Understandably, they think this practice is much more private and individualistic than communion via a 'live' video link in which communion is partaken simultaneously. But the question before us concerns the 'nature' of the church and the Lord's Table and the best ecclesial practices which follow upon this.

It is not clear, in light of the biblical, historical, and traditional dimensions of the Lord's Table outlined above, that there is any principled theological and/or biblical reason for thinking temporal proximity (i.e. partaking at the same 'time') is essential for participation in the Lord's Table but local proximity (i.e. partaking at the same 'place') is irrelevant. Indeed, in many ways the meaning of communion is obscured without some sense of a shared table and shared communion elements. Sharing a common table, bread and wine/juice requires not only temporal but *local* proximity. We might ask advocates of online communion: where does scripture or church tradition suggest that partaking of communion at the same 'time' is essential but being present at the same 'place', is not? Aside from what 'feels' more like being in communion with others to us, it is difficult to see according to what biblical rationale one would decide to allow live video participation in communion from different locations but reject that one could partake of communion from a pre-recorded video whenever and however often one wants. Furthermore, after accepting the practice of online communion, it is difficult to have a principled biblical and theological basis upon which to, as per the Westminster Confession, rule out private communions so long as when partaking of communion, one 'intends' to be united with one's church.

In short, the bible seems to see local proximity as a component of what is communicated in the Lord's Table since this allows for a common table, loaf and cup and mutually serving one another. Once local proximity is sacrificed, it is difficult to see what principled biblical and theological reason there is for avoiding far more individualistic forms of partaking of the Lord's Table, including even private communion.

One further point worth mentioning is that the Passover which underlies in part the Lord's Supper was a family and community ordinance. Small families shared with others so that none would celebrate on their own.¹⁹

It is the importance of the sacrament that drew the United Free Church to its practice of having a quorum of the Kirk Session physically present at a home communion, thus affirming the churchly nature of the sacrament. *Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone; as likewise, the denial of the cup to the people, worshiping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about, for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.*²⁰

It is important, in discussing the ways in which a confessional document like the Westminster Confession does and does not apply to our context, to ask not only what it says, but why it says it. Why did the Westminster say that partaking of the sacrament 'alone', 'carrying [the elements] about,' or 'reserving them' was contrary to the 'nature' of the sacrament? It is not

¹⁹ Exodus 12: 1 - 4

²⁰ WCF Chapter 29:4

only because, as is well known, the Reformed rejected the Roman Catholic view that the bread and the wine ceased to be bread and wine but were substantially transformed into something else, but also because these practices assumed a focus on the elements themselves and their consecration, rather than seeing communion as being not about the elements in isolation but the elements insofar as they are embedded in the broader setting of a common, shared worship service with the gathered congregation, the speaking of the gospel, the words of institution, and so on. (The roots of the Lord's Table in the Last Supper already seem to suggest this, it is not just bread and wine in isolation but the shared table, shared elements, serving of one another, and shared words that are all essential).²¹ This too suggests that local proximity in a church gathering is an important aspect of the Lord's Table, since it is not just the elements in themselves which are essential, but the entire corporate worship event occurring when a church 'comes together' (1 Corinthians 14:26).

There is no doubt that we felt the pain of being unable to partake of the Lord's Supper during the lockdown, but in the longer term we need to be wary of the danger of reflecting the world around us in viewing ourselves primarily as consumers whose desires have to be met immediately. Additionally, there has been a loss of the sense of lament as a part of Christian experience and expression. That when we face situations that cause us pain, we are to cry to the Lord in full expression of that pain, and so seek His face.

In the light of all that has been said about church; about presence; and about the coming presence with the Lord in glory, it is of note that in Jesus' celebration of the Supper with His disciples, Jesus comments: "*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,*" he said to them. "*I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.*"²² That is, Jesus Himself will not celebrate with the disciples until the day He is physically present with them in the new heaven and new earth. Jesus waits for the full encounter of physical and spiritual in the one new body.

Conclusion

There will always be exceptional circumstances. Being a believer in a closed country may mean physical fellowship and gathering with other believers may simply not be possible. Notwithstanding that, it should be clear that the normal pattern for the Christian is both belonging to a church, and gathering with one's fellow believers in the rhythms of worship and service.

Within that pattern there will very obviously be those by age or infirmity who, having been part of that church, can no longer gather in that same way and video technology has unquestionably been a great boon. It should also be asked what *can* we do online, that we *can't* by physical meeting. It is here that opportunities unique to online may come into their own including; opportunities for instruction, for maintaining contact with those who have moved away, for publicising church in the community, and for offering fellowship across our denomination.

To the issue of the Lord's Supper what we have argued is that the physicality of the Supper underpinned by the physicality of the nature of the church must mean that communion should involve a physical gathering in which the church is locally proximate to one another.²³

²¹ See: Billings, Remembrance, Communion and Hope, 66.

²² Mark 14: 24, 25

²³ In this we agree with a number of other, negative evaluations of online communion offered by figures in the Reformed tradition, e.g. Harrison Perkins, "Virtual Communion?" Modern Reformation, <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/the-mod-virtual-communion>. Scott Swain, "Should we Livestream the Lord's Supper," <https://www.scottswain.com/2020/03/30/should-we-live->

To those who cannot attend, home communion where a representation of church may gather; the Scriptures read and expounded – however briefly; and prayer offered is the best alternative.

This is preferable for three reasons. *One*, it is a more traditional practice rooted in the history of the church. *Two*, it maintains the centrality of the church gathering with common elements, insofar as is possible under those conditions. This is because there are still common elements and a common table amongst the participants rather than each participant or household bringing out their own elements and partaking at their own table. *Three*, the elders gathering with the house-bound person represent not the house-bound person's physical separation from the community of the church but by engaging in this practice, they so prioritise the local proximity of the church that the church gathering is symbolically 'brought to' the house-bound person who cannot themselves attend. The elders represent the rest of the community and as representatives of that community, come into the physical presence of the housebound person, representing their shared communion in Christ and sharing in common elements at a common table.

At this point, we should consider some objections. Some will wonder whether the New Testament vision of a common cup and loaf is already undermined by having small glasses of wine/juice or having a collection of wafers or pre-cut bread. Likewise, others will claim that once one has allowed for the practice of elders bringing communion to the house-bound, the necessity of physical proximity has already been eroded. At some extremes, people even wonder whether amplification is ruled out if we must be physically present with one another. Finally, some will wonder if all of this is so much overly dogmatic, scholastic hair-splitting with no relevance to actual church life and mission.

An important point to keep in view in responding to these concerns is that one of the distinctive characteristics of Reformed sacramental theology, is a reliance upon direct divine action in the sacrament and the refusal to claim that it is the minister's action which straightforwardly calls forth or makes efficacious our communion with God in the sacrament. Thus, it is not the case that if some aspect of the celebration of the Lord's table is not performed precisely according to best practice, the celebration is no longer sacramentally valid. This would too closely link the minister's action in the sacrament with God's action. (The Reformers associate this approach with Roman Catholicism, and, indeed, it is common in Roman Catholicism to think that even slightly 'incorrect' celebration of the sacraments invalidate their sacramental efficacy). In view of this, our aim is not to specify when God can and cannot act through any given celebration of communion, including an online one. We are not setting up the conditions which must be met in order for the Lord's Table to be sacramentally efficacious. Instead, our aim is to outline the best practice for partaking of communion which most closely corresponds to the biblical and theological 'nature' of the sacrament and of the church gathering.

There is space for a certain amount of variation with respect to exactly how the Lord's Table is partaken, but what we have endeavoured to show is that physical proximity is close to the heart of what the Lord's Table communicates. What 'exactly' counts as physical proximity is not the point (thus, we raise no objection to amplification or video projection in a common space or building). However, there is a difference between being locally present with another person, and not being present. Even if the boundary specifying what 'counts' as local presence is vague or fuzzy, it is intuitive that we can tell when we are or are not locally present. When we are separated, potentially by miles from one another, we are not locally

stream-the-lords-supper/. Donald Macleod, "Online Communion Services?" <https://donaldmacleod.org.uk/dm/online-communion-services/>. We appreciate that, like with any theological issue, there are important voices with other views.

present with one another and something basic to the meaning of communion is obscured if we partake at this distance.²⁴

Similarly, a bottle of wine/juice, poured into multiple small glass, placed upon a common table for distribution, does not seem – in a fundamental way – to sacrifice the Lord's intention that communion communicate church unity through a common cup and loaf (who would deny that a supermarket purchased, pre-sliced loaf is not a single loaf of bread?). This seems very different from the total lack of local proximity obtaining in online communion.

Likewise, we have already given reason to think that taking communion to the house-bound, while in some ways not ideal – because the house-bound person would prefer to be in the physical presence of the church community—better maintains the principles of local proximity, a shared table, and common elements which underlie the nature of corporate worship and the Lord's Table we have outlined.

Is this whole discussion hair-splitting with no relevance to the church? We have been at pains to emphasise that we have not tried to merely ask pragmatically what 'seems to work' but have been seeking to ask how we should practically partake of communion given the biblical and theological 'nature' of the church and the sacraments. But if we were to speak in terms of the practical implications of this discussion, perhaps a more intensive focus upon the uniqueness of the church gathering and of our shared participation in the sacraments will – in some very small way – be a part of encouraging the missional revitalisation of our churches.

One of the key reasons sociologists identify for a lack of participation in church is 'disenchantment', i.e. a feeling that there is no transcendent, no supernatural; that the world is flat, with all times and places being 'the same', with no place to uniquely encounter the divine. Figures like Charles Taylor associate disenchantment with a loss of a sense that there are unique times and places where God is present and active.²⁵ Perhaps a church freshly alive to God's special presence when we gather for corporate worship and receive the gifts of his grace through bread and wine would give the lie to disenchantment. Perhaps if we began acting and speaking as if in gathering for church and partaking of communion we were doing something profoundly serious and holy (i.e. set apart), others might start to take notice as well. It is too much to hope that a revitalised vision of church worship and the sacraments alone will reverse years of secularisation, but perhaps, by God's grace, taking more seriously the profound gift of receiving Christ at a shared table, together, could be some small part of the way God reenergises his church and helps us believe in the transcendent in a world that feels empty and flat.

In all of this, we are not condemning those who have engaged in online communion. We are not even claiming that God cannot be at work in online communion. We are, however, claiming that online communion is not the most fitting way of partaking of the Lord's Table given the foregoing theological, biblical and traditional principles and is not the 'best practice' of our denomination.

²⁴ The fact that there is a vague or fuzzy rather than clear cut boundary between being 'in' and 'not within' close proximity to another person does not rule out the validity of the distinction. For example, contemporary philosophy has a large literature devoted to 'vagueness' and, to use a widely cited example, the fact that it is very difficult or perhaps even impossible to specify precisely how few hairs a person must have in order to be rightly termed 'bald,' does not invalidate the distinction between a person who is bald and a person who is not. A fuzzy boundary can still be a valid boundary, and thus there is a valid distinction between being locally 'present with' another person and not being 'present with' them.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 96-7; 553.

The issue of those who are seeking Biblically orthodox teaching where they are not within reach of such a church raises a difficult problem precisely because the physical fellowship and service is not immediately possible. Whilst video technology enables the possibility of accessing Christian teaching so that they may be fed, thought needs to be given to how the other aspects of church may be incorporated. This will essentially be the problem for the church with whom such contact is made, not least pastoral care, discipleship and discipline.

The gathering of the church is vital, all the more in our day when discouragements abound, and isolated we may become discouraged. We come to be equipped by the gospel; to *speak to one another with Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.*²⁶ *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*²⁷ This latter quote from Hebrews reminds us that we never meet just for ourselves; and just for the present time. But for one another with our eye upon the day of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Committee,

IAN F R LLOYD
JEROME O'BRIEN

Convener
Secretary

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

11. General Assembly accept the Report as the position of the Church

²⁶ Ephesians 5:19

²⁷ Hebrews 10: 25