

A personal response from Revd Dr Pete Phillips as Director of the CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology, Durham University.

The Methodist Church is debating a report from their Faith and Order Committee entitled "Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media". The report broadly proposes rejecting such celebrations of the central liturgical act of the Church. The reasons are threefold – community, presidency and virtuality. The key controversial section of the report centres on whether you can have social presence online.

As part of the preparation of the report, I was asked to submit some thoughts on the subject as a representative of CODEC. So I have decided since I retain the copyright and intellectual property rights on the piece I wrote and because there is not much left of my comments in the final report, that I would make it more available.

So here it is...

Can we 'do' Communion Mediated by Social Media" – or as the original memorial asked: "the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the Internet or video-conferencing"

My point is not that Holy Communion mediated by social media cannot be a valid celebration, or a significant corporate act of worship, but simply that within Methodist doctrine on Holy Communion it cannot be done – presbyteral Presidency stops us performing multi-local communion. It's all about procedure and church order (the only reason we hold to presbyteral presidency) and not about theology at all. The theology both of community across multiple locations and of social presence across multiple locations and multiple modes of embodiment (or not) has been well rehearsed over the years and certainly well within reach of contemporary conversations about a Mission-shaped Church.

We need to hold in mind that the Faith and Order Committee has severely limited the remit of the report by moving away from the original Memorial (a broad definition of translocational Holy Communion) to a narrower idea of social media mediated communion, indeed even to Communion on Twitter.

The original memorial from the South East District asked the following question:

The South East District Synod requested the Conference to instruct the Faith and Order Committee **to form a policy regarding the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the Internet or video-conferencing.**

In this form of remote communion, a minister in one location would be permitted to preside over a celebration of Holy Communion with a gathered group of fellowshiping believers consisting of groups or individuals residing in disparate locations who provide their own elements to be blessed by the person presiding

The following comments focus more on Communion mediated by social media since this is the focus of the current report.

Introduction

There are a number of issues which surround the concept of communion mediated through social media. Broadly, the issues centre on the nature of the eucharistic community, the presidency of the eucharist and on the nature of social media. While I am convinced that both the creation and sustenance of (ecclesial) community is possible through social media, I am not convinced that under current Methodist (or Catholic or Anglican) polity, a Celebration of Holy Communion mediated through social media (or through video conferencing as proposed in the actual memorial) would be possible.

It is important to note that there has been a shift away from the wider form proposed in the original memorial to the more limited form proposed in the response.

Let me address each issue briefly – although there are huge complications in each which will need to be glossed over here because of both time and space.

1. Eucharistic Community.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul makes it clear that community is at the very heart of the celebration of communion. This is affirmed in our own documents about Communion. The Eucharist is a celebration of community on different levels – a celebration with the Church Militant and with the Church Triumphant; a celebration that is part and parcel of the global and eternal celebration of Christ's saving acts. As such, Holy Communion is never a secluded, personal act of devotion – it is in its own right a community celebration. Paul's insistence in 1 Corinthians 11 is that the immediate human/social context of communion is also of immense importance. We need to recognize the body. By this, I understand Paul to be speaking on two levels – to understand the body of Christ in terms of his (Christ's) [real] presence in the Eucharist (as in Methodism's Statement on Holy Communion: *His Presence Makes the Feast*) but also, as in the next chapter of Corinthians, the representation of Christ in his body the Church – recognizing both Christological and humano-ecclesiological presence. The problem seems to have been that the people in Corinth were not recognizing that they represented/were the body of Christ and as such the Lord's Supper was more focused on the individual's needs than on the building up of the body. Communion had become an individual expression of devotion rather than a community-centred celebration of Christ's saving acts.

Historically, the locally, contemporaneously-enfleshed expression of community is what makes the Eucharist valid. But there is more to communion than this. Communion must transcend the local experience – just as it is not just an individual experience nor is it a local church experience. Certainly, the connectivity of the local congregation with the Church Militant and Triumphant means that we can recognize the body of Christ as transcending both synchronicity and geography. As such, all Eucharists are community-based, but that means based in an ecclesial community which is both global and eternal. Even one person celebrating the Lord's Supper engages in the worship of the whole body of Christ: we are all connected both by Christ's presence, but also by the work of the Holy Spirit and by the omnipresent Grace of the Father. The presence of the Body is about Jesus, about the local church, about the global Church, and about the Church that has been/will be through all ages.

Since Communion is about translocation, transtemporal incorporation into the body, it is without doubt possible to develop an ecclesial community which is entirely connected through digital means rather than physical proximity. God's omnipresence means that we are connected in community wherever and whenever we are. Paul said that although he was absent in body he was present in Spirit (Col 2:5, 1 Cor 5:3); Jesus said he was with us always to the end of the age (Matt 28:20). Some form of presence is possible across distance and the direct connection of social media must surely make that even more possible.

However, this does not mean that everything we do in close-proximity communities can be replicated across media – for example, we cannot share the same loaf, the same cup, the same food, be baptized in the same water, share the same sense of proximal community. Nancy Baym and others have explored the problems of absent presence within such communities, which changes the nature of them and limits the social embeddedness possible – see Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* and Sherry Turkle, *Connected but Alone*. But no one in digital studies or in contemporary sociology would argue that community development is impossible across different, remote locations.

2. Presidency

Methodism does not adhere to priestly concepts, as we see in the Deed of Union. However, for church order, we do argue that only those authorized by the Conference, usually presbyters, may preside at Holy Communion. The role of Presidency has been explored in numerous statements of the Church, not least in *His Presence Makes the Feast* (and I think in *Called to Love and Praise*) and in the documentation around the Covenant process. [Forgive me for not giving chapter and verse here.]

Basically, Presidency is NOT about saying the magic words. Presidency is about reflecting the fourfold process at the centre of all acts of the Eucharist – taking, blessing, breaking, distributing.

The Presiding Minister is an essential part of the whole act of the Eucharist, not just in verbalizing sections of it. If we believed that it was about the words, then anyone could preside because a presbyter first wrote the Worship Book. Or we could record the President of Conference doing Communion and send that recording out to everyone church and have a Presidential Eucharist. But we don't believe that. We don't reserve the Eucharist because we celebrate local, immediate consecration of the bread and wine and the proper disposal of those elements after the service. The words are not magic.

Presidency is about taking, blessing, breaking and distributing the elements. As far as I understand the proposal in the Memorial, it argues for a breaking up of the act of Presidency – a presbyter would say the words, or type them, while individuals in remote locations would do the other acts of presidency – taking, breaking and distributing. As such, each remote communion would really equate to a new celebration of communion or a new act of presidency. Each remote location would need its own president and therefore its own authorized person.

Could the Holy Spirit enable the Presidency to be equally effective in different locations? If we believed this, we would do it already. Enough churches suffer Eucharistic deprivation. If we believed a Superintendent in X Church could consecrate elements in Y Chapel simply by mediation through technology, why are we not doing it already? It is because the Holy Spirit COULD consecrate, but miraculous fragmentation and distribution of the bread by the Holy Spirit seems to be a step too far for most Methodists to believe. God gave us human presiding ministers to do this.

This is the key issue which the memorial misses. It equates Presidency to saying some magic words, rather than to the orderly reenactment of the fourfold Eucharist action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving the elements to a gathered congregation. This is both the teaching accepted by the Methodist Church and which would need to be replaced before remote communion could be authorized. In my opinion.

3. Social Media

The initial proposal argues for the use of live, interactive media or video conferencing. This is important because it focuses on synchronous media. In other words, it relates to an shared, synchronous experience across media. One of the big issues of social media is that it is ultimately asynchronous. Readers of social media platforms regularly send tweets, Facebook updates or microblog posts which they know will not be read synchronously often because of the worldwide nature of their reader-community. As such, social media platforms are built precisely to account for asynchronous communication allowing for synchronically linked comments, but also for asynchronously linked modes such as likes and favouriting which allow asynchronous responses without the need to interrupt ongoing comment conversations. However, such aspects of asynchronicity would suggest that social media is especially unsuited to the exploration of virtual sacraments.

We have already seen that Methodism does not believe that words themselves consecrate the elements or validate the celebration of the Eucharist. As such, just as a historically printed version of communion does not validate such a celebration, nor would a contemporarily typed twitter or Facebook version.

(If we did believe the words themselves were magic, there would be an interesting philosophical issue. Since words can be seen as speech acts creating perlocutionary effects, the words of the Communion Service could be understood to have the perlocutionary effect of consecration (hence “the magic words”!). Moreover, those words could be spoken but also they could be typed (for example, if the president was unable to speak) or signed (for example, for those reading sign language). As such, it would be possible to argue (if everything else was OK!) that social media is a valid carrier of perlocutionary meaning (for example, you can tell someone to turn a light off via Twitter as well as via direct speech). In normal speech, moreover, perlocutionary effect could be delayed without its effectiveness being denied (the light can be turned off whenever the message is read). However, in this specific case of linguistic usage, Eucharistic speech, the perlocutionary effect seems to be chronologically dependent upon the synchronic reception of the message. It would not be accepted, I think, that those words would have the perlocutionary effect OUTSIDE of that act of communion – just as we don’t grant ongoing perlocutionary effect to the Worship Book or to recordings of Eucharist Prayers, etc. The issue is that this is a special case of linguistic

usage – a new language game in Wittgenstein’s terms – where we need to play by the rules of the game. Anyway, we don’t believe the words are magic in any case!)

We have seen that communities can be developed through the use of the media. Community is not limited to immediate proximity, although sociologists have different opinions about the effectiveness of remotely connected communities and want to make distinctions between present-presence, absent-presence and anonymous-presence as forms of community engagement. Present-presence, the ability for us to recognize the body of Christ within the presence of the community, is an essential pre-requisite for an act of Communion. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that such an awareness could be created over the internet and/or through social media. Indeed, 1 Corinthians shows us how difficult it was for even a relatively small, household-centred, flesh and blood congregation to gain such a mutual awareness – and the importance that they did!

We have seen, crucially, that Presidency of the Eucharist is about a representation, re-enactment, re-figuring of the fourfold Eucharistic actions – taking, blessing, breaking and giving, reflected in the words of institution and in the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper (and John 6). As such, these actions should without exception be completed by the authorized person. It is a misunderstanding of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the Methodist Church to limit the Presiding activity to the conveyance of certain words. Since the method proposed in the Memorial and in the concept of Communion mediated by Social Media limit the role of Presiding to sharing the [magic] words, this reflects an incomplete and incorrect understanding of Methodist polity and practice. I am not able to envisage any way in which the President could take the elements, speak the words of blessing, break the bread and distribute the elements with the use of social media as the central method of mediation between members of the Eucharistic community. Technology does not permit this and it is not easy to see how it ever will.

We have seen that issues of synchronicity also seem to be involved in our current Eucharistic practice and that social media’s loose relationship with synchronicity provides a specific series of problems for the use of social media as a tool of mediation for the Lord’s Supper.

Prayers, Acts of Remembrance, LoveFeasts all seem to be conveyed well across the Internet. However, we have seen that this specific act, as currently instituted by the Methodist Church, is not suited to mediation across social media. The reason for this is that our current practice and theology reflects a non-digital community and a Presidency located in a specific location and time. We re-enact the Last Supper with a presently-presented congregation and President, synchronically and proximately delivered words and actions, and the use of one bread and one wine. The delivery of this setting across remote geographical and chronological contexts would not be possible without providing multiple representations of one or more aspects – multiple Presidency (each taking, blessing, breaking, giving elements in each remote location/context), multiple elements (different breads, different wines). The latter could feasibly be commuted by pre-consecrating and distributing elements to participants but Methodism does not do that and still the act of Presidency would have to be multiplied across all contexts.

It is my belief that the Eucharist, as presently understood within the Methodist Church, cannot be mediated by Social Media because of the implications for both the role of the President and, connected to this, the subsequent nature of the elements themselves. If we maintain central

The report should reference Paul Fiddes important, but all too brief article on Virtual Sacraments (available here: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/86883542/virtual-communion>) although I think Paul is probably wrong to suggest that an avatar receiving the elements would also receive grace and that this could also be of benefit to the real person connected to the avatar. Although there is a whole host of philosophy of the virtual to explore there. Please note that this memorial is about a different subject – remote communion not virtual communion.

Pete Phillips, January 2015
Edited PMP, June 2015