

Virtual Communion in the URC?



Some of our people wonder whether we can celebrate Holy Communion online.

The person presiding would be linked by video or audio connection to others. Each participant would have bread and wine (or a suitable equivalent) ready beside them as they tuned in. When the time came to eat and drink, all would do so at the same time.

Is this communion, and may we do it? Here are a few thoughts:

1. It may not be the most inclusive kind of worship, if it leaves out some people who would like to be there but lack the technical skills or kit to connect.
2. It's not the most ecumenical kind of worship, and those who belong to LEPs may want to be careful about the reservations of other Churches. Neither the Methodist Church nor the Church of England, for example, would recognise a communion of this kind.

So in LEP situations, please ensure that you consult ecumenical partners first. If the decision is to go ahead, make clear that this is a URC communion to which ecumenical guests are welcome. Be aware that such guests may wish to observe and not partake of physical elements, in line with their differing but profoundly held understanding of communion.

3. With these qualifications, our advice to the URC is that our tradition could in principle affirm the practice of online communion, as an appropriate pastoral provision in these exceptional times.
4. In our tradition communion is thought of as a visual enactment of the Gospel. The reception of the elements signals our response to its promises. We certainly are willing to preach the Gospel online, and communion is one way that we do this for and with one another.
5. It is important that the words of institution are read (1 Corinthians 11:23-26, or parallel verses in one of the gospels). There ought also to be clear presenting and receiving of the elements, and a firm affirmation that we share the feast as Christian community. If audio only is used, try to help the worshippers to visualise the sacramental actions – 'we take, we break, we share ...' – before they receive themselves.
6. The person presiding ought to be someone who could normally preside in the congregation concerned – a minister of word and sacraments, or another person authorised by the synod.
7. What about the theology? A positive point comes from Calvin, that communion brings earthly people into the presence of the heavenly Christ: 'What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.' If the Spirit can do this for us with Jesus, the Spirit can surely

unite us with one another in a virtual sharing of this sacrament.

8. All the above would suggest that for us virtual communion is a reasonable interim measure, if we can handle the practicalities well and include people helpfully. If we do it well, it will both remind us of times when we could share at the Lord's table and point forward to times when we shall do so again. In this – remembering and looking forward – it will reflect the character of every communion service, which remembers the Last Supper and looks forward in hope 'until he come'.

Communion is a sacrament for the time in-between, between the earthly life of Jesus and his coming in glory. As it turns distance into presence, so in these strange days it may turn isolation into companionship, and in places of anxiety and detachment it will quicken and renew our faith.

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