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Signature:

Joseph B. Natwick

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Eat the Livestream:
Hybrid Communion in a Digital Era of Worship

By

Joseph B. Natwick
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

Elizabeth Corrie, PhD
Project Consultant

Jennifer Ayers, PhD
Director of DMin Program

Abstract

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Holy Communion is a central component of Lutheran hybrid worship (worship that takes place both in-person and online, on TV, on the radio, or in other digitally mediated modes). Hybrid Communion practices are rooted in the theology and history of the Lutheran movement. For those who worship in digitally mediated, non-traditional settings, Communion allows worshipers to unite with the real presence of Christ in tangible form. In an otherwise largely audio/visual experience, hybrid Communion honors the fullness of the whole human body at worship. Hybrid Communion practices also expand worshipers' understanding of the *effect* of Communion, that is being united in the meal with the whole fellowship of the saints – those we can see and those we cannot.

Lutheran congregations who gather in hybrid worship settings in this new digital era of worship should reconsider how they educate people for Holy Communion, prioritizing readily available, on-demand resources for adults and the unchurched. Hybrid worshipping congregations should also consider issues of access: namely access to sacramental materials, intuitive digital platforms, and high-quality livestreams. And lastly, congregations must reexamine the language of their liturgies to include the whole hybrid assembly. Two places in the liturgy in particular need of examination for hybrid Communion are the invitation to Communion and the distribution. This new digital era of worship, accelerated by the societal effects of Covid-19, will push the boundaries of the church's worship spaces and who we consider gathered in an assembly. Leaning on the theology of the incarnation, the church can enter confidently into our technology-shaped world caring for and honoring the bodies God has made and Christ has redeemed.

Eat the Livestream:
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By

Rev. Joseph B. Natwick

Pacific Lutheran University, B.A., 2011
Luther Seminary, M.Div., 2015

Project Consultant: Dr. Elizabeth Corrie, Ph.D.

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“The sacrament belongs to him who receives it, not to him who administers it, unless he also receives it.”¹

A print sits on the floor of my office at Bethel Lutheran Church in Windsor, Colorado. My call to serve as their pastor (minister of Word and sacrament) is new, so the floor is serving as a transitional space as I settle into the congregation. Prominently featured on the print are two men who never met. In fact, they could not have met because one of them died 68 years before the other was born. In other words, they are virtually present together in this picture. And yet, they are united in one common task: giving the gift of Holy Communion to the people.

The print is a woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder of Martin Luther and Jan Hus giving Communion to the princes of Saxony.² Hus serves the bread and Luther the serves wine. Behind them, Christ is a fountain pouring out the abundance of his life from his hands, feet, and side, The water, representing his blood, flows down endlessly to his beloved children. This woodcut commemorates both reformers’ work in challenging the theology and practice of reserving the cup for the priests while withholding it from the laity. These men, virtually present but united in the body of Christ, invite the assembly to drink and eat of the abundance of the Lord.

The task of the reforming church has always been about that abundance, letting the abundance of Christ’s mercy and love spill out into the world and into God’s people. In the 15th and 16th centuries, that meant letting Christ spill out through bread *and* wine. In the 21st century, as worship is increasingly shaped by digital technologies, it will be digitally mediated practices that facilitate the love of Christ spilling out even further than before.

¹ Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), in *LW* 41: 152.

² Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Reformers Luther and Hus Giving Communion to the Princes of the House of Saxony*, 1472-1553, woodcut, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.43174.html>.

Hybridity

Hybrid³ worship is worship. During the global Covid-19 pandemic, churches throughout the United States pivoted to provide worship experiences digitally for their congregants to participate in at home. Although some churches have since discontinued the use of technology to digitally mediate worship experiences for online audiences, the hybrid model of worshipping with assemblies who are simultaneously online and in-person will continue in many congregations long past the conclusion of the Covid-19 pandemic. Worship practices in this next decade will continue to explore the many ways people access, participate in, and receive elements of our shared liturgy. The church's task in this emerging era of hybrid worship will be the same as it has always been: helping people encounter Christ in their lives, in their communities, and in the world.

Hybrid Holy Communion is Holy Communion. Communion is a critical component of hybrid worship. In the Lutheran theological tradition, Holy Communion is one of two sacraments, which are the very means of encountering God's grace. As a means of grace, there is a rich benefit for worshipers who are invited to participate in Communion with the whole assembly, offering a tangible sign of Christ's presence in an otherwise largely audio/visual experience. This hybrid era of worship will require churches to explore new strategies of equipping, educating, and empowering congregations to prepare Communion tables big enough and adaptable enough for the whole hybrid community to gather.

This paper will explore the gift that Holy Communion offers for the whole hybrid worshipping assembly. A Lutheran theological understanding of hybrid Communion practices can

³ The use of "hybrid worship" has become very popular in recent years to describe an approach to worship that includes both in-person and online worshipers. I'll use hybrid to include any worship assembly that includes in-person worshipers and online worshipers, those who worship over the radio, or who tune in on television.

be a rich asset for congregations seeking to make their worship practices more welcoming and accommodating of people in all situations. In this paper, I will address some of the common hesitations and criticisms of digitally mediating the sacrament, while also considering some ways congregations can think about their own Communion practices in this new era. I will argue that a Lutheran theology of hybrid Communion can enrich the experience of worshiping online, on the radio, or on TV by taking seriously the tangible presence of Christ and the embodied experience of the worshiper. Additionally, a Lutheran understanding of hybrid Communion also enriches the experience of those who worship in church buildings. For the in-person worshiper, hybrid Communion practices emphasize a theology often neglected at the table: in Communion we are united with Christ and the *entire* fellowship of saints. By creating liturgies of welcome and revisiting the ways we teach about Communion, the church can boldly step into this new era of digital worship, trusting that the Holy Spirit will increase our faith and Christ will continue to feed us through this blessed sacrament.

Setting the Scene – Covid-19 and a New Communion

In March of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily shut down nearly every aspect of communal life in the United States. In an effort to better understand the burgeoning virus and “flatten the curve,”⁴ schools and businesses closed, and people stayed home for weeks as state governments mandated short-term stay-at-home orders. The pandemic shutdown was a major upheaval in societal life. Major cultural touchstones, like March Madness, the multi-million-

⁴ Siobhan Roberts, “Flattening the Coronavirus Curve,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/flatten-curve-coronavirus.html>.

dollar college basketball tournament, and the movie industry became early casualties of the shutdown, sending ripples throughout the entertainment industry.⁵

At the very outset of the pandemic shutdown, Christian congregations throughout the United States immediately began to develop digital means of worshipping God. Slapping together smartphones, tablets, and webcams, thousands of congregations took to YouTube, Facebook, Vimeo, and Zoom to read scripture, proclaim the gospel, and support one another through this uncertain and unsettling time. Pastors, priests, deacons, and other congregational leaders were thrust into new roles of technology developers and digital communications coordinators overnight. By July of 2020, over one-third of US adults worshiped online or on TV and 18% of US adults worshiped online or on TV for the first time in their lives.⁶

In bringing their worship experiences online, worship leaders were forced to translate in-person experiences for online platforms. Congregations evaluated the components of their worship (liturgy, sacraments, preaching, hymnody, etc.) in light of how they would be captured by cameras and microphones and how they would be received by someone on the “other side” of the screen. The task of answering the “why?” is always important for congregations in any time. Why do we do this? Why don’t we do that? But the “why?” of worship became urgent in the work of translating worship services for the small screen. Answering the “why?,” congregations edited, deleted, and transformed elements of worship. In many ways the Covid-19 pandemic ushered in a time of great worship experimentation!

⁵ Ivan Pereira and Arielle Mitropoulos, “A Year of Covid-19: What Was Going on in the US in March 2020.” *ABC News*, March 6, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/year-covid-19-us-march-2020/story?id=76204691> .

⁶ Alan Cooperman, “Will the Coronavirus Permanently Convert In-Person Worshipers to Online Streamers? They Don’t Think So,” *Pew Research Center*, August 17, 2020 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/17/will-the-coronavirus-permanently-convert-in-person-worshippers-to-online-streamers-they-dont-think-so/> .

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States, the most controversial worship element translated for digital platforms was Holy Communion. Lutherans wondered whether they should gather at the table of the Lord during this unprecedented time or if they should fast from the meal until they could be together again. Early on, Lutheran leaders called for a temporary fast from communion. The presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton, and the ELCA worship staff wrote in a letter on March 20, 2020:

We recommend that we do not urge people to employ virtual communion, that deacons, pastors, and bishops use this time as a teaching moment about the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God, that we make use of the Service of the Word and Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer and Responsive Prayer, that we spend time in scripture study, that we pray for each other, and that we contact others regularly by phone, email, or social media.⁷

Early on, many people assumed the pandemic would be temporary, perhaps consisting of one large surge and decline. For churches, that meant getting through the season of Lent, fasting until Easter when worship could resume as normal once again. Fasting from Holy Communion was seen as a temporary fix for a temporary problem.

And yet, Lutheran congregations throughout the United States found ways to celebrate the Eucharist while quarantining at home.⁸ Some congregations offered drive-through Communion,⁹ where congregational leaders distributed the bread and wine to people through the

⁷ ELCA Worship Staff, “Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: Covid-19/Coronavirus,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, March 20, 2020, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf?ga=2.245191941.1270333004.1649122519-1556791735.1643655628, 2.

⁸ A major source of information about on-the-ground ministry responses to Covid came to me from two private Facebook groups for Lutheran leaders: the “ELCA Clergy” page which has over 7,000 members and the “20/30 Rostered Ministers & Seminarians” page which has just over 900 members who are between the ages of 20 and 39.

⁹ “Trinity Lutheran Church to Have Drive-Thru Communion Service,” *Times-Gazette* (Ashland, OH), October 10, 2020, <https://www.times-gazette.com/story/lifestyle/2020/10/02/trinity-lutheran-church-have-drive-thru-communion-service/3586611001/>; Nick Green, “San Pedro Church Holds Drive-Thru Communion,” *Daily Breeze* (Hermosa Beach, CA), May 31, 2020, <https://www.dailybreeze.com/2020/05/31/san-pedro-church-holds-drive-thru-communion/>; Susan Christian Goulding, “Drive-Through Communion, *Online Sermons: Venerable*

windows of their vehicles. Some congregations created at-home communion kits so that families could celebrate Holy Communion together in their homes.¹⁰ Some congregations celebrated the meal live on camera during worship and invited their digitally assembled congregants to share in the meal with whatever elements they had on hand at home.¹¹

By summer of 2020, congregations began the work of navigating a new hybrid future that would involve both online and in-person worshipers. As of the winter of 2022, Covid-19 still raged. New variants continued to spread the deadly virus far and wide. Today, churches continue to navigate the realities of social distancing, masking, and quarantining, all while prioritizing worship in the weekly rhythms of life.

Although many congregations were already broadcasting worship services on the radio, television, and internet, the pandemic pushed thousands of congregations to go online for the first time and now it seems many will stay that way forever, ushering in a new era of worship that pushes the definition and boundaries of the “gathered” assembly. Churches will continue to examine their worship practices in light of this new situation where the worshiping body is no longer assumed to be physically assembled inside a building or within the confines of certain physical boundaries.

As the church found ways to celebrate the meal in more inclusive, accessible ways during the early stages of the pandemic, many will find it difficult to consider a “closed” Communion table that does not welcome the whole hybrid assembly. Throughout this whole process, the

Tustin Church Adapts to Pandemic,” August 2, 2020, <https://www.oeregister.com/2020/08/02/drive-through-communion-online-sermons-venerable-tustin-church-adapts-to-pandemic/> .

¹⁰ The Western ND Synod of the ELCA where I served from 2015-2021 produced an at-home Communion liturgy for families to use around the kitchen table. David Zellmer, “Holy Communion in a Time of Covid-19,” Western North Dakota Synod, March 25, 2020, https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Recommendation-for-Holy-Communion-during-COVID-19--Updated-.html?soid=1111756212968&aid=nWoW_mIxIHk .

¹¹ This was the strategy of the congregation I served, St John Lutheran Church in Dickinson, ND.

pandemic exposed a need in the church to include people who do not feel comfortable or safe gathering with large crowds of people inside the confines of a building. By meeting the needs of the hybrid assembly, churches have found ways to gather even more of the faithful at Christ's table. And with no end in sight to this new pandemic world, the church must shift gears and imagine a future in which all of God's people – those who worship in buildings, those who worship on the radio, those who worship behind a screen, and those who might worship in ways that we cannot presently imagine – are welcomed at the table where we are made one in Christ Jesus.

Collaboration in the Badlands

I served as the associate pastor at St John Lutheran Church in Dickinson, North Dakota from 2015 to 2021. St John is the largest ELCA congregation in the southwest corner of the Western North Dakota Synod. Dickinson itself is a predominately Roman Catholic city, with four Roman Catholic congregations and a k-12 Catholic school system. As the largest non-Catholic congregation in Dickinson, St John has a history of being “high church” and traditional, reflecting some of the cultural preferences for that style of worship. The sacrament of Holy Communion is central to the worship life of St John and is even mandated by the congregation's constitution to be celebrated at every worship service of the congregation.

At the outset of the pandemic, St John saw a need among neighboring Lutheran congregations, which are mostly small and situated in rural areas. These congregations did not have the tools, infrastructure, or resources to create live worship services for the congregation. Because St John had a history of over 70 years broadcasting worship services regionally on the radio and because of the already-built infrastructure for high-speed internet, high-quality audio,

and access to technologically savvy leaders, St John became the hub of digital innovation for Lutheran congregations in southwest North Dakota. Together with the pastors of those congregations, we collaborated to create Devotions from the Badlands (a daily video devotional on Facebook). And for two months we collaborated to create Badlands Lutheran Worship, a liturgically Lutheran livestreamed worship service led by those same pastors. This allowed rural congregations with little-to-no access to the internet to provide digital worship services for their congregants utilizing the resources of St John in Dickinson.

At the outset, we decided to include Holy Communion in our shared worship. We hoped that Holy Communion could become the central gathering place for our varied communities to come together virtually. Through Facebook posts, videos, and congregational newsletters we invited people to have on hand some form of bread and wine to take part in the meal together with the whole digitally gathered assembly. We received pictures from many members showcasing their at-home Communion setups.

A few months later, each of the churches began worshipping in-person again. Some of those congregations could not broadcast their services online or on the radio, so St John continued to be the central gathering place for people who were not comfortable worshipping in physical proximity to their neighbors. Today, St John is a hybrid worship community, gathering hundreds of worshipers in the building together with hundreds of worshipers online and an unknown number of listeners on the radio. They continue to invite the whole hybrid assembly to the central meal where Christ meets us with his grace and love.

When any organization faces a major change—like the transformation of worship during a pandemic—there will be technical challenges and adaptive challenges. Ronald Heifetz,

Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky¹² define a technical challenge as one that can be solved with the current know-how. With technical challenges, authoritative experts in the field can offer solutions to overcome the challenges. Technical challenges do not require a paradigm shift in thinking but can be accomplished utilizing the structures that are currently in place. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, cannot be solved with current structures, but require new ways of thinking, new priorities, and new systems. Many organizations fail when they try to meet adaptive challenges with technical solutions.

The technical challenges of this moment were easy to accomplish. Google searches and Facebook groups of similarly situated church leaders provided advice and solutions for various technical problems. The right assortment of cameras, cables, and internet-connected devices put us in the homes of hundreds of regional worshipers. The technical challenge of celebrating Holy Communion together was even easier to accomplish. This meal was always meant to be accessible, consisting of bread and wine – staples of the ancient world – and the Word of God. We assumed people had access to at least some form of bread and wine (or grape juice), and with the aid of technology, we could proclaim the Word of God into each home simultaneously.

The adaptive challenges – the challenges that make us rethink and question the framework of our practices – we continue to wrestle with today, long after Badlands Lutheran Worship disbanded, and local congregations resumed in-person worship. And we are left with adaptive questions that challenge us to consider how our worship practices best bring people into relationship with Jesus Christ. We are left wondering who our priority is in this digital era of worship how hybrid worship can create meaningful and lasting experiences of the divine in people's lives today.

¹² Ronald Heifitz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practices of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 19-23.

Throughout the experience of presiding over the hybrid table these past two years, I have been surprised by the people who gathered there. At St John, hybrid worship didn't become the shallow consumer product some people fear it to be. People like John MacArthur, a very popular non-denominational pastor, who argued on his internationally syndicated radio and television program *Grace to You*, "Zoom church is not church. It's not church; it's watching TV."¹³ Or Lutheran scholar of worship, Gordon Lathrop, who worried that,

If taken as substitutes for assembly, sustained use of these electronic means can have deleterious effects in the long run: worship once again thought of as a thing we watch; the bodily assembly thought of as unnecessary; the sacraments turned into commodities that we "get" for ourselves; the poor forgotten.¹⁴

These warnings have been contrary to my experience presiding at the hybrid table. Consistently I heard from people who are immunocompromised or too sick or weak to travel to church and their caregivers that they faithfully prepare their table each week to join at the hybrid table of the Lord at St John. Throughout, the faithful folks who gathered with the in-person worshipers at the hybrid table were those who have deep connections to our community of faith and relish the opportunity to gather with their congregation at the table. Rather than feeling forgotten, they expressed deep gratitude for a chance to celebrate the meal with their church family. Not only did this hybrid way of gathering around the table make the meal more accessible for faithful churchgoers, but I have come to believe that the practice of hybrid Communion is faithful to my own Lutheran theological tradition.

¹³ John MacArthur, "Bible Questions and Answers, Part 77," *Grace To You*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/70-54/bible-questions-and-answers-part-77> .

¹⁴ Gordon W. Lathrop, "Thinking Again about Assembly in a Time of Pandemic," *CrossAccent* (Valparaiso, IN), summer, 2020, <https://alcm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/04-Thinking-Again.pdf> , 16.

Luther and the Theological Gift of Hybrid Communion

To create a robust theological vision for hybrid Communion in Lutheran worship contexts, we can glean much from the early theological thinking that led Martin Luther to challenge the theology and liturgical practices of his day. Giving specific attention to his early writings like his 1519 treatise, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ,” and his 1520 work, “On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” we can make helpful connections to some of our theological thinking surrounding hybrid Holy Communion practices today.

Martin Luther’s theology of the Eucharist was rooted in the Roman Catholicism of the 16th century. Luther, a monk turned priest turned professor, took the sacrament of Holy Communion and the presence of Christ within the meal very seriously. He retained many elements of the Eucharistic theology and practice of the Roman Catholic church. Throughout his reforming work, Luther continued to give central place to the meal and Christ’s real presence in it. Even as other reformers like Andreas Karlstadt and Ulrich Zwingli took his Communion theology to the extreme end of denying the real presence of Christ in the meal, Luther staunchly defended his theology against them throughout his life.¹⁵

The real and full presence of Christ in Communion remains to this day a central theological feature of the Lutheran church and a convincing reason for including it in hybrid worship assembly. Luther believed Communion to be a “a sure sign from God himself [*sic*] that [the believer] is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common with them, that Christ suffering and life are his own.”¹⁶ For worshipers, whether they gather in a building or

¹⁵ See Luther’s own breakdown of his disagreement with other protestant theologians over the real presence of Christ in Communion in *Brief Confession concerning the Holy Sacrament* (1544), in *LW* 38, 296-298.

participate at home with the help of a computer screen or radio, Communion is a gift that we can cling to, assuring us of our union with Christ. If there is any doubt about Christ's presence in a nontraditional worship experience (like the experience of worshipping around a smartphone), Communion offers the real presence of Christ to which the worshiper can cling.

Although the Word of God is enough to unite us with Christ and assure us of his presence in our lives, there is something particularly distinctive about eating those promises. True, the Word of God creates faith, and faith is enough to save us. True, when we worship on a screen or over the radio, hearing promises in scripture, song, and sermon, we have everything we need to receive Christ and all his benefits. But in a noisy world, hearing isn't always enough to assure us that these promises really are *for us*. And so, Christ gives us real, tangible things like bread and wine to cling to as a sign of those promises:

Christ appointed these two forms of bread and wine, rather than any other, as a further indication of the very union and fellowship which is in this sacrament. For there is no more intimate, deep, and indivisible union than the union of the food with him who is fed. For the food enters into and is assimilated by his very nature, and becomes one substance with the person who is fed.... Thus in the sacrament we too become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the Saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts in our behalf.¹⁷

Although it is theologically possible to fast from Communion for one's entire life and still be saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:8),¹⁸ Jesus desired for us to have something tangible to taste, smell, and feel to assure us of salvation often. When the hybrid community gathers at the table, we all walk away with the promise and hope of salvation in our stomachs, not just in our thoughts and dreams.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ* (1519) in *LW* 35, 52.

¹⁷ Luther, *Blessed Sacrament*, 59.

¹⁸ All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

One of the major elements lacking for those who worship in digitally mediated ways is the full sensory experience of worship. When we worship on a screen, much of our worship is limited to our eyes and ears. Although this is still an embodied experience (ears and eyes are a part of the body after all), it does not utilize our full God-given capacity for sensing the world. Holy Communion is a gift of Christ that gives us a full-body sensory experience of himself in an “intimate” and “deep” way. For those who have worshiped for nearly two years behind a screen, the sacrament of Holy Communion gives them something their senses can trust that Christ really has entered them and united them with the whole body of Christ.

Another aspect of Luther’s Eucharistic theology which can enhance the church’s understanding of hybrid Communion is his emphasis on the *effect* of Communion, which unites us with the whole fellowship of saints. Paul first wrote about this *effect* in First Corinthians, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17).

Not only does the worshiper who receives the bread and wine receive the fullness of Christ himself, but also the whole fellowship of the saints is united with the worshiper as “one spiritual body.”¹⁹ After all, the word Communion comes from the Latin *communio* which means “sharing in common.” Belonging to this fellowship unites us with all believers. Rather than being merely a personal encounter between Christ and the believer, Communion is a communal experience that unites the believer with others. Luther was adamant that this kind of fellowship comes with costs – namely the burdens of our neighbor:

There are those, indeed, who would gladly share in the profits but not in the costs. That is, they like to hear that in this sacrament the help, fellowship, and support of all the

¹⁹ Luther, *Blessed Sacrament*, 50.

Saints are promised and given to them. But they are unwilling in their turn to belong also to this fellowship. They will not help the poor, put up with sinners, care for the sorrowing, suffer with the suffering, intercede for others, defend the truth, and at the risk of their own life, property, and honor seek the betterment of the church end of all Christians. They are unwilling because they fear the world.... They are self-seeking persons, whom this sacrament does not benefit.²⁰

Luther argued that it was important, then, to share this meal frequently, in order to keep this fellowship at the forefront of our minds. The inclusion of Holy Communion in the hybrid worship does just that. It frequently keeps the whole fellowship of the church at the forefront of our attention. We don't just gather at the altar with those we can see²¹ (those physically capable of coming to church) but with the whole body of Christ: those who cannot come to the table, those away on a mission trip, those on vacation, those in the hospital, and those with real phobias that preclude them from entering a congregation. The hybrid Communion table takes seriously the whole fellowship because it unites people with the body of Christ they cannot see, but who are present at the table and in the meal.

Hybrid Communion practices enrich the experience of Communion by calling to attention those whom we cannot see. The hybrid assembly is always remembering that the table is bigger than we grasp. Hybrid Communion is the constant reminder of the other who is also a member of the Body, drawing us out of ourselves and in service and love toward our neighbor. In my 32 years as a Lutheran, I have rarely (if ever) heard this distinctly Lutheran focus of the table in a non-academic setting. For so many, Communion is believed to be a deeply personal experience. A hybrid practice of Holy Communion can help us reclaim Communion as both a

²⁰ Luther, *Blessed Sacrament*, 57.

²¹ Sunday morning worship remains a highly segregated experience. "Those we can see" at the local congregational table are often those who look like us, have similar beliefs and opinions, and come from the same socio-economic backgrounds.

deeply personal union with Christ *and* a union with our neighbor who is a part of the body of Christ.

One last theological insight for hybrid Communion comes from one of Luther's earliest theological breaks from Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology surrounding the practice of withholding the cup from the laity. In "On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church," Luther argued for a literal interpretation of Jesus's command, "Drink from it, all of you" (Matthew 26:27). A common jig that Luther employed in his theological thinking was to take Christ's clear command and apply it to the practices and traditions of the church. Whatever from the tradition did not fit into this jig, Luther cut from the practice of the church. For Luther, it was simple: since Christ did not withhold the cup, neither should the church., "For here the word and example of Christ stand unshaken when he says, not by way of permission, but of command: 'Drink of it, all of you.'"²²

One of Luther's main concerns with the practice of withholding the cup from the laity was of the improper use of authority. Luther argued that the church does not have authority over Christ's clear commands. Luther worried that the Church could take this to the extreme outcome of withholding the sacrament entirely:

If the Church can withhold the wine from the laity, it can also withhold the bread from them. It could, therefore, withhold the entire Sacrament of the Altar from the laity and completely annul Christ's institution so far as they are concerned.²³

I find this line of thinking compelling when considering digitally mediated Communion practices. If the church is able to withhold the elements from those who worship in nontraditional modes, while at the same time serving in-person worshipers, it could easily annul Christ's

²² Babylonian Captivity of the Church. In Basic Theological Writings. 216

²³ Babylonian Captivity of the Church. In Basic Theological Writings. 217

institution for the more vulnerable members of the congregation for whom physically attending church is dangerous or traumatic. When Jesus said, “Drink from it, all of you,” surely he meant all, and I take that to include the whole hybrid assembly of worshipers.

When it came to sacraments, Luther’s thinking was direct and simple. We partake of the sacrament because Christ commanded it when he said, “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). We use bread and wine because Christ promised his whole body and blood in bread and wine when he said, “this *is* my body” and “this *is* my blood” (Matthew 26:26, 28). What began as a response to pandemic need, has morphed now into a reimagining of what it means when Christ said, “all of you.” The early church gathered in homes to break bread and share the cup (Acts 2:46). The church today gathers in multiple homes alongside those who gather in traditionally sacred communal spaces. Although it looks much different today, the command is still simple and clear.

The benefits of Holy Communion for the hybrid assembly are abundant. Holy Communion in a hybrid setting expands the horizons of experiencing Christ’s presence in profound ways. For the worshiper at home, watching on YouTube or listening to the radio, Holy Communion is a sure sign of Christ’s presence in that place. Rooms and spaces that people never imagined to be sacred become the very place Christ comes to us in his fullness. In a largely audio/visual experience, the Lord’s Supper gives us something our whole body can cling to. Christ comes to us as food and is united with us in a deep and intimate way. And for the in-person worshipers at church, the presence of these digital worshipers who gather at Christ’s hybrid table drives home a crucial theological understanding of our union with the whole fellowship of believers. Hybrid Communion takes seriously that this meal is a shared meal and in it we are confronted with the whole body of Christ, seen and unseen. Holy Communion is

Christ's gift of himself for us and the church should take that responsibility seriously in this new hybrid era of worship.

Hybrid Worship and Our Bodies in a Digital World

Is it the same? Is it real? Does it count? Does what we get from a digitally mediated experience of Holy Communion compare to what we get from communing in physical proximity to the assembly? Does the liberalization of Holy Communion to include digitally mediated practices make it more consumeristic or individualistic? These are some questions and concerns that lie at the heart of hybrid Communion practices. And they are important. In January 2022, Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest and author, called for an end to online worship practices offering a scathing review of its effect on the lives of believers. She wrote, "offering church online implicitly makes embodiment elective. It presents in-person gatherings as something we can opt in or out of with little consequence. It assumes that embodiment is more of a consumer preference, like whether or not you buy hardwood floors, than a necessity, like whether or not you have shelter."²⁴

Human beings are bodies. The human brain takes in information from our bodies to process the world around it. The human brain is also a part of our body. It is influenced by the experiences of our body. It can be traumatized by a traumatic experience in our body. *Everything* we experience in this life is mediated through our bodies. We are incapable as created beings to engage in any disembodied experience. A common criticism of Harrison's article focused in on her claim that online church is not embodied. One reader responded on Twitter, "I am embodied. I am always embodied because I have a body, albeit a disabled one. When I am in bed, watching

²⁴ Tish Harrison Warren, "Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services," *New York Times*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html> .

a service, I am worshipping with my body. Please don't confuse geographically less proximate with disembodied."²⁵

We all live in a new era of digitally mediated, embodied experiences.²⁶ From the first video game, Pong, which allowed us to play virtual ping pong against another person or a computer, to the millions of people working at home and attending virtual meetings, to the millions of video chats that connect families and loved ones instantaneously over impossible distances, we are reshaping how we interact with others, the world around us, and our own perceptions. Today, virtual reality, the long-anticipated means of experiencing digital realities, is reshaping the way our bodies interact with the larger world. One no longer needs to travel to the streets of Jerusalem, creating thousands of pounds of CO₂ emissions, to see, hear, and experience those same streets on a VR headset. And like any new technology, it creates cultural anxiety. Particularly it stirs up a dystopic vision of a future devoid of “real” human experience and interactions: millions of people experiencing their own reality parallel to others’ realities, like a real-life version of the humans aboard the Axiom starship in Pixar’s 2008 film, *Wall-E*.²⁷

But virtual reality is a misleading name. “Virtual” implies something fake or unreal. We can use *virtual* to mean something that is *almost there* – a sort of disembodied experience of more real reality. But, again, nothing we experience as human beings is ever disembodied.

Deanna Thompson is a leading Lutheran theologian writing about the ways in which Jesus and

²⁵ Tanya Marlow (@Tanya_Marlow), “@Tish_H_Warren I am embodied. I am always embodied...” Twitter, January 31, 2022, 10:44 a.m., https://twitter.com/Tanya_Marlow/status/1488206616138854400.

²⁶ Theresa Berger explores the embodied experience of people living in a digital world in chapter two, “Virtual bodies, digital presence, and online participation” in Theresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁷ *Wall-E*, directed by Andrew Stanton (Pixar, 2008), <https://www.disneyplus.com/movies/wall-e/5G1wpZC2Lb6I?irclid=UwS3bwTNqxyITnEV9sUt6VkWUkGVY-2xQxt%3AU80&irgwc=1&cid=DSS-Affiliate-Impact-Content-JustWatch%20GmbH-705874>.

his church engage in a virtual world. She writes, “But thinking of virtual reality as diametrically opposed to embodied reality belies the ways in which our engagement with virtual reality is always done by those of us with bodies, living in a material world.”²⁸

Consider this vignette from my own life. Occasionally I like to play competitive games with my friend, Ben. We often play Beat Saber, a virtual reality game in which the users (Ben and me) cut through virtual floating blocks with virtual light sabers to the rhythm of music in an immersive techno world. Ben is another Lutheran pastor who lives 867 miles away from me in a different state. Virtual Reality, often described as a sort of fake reality or escape from reality, is in fact very *real* when I play against Ben in VR. The eyes and ears that take in the music and the oncoming boxes are our own very real bodies. The voice (and heavy breathing) I hear in my headset is the very real voice of my friend, Ben. The sabers that cut through boxes at different angles are powered by my very real muscles and the bars under which I duck require me to use my legs and back. The sweat that gathers on my back and arms are real (and gross). And the dopamine hit I get because I spent quality time playing a game with my dear friend is real and lasting. Playing Beat Saber on a VR headset with my friend is an experience of fun and friendship as real as the many times we have traveled to see each other in-person. In fact, we have even donned the headsets to play Beat Saber while we were physically present in the same room!

Digital technologies mediate experiences for our bodies. Our bodies dictate how we experience those technologies. Without our bodies, the internet would be a vast network of connections unusable for us.²⁹ Even in the fast-growing competitive world of professional

²⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, “Christ Is Really Present, Even in Holy Communion via Online Worship,” *Liturgy* 35, no. 4 (October 2020): 19, doi:10.1080/0458063x.2020.1832847.

esports, real bodies compete against one another. The use of performance enhancing drugs is a widespread problem in esports.³⁰ Like in any other contest of physical abilities, stimulants and anti-anxiety medications are often used by esports athletes to create an advantage over and against other bodies.

The business world has found the benefit of utilizing digital means of working, collaborating, and meeting. The entertainment world has found the benefit of creating virtual means of relaxation, connection, and fun. And the church world has just begun to realize that digitally mediated experiences of the divine are not just possible but are already happening all over the world through meditation apps, YouTube videos, digital devotionals, and so much more.³¹

The church does not need more digital denial, we need a revolution of people who care deeply about the wellbeing of the human bodies who engage the world digitally. So often, it is the digital experiences that society deems “disembodied” or “fake” that do the most actual damage to our bodies. Video game addictions that cause sleep disorders;³² pornography addictions that result in sexual dysfunctions;³³ consumption of hyper-violent content that

²⁹ For a more thorough treatment on the topic of our embodied interactions with the internet, see Kutter Callaway, “Interface is Reality,” in *The HTML of Cruciform Love*, edited by John Frederick and Eric Lewellen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

³⁰ Justin W. Bogle, “Trying to Think Faster: Doping in Esports,” *Moorad Sports Law Journal (Villanova University)*, October 6, 2020, https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/law/academics/sportslaw/commentary/mslj_blog/2020/TryingtoThinkFasterDopinginEsports.html.

³¹ For a full treatment on the breadth and scope of digital worship practices, see Theresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

³² Sara Peracchia and Giuseppe Curcio, “Exposure to Video Games: Effects on Sleep and on Post-Sleep Cognitive Abilities. A Systematic Review of Experimental Evidences,” *Sleep science (Sao Paulo, Brazil)* vol. 11,4 (2018): 302-314, doi:10.5935/1984-0063.20180046.

³³ Brian Y Park et al, “Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports,” *Behavioral sciences (Basel, Switzerland)* vol. 6,3 17, (August 2016), doi:10.3390/bs6030017.

desensitizes people to violence;³⁴ the unrealistic standards of beauty on Instagram which have a real-world impact on the self-esteem of young girls.³⁵ The ways our bodies engage in digital experiences have consequences for the world and God's people. Who are the people engaged in the world caring for these digitally engaged human bodies? It should be the incarnational church, which is the very presence of Jesus in this messy, broken world.

When people join a worship service on YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, or even on the radio, they join with their bodies. As Theresa Berger notes, “no digital world can be entered, no website accessed, and no app installed without a body. Thus, digitally mediated practices too are bodily practices. Being @ worship in digital space is simply not possible as a wholly disembodied, dematerialized practice.”³⁶ They are the same bodies that just spent hours surfing the web; the same bodies who spent all week in virtual meetings at work; the same bodies who are exposed to hateful and violent speech in online forums and blogs. The church must take seriously the presence of those bodies and their digital experiences in worship. If the experience feels somehow lacking, the church should creatively engage those bodies in ways that honor the full inclusion of their bodies in worship. Hybrid Holy Communion is an ancient practice that can engage those bodies in a way that unites them with Jesus and the whole body of Christ.

This world is a world of bodies, whether those bodies run marathons or watch marathons of movies. And God so loved our bodies, God gave us a body to cling to. Not one that is merely

³⁴ Barbara Krahe et al, “Desensitization to Media Violence: Links with Habitual Media Violence Exposure, Aggressive Cognitions, and Aggressive Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* vol. 100,4 (2011): 630-46. doi:10.1037/a0021711

³⁵ Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739> .

³⁶ Theresa Berger, *@Worship*, 18.

“virtually present” – meaning not quite present or almost present – but a real body, really present. In Luther’s day, there were those that did not believe that Christ could be both “seated at the right hand of the father” as recited in the Apostle’s Creed *and* present in the meal of Communion. But Luther understood the ubiquity of Christ meant that Christ is everywhere, at all times. Today, that means Christ is in the network servers; Christ is in keyboards and the fingers that type on them; Christ is in the screens and the eyes that fatigue while reading them.

But it is not enough to tell the bodies of those who live in this digital world that “Christ is there in your midst when you attend a corporate meeting on Zoom or face harassment in the comments section of a YouTube video.” God wants us to have something to hold onto, to know that Christ is really with our bodies. As Luther described to his rivals,

This he does in the Supper, saying, “This is my body,” as if to say, “At home you may eat bread also, where I am indeed sufficiently near at hand too; but this is the true *touto*³⁷, the ‘This is my body’: when you eat this, you eat my body, and nowhere else. Why? Because I wish to attach myself here with my Word, in order that you may not have to buzz about, trying to seek me in all the places where I am.”³⁸

The church has been entrusted with this distributing the gift of Christ’s body for our bodies.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, there is nothing “virtual” about Christ’s presence for our bodies. And through him, we are connected (not virtually) but spiritually to the whole body of Christ. Hybrid Communion is truly an embodied experience.

³⁷ There was a conflict in Luther’s time about the word “this” (or *touto* in Greek) and whether it was referring to Jesus’ physical body or the bread he was holding.

³⁸ Martin Luther, *That These Words of Christ, “This Is My Body,” etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics* (1527) in *The Annotated Luther vol. 3*, 214.

Sharing the Feast with the Whole Body

From the beginning of the Christian movement, the church could not always gather physically together in the flesh. As the movement grew and new churches were planted around the Mediterranean, Paul was instrumental in casting a theological vision of these assortment of local churches as one, universal church in the body of Christ. Deanna Thompson writes, “Paul’s radical, unconventional vision of church has not just been about local communities of faith but also about what I am calling the virtual body of Christ, a body that is wedded to but also transcends specific, individual incarnations of church.”³⁹ Through its shared use of the gospels, the letters of church leaders, and the creeds, churches separated by distance continued to grow as one body with Christ as the head (Col 1:18).

From some of the earliest evidence of the church, we find that Holy Communion was an integral part of the Christian worship experience and Communion was one way in which the church celebrated its oneness in Christ. In describing the Communion practices of the first century church, the *Didache* offers a prayer that is still sung in churches today, “As this fragment of bread was scattered upon the mountains and was gathered to become one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.”⁴⁰ Communion was the gathering event of churches in every time and space.

This meal was so important for the gathering of the whole body of believers, the early church found ways to distribute it to people outside of the spatial and temporal confines of the worship building and experience. Writing in the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr

³⁹ Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 65.

⁴⁰ *Didache* 9 (Ehrman, LCL).

described how the deacons would bring the meal to people unable or unwilling to attend the communal gathering of the church. Justin Martyr described the practice in this way,

When we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and the reception of the consecrated elements by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons.”⁴¹

Justin gives no indication as to why those mentioned were “absent.” And I find it convincing that he offers no qualifier. In the next sentence Justin describes various people in need of monetary support like “orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among us...”⁴² But the deacons brought communion to the more general “absent.” Today, there is a common practice in mainline traditions of distributing communion to the homebound. But what if the church were to expand their vision of those who are “absent” to include more than just those who cannot leave their homes, especially in a culture where regular attendance often means one or two times per month and where families are inundated with activities on Sunday mornings? In Justin’s time, Communion was sent to those virtually present by deacons. Today Holy Communion can be “sent” digitally via the internet and the airwaves to those virtually present by the presider of the assembly herself. Although sending the sacrament in this way can help us rediscover our unity in a fractured world, hybrid Communion does have its critics and challenges.

⁴¹ Justin Martyr, *Apol.* (translated by Edward Rochie Hardy) 67

⁴² *Ibid.*, 287.

The Challenges of a Hybrid Table

What we desire for hybrid Communion is what we desire for all Communion practices: that the person would receive Christ's love and grace and that people would feel connected to their neighbors in the body of Christ. There is a fear today that hybrid Communion practices are ineffective at delivering the fullness of those promises. By recognizing the potential pitfalls, we can create better table practices.

One such fear is that participating in hybrid Holy Communion will exacerbate individualism. The thrust of modern life is toward individualism. In a culture where you can do just about anything without having to interact with another human being, digitally mediated Communion has the potential to further separate people from real expressions of community. Any practice of Communion that exclusively extolls the individual benefits of receiving the sacrament (union with Christ) while omitting the effect of sacrament (union with the whole fellowship of saints) denies the fullness of the meal. However, this is not so much a hybrid worship problem as it is a theological blind spot for many leaders of the church. Surrounded by modern "personal relationship with Jesus" theologies, the church needs more practices that pull the believer out of a position of *incurvatus in se* toward a posture of love and service to neighbor. Hybrid Communion practices that emphasize this aspect of the meal would greatly benefit the whole church, both in-person worshipers and non-traditional worshipers. By expanding our attention to all those gathered at our table, we are better able to recognize all neighbors as Christ's treasured table guests.

Just as it is important to see, hear, and feel the presence of our neighbors who stand in line in the aisle, join us at the kneeler, or physically serve us the meal as Communion assistants, it will be important for hybrid Communion practices to call attention to those who gather online,

on the radio, or in some other nontraditional, non-proximal way. Through the use of video technologies, photographs, or voice recordings in worship, we can call attention to the whole worshipping body who gathers at the table.

Another fear that permeates the conversation around hybrid communion is its susceptibility to misuse. When our invitation is so broad that we do not know who we are inviting to Christ's table, all sorts of people may join in the feast. Those people may not understand the history or theology of our Communion practices. They may use the wrong elements. They may leave the table not knowing the life-changing experience that they received.

In a post-Christendom environment, this is a challenge the church faces for all aspects of the liturgy, whether in-person or in a hybrid assembly. Churches can no longer expect (if we ever really should have) that people understand the "how" or "why" of various elements of our worship life. For our liturgy in this era of digital worship to be truly invitational, it needs to be educational, too. Many pastors and worship leaders take time to teach about various elements of the liturgy like giving a brief history of a creed or a theological blurb about why we sing Kyrie Eleison. For the hybrid Communion table to be open and welcoming, the people who are welcomed should truly know and understand the grace they are about to experience. This includes regular invitations to learn more about Communion in classes or with online resources and a consistent infusion of invitational and educational language surrounding the Communion liturgy in worship.

A final criticism of the hybrid assembly that the digitally worshipping church should address is the issue of "the assembly." For Lutheran scholars, like Dirk Lange and Gordon Lathrop, this was one unresolved issue that led them to reject digitally mediated communion

practices early in the pandemic.⁴³ They argue that the only way Communion is truly a “communion” is when it happens in the presence of a gathered assembly. This reflects official ELCA teaching.⁴⁴ There is disagreement as to whether or not those who gather digitally are truly gathered as an assembly. Perhaps it is because of the anonymity, or the lack of the sensory experience of the other. However, I would argue that people are increasingly comfortable with the blending of online and offline lives in a way that makes online experiences an extension of life. And in worship, platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom actually enhance the ways people interact in ways that are completely different than the way we usually interact in-person.⁴⁵

Just as there is nothing less real or embodied in digital experiences, digitally mediated assemblies are no less assemblies. The church has defined, negotiated, and redefined who is part of the assembly throughout its history and who is invited to the table. The assembly in a digital era of worship will include digital worshipers and in-person worshipers.

Defining Hybrid Communion

Hybrid Communion is the practice of consecrating, distributing, and receiving Christ’s body and blood in a hybrid assembly. Hybrid Communion requires three things: the promise of Jesus Christ (“this is my body”), the elements (bread and wine), and someone to receive it (“for

⁴³ Dirk G. Lange, “Digital Worship and Sacramental Life in a Time of Pandemic,” *The Lutheran World Federation*, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic>.

⁴⁴ “The gathered people of God celebrate the sacrament. Holy Communion, usually celebrated within a congregation, also may be celebrated in synodical, churchwide, and other settings where the baptized gather.” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 44.

⁴⁵ I am continually amazed by the interactions people have in the comments sections of online worship. People share prayer concerns, comment on sermons, and greet each other throughout the service. At St John, we experimented with having volunteer “digital ushers” whose task was to interact with worshipers and answer any questions. In contrast, many worshipers experience little interaction with others when they worship inside of a building, especially with people they do not know.

you.”) For the sacrament to be tangible, and thus provide something for the worshiper to cling to, it must be able to be touched, tasted, smelled, and seen. Hybrid Communion is not, therefore, digital. It does not involve an avatar “consuming” a digitally rendered image of bread and wine (though my middle school aged confirmands see no problem with that). It does not gaze on the host via a livestream on YouTube.⁴⁶ In Hybrid Communion, the promises of Jesus Christ are heard (or seen) through the digital mediation of a computer screen or speakers and the meal is mediated through bread and wine, where Christ is truly present for you.

Hybrid Communion is an event. It takes place in space and time and among human beings.⁴⁷ It involves the whole action of Communion⁴⁸ within the context of a hybrid worship gathering. It gathers multiple people, multiple tables, multiple breads, and multiples cups of wine together as one in the body of Christ. And it is a real, tangible sign of our union with Christ and one another. What follows are some action steps churches can take in order for hybrid Communion to become this sign. These are the very steps I will be taking as I begin my new call as a pastor to Bethel Lutheran Church, in Windsor, Colorado.

⁴⁶ A simple search on YouTube for “Eucharistic Adoration” yields results from around the world.

⁴⁷ More work needs to be done to address the issue of synchronicity in the hybrid event of worship and Holy Communion. Historically, the church has accommodated homebound members by delivering Communion to them outside of the spatial and temporal boundaries of worship. Today, people can access worship services years after they originally went live. Clearly Christ can be present anywhere and in any time as seen in his resurrection appearances. Luther deals with this in his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), in *LW* 37, 214-217. But is something missing for the worshiper when they partake in hybrid communion days, weeks, or even months after the original event? I suspect, done with good intentionality, asynchronous hybrid Communion would still be a highly effective experience of union with Christ and the fellowship of saints.

⁴⁸ “In Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed...,” in *FC,SD* 7:84, in *BC*, 607.

Action Step #1 – Educate

Hybrid Communion happens at an open table. From week-to-week, we do not know who will join us, where they are from, or whether or not they have any experience with, or any understanding of, Christian worship. Although there is an element of mystery that will always be present in the Eucharist, it is still important that people be acquainted with the history and meaning of this important meal and how to participate in it. Churches that provide hybrid Communion need to create accessible, on-demand educational resources that are readily available for any newcomer to use online from the comfort of their own computer screen.

Because most Communion education happens for people who will receive the sacrament for the first time in their lives, many churches currently offer resources for educating children. In a digital era of worship, we cannot assume the novices at the Lord's table are children or that the people who need educating have not already feasted at the meal multiple times. Our resources must recognize the diversity of people who are new to the faith. These resources should be given a prominent place on the church's website or social media, equally as prominent as most congregations' "give" buttons.

The first thing these educational materials should do is teach people how to actually participate in the meal. It is important for people to understand that all they need to sup at the Lord's Supper is access to a worshiping assembly (through video or audio) and materials for communion (bread and wine).

Next, educational materials should focus on the major theological components of Communion that will have a profound impact on their worship experience and in their lives. **1.) Christ is truly present in this meal.** Whenever and wherever we receive the bread and wine, we are receiving the fullness of Christ. It is a serious and important endeavor and should be treated

that way wherever someone partakes of it. **2.) When we eat this meal, we are not alone.** In the church, we often talk about the “body of Christ,” but we mean it in two ways. First, we mean the actual body of Jesus. This is big because God became a human body in Jesus. And because God became a body, died, and was resurrected, so too does God redeem our bodies from sin and death. The second is the body of Christ of which all the saints are members (1 Cor 12:12-13). So, when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we both consume all of Jesus, uniting with him and receiving his love, mercy, and grace in a deep way *and* we are united with the whole body of believers. **3.) This meal sends us into the world.** Communion isn’t like eating a microwave dinner in front of the television, a lonely self-serving experience. Because we are freed by the body and blood of Jesus and because we are united with the whole body of believers, we recognize and are compelled to be present for the members of the body that are suffering or hurting in any way. It would be highly effective to create short (1-2 minute), high-quality videos that each address one of these theological points, accompanied by written resources accessible on social media and the church’s website.

Many congregations offer First Communion Classes once or twice a year for children who will receive the gift of Communion for the first time. In this digital era of worship, and especially with churches that celebrate hybrid communion, congregations should offer “first-communion” type classes that are geared toward adults who want to learn more about the sacrament. These classes should be hybrid in nature, inviting in-person and digital worshipers to learn together. Zoom has proven to be a great resource for engaging people who have gathered in a physical setting with those gathering virtually and would be a logical choice for these classes.

Action Step #2 – Overcome Barriers

In order to invite people to the hybrid Communion table, people need access to the table and the meal. Access to the hybrid communion table comes by way of physical mobility (to a church building) or by way of media (internet, TV, radio, etc.) For most hybrid assemblies in this digital era of worship, that means access to the internet is critical. Luckily in this country the internet is becoming as ubiquitous as bread and wine were in the ancient world. According to the US Census Bureau, 92% of all American households have “at least one type of computer,” and 85% had a subscription to broadband internet.⁴⁹ Because of its importance in connecting, informing, and providing a platform for public expression, in 2016, the UN declared the internet to be a basic human right.⁵⁰ On a larger scale, churches around the world should be advocates for internet access for all people.

Locally, when choosing a platform for the hybrid worship service, issues of accessibility and popularity should be considered. Choosing a platform that is either obscure or difficult to operate could be a detriment to welcoming people to the table. In my own ministry contexts, I have found that people of all ages are quite capable of learning to use popular platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom for worship experiences.⁵¹

When it comes to the *stuff* of communion, again we are fortunate that most people have access to some form of bread. If a congregation wants everyone to eat the same kind of bread, they could distribute a recipe on their website or social media feeds. Or part of the education in

⁴⁹ United States Census Bureau, “Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2018,” *Press Releases*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/computer-internet-use.html> .

⁵⁰ Catherine Howell and Darrell M. West, “The Internet as a Human Right,” *Techtank (Brookings)*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/11/07/the-internet-as-a-human-right/> .

⁵¹ For practical tips on creating welcoming and accessible worship services online, see Dave Daubert and Richard E. T. Jorgensen Jr, *Becoming a Hybrid Church* (Day 8 Strategies, 2020).

action step #1 could be to offer a sort of theological cooking class. In this class, ministers could teach people how to make Communion bread at home while explaining the important theology of the meal and its history. But bread alone is not enough. Although historical Christianity has always understood Christ to be fully present in one kind, it would not be helpful to create any sort of division between worshipers who have access to the wine and those who do not. There are many ways to get wine or grape juice to those who are worshipping at home. A member of the congregation could take on the task of helping prepare people for communion by bringing the elements to those who are local. Alcohol delivery apps like Drizly could accomplish the same task outside of the region for a fee.

The last barrier to overcome is audio and visual quality. Churches who pay for someone to make sure the physical church remains accessible and hospitable (like groundskeepers, janitors, and audiovisual technicians), should also consider paying someone to make sure the online worship experience is also accessible and hospitable. Considering the amount of people who will worship using a tablet or smartphone with tiny speakers, the quality of the feed is paramount to helping someone hear and see the Word of God.

Action Step #3 – Create A Liturgy of Welcome

Congregations that become hybrid worship assemblies need to reconsider the language and practices of their liturgy, anticipating that people will be joining them in varying circumstances. If the table is really for all, then the whole thrust of the worship liturgy should move the hybrid assembly to Communion.

A liturgy of welcome begins with **instructions**. If a bulletin is printed, make sure it is available to those who are worshipping over the radio or online. In the bulletin, include verbiage

not just for those in the room (like instructions on how to walk up to the altar or obtain gluten-free wafers) but also for those whose worship experience is digitally mediated. Churches should cover the basics of what to prepare and how. What counts as bread? What counts as wine? What type of dishware and glassware should the worshiper use? What are the words of distribution and who should say them?

Most congregations have a **welcome** at the beginning of their liturgy. The welcome is an excellent opportunity to call attention to the whole hybrid assembly, those present in the room and those present in the Spirit. This welcome accomplishes a few things. First, it helps the people who are not physically present feel like an important part of the worship experience. Second, it helps the whole congregation recognize that this worship service is part of something bigger they cannot see. Third, it sets the tone that this worship service will continue as a hybrid experience. Worship leaders should use this opportunity to reiterate their welcome to the hybrid table for Holy Communion and encourage those who are worshipping somewhere else to prepare their tables to take part in the shared meal.

Later, after the communion minister says the Words of Institution (“on the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and broke it...”) and after the whole hybrid assembly has recited the Lord’s Prayer, it is helpful to take a moment and invite families and friends to **distribute** sacrament to one another. Again, these words should be printed somewhere accessible, like in a bulletin or on screen. This is also an opportunity for the presiding minister to speak the words of distribution directly to those who are the sole worshiper in their physical space.

There are many ways to acknowledge the presence of online worshipers in a hybrid assembly and each congregation will find a different approach depending on their technical

capabilities and comfort level. If there are members of the community who are usually worshipping online, have them send a picture to be placed on a wall or scrolled on a slide show during communion. A more technologically advanced idea would be to set up a screen right behind the elements and have someone at home say the words of distribution (“the blood of Christ shed for you”) to in-person worshipers as they receive the sacrament.

The last and most profound way to create a liturgy of welcome around the hybrid table is to share an **invitation to Communion** that acknowledges God’s work among the whole hybrid assembly. Many ministers take a moment to invite people to the table between the Lord’s Prayer and the distribution. It has become a place of proclamation and radical invitation. This can be a powerful place in the liturgy where the language of the prayers, the songs, and the sermon become specifically focused for the worshiper. In a way, it is an invitation to eat the sermon.

In contexts where I have served as a pastor, this invitation is one of the most powerful and memorable acts of the liturgy. I have heard countless parishioners refer to it as the *second sermon*. In new member classes, I consistently hear that this invitation is the reason they wanted to join the church. The invitation touches on this profound intersection between a theology that takes communion seriously (this really is Jesus for you) and an act of radical welcoming (yes, even *you*). The invitation to Communion is a powerful tool for welcoming the whole hybrid assembly to the table. It should be as important and intentional as other liturgical moments like the Confession and Absolution or the Prayer of the Day.

By creating a liturgy of welcome that points the assembly to the whole hybrid gathering of the Body of Christ, we create a table big enough for all God’s people.

Bonus Action Step – Be Willing to Fail and Fail Fast

In his book, *Grace and Gigabytes*, Ryan Panzer describes how churches can better engage with the values of our new tech-shaped culture. Panzer argues that churches who want to effectively live out their mission in today’s world of digital technologies and social media should prioritize questions, connection, collaboration, and creativity in their communities. Hybrid Communion practices should leave space for each of these important values. Most importantly, though, churches who want to succeed in this tech-shaped culture must be willing to fail and quickly learn from those mistakes. Panzer writes, “We need more thoughtful risk taking. Sometimes, our shared search for God moves forward not through success, but by the simple act of trying.”⁵² Technologies will continue to develop and our relationship with those technologies will change. Solutions that worked in 2021 may no longer be effective in 2025. Not everything a congregation tries will create a deep and meaningful experience, but some failures might lead to new innovations we never imagined before. Although the stuff of Communion will never change (Christ’s promise and the bread and wine), the way we mediate those promises and gifts will. In this new digital era of worship, churches who gather at the hybrid Communion table will continue try new things in pursuit of distributing this central meal, trusting that Jesus will always show up, uniting himself with us and the whole body of Christ.

Incarnation and the Mediation of God’s Love

God cares about human bodies! In the incarnational event of Jesus Christ, God *was* a human body. That incarnational event has major implications for our embodied lives. It means there is no aspect of the human life God does not know deeply and cannot enter to save us.

⁵² Ryan Panzer, *Grace and Gigabytes: Being Church in a Tech-Shaped Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 140.

Karoline Lewis, a Lutheran scholar on the Gospel of John, often argues that nothing is off-limits when considering the embodied experience of the incarnation. Writing about the often-overlooked romantic aspects of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 3, Lewis says, "to take the incarnation seriously, to give it the fullest extent and expression, demands that no aspect of what it means to be human be overlooked. To do so would be to truncate the principle theological claim of this gospel."⁵³ Any effort to try to keep Jesus above the fray of real, lived, messy human experience, is an effort to deny the power and significance of the incarnation: that God so loved the world, God took on flesh to save us.

Incarnation means that God knows the experiences of living in a digital world. In the cross, Jesus took on the entirety of human sin and there is no human arena in which Jesus' salvific work is missing. Christ takes on our sin, our brokenness, our messiness, and redeems us to be people of God's love in the world. This is profoundly good news for people of every age. It is perhaps even more profound for people disillusioned by modern lives of individualism and disconnection. Jesus knows the loneliness of living in a digital age. Jesus knows the threat of meaninglessness in a world bent on monetization and consumerism. And Jesus enters *there* with his body, dying to a world of meaningless and loneliness, creating us and all things anew (2 Cor 5:17).

Today there are many ways to find strategies and support for a healthy lifestyle and mindset in our modern, digital world. We can text with a therapist, download any number of meditation apps, and we can read endless self-help blogs, to name just a few. But none offer the good news of the incarnation: that God so loves you, God took on flesh to save you from sin. None offer the death of the old and the birth of something new. Nothing offers us new life in

⁵³ Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Press Preaching Commentaries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 55.

Christ, which can free us from our bondage to sin and lead us to a life of love and service. Those promises are incarnated through Christian communities who worship together, reading scripture, breaking bread, and serving the neighbor in need. What has the power to save us and transform our digital lives is the same thing that has always had the power to save and transform us: Jesus Christ and his love. That is what is mediated for us in Christian worship, in the Word of God, and in the sacraments of the church.

But in this emerging digital age of worship, the church is recognizing that people do not need to physically go somewhere to experience this. There is not something purer about worship in a sanctuary. There is not something more real about hearing God's promises proclaimed with your own eardrums than hearing them through a speaker or amplified by in-ear hearing aids. It is not the medium mediating the promises that makes them effective for our lives, it is the promises themselves. Theresa Berger has written extensively about this topic in her book, *@Worship*, in which she challenges assumptions that digitally mediating experiences of worship are lesser experiences. She writes, "inquiring into digitally mediated practices of prayer and worship thus forces one to acknowledge that there is no unmediated ("pure," "spiritual") bodily presence at worship, offline or online."⁵⁴ God has always chosen to mediate divine promises through people and the means of grace. However it is mediated, the experience of God is the same.

I often look at my Cranach print of Luther and Hus serving Communion in both kinds and wonder how Cranach might depict our hybrid Communion practices today? Surely the same fountain of Christ's abundant love and mercy would continue to spill down endlessly to the saints. That will never change. But how would it flow? Who would it flow to? Would Luther serve John the Steadfast through window of his car? Would the saints of Saxony be gathered in

⁵⁴ Berger, *@worship*, 20.

the background on Zoom? Would Hus wear a virtual reality headset, Communing with Frederick III in the metaverse? Maybe. Regardless of what it looked like in the 16th century, what it looks like today, or what it may look like in 100 years, one thing is certain: at the table Christ meets us with his body uniting us with himself and the whole fellowship of the saints as we proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus until he returns.

In this new digital era of worship, hybrid Holy Communion will be an integral part of mediating the love of God, the forgiveness of sins, the fellowship of the whole Body of Christ, and the promise of eternal life to human bodies. Acknowledging the fullness of his incarnation, the church can recognize that Jesus is already there in homes, workplaces, hospitals, or wherever God's people may be. A hybrid practice of Communion celebrates this presence and makes the promises specifically located there for everyone.

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