Celebrating Holy Communion Online in the Methodist Church: A Theological Action Research Project

Final report

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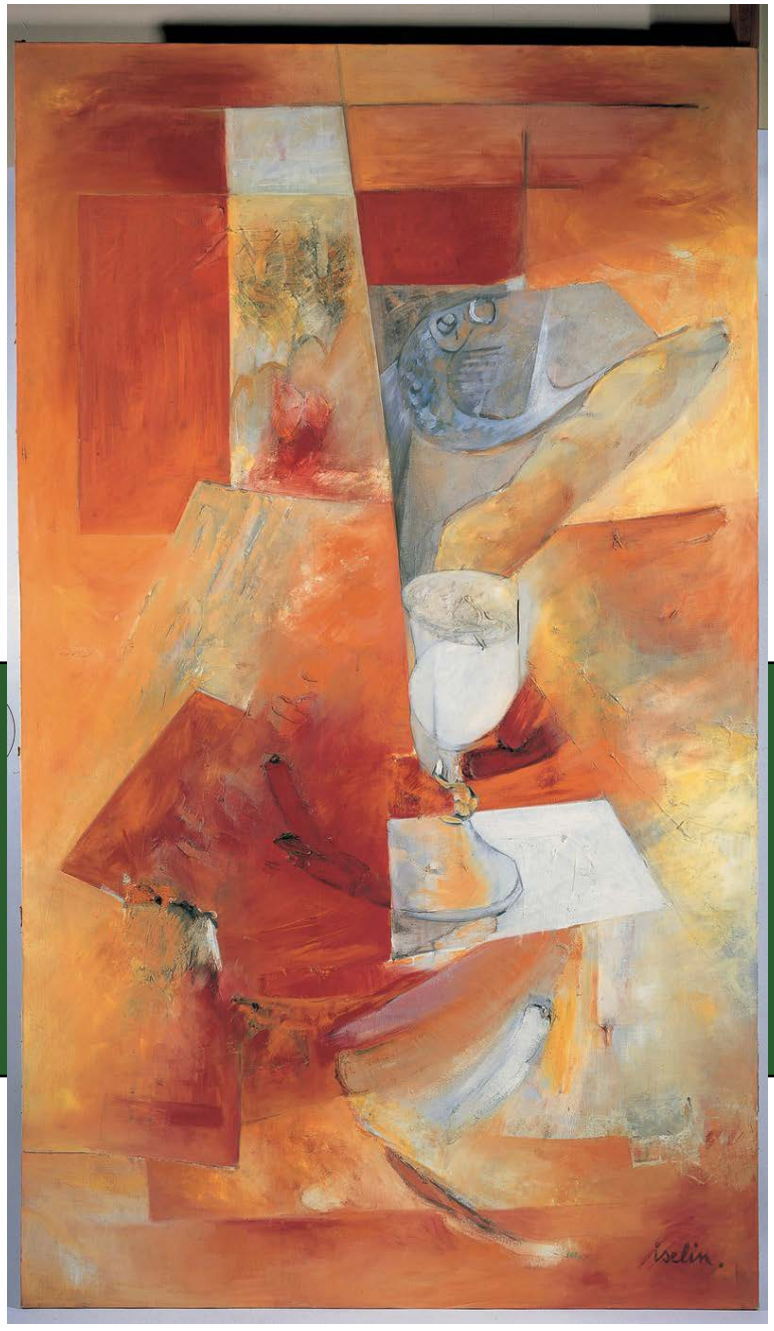
April 2026



The Elements of the Holy Communion by Jacques Iselin, from the Methodist Modern Art Collection.
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1. Background

1.1 Purpose of the research

In this project, we seek to surface and reflect on the theology embedded in the practice of online celebrations of Holy Communion [hereafter: 'Holy Communion online'] in the Methodist Church in Britain.[1] It contributes to a broader and ongoing process of discernment currently underway within British Methodism concerning the question of lasting provision for the celebration of Holy Communion online. A collaboration between the University of Roehampton and the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church and funded by the Southlands Methodist Trust through the Susanna Wesley Foundation, the research begins from the conviction that within the practice and understanding of Holy Communion online there is theological insight which needs to be heard in conversation with more formal theological accounts, including existing reports produced by the Faith and Order Committee and ongoing ecumenical consultation with partner denominations. It employs a 'theological action research' approach, which is collaborative and participative in its research practices and has involved working with several research sites as co-researchers to explore with them their practice of celebrating Holy Communion online. Taking this participative and qualitative approach means that we focused on depth rather than breadth or representation.

We have been guided by the following initial research questions:

- How do Methodists understand their participation in celebrations of Holy Communion online?
- How is this similar/different to their understanding of participating in celebrations of Holy Communion onsite?

1.2 Broader context

Debate over the possibility of celebrating Holy Communion online has persisted for many years within British Methodism. It was first prompted by a Methodist minister proposing to conduct the sacrament on Twitter (now 'X'). Following a memorial from one of the Methodist Districts calling for clarity on whether such a form of Holy Communion is acceptable within Methodist discipline and practice, the 2011 Conference instructed the Faith and Order Committee to establish a group to discuss the issues related to 'the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the internet or video-conferencing', including the question of whether 'such a form of Holy Communion is acceptable within our discipline and practice'.[2] The resulting report, Holy Communion mediated through Social Media, recommended to the 2015 Conference that presbyters should not be permitted to conduct services of online communion. The specific theological grounds for the decision were the following:

- 'The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the Church, celebrated corporately by the people of God with an authorised president, and the physical gathering of Christians (normally around the Lord's table) is an essential feature of its corporate celebration.
- Presiding at the Lord's Supper is a distinctive role that involves, among other things, specific sign-actions. When one or more of these sign-actions is performed separately at a location physically remote from the gathering of the people of God then the integrity of presiding at the Lord's Supper, and hence the integrity of the sacrament, is compromised.
- The communion bread and wine symbolically represent the body and blood of Christ, and also symbolically represent the unity and integrity of the body and blood of Christ. This symbolic representation fails in the case of separate quantities of bread and wine, as when groups or individuals at a location physically remote from the celebration of the Lord's Supper use their own elements.'

Following debate, the Conference directed that further work should be undertaken and should report back to the Conference no later than 2018.[3] At the 2018 Conference, the recommendations of the 2015 report were finally adopted. However, following a Notice of Motion considered in 2020, the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to 'undertake further reflection on Holy Communion, as to bring a report and recommendations regarding "online communion" to the 2021 Conference'.[4] As the country emerged from COVID-19 lockdowns, the Faith and Order Committee considered once again, with new urgency, the possibilities for online celebrations of Holy Communion. The resulting report, Holy Communion and Online Worship, taken to the 2021 Conference, softened the 2015 recommendations and invited 'a period of discernment during which the Methodist people are invited to experience services of the Lord's Supper online'.[5] Originally due to conclude in 2024, the Faith and Order Committee proposed that the discernment period should be extended until 2026. As mentioned above, this project forms part of this ongoing work of discernment. A

version of this report has been considered by the Faith and Order Committee as part of their considerations and it is a counterpart to the Committee's report, 'Online Celebrations of Holy Communion', which is tabled for debate at the 2026 Conference.

1.3 Related literature

Just as the Methodist Church was compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic to reconsider its position on celebrating Holy Communion online, since 2020 there has been a resurgence of theological attention to the topic. However, while the COVID-19 pandemic raised the question with new urgency and debate, the idea of online Holy Communion has long been of interest to theologians and sociologists of digital religion. In *Creating Church Online* (2017), Tim Hutchings has explored ethnographically the cultures of online churches – from virtual worlds to video streams – including the 'highly contentious' idea of offering sacraments online.[6] He cites as an example the 2002 Vatican report *The Church and Internet,* which declared that although online church might offer Christians a great deal, it cannot 'substitute' for real community and the sacraments, which can only be experienced face to face. 'There are no sacraments on the Internet', the Vatican report concluded.[7] Even among churches that do celebrate Holy Communion online, Hutchings found widespread differences in practice, especially regarding the handling of the elements. Likewise, in Teresa Berger's influential *@Worship*, which argues strongly against falsely dichotomising what is 'virtual' and what is 'real', she assesses the 'arguments pro and con' online communion, noting that the practice dates back to the 'exceedingly early' example of the 'Cyber Eucharist' of 1997.[8] Agreeing with a point Hutchings makes and engaging with some of the debates and reports within British Methodism cited above, the main argument Berger says is cited against online communion is that 'the Christian faith is deeply incarnational, and that means wedded to physicality and matter'.[9] Fundamentally, celebrating Holy Communion online is a problem of embodiment. The main argument for online communion Berger presents is through the position of Gregory Neal of the United Methodist Church, who holds that 'God can mediate grace through any means'.[10] Berger concludes by observing that, in many ways, these theological struggles over sacramental mediation are nothing new: 'They are the bread and butter ("wine"?) of the life of the church on its journeying through time.'[11]

At the time of both Hutchings's ethnography and Berger's study, Holy Communion online was mostly experimental and largely confined to isolated pockets of the internet. All this changed in 2020 when churches around the world were plunged into lockdown and the question of Holy Communion became both mainstream and urgent.[12] During the pandemic, the topic was vigorously debated in theological journals across different church traditions. From a Baptist perspective, Steve Holmes argues that although online Holy Communion is in many ways 'sub optimal', it does not 'violate the *esse* of the sacrament'.[13] While he cites arguments from current Baptist practice, Holmes develops his 'positive theological case' for online Holy Communion through a discussion of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982), showing that the practice is not inconsistent with the broad theology of the Eucharist affirmed in this landmark ecumenical text. As we shall see, for many of the participants involved in our project, it was not the case that online experience of Holy Communion was 'sub-optimal' – for some, in fact, it seemed to encourage a deeper, more intensive form of engagement. Notable across this literature is not only the primacy of the 'validity' question, but the way the pandemic encouraged a rethinking of the question of embodiment – long recognised as one of the key arguments against early experiments with online forms of Holy Communion. From a Lutheran perspective, Deanna Thompson, a self confessed sometime 'digital sceptic', is now convinced we should take seriously 'that our bodies are involved and engaged in worship streamed through our computers, and that it's still possible to be gathered with other embodied participants of the assembly that is done online', and that it is 'possible to interpret virtual communion as an embodied way of connecting to the real, bodily presence of Christ'.[14] It was not the pandemic that changed Thompson's mind, but being diagnosed with incurable cancer. She writes movingly about the 'life giving possibilities of virtual connectedness' during her periods of quarantine. 'These virtual connections were not simply poor substitutes for real interaction; they nurtured my broken body and filled my soul at a time of despair. I wouldn't have survived my cancer quarantine without them.'[15] As we shall see, the question of inclusivity and indeed the broader theme of embodiment features in our research. Thompson's positive theological case draws on the normative voices of her own Lutheran tradition, namely Luther's eucharistic theology. And, from a Catholic perspective, Vivencio O. Ballano's argues in favour of online masses and calls for the Catholic Church to 'update and redefine its sacramental theology to better respond to the needs of the times'.[16]

We are not setting out to make another case for or against the practice; instead, our aim is to explore with those engaged in the practice what Holy Communion means to them.

Perhaps the closest existing literature to our project is Sarah Kathleen Johnson's ethnography of Canadian practices of online Eucharists during the first Holy Week of the pandemic.[17] Examining Free Church, mainline Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic practice through a broadly receptive ecumenical approach, she 'asks what gifts Christians from various traditions can receive from one another in relation to online communion both during and beyond times of crisis'.[18] While the focus of our research is more on the 'beyond' than the 'during' times of crisis in its aim to contribute towards a lasting decision for the post-pandemic church, like Johnson, our project seeks to give (albeit through a different qualitative methodology) particular voice to the experiences of practices of online communion rather than examining formal or normative theological voices. And, like Johnson, our primary question is not the validity of the practice of online Holy Communion. We are not setting out to make another case for or against the practice; instead, our aim is to explore with those engaged in the practice what Holy Communion means to them.

1.4 Summary of the research project

The project was funded by the Southlands Methodist Trust through the Susanna Wesley Foundation for 18 months beginning from February 2025.

1.4.1 Research sites

We identified three research sites to work with as co-researchers.[19] Two of the research sites are churches that had met in church buildings but now gather together principally online through Zoom. The third research site is a church that gathers in their church building and also streams its Sunday service via streaming platforms such as YouTube.

1. **Site A** began worshipping online during lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic. There were already questions over whether their chapel should close before 2020 and it became clear that transitioning to an online community (gathering on Zoom) would enable them to gather without the pressures of a maintaining a church building. They have been practicing Holy Communion online regularly since permission was given by the Conference.

2. The story of **Site B** is similar. They were discussing what to do about their building when the COVID-19 pandemic began. They began gathering online and did not return to the building, continuing instead with their now regular Zoom service. The group has grown from the founding group coming from the closed church with people joining the gathering from a number of places around the UK and one or two international participants. We began reflecting with Site B just as they had made the decision to start celebrating Holy Communion online for the first time.

3. **Site C** is a church which streams its Sunday service. Again, they began streaming in lockdown and continued to stream their service when they returned to their building once the lockdown restrictions had lifted. They have invested in the technology to do it well and have reflected on ways to give those streaming from home the best and most engaged experience they can. Once permission was given by the Connexion, the presiding minister began encouraging those joining the service via the streaming platform to participate in Holy Communion online if they wished.

During the research process we decided to supplement the reflections from these three research sites with insights from two further research sites. This was mainly due to a realisation that we would benefit from hearing from those who had experienced being part of a streamed service (**Site D**) rather than 'only online' service. In turn, this led to the discovery of **Site E**, which had a more hybrid approach to Zoom (as discussed below) and which we also included in the project as this seemed an interesting addition to the reflections. Rather than setting them up as research sites, following the pattern of work with the three sites named above, we engaged with these sites through more conventional research methods, such as interviews. The process and rationale is laid out more fully below.

4. **Site D** is a large, town centre church, which streams both of its Sunday morning services. One a 'lively and modern' service with a worship band, the other a more formal service with choir. The services are streamed through Facebook and YouTube.

5. **Site E** had to sell their building around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when it became clear it was unsustainable due to repair costs. While they considered purchasing a new building, they decided to embark on a 'voyage of discovery' and remain online. Their weekly service is Zoom-based and they have invested in the technology to allow them to run hybrid services with other churches in the circuit. They often join other churches for their onsite service and stream these services using their technology. They also have a larger monthly worship service which draws a group of people (30-40) and a study group of about 20 people – both take place predominantly online.

1.4.2 Research process

1.4.2.1 The Roehampton and Faith and Order Committee team

A team from the University of Roehampton led the project. They were responsible for setting up the research sites, coordinating data collection, organising data reflection and overseeing dissemination. The team consisted of:

- Dr James Butler
- Dr Ash Cocksworth

James and Ash worked with representatives of the Faith and Order Committee to form a 'reflector team' with a responsibility for designing the project, reflecting on the data and, with the teams from each of the research sites, identifying the theological learning emerging from the sites. The representatives from the Faith and Order Committee were:

- Ms Anna Clough
- The Revd Jo Rand
- The Revd Dr Judith Rossall
- The Revd Dr Mark Rowland

1.4.2.2 Site teams

Each theological action research site has a local team who worked with the project team to design and carry out the research and to reflect on the data collected. Each site was asked to identify members of its own team, typically made up of the Presbyter and lay members from the local church. The local team from each site worked with the wider reflector team (normally represented by James, Ash and Mark) to design the project within the site. This involved identifying together the key questions they brought to the project, the best way to gather and reflect on the data and finally discerning the learning emerging from the data and reflector conversations.

1.5 Research approach

In the project, we sought to attend to the theology embedded in the words and practice of the different sites celebrating Holy Communion online. Through a collaborative and participatory approach, based on a series of developing conversations between the Roehampton and Faith and Order Committee (hereafter: Roehampton/F&O) team and each local team, we were able to develop an account of the theology of Holy Communion online emerging from their practice and experience. The project does not aim to speak comprehensively of the scope or diversity of theological positions on the matter of Holy Communion online within the Methodist Church. Rather, we sought to contribute to the Faith and Order Committee's work by learning from the lived theology and experience of Holy Communion online practice in particular Methodist communities. The learning which comes out of each of the sites both feeds into the wider reflection of the project and the research sites' own on-going work of discerning the practice of online church and Holy Communion online.

1.5.1 Theological action research

It is helpful to give a brief account of theological action research and highlight some of the terminology that appears

in the report. Theological action research is a participative and collaborative method of practical theological qualitative research which seeks to attend to the theology embedded in practice and people's articulation of their beliefs as well as those sources of theology more commonly recognised such as the formal theology of theologians and the normative theological sources and traditions of the church denomination. It does this by working with a team from each of the research sites as co-researchers.[20] The process is designed by the two teams working together. Members of both teams are involved in decisions around data collection and importantly the data is reflected on together.

One of the key characteristics of theological action research is that it is 'theological the whole way through'. This means that at every step of the way, theology is at the heart of the conversation. This theology is recognised as having several 'voices'. These include the formal theology of the academy and the normative theology of the tradition; it also recognises the theology of how people express their faith (the espoused) and the theology embedded in how faith is lived in practice (the operant). The conviction of theological action research is that these voices – the formal, normative, espoused and operant – are present in varying ways within the sites in the research; and that through engaging in actual conversations, and attending to voices in the room and heard through the data, new insights emerge and new 'theological disclosures' are identified. These new connections, fresh insights and revelations that come amid the conversations open up new possibilities, renew practice and contribute to wider theological developments. Each team is encouraged to identify their learning through the project, and this is what is captured in this report.

1.5.2 Survey

Our approach has been to take a close look at the particular practice of three sites. Alongside this, we wanted to gain a broader sense of the prevalence of Holy Communion online across the Connexion. To do this we asked the connexional Superintendents' conferences to respond to the following three questions by show of hands. In total between the two gatherings there were 180 superintendents taking part.

- Please raise your hand if there has ever been an online celebration of Holy Communion whether over a platform such as Zoom or a streamed onsite service or in any other way, within your circuit to the best of your knowledge. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.
  101 hands raised (56%)

- Please raise your hand if there is currently a regular online celebration of Holy Communion in your circuit, whether streamed, through a platform such as Zoom or in any other way. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.
  83 hands raised (46%)

- Finally, please keep your hand raised if the regular online celebration of Holy Communion is an onsite service which is streamed or which others can join via a platform such as Zoom. Please keep your hand raised while they are counted.
  78 hands raised (43%)

This is a rough poll but gives an indication that Holy Communion has probably been celebrated online in more than half of circuits in British Methodism and that large number of those still practice it regularly. It also highlights that the most common form of Holy Communion online is when an onsite service is made available for others to join via a streaming platform.

1.5.3 The process with each site

Each of the three research sites operated as its own mini research project. A typical pattern for a theological action research project contains the following stages: planning, data collection, reflecting as individual teams and a final joint meeting to identify our joint learning. This pattern was adapted in different ways to suit the site.

- **Site A** followed the typical theological action research pattern most closely. A planning meeting identified a key focus around the experience of belonging, how people grow as Christians, how the online space is experienced and particularly the experience of Holy Communion online. The data was collected through recording some discussion times led by the minister during the service of Holy Communion and in the local preachers' meeting. Two focus groups were organised, one with members of the community and another with others connected to the community. Then two interviews were organised with ministers who had led Holy Communion services for the community. The data was reflected on by the local team and by the Roehampton/F&O team and learning identified in the join reflector meeting to finish the process.

- **Site B** had been worshipping together over Zoom for a number of years but had only experienced Holy Communion together in a member's house, not online. We journeyed with them as they planned their first two online Holy Communion meetings and reflected on them. The basis of the research was regular meetings with the Site B team to reflect together on their experience and what they had heard listening to others in the church. These were recorded and reflected on by the Roehampton/F&O team. We met for a final joint reflector meeting with both teams to identify learning.

- **Site C**. After meeting with the local team, we decided to listen to the experience of those who had participated in the streamed service. They were particularly interested in how people had experienced the streamed service and how they could build online community. We used a short survey to recruit people. We had 12 responses to the survey and spoke to four people who had experienced the streamed service, two of whom regularly streamed at the time of the data collection. The data was reflected on by the Roehampton/F&O team, and a joint reflector meeting was held to reflect with the local team and identify learning.

Given that streamed services seemed to be most prevalent, we decided to engage with a further site to hear about the experience of streaming. **Site D** also sent out a short questionnaire during their streamed service and received 11 responses of which only one person who mainly attended online was willing to be interviewed. **Site E** offered a hybrid service which allowed people to join via Zoom with those gathered in onsite. We included a focus group to engage with Site E. Data has been reflected on by the Roehampton/F&O team and our reflection have been shared with Site D and Site E.

2. Exploration of themes

The project developed a wealth of insights around the theology and practice of Holy Communion online. On the basis of our conversations, we have developed the following four key themes.

2.1 Intensification: A deepening in meaningfulness of Holy Communion

Across all five sites, participants consistently described Holy Communion online as a genuine and meaningful experience of Holy Communion – for themselves personally and together as a community gathering online. While people acknowledged that Holy Communion online felt 'different', it was not perceived as 'less than' Holy Communion onsite. For some, those differences meant their preference was for Holy Communion onsite, but others described a preference for Holy Communion online. We identified an 'intensification' of the meaningfulness of Holy Communion for a number of people engaging in Holy Communion online, particularly among those participating in Zoom services.

Participants did not question whether what they were celebrating counted as anything other than 'Holy Communion'. For them, to celebrate Holy Communion online was described in ways which indicated that it was experienced as a means of grace through which they encountered God. Many expressed a strong desire for the wider Methodist Church to understand how meaningful this practice was to them, and some expressed concern at the prospect that provision might be withdrawn. Kathleen was particularly concerned about this. In a telling slip, she referred to the Faith and Order Committee as the 'Law and Order group', emphasising her concern that Holy Communion online might be taken away from her.

> I can't be physically present in my own church anymore, but I can feel that I'm physically present in a church which is meeting, in communion and in communion with the Lord. And this. It is very significant. I would be very sad to hear, I know I'm not a member of your church, but I'd be very sad to hear that the Law and Order group don't understand the real value of having communion together in this way. It is a really genuine communion. It isn't … It isn't it sort of optional extra. (Kathleen, Site A)

One person in Site D, who only attended via the live stream, felt the invitation to participate in Holy Communion made them feel valued.

> When we are given the invitation to share in the communion, personally it makes me feel a part of the service and I have greatly valued this. Before this was allowed it felt like something was missing not been able to share in communion felt like I wasn't good enough to receive. (Survey participant, Site D)

Most participants involved in the project had been Christians for many years and carried long and deep experiences of participating in Holy Communion. These experiences shaped how they approached Holy Communion online. Holy Communion was already a meaningful practice for them, and its meaning was being worked out in new ways as it moved online. In this sense they saw the development of Holy Communion online as a new way doing an old thing. It was part of the ongoing task of making sense of their Christian lives in a changing world and as part of Methodism's own history of adapting the practice of communion. One participant likened the emergence of Holy Communion online to his memories of the introduction of the peace into the liturgy in the 1970s. The particular forms communion takes are passing forms in this sense, they come and go as they evolve with the world around them. The move from celebrating onsite to online did not appear to be considered by the participants as a move away from Methodist tradition and practice.

Gloria, from Site A, spoke of how she has had 'the same feeling, a wonderful feeling, when I took it on Zoom or stream that I've had when I've sat in church'. In fact, we heard multiple accounts of what might be called 'communion +' – that Holy Communion online for some people intensified the meaning and experience of Holy Communion. One such form of intensification concerned the way celebrating communion online seemed to cultivate more intensive relations of intimacy together.

> Seeing it on the screen makes you feel like a family. [Patricia, Site A]

> I personally feel that the ties are stronger here than they would have been in the building. [Keith, Site A]

This sense of intensified intimacy was largely stimulated by the ability to 'have eye contact' through the Zoom gallery and to know everyone by name throughout the service in ways that are more difficult to achieve in an onsite context.

> When you go to the communion rail, you don't see anybody other than the person that's ministering the communion. Online you see everybody and you feel as if you really, really share and it's a more special experience I find for me personally. [Penny, Site A]

For Penny and others, there was significance not only in taking communion together at the same time but seeing each other taking communion together at the same time. Others highlighted the contrast with the choreography of Holy Communion onsite. One participant described onsite communion as sometimes feeling like a 'production line', with individuals approaching the communion rail one by one.

> One of the ways in which intimacy is advanced by our sort of Zoom service is that we are making eye contact with each other far more than we did when we were meeting in person. And so there's a different kind of specialness or contact, which is streets away from, uh, you know, being on a production line. Some communion services are like a production line where you follow on from, and it's more about traffic control than, than anything else. So I think we shouldn't beat ourselves up with the idea that because we're not together physically in in one place, it can't be special and intimate because I think it can. [Yvonne, Site B]

Online, with everyone facing each other and consuming the bread and the wine together, the 'you' in 'body of Christ given for you' seemed to be more readily experienced as pluralised, the community gathered together.

Although Holy Communion online is not without its technical tasks (getting words on the screen, monitoring the waiting room, distributing the Zoom link and muting or unmuting participants at the right moments), the general posture felt more contemplative than active. Freed from the need to shuffle to the altar rail and the low-level anxiety about where to kneel or how to fall into line, participants told us that they were able to engage in a deeper, more reflective mode of worship. And being freed from having jobs related to the church and the building also enabled them to participate more fully in the service of Holy Communion without having other things distracting them. Holy Communion online was also identified across the sites as enabling greater inclusivity: those who struggled to attend church for various reasons found Holy Communion online more accessible and less exposing. They did not have to navigate the church building or risk being singled out as needing special assistance.

One participant suggested the screen itself was a 'sacred object' in worship. It was through the screen that they connected more intensively with their church community. This led the Roehampton/F&O team into a conversation about a theology of mediation – how people encounter God through material and technological means. We drew a parallel between the screen and theological ideas of the icon, often described as a 'window to the sacred', which suggests a link to another theme raised later: the way the screen brings the sacred into the home and everyday life. This also intersected with our discussion of the presence of Christ in Holy Communion. Many participants spoke as though Christ's presence was mediated less through the elements themselves and more through the faces appearing on their screens. While Methodist theology affirms the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements and in the people of God gathered (and in the word proclaimed and in the presiding minister), we noted the change of emphasis in experiences of Holy Communion online. Charlotte expressed this vividly:

> Seeing all the faces on the screen for me… there's something about that, the image of God. Have you ever seen that pixelated image of Jesus? I don't know… whenever I log on, it's in my head that actually this is Christ's body, just meeting online. (Charlotte, Site A)

While experiences differed across the research sites, particularly between 'only online' and 'also online' forms of Holy Communion, there was a shared sense of meaningfulness. In Site C, for example, where Holy Communion was streamed, participants distinguished between watching communion online (as spectators) and participating in it. Those who felt they were participating rather than spectating found meaning in the familiarity of the words, in the familiarity of the person leading the service, in the sense of togetherness that comes from the awareness of others around the world doing the same thing, and in the sense of communion with Christians who have gone before them. Practical factors helped shape this sense of participation. These included the angles of the camera, the footage being screened, how they are being 'seen' or acknowledged by those onsite and the extent to which they are engaged with by those onsite. In Site D this was highlighted by one person's comments on their negative experience.

> It was very noticeable that when taking communion online, the live feed stream moves from an image of the church and what's happening, to a still image of the flowers or a window. I then felt disconnected from the act of communion and worship as I could hear what was happening but not see. (Survey response, Site D)

Even the experience of simply being able to type into the chat at the beginning and end of the service in the live stream helped Gloria (Site D) to feel welcomed and included.

Emily (Site C) offered a distinctive perspective on streamed services: she valued the ability to pause the service and to catch up with it later. 'That's what I find beautiful about the online. The online worship is I can pause it. Yeah. And I can go and get what I need. Yeah. Because I it won't register ahead of time.' Because of chronic fatigue, she often watched the service later and still found communion deeply meaningful. Her practice raised important questions about communion 'on catch-up'. We wondered what it means for communion to be 'communion' when it is done at a different time. On Zoom, Holy Communion is synchronous, it is happening at the same time but not in the same space and with different elements. Extended communion happens at a different place and time but with the same elements. Communion 'on catch-up' involves different elements in a different place and at a different time. We asked whether this starts to lose a sense of togetherness. However, we noted that this was not Emily's experience. 'I still get that. Yeah, but only if it's being led by somebody that I know. Yeah. Not if it's being led by somebody I don't know.' Emily felt a sense of togetherness because she knew the people leading it, and when it wasn't someone she knew, she wouldn't watch it. There remains a sense, however, that 'also online' hybrid streaming (whether asynchronous or synchronous) as distinct from 'only online' Holy Communion was less an experience of 'communion+' and an experience of 'It's not as good, but it's it is good and it's a heck of a lot better than nothing' and enables you to 'still [feel] part of the church family' [Rachel, Site C].

The intensification of the experience of Holy Communion we saw in the different sites surprised us. For this reason, it was one of the most significant themes to emerge from the research. It drew us as a team into new questions about Holy Communion online, pushing the theological conversation beyond questions of validity (i.e. whether this was or wasn't Holy Communion) into questions of what is being learnt about the practice and theology of Holy Communion more generally from this particular experience of the practice of Holy Communion.

2.2 Gathering: A renewed emphasis

The gathering of the people of God through confession, prayer, hymn-singing, and the ministry of the Word for the celebration of the Lord's Supper has always been integral to Christian worship. In celebrations of Holy Communion online, however, these practices of gathering took on newly intensified significance. If the celebration of Holy Communion onsite is seen to emphasise a dynamic of being gathered in order to be sent, Holy Communion online seemed to give a renewed emphasis on different sorts of gathering: gathering people from and within ordinary life and everyone also gathering their own elements and bringing them to Holy Communion.

Celebrations of Holy Communion often focus on gathering in order to be sent. Those 'who gather around the table of the Lord are empowered for mission: apostles, sent out in the power of the Spirit, to live and work to God's praise and glory'.[21] Celebrations of Holy Communion online seemed to involve a different dynamic. As people were scattered in their homes, the focus tended to be on the gathering rather than the sending.

Some of the communities gathering online intentionally set aside time before the formal 'start' for practices of gathering – for people to exchange news and stories about their week, update each other on health issues, offer prayer requests, share their encounters with God since they last met and have time for the ordinary chit chat of life. Of course, these are important forms of church life however and wherever it meets, but the participants identified how these conversations taking place in the open of the 'round', where people could see and be seen by others face-to-face in the specific context of Holy Communion made these practices of gathering especially meaningful. What was being gathered was not only their bodies, but their stories too, their full personhood. Alison expressed this with reference to John 6.

> In a communion service generally the biblical picture, if you like, along with other things, it really is remembering the Last Supper, isn't it? And the events and the events there. Whereas in online communion, personally, as somebody who's presiding, I feel that whilst it's important that obviously we remember the events of The Last Supper, actually maybe the picture in John 6 is […] a

> picture that feels more relevant. I can't really describe it any more than that at the moment. I'm still musing over all of that. [Alison, Site B]

The theme of gathering involved not only the bringing together of people, but the literal gathering (and therefore preparation) of the elements. In Holy Communion online, each participant needed to gather their own bread and wine, bring them to the service, offer them for blessing and then take for themselves the bread and the wine. Yvonne, a long-standing member at Site B, particularly drew attention to this reflecting on how the elements felt different in this context.

> They would come together, wouldn't they? So instead of it being it's all here and it's going out. We each prepare our own and bring it in together. And it is made together. And there won't be waste. Because we each bring just enough. [Yvonne, Site B]

Alison, the minister, developed the insight further.

> I'm really struck Yvonne by what you said a few moments ago actually, because it was just real for me, that was so helpfully put about how when we're, when we're doing communion, generally, on site, in person, physically, all together, um, it's the table and it goes out from the table. Whereas that focus shifts in online and actually it's, it's where people are and, and, and we're bringing it all together. [Alison, Site B]

Similar dynamics are already present in the liturgy. The Methodist Worship Book encourages the people of God to bring the bread and the wine to the table, but in practice the elements are often already on the table and are simply uncovered having been placed there beforehand by the communion steward.

Holy Communion online, then, required what one participant described as an extension of the theology of communion stewarding. Roy called this extension the 'priesthood of all communion stewards', in which each person assumed responsibility for a task normally carried out by a single individual on behalf of others. Each person became their own communion steward, bringing their own gifts and raising them for blessing. In doing so, they were entrusted with roles usually reserved for the ordained president – for example, holding up the bread for all to see. Some articulated the sharing of 'priestly' responsibility in terms of Methodist non-conformism. Alison reflected on this having presided at Holy Communion online:

> I think I found quite moving that when I asked people to hold up their elements that they had in front of them, there was something in that about the care that people had taken. I mean, you know, it wouldn't have taken people long to get those things together, I'm sure. But there was just something. Well, I think I even said in the reflections on the John 6 reading, when it was like the boy presenting the loaves and fishes almost it, you know, that people had brought something to this gathered table. [Alison, Site B)

In light of the way the roles within Holy Communion seemed to be shared differently, it was interesting to us that there wasn't more reflection on who breaks the bread within the conversations with participants; and nor did the theme develop into a particular focus of conversation in the reflector meetings with the sites.

Within the theme of gathering we noticed an increased emphasis placed on practices of preparation. Preparing the elements became theologically significant in ways that are not always apparent in Holy Communion onsite. Participants spoke about gathering bread and wine from their kitchens, shops, care homes, or whatever is to hand. In this sense, preparation itself took on a liturgical quality, a sort of 'church before church'. Having sought out and prepared their own bread and wine, whether taken from the daily bread used for sandwiches, or bought especially for the occasion, or even baked by hand, participants took to the preparation of the elements as preparation for communion itself. When it came to the service, people often felt more prepared, more ready to receive the love of God on account of these practices of preparation. In our reflector meetings, we explored the longer theological traditions surrounding the materiality of the Eucharist: the histories of bread-making, wine production and the liturgical actions bound up with them. Much of this rich liturgical and symbolic tradition has faded from contemporary practice, yet Holy Communion online seemed to return to these longer traditions by reconnecting participants with the origins and materiality of the elements they brought to the table. This, we felt, was a significant 'good' to be received from online practice.

2.3 Reimagining Holy Communion and everyday life

The emphasis celebrating Holy Communion online places on both the gathering of the people of God from (rather than sending into) the world and the (literal) gathering of the elements revealed a different perspective on how God is encountered in everyday spaces and patterns of life. More specifically, we saw how Christ's table became less associated with a physical table in the church building and instead identified as a 'virtual table' which 'spans all time and space'.

The image of Christ's table received significant attention in the different conversations. For some it appeared that when they thought about the table in Holy Communion it was the table in the church building on which the elements were placed. This meant that for Hazel, when planning to preside at a service of Holy Communion online, she assumed that references to table needed to be removed from the liturgy.

> The first time I thought it doesn't make sense to say that we're gathering round the table because we're not, because there's not, you know. … But in the end I put that in. I left it in and actually in the service there was a real sense I felt of people being gathered around a virtual table, which was really interesting. I wasn't expecting that to happen. [Hazel, Site A]

Having decided to leave it in the liturgy she was struck by the significance of the table, and had her imagination drawn away from the physical table in the building to a 'virtual table' around which everyone was gathering.

> I was watching what other people were doing on the [Zoom] gallery. So there was a sense of us all preparing to take bread and wine together. So seeing other people was quite important, I think. But also the sense was reinforced by the comments afterwards when people said that they feel as though they're gathering around a table, a virtual table. Well, they didn't use that word, but they said it's it feels almost more that we're gath[ering]. … Because I asked them afterwards to feed back a bit to me how it had felt. They said it felt more as though they were gathering around the table because in the church you often just go and stand at the front. So it was. It was really interesting. I wasn't expecting that to happen. [Hazel, Site A]

What Hazel was suggesting was that the sense of gathering together around the table was enhanced by the experience of Holy Communion online, not diminished. Alison saw something similar, as already quoted above, when she identified how people brought their elements.

> It was just something really profound about, um people had brought this to the table. I guess this table that spans all time and space and which again, I think was sort of in our liturgy somewhere, this, you know, the gifts that people bring. [Alison, Site B]

Here it felt natural for her to identify everyone coming to 'this table' as Christ's table which 'spans all space and time'. Terry shared a powerful moment in their communion service which did something similar for him.

> I remember so vividly was we did a communion service, and, um, we drew the table afterwards - we did a … we got Google Maps and drew the communion table that we'd all just gathered around. And it was this strange, sort of pointy, triangular looking affair that was about 3500 miles long, or about 1200 miles deep, and it tapered and that and that. The hairs are up on the back of my neck just thinking about it now, because when I think about what Jesus called for us to do and what Jesus called for us … what communion would mean to us in the future, I don't think we could be more on the money. It didn't. The miles didn't matter. The borders didn't matter. We gathered around that one table and shared in that meal across the screen. And it was just it spoke for itself. [Terry, Site E]

This pointed to something already named in the reflections on gathering that there was a blurring of the boundaries between the worship service and the rest of life. As Roy, in Site A, expressed, 'We're in our own homes, and that's different'. People worship within their own homes, rather than going to a different building. People have brought their own elements, and those same elements were part of daily life – the bread was brought from the same shop and part of the same loaf as their lunchtime sandwiches. And Alison talked about how she presided over communion from the kitchen table. It was apparent to people that the worship service was deeply interwoven with their ordinary lives. Greg articulated this really clearly in Site E.

> the thing that I was thinking of when, when these guys were talking just then was trying not to make this sound too like, uh, theoretical, but it's just something, I think, really beautiful about worshipping at home, about the, like, situated ness of worship. Um, which I think has been really good for my own, like, theology and, uh, even just the way I think about church, my own ecclesiology, just this sort of idea that church isn't, isn't any more a place I go to, um, and then leave again. It's a place I join and I'm part of, and I'm always in. And it's the, when we go to church as a family, we go to the same place that we either go to watch telly in the lounge, it's just in there, or we go to when I go to work and sit at this desk here, and sometimes the whole family gather around round by my little desk in the study, and that's church. And so you can't you can't leave church for Sunday morning or for a building. [Greg, Site E]

The space in which Holy Communion was taking place was not being imagined as a sacred space online, a virtual church building, but as a connection between people in their houses, interacting more obviously with their everyday lives. The result is that Holy Communion, and indeed church, is not imagined as separate from the world as it might be when you have to walk through the doors into a building but as both scattered and gathered at the same time. In this sanctification of the domestic, the space in which they spent much of their lives would become holy as the virtual table of communion extended into their spaces and their physical environment was being drawn into the communion. The same screen was being used for Holy Communion as it was for doing online shopping, or watching telly, or for work purposes. In the Roehampton/F&O reflector conversations we made connections to images of Mary at the annunciation, where the angel visits her in what is often pictured as a domestic space – in her house, sometimes engaged in the domestic tasks of homelife. As with the scenes of Mary, there was also a sense the ordinariness of life being taken up into the life of God. Responding to a suggestion that the meaningfulness of communion was in gathering and fellowship, one person in Site A said that it is 'also about everyday life, because Jesus is in our everyday life'.

Although we were exploring Holy Communion online, physicality mattered. Not only the materiality and physicality of the elements and their preparation, but the place and space of communion – which tended to be people's homes. Some of the participants, if say they were part of the same family or residents in the same care home, would meet in the same room. Others would join from their own 'places' with a sense of these everyday places and spaces becoming more connected and helping them to discover the life of God present in the ordinariness of life. The screen functioned as a window into the divine, but also as a window into the homes of those they were worshipping with. Worship and Holy Communion were being practiced and found meaningful not in a specific place set apart for worship but within the material ordinariness of life. Greg's story and others suggested that this offered a new imagination for how the things of God relate to ordinary life – discovered within the everyday, not physically separated from it.

A recurring question for many in the different sites concerned mission. In particular it was about online communities finding ways to engage in mission. It struck us in the conversations at the start of the research that mission was being imagined as something you had to do 'out there' in the world with the Zoom service was being imagined as a closed group separated from the world. However, the reimagining of the relationship between church and world discovered in celebrating Holy Communion online, as both gathered and scattered in ordinary life, offered a renewed perspective on mission. What we heard, in light of this, was the way in which church engaged with people's lives in different ways. In Site A it had led to multiple connections across a supported living complex. For Emily in Site C the streamed service and other online content connected her with people in her local area in a different way as they recognised her from online videos produced during lockdown. She also talked about the conversations which emerged as she streamed the online service on her phone when out at the coast while her husband was fishing. The reimagining of church and world, and the domestication of the sacred highlighted very different ways mission was already happening. This view of the church as simultaneously gathered and scattered helped to challenge the assumption that Zoom services were a closed-off experience. We heard how these services had allowed people to remain connected who had moved away, had help people to remain part of the church when experiencing illness or could not physically get to church, and had opened up ways that people who would be unlikely to walk through a church door could try church anonymously, from the safety of their own home before deciding whether to venture onsite.

2.4 The liturgy does the work of the liturgy

It was striking how many of the reflections were about how the liturgy still worked in the online setting. Moving to Holy Communion online changed the emphasis and reception of the liturgy, and although there was discussion about what needed to change within the liturgy, on the whole the conclusion was that less needed to be changed than was anticipated. There were some changes needed around specifics of where people and the elements were, and there was a need for help with guidance of the changing choreography of the communion when it is online/streamed.

We noticed that the move to Holy Communion online via Zoom made by Site A and Site B had opened up rich reflections on the meaning and practice of communion. A number of times it was reflected in the Roehampton/F&O team that most churches have not thought about the theology and practice of communion in the way these groups had. It was likened to the time in the Methodist Church when decisions were being made to enable children to participate in communion and the rich reflections which had emerged at that point. We feel it was partly for this reason that there was a lot of reflection on the words and practice of the liturgy.

Already in the themes discussed above the importance of the liturgy had been emphasised in the significance of the familiar words and the changing choreography of communion when moved online. Similarly, the renewed emphasis on gathering in the liturgy, and how the table was not lost but became primarily understood metaphorically also foreground the liturgy. For Site B in particular, one of the things they identified as an unexpected learning was that rather than needing to write a whole new liturgy for Holy Communion online, what was needed was minor tweaks, as you might make in any changing context of communion, and some guidance on how things work in an online or streamed setting around the choreography. As one person commented in the Roehampton/F&O team, 'the liturgy does the work of the liturgy'.

In the conversations with Site B, we began to recognise the kinds of shift which took place in moving to Holy Communion online. Some things, such as the bringing of the elements, became more literal when moved online.

> the fact that people had got [their elements] there to hand and held [them] up. And everybody's looked slightly different, didn't it? [..] which again, I think was sort of in our liturgy somewhere, this, you know, the gifts that people bring. [..] where there's actually a designated stage direction that says about the gifts are brought forward [..] but in actual fact that that never really happens in it, because the gifts have been brought forward before the service began by the communion stewards, and it's already all there on the table and covered by the time your service begins. [Alison, Site B]

And other things, like the table, became more metaphorical.

> And that's interesting because we've talked about the table, haven't we? And of course, it's not one table at the front like it is if a if we're doing it physically all in the same space. But actually when we say, Lord, we come to this, your table trusting in your mercy and not in any goodness of our own, that table takes on a different, um, resonance, doesn't it? It's the table that people will have their elements on, but then it's the shared table that all of creation is invited to. [Alison, Site B]

Similarly, there was a change in how active and passive those celebrating communion were and where that activity was focused. Each member now had responsibility for gathering the elements, not a single communion steward. The lifting up of the elements became a communal exercise. The activity involved in going up to the rail or the front to receive was gone, and in its place was a quieter space for contemplation and reflection. There was some concern that moving to Holy Communion online pushed people to be spectators and consumers, but there was plenty of evidence that people experienced a high level of active participation. The teams from Sites A and B where the service is on Zoom reflected on how they had noticed that active participation in the service was greater than it would have been in the building. More voices were heard during the service as a whole and were able to participate through readings etc. Again, seeing one another was an important part of this. As a Roehampton/F&O team we felt we were seeing a democratisation of worship and Holy Communion, where roles were being shared across the whole people of God.

Perhaps it is not surprising that there would still be a strong sense of participation in a Zoom service, but we also heard stories of how people were able to move from feeling like a spectator to active participation within the streamed services. This brought different insights into participation. Eye contact from the person presiding was one way people felt included as a participant and when the person presiding was known to them they felt more involved. Emily, in Site C, talked about the need to make an effort.

> And when you're in church and you're doing it, it's almost like you're going along with it a bit. And yet God still brings you to that place. Yeah. When you're doing it at home, it's you're making yourself engaged with God that way rather than God leading it. Yeah. [..] You have to put the effort in. Yeah. There's no there's a way to cop out. [Emily, Site C]

This in turn inspired Rachel to try Holy Communion online too.

> I just find it better in church. I feel more, I get more when I am there, but actually listening to Emily, maybe I opt to give it a go. [Rachel, Site C]

In site D, Gloria, responding to the suggestion that some might think Holy Communion online is an impoverished experience, said something similar.

> I think it's what you give to it in the first place. If you just go and think I'm receiving the bread and wine and not actually think, why are you receiving the bread and wine, then I think you can think that. But to receive the bread and wine, knowing that you're receiving the bread and wine and the reason why you're doing it, then you can feel inclusively involved with it. (Gloria, Site D)

For Roy, in Site B, the prayer of humble access was 'the absolute knock out of communion' and it was 'meaningless' if they couldn't say it together. The team from Site B reflected that Zoom made it hard to say things together, but they also noticed that the more they did it the better they became at it and they found ways to participate together in the liturgy that worked.

> Initially we try and all say the Lord's Prayer together. And it was cacophonous, wasn't it? And we gave up. And gradually, over time, we've started saying the Lord's Prayer together, saying responses in intercessions, uh, saying the grace. And there's a way in which by following the leader, if you like, and seeing the speed at which they are going and timing your responses with them is a sharing, isn't it? Yeah. And it's a, a recognition of, of a relationship. [Yvonne, Site B]

These kinds of reflections drew attention to the liturgy as a practice, not just words, and the ways in which the meaningfulness of communion for many people seemed to be held within the liturgical practice. This was highlighted in Rachel's account from the streamed service that despite the fact that she hadn't chosen to participate in Holy Communion online she had still found it meaningful because of the liturgy.

> And being listening to the comfort and security and, and everything of having listened to that all your life kind of thing is there's, there is comfort in it and safety and security and it just. Yeah, it's a good feeling. [Rachel, Site C]

It is also helpful to note some more practical elements around liturgy. Despite an initial feeling from Site B that they needed to write new liturgies for Holy Communion online, and an instinct from Site C to move towards less formal ways of sharing communion, both sites began to notice the ways in which the liturgy was important to participants and enabled a level of participation. What began to be suggested was more of a commentary and additional direction for the common communion liturgy, rather than developing a distinct 'Holy Communion online liturgy'. This common liturgy would be able to accommodate different practices, such as everyone bringing their bread and wine and lifting it up, encouraging the person presiding to identify that people online would be participating and to look into the camera. This would also have effect of emphasising the commonality between online and onsite communion, which is theologically beneficial.

Connected to the insights around the work of the liturgy was the way choreography was adapted. In Site C we had a detailed conversation about the position of the communion table and the positioning of cameras to allow those online to see and have a sense of participation. There is plenty to think about around choreography, but it was pointed out that these are perennial questions in the life of the church. The question of where the communion table should be and how the person presiding should stand in relation to it has a long history. This emphasises another more general observation, that while it is easy to get drawn into thinking that the questions we were coming up against were about online and onsite, we realised that these are questions that are dealt with in any move of context of communion. Moving from a small group of 10 people to a larger church has many of the same challenges and questions involved as our participants were wrestling with. We became increasingly keen to emphasise how the questions being raised by Holy Communion online, were relevant to Holy Communion onsite too. This also led us to ask the question, given all that has been reflected above: how might the experience of Holy Communion online enrich the experience of Holy Communion onsite?

3. Emerging areas for further reflection

3.1 The theology of Holy Communion online

The research has sought to do more than simply identify and explore experiences of Holy Communion online. It has sought to engage with those experiences and the developing reflections on those experiences as theological in their own right. The fact that many people experienced Holy Communion online as an intensification of their experience of Holy Communion, and that theological themes such as gathering became emphasised is theologically significant. According to the theological underpinning of theological action research, it is when the theology embedded in what people do and say is heard in conversation with the formal and normative sources of theology that new insights and theological disclosures emerge. In such an important theological discussion around Holy Communion online, experience of participants do not simply override all other considerations, but neither can they be sidelined as simply people's experience. Theological action research provides a way for these accounts and emerging insights to be taken theologically seriously as part of a broader, ongoing and unfinished process of discernment. It would be beneficial to reflect on how these voices from experience and the theological insights arising can continue to be heard with the more formal and normative sources within and beyond Methodism as British Methodism continues to discern the place of Holy Communion online.

3.2 Differing experiences between video conferencing and streaming

The research has indicated that different mediums of engagement in Holy Communion online create different experiences. Where many engaging on Zoom found that their experience of Holy Communion was deepened, those streaming very often found it good, but not as good as participating onsite. Given that our indicative survey of prevalence suggested most Holy Communion online in the Methodist Church was offered via streamed services rather than 'online only' services, there is work to be done around promoting and sharing the best practice of streaming Holy Communion. For example, the reflections emerging from this project suggest that there are practical ways in which eye contact (looking into the camera), camera angle and addressing online participants can deepen the experience of those participating online. It suggests that small changes can make a real difference and encouragement to do the necessary reflective work into good practice will pay off. The research also suggests that there are some experiences around the Zoom service which could be incorporated into the streamed service which might also be beneficial. As many of the participants reflected, gathering people engaging with Holy Communion online to share their learning with one another could be a good way to do this.

3.3 Not 'othering' church online and Holy Communion online

One theme we noticed through our reflector team conversations was the way many of the areas of reflection were applicable to church onsite as much as church online. This led to identifying the importance of not judging church practice online by different standards from which church onsite might be judged. One example was how the highly relational experience of church on Zoom would be affected by it growing significantly and noticing that this would be the case for any small church, whether gathering online or onsite. It suggested that it would be beneficial to have further reflection on how to talk about online church and Holy Communion online which didn't identify it by its difference and 'otherness' but was able to also identify its continuity and commonality. It suggested to us, that rather than seeing Holy Communion online as a different entity, that seeing it in continuity might help to highlight

the ways in which reflection already undertaken on Holy Communion might help to navigate some of the different questions emerging, such the challenges of recognising different eucharistic theologies, different groups engaging together, different ages of people, differing numbers of participants and even the complicated question of the kinds of elements drawing from cross cultural mission reflections.

3.4 The elements and their preparation

Each of the sites in the research were finding ways in which they navigated questions around the elements. We felt the suggestion of everyone being their own communion steward might offer some guidance on how to prepare. Groups were finding ways to advise participants how to prepare the elements and themselves for online communion and beginning to think about encouraging them to pray as they did it. There were some helpful questions raised about how those who were unable to prepare their own elements or don't have those elements immediately available might be helped. Finally, there were some more theological complex questions raised around whether in the privacy of one's own home it is acceptable to use alcoholic wine, and what kinds of elements are most appropriate.

3.5 Presidency in Holy Communion online

The research raised interesting questions about presidency which were being navigated by the different sites. While some of those presiding at online communion in the research felt that it was becoming natural for them, others had less experience and found it less familiar. In identifying the need for those presiding to be a non-anxious presence and to create spaces for participation we felt that further reflection was required to explore what that support might look like. There were a number of suggestions emerging in the research about enabling participation through the invitation offered, through tweaks being made into the way the liturgy and choreography of Holy Communion online is practiced and in the way the technology is used. Simple guidance could be developed from what has been identified and learnt from the sites.

3.6 The implications for liturgy

One of the emerging insights from the research is the way that the existing liturgy is reinterpreted and reimagined through the celebration of Holy Communion online rather than needing a whole new liturgy (which would risk 'othering' Holy Communion online in unhelpful ways). Drawing on the ways in which liturgy is already adapted by the presiding minister in Holy Communion when moving between different church buildings and different numbers of participants, the liturgy could be similarly adapted for Holy Communion online. This might include a number of optional or alternate phrases, and some particular direction for Holy Communion online.

3.7 Discovering mission online

One of the main insights around mission was the blurring of public and private and the blurring of sacred and everyday. Moving away from an understanding of mission as what goes on 'out there', this more blurred account, seeing church as simultaneously gathered and scattered, opens up the possibility of a different imagination about mission and to notice different ways mission is enabled in the ordinary and everyday. Added to this the increased emphasis on gathering also offers ways in which the missional patterns of Holy Communion can be reimagined, not simply feeding to be sent, but the gathering taking place in the world.

The research also identified the ways that Holy Communion online can facilitate the inclusion of those who are unable to get to church because of various disabilities, those who live too far from a worshipping community, those whose life routines restrict them from attending and those who may feel unable to attend due to negative or traumatic experiences. In these ways church online and Holy Communion online, particularly in its streamed variety, allows a way to participate from a safe distance. There may well be ways that this inclusion can be broadened and further developed. We also recognised, however, that any form of online activity can introduce new forms of exclusion and this also needs to feature on the inclusivity agenda. These include problems around digital poverty, accessibility of highspeed internet, and the potential invisibility of the 'church door' when online.

3.8 The significance of space to reflect

As with many theological action research projects, one of the things identified by site teams as valuable was the way in which the process itself offered a space for reflection. We also noticed the ways in which the change from Holy Communion onsite to Holy Communion online naturally encouraged reflection to take place. At the same time, we noticed that some groups were less inclined to this reflection, and that those who volunteered to participate in the research were, by nature, more likely to be those who wanted to reflect. Changing practice offers good opportunities to reflect as people navigate a familiar practice in new way. The experience of engaging with Holy Communion online enabled participants to notice the things they take for granted, the things that are most important to them, and to see new ways of participating which offered meaningfulness in different ways. In the sites in this research, this seemed to have naturally led many into conversations reflecting on the meaning and theology of Holy Communion.

4. Conclusions

It has been powerful to work with churches who have been celebrating Holy Communion online in their worship together. To collaborate with them in this journey of listening and reflection has brought a depth of theological insight and practical wisdom. This report recognises those insights, explored in the themes above around intensification, gathering, Holy Communion in everyday life and the work of the liturgy. These themes do not result in simple recommendations, or clear theological positions and in fact in many ways they complexify the questions around the celebration of Holy Communion online. This complexity comes from the fact that lived practice is always complex and has developed through navigating multiple perspectives, voices and experiences. Theological questions about Holy Communion online arise precisely because it is an emerging practice here and now. Because of this, this project does not seek a final conclusion but offers ways to continue to navigate these questions drawing on the theological insights which

emerge from practice and with the expectation that these practice-engaged theological perspectives contribute to ongoing conversations.

We began the process with two broad questions posed by the Faith and Order Committee: 'How do Methodists understand their participation in online celebrations of Holy Communion?' and 'How is this similar/different to their understanding of participating in onsite celebrations?'. These questions have led us into a theologically rich engagement with the practice of Holy Communion online and revealed the ways in which those participating have experienced Holy Communion online as Holy Communion, and for some, as an intensification of it. Some of the assumptions based in comparisons between Holy Communion online and Holy Communion onsite have been challenged, and what we have seen is a need to see Holy Communion celebrated online as a development in Holy Communion in a new context, which can be navigated in similar ways to any new context. Emphasis, the nature of participation, and the way people relate to Holy Communion may have shifted, but what is not being discussed is a new thing: it is about seeking to be faithful to God in holy practice. This is not to say that the sites we have looked at and their developing practices are inherently right and good but reveals that, as they are reflected on and discerned, they have important insights to offer the continuing development of Holy Communion, and indeed faithfulness to God.

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Endnotes

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1. We have adopted the term 'Holy Communion online' rather than 'online Holy Communion' to reflect one of the core concerns that emerged early in the project: many participants were keen to emphasise that they saw themselves participating in Holy Communion that happened to be taking place online rather than doing something that was substantively different from Holy Communion onsite. In other words, what was key was not *where* they were celebrating Holy Communion but *that* they were celebrating Holy Communion. We are using 'onsite' to refer to celebrations of Holy Communion that take place in a church building and 'online' to refer to celebrations of Holy Communion that take place either 'only online' (i.e. through a platform such as Zoom) or 'also online' (i.e. streamed through a platform such as YouTube) to enable online participation in an onsite celebration of Holy Communion.

2. Paper 37 of the 2015 Methodist Conference, 'Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media'. Available at: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2015-37-Communion-Mediated-through-Social-Media_ItOWpRq.pdf

3. Paper 31 of the 2018 Methodist Conference, 'Faith and Order Committee Report'. Available at: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2018-31-Faith-and-Order-Committee_RBfl0aq.pdf

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6. Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (Routledge, 2017), 36-40 (36). Following an incident of online Holy Communion in 2013 in The United Methodist Church, Hutchings reports of the formation of an 'Online Communion Task Force'. See Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*, 38.

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8. Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (Routledge, 2018), 83-90 (84).

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10. Berger, *@Worship*, 87.

11. Berger, *@Worship*, 89.

12. For example, Richard A. Burridge, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds* (Wipf and Stock, 2022).

13. Stephen R. Holmes, 'Can the Eucharist Be Celebrated in an Online Gathering? A Theological Analysis', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023), 87–106 (92).

14. Deanna A. Thompson, 'The Virtual Body of Christ Post Pandemic: Called to Continue Offering the Sacrament of Holy Communion in Online Worship', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023), 19-23 (21). See also Deanna A. Thompson, 'Christ is Really Present, Even in Holy Communion via Online Worship', *Liturgy* 35, no. 4 (2020), 18–24 (18).

15. Thompson, 'Christ is Really Present', 18.

16. Vivencio O. Ballano, 'COVID 19 Pandemic, Telepresence, and Online Masses: Redefining Catholic Sacramental Theology', *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Global Studies* 16, no. 1 (2021), 41–53 (41).

17. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, 'Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism: A Holy Week Ethnography During COVID-19', *Studia Liturgica* 50, no. 2 (2020), 188–210.

18. Johnson, 'Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism', 188.

19. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Roehampton Ethics Committee [HUM-25-030]. We have pseudonymised the names of the research sites involved in the project as Site A, Site B, Site C, etc; we have also pseudonymised the names of the participants involved in the project.

20. For those looking for a more detailed summary of the dynamics of theological action research, see James Butler, 'Researching the Grassroots Experience of Faith Learning: Introducing the Learning Project and Theological Action Research', *Anvil* 39, no. 2 (2023).

21. *Orders of Service for Holy Communion from the Methodist Worship Book* (2021), 114