

Providing Communion Using Technology

Committee on Church Doctrine, Rec. No. 2, 2012

(A&P 2012, P. 243-47, 20)

OVERTURE NO. 2, 2010 (A&P 2010, p. 609, 356)

Re: Using technology to assist in providing communion

Overture No. 2, 2010 raised an issue which could be formulated as a two-part presenting question: 1. Can the elements of bread and cup be blessed via webcam or other video media, or does the minister need to be physically present to bless the elements?

Additional underlying questions are:

2. What steps can be taken to ensure that the sacraments are regularly celebrated in congregations that do not have a settled minister or lay missionary?
3. As more and more presbyteries are closing small distant congregations within their bounds, many Presbyterians are inadvertently left either to join churches of other denominations or to remain outside of communion altogether even after life-time service to our congregations. How do we serve loyal life-time members who have been displaced by congregational closures? Although the General Assembly may, with certain conditions and for a defined term, approve the licensing of ruling elders and diaconal ministers to celebrate the sacrament of communion as one way of addressing these concerns, could a video connection via internet or even television be an alternative way of ensuring access to the sacrament of communion?
4. What does it say about a small local congregation in a remote area as a visible sacramental community proclaiming God's love to its neighbours when its presence is based on ways and means dependent on electronic means at the mercy of technological availability?

The doctrinal question: There is an additional doctrinal question to clarify. This question arises out of the Westminster Confession, Chapter XXIX, No. 3:

III. The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people, to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants; but to none who are not then present in the congregation.

Could a connection via video link constitute "presence in the congregation" as per the Westminster Confession? Additionally, can the setting apart of the elements and the breaking of the bread be considered "present" through such a video link?

Towards a response to the underlying question raised by the overture

At present an estimated 15% of congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada are without a settled minister and have stopped looking for one. For example, in the Synod of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, seven of the 32 congregations in the synod have no intention of seeking a minister to “fill their pulpit”. A variety of options have been used to ensure the regular celebration of the sacraments in these congregations: using retired clergy or clergy not employed in congregational work, using regional staff, or making the interim moderator responsible. While these options work well in some contexts, they are not a universal solution. In particular in those places where there are few retired clergy available and/or when the distances to be traveled are great (say over two hours each way) the often suggested solutions start to fail. In these cases congregations may go lengthy periods of time between communion celebrations.

Calvin argued the marks of the church to be the Word “purely preached and heard” and the sacraments “administered according to Christ’s institution”. For a congregation not regularly to celebrate the sacraments is to violate the right administration of the sacraments. When a denomination has rules that cause some congregations rarely to celebrate the sacraments, the denomination is hampering those congregations from being “a church of God”. (Institutes IV.1.9)

Calvin also described the infrequency of communion as an “invention of the devil” (Institutes IV.17.46):

Most assuredly, the custom which prescribes communion once a-year is an invention of the devil, by what instrumentality soever it may have been introduced. They say that Zephyrinus was the author of the decree, though it is not possible to believe that it was the same as we now have it. It may be, that as times then were, he did not, by his ordinance, consult ill for the Church. For there cannot be a doubt that at that time the sacred Supper was dispensed to the faithful at every meeting; nor can it be doubted that a great part of them communicated. But as it scarcely ever happened that all could communicate at the same time, and it was necessary that those who were mingled with the profane and idolaters, should testify their faith by some external symbol, this holy man, with a view to order and government, had appointed that day, that on it the whole of Christendom might give a confession of their faith by partaking of the Lord’s Supper. The ordinance of Zephyrinus, which was otherwise good, posterity perverted, when they made a fixed law of one communion in the year. The consequence is, that almost all, when they have once communicated, as if they were discharged as to all the rest of the year, sleep on secure. It ought to have been far otherwise. Each week, at least, the table of the Lord ought to have been spread for the company of Christians, and the promises declared on which we might then spiritually feed. No one, indeed, ought to be forced, but all ought to be exhorted and stimulated; the torpor of the sluggish, also, ought to be rebuked, that all, like persons famishing, should come to the feast. It was not without cause, therefore, I complained, at the outset, that this practice had been

introduced by the wile of the devil; a practice which, in prescribing one day in the year, makes the whole year one of sloth.

Ironically, while many Presbyterian congregations are increasing the frequency of their communion celebration from the traditional four times a year to as many as 10 to 12 times a year, a number of congregations are being blocked from being able to celebrate communion even twice a year.

While giving permission to specially-trained ruling elders and diaconal ministers to celebrate the sacrament of communion would likely go far in alleviating the issue of accessibility to the celebration of the sacrament, it is not necessarily the whole solution, because, in addition to congregations that may not be able to celebrate the sacraments, there are groups of individuals who are cut off from the regular celebration of the sacraments. Residents of nursing homes and other persons with mobility challenges come to mind immediately.

Some congregations within The Presbyterian Church in Canada have been inviting people watching via TV to join in the celebration of the sacrament of communion in their own homes, with bread and cup. They sometimes also have elders present in nursing homes who serve communion to residents while watching the televised service. As the minister speaks words to set apart the elements both physically in front of her or him on the communion table, viewers are sometimes invited to participate at home. This practice has been well-received by many in the TV audience. The internet now makes similar kinds of worship participation possible via web-conferencing software. Can and should these kinds of practices be extended to situations where small congregations with few members located in remote areas are linked or twinned to their nearest congregations with a minister?

The Church Doctrine Committee contacted some Presbyterian denominations in the United States, Scotland and New Zealand to see what practices are common in those jurisdictions. We did not get a response from the United States; but we have heard from both our Scottish and New Zealand sisters and brothers that they have no policies in this regard and look forward to hear what The Presbyterian Church in Canada decides on this matter as they often face similar situations.

Such possibilities raise questions such as, “Where is the community of the church in this?” While recognizing that this may be the best way for persons with physical limitations to participate, this should not become the means of avoiding the hard realities of communion/community. For example, the person I am angry with is eating at this table with me and the person I said something derogatory to this week is over there and I need to make amends. If not careful, the interposition of technology for distributing elements may be open to abuse and misuse by some, if communion becomes subject to what is merely expedient or efficient. If the adoption of technological means were to include members in communion mainly for utilitarian reasons, it would undercut the Lord’s Supper as a joyful communal mystery proclaiming salvation to a troubled age.

If communion is about the community of faith becoming the body of Christ, how do we make that real via virtual means? How can we make the accountability to a lived discipleship which is inherent in the sacrament come alive to individuals living in isolation from one another and the community of faith? Further, how does the compelling call to bear witness embedded in the sacraments make itself heard in a highly privatized celebration involving a single individual or a couple and a minister present on a screen?

After careful consideration of both the pitfalls and advantages of celebrating communion with the aid of technologically-mediated presence, the committee finds that the communion elements could be properly set aside and blessed by means of virtual media. The committee finds that the celebration of communion by means of visual media could be approved as a proper way of constituting “presence” for the purposes of communion. However, it is important for the right administration of the sacrament to follow the following rationale and guidelines.

The Rationale

1. The right and regular celebration of the sacraments is a mark of the church and access to communion is therefore a fundamental aspect of our understanding of the church and its local expression.
2. As one of the marks of the church in the Reformed tradition, the practice of communion is properly part of doctrine and should be engaged in with care, reverence and with integrity of teaching and process.
3. Since the 20th century, the development of communication media has enhanced the ways in which human presence can be extended through acoustic presence (telephone, radio, etc.) and through visual presence (video media). Even though such “presence” is not completely equivalent to personal bodily presence, there are steps that can be taken to enhance the personal presence and the experience of community, as will be outlined below.
4. It must also be pointed out that the insistence in the Westminster Confession on presence at communion had concerns behind it that differ somewhat from the question about technological presence. First, the Confession emphasized the community aspect of communion as the cup of the people which cannot be over-individualized. Secondly, the concern was also with private “masses” that represented some of the doctrinal tensions of the time.

The Process and Practice of Communion via Visual Media – Guidelines

Preamble

Allowing virtual communities to celebrate the sacraments raises the question of how we build community in an increasingly individualized and isolating society. Some technologies allow for different ways to be part of one's visible and physical congregation. Although virtual communities normally ought not to replace physical communities and if there are no means of participating physically, the church should explore other means for its members to remain connected and to participate in communion. Because the interposition of a camera and screen decontextualizes community, it is important to take steps that will make mutual connection in relationship possible. To ensure the building up of community:

1. Virtual community and participation in communion via visual and/or acoustic media should always be built on the foundation of pre-established face to face relationships. The session has the pastoral responsibility for ensuring that such community is established.
2. For the reason above, it is the opinion of the committee that at least one ordained elder normally needs to be present where people participate in communion through visual and/or acoustic media. The committee can think of some exceptions to this guideline, particularly where Presbyterians travel in countries where there is no overt Christian presence and they wish to join in communion with their home congregation via the internet.
3. That in addition to at least one ordained elder, should the virtual communion be taking place in a setting other than a congregation gathered for worship (e.g. nursing home, prison, hospital, private residence), some persons from the nearest congregations should be encouraged to be present and participate in the service as well.
4. That prior to communion, there must be some service of the Word, where the Bible is read, and a brief application or devotion given. That is, partaking in communion ought to be part of public worship service duly sanctioned as such by the session and not to be done by privately joining into the broadcast without the knowledge of the session.
5. The use of various communication media represents some drawbacks. The placement of cameras and the use of screens for projected participation require thoughtful consideration. Some matters to be ensured by sessions that are participating in such a project include the following:
 - a. Are the celebrant and the elements of communion clearly visible to the remote participants?
 - b. Is there some visual sense of the community where communion is being celebrated?

- c. Is the sound connection effective enough so that the remote participants can clearly hear the words of institution and the prayers?
- d. Is there an ordained elder present with the remote celebrants to facilitate the distribution of the elements and to extend proper pastoral care and presence where necessary?
- e. Does the celebrant consciously include the remote community through word and visual contact?

In addition, not as a requirement but as a strong recommendation, it should be investigated if a two way link can be established so that the two communities can communicate back and forth to enhance the visual and acoustic presence.

If these matters are attended to properly, it is the opinion of the Committee on Church Doctrine that such a celebration of communion via various communication media is proper within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Committee on Church Doctrine, Recommendation No. 2 (adopted, p. 20)

That the above report with its guidelines be the response to Overture No. 2, 2010 regarding using technology to assist in providing communion.