

March 26, 2020

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Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion

This inaugural blog post of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community is written by Director Deanna A. Thompson. She is the author of five books, including *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Abingdon, 2016), and in this post weighs in on an issue facing churches across the globe during the pandemic: whether and how to do virtual communion.



Immanuel Lutheran Church in Amherst, Massachusetts. Photo taken by John Pearson.

I used to be a digital skeptic, dubious that virtual connectedness could foster any meaningful relating among us. Getting diagnosed with incurable cancer, however, provided all sorts of opportunities to reconsider my assumptions about how the world works, including my certainty that virtual connectivity is incapable of enriching our lives.

Cancer broke my back and treatment landed me in the hospital, sidelining me from in-person interaction except with doctors and nurses, family and a few close friends. Life as a university professor, involved parent, active churchgoer and participant in community events — all of it came to a halt.

These virtual connections were not simply poor substitutes for real interaction; they filled my soul at a time of despair.

But amid so much loss, I was introduced to the life-giving possibilities of virtual connectedness. Relatives and friends got in touch through a website focused on caring for those who are sick. Friends created a virtual calendar of food and cleaning needs. As news of my cancer spread virtually, others living with incurable cancer got in touch to offer resources and support. These virtual connections were not simply poor substitutes for real interaction; they filled my soul at a time of despair. I wouldn't have survived my cancer quarantine without them.

As a theologian I had never given the invisible church much thought in life before cancer. But when cancer prevented me from being physically present at church, I was introduced to how the body of Christ exists virtually in profound, healing ways. And when I came across Pastor Jason Byassee's insight that [the body of Christ has always been a virtual body](https://faithandleadership.com/jasonbyassee/), I set to writing and speaking about the important role the virtual body of Christ has always played in ministering to our digital tools to enhance our ability to live out this calling in the world. (<http://www.epx.ets.edu/virtual-theological-education>)

These days it's not just the very sick or the very frail who are connecting with the virtual body of Christ; it's most every churchgoer. Christian communities are scrambling to offer online worship, virtual youth group, Bible studies and more in response to the call to avoid physical contact with one another.

With the mass migration to virtual worship, churches face a host of questions about how and whether key elements of worship can be carried out in virtual spaces. And perhaps most prominent among them is the question of virtual communion.

As we consider what it might mean to do communion virtually, it is important to reflect more deeply on what being present to one another in virtual spaces actually means. While conventional wisdom tends to view virtual spaces as disembodied and therefore inferior to embodied, in-person presence, theologian [Kathryn Reklis](http://www.epx.ets.edu) insists that our theology must move beyond “seeing the real versus virtual divide in terms of embodied versus disembodied,” and we must think more [reality-and-the-](http://www.epx.ets.edu) “the new permutations of digital and virtual technology informing our lives as particular ways we are embodied.”

incarnation)

Virtual gatherings for worship over the past few weeks, for many of us, have been real experiences of gathering, connection and worship.

Just as it's possible to be in close physical proximity with others while simultaneously being absent mentally or spiritually, it's also possible to be virtually present to one another in profound, meaningful and real ways even when we're physically distant. The tears running down my cheeks as I participated in my church's virtual worship service this past Sunday illustrate the embodied impact that gathering together virtually with the body of Christ had on at least my physical body. Virtual gatherings for worship over the past few weeks, for many of us, have been real experiences of gathering, connection and worship.

The denominational guidelines from the ELCA for [communion for those who are ill, homebound, or in prison](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/How%20can%20we%20provide%20for%20communion%20of%20the%20ill%20homebound%20or%20in%20prison) provide insight into how the church has thought about the issue of communion apart from those physically prevented from worshipping corporately, or lay persons bringing bread and wine that have been blessed and shared as part of congregational worship as faithful ways to include those physically separated from congregational gathering for Word and sacrament.

The question we face amid the pandemic is: what happens when congregations cannot physically gather and pastors are not able to administer the sacrament in person?

In his time Luther stressed the sufficiency of the Word for the nourishing of faith, just as ELCA leaders are doing today.

Currently the ELCA recommends that, for the time being, congregations fast from communion, proposing that temporarily foregoing the sacrament allows us to focus renewed energy on how the Word of God comes to us. This line of thinking is certainly in harmony with Martin Luther's insistence that when Christians do not have access to the sacramental elements, faith is not in jeopardy. In his time Luther stressed the sufficiency of the Word for the nourishing of faith, just as ELCA leaders are doing today.

Lutheran theology affirms that the Word is a gift from God that comes to the congregation through public reading of Scripture and proclamation of the gospel; that the liturgy and hymns are means for the community to proclaim and respond to God's Word. Lutheran theology also affirms that in response to our confession of sins, God works through words of absolution to bestow forgiveness (the part of worship Luther himself deemed most important). In writing about a renewed focus on the Word in this time of coronavirus, ELCA leaders claim that “[t]he Word of God comes to us in all these ways and is really present.” Yes, and Amen.

([https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship%20in%20Times%20of%20Public%20Health%20Concerns.pdf))

I encourage the church to consider the potential power of real presence in virtual spaces to nourish and heal.

And if God is *really present* through the Word in all these ways — even through virtual forms of worship — it is worth reflecting on the theological possibility of the real presence of the Word incarnate in, with and through the experience of virtual communion. Despite the recommendation to fast from communion at this time, many churches are nevertheless experimenting with how they might celebrate the Lord's Supper virtually. And while fasting in all sorts of ways is a common Lenten practice, in a few weeks Lent gives way to Easter. In anticipation of getting to that great feast of victory in the church year, I encourage the church to consider the potential power of real presence in virtual spaces to nourish and heal.

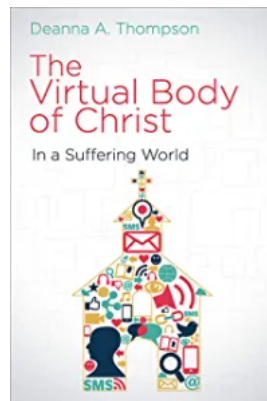
In his theology of the cross, Martin Luther insisted that God is present precisely where we least expect God to be. Luther called on Christians to pay attention to God's hidden presence in the pain and suffering of the cross, witnessing how God is at work in such unexpected places to bring redemption and healing. Rather than discouraging practicing communion virtually, perhaps we're being called to more reflection on how God is really present even where many least expect God to be: in, with and through virtual spaces.

At a time when physical contact is so limited, communing together virtually with our faith communities can affirm the reality that our bodies are engaged in worship even when we're participating from our living room, that we're still connected to the other bodies gathered virtually for worship ...

What might it look like to do virtual communion well? We could start with preparing members beforehand, encouraging them to prepare the table in their own homes. Send along the recipe for the bread regularly used in communion; invite people to consider what cup and plate might be meaningful to hold the elements; remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament; affirm what so many already know, that Christ comes to us even when we gather virtually.

We in the ELCA believe that the sacrament of Holy Communion is a means of grace that "creates and strengthens faith for our daily work and ministry in the world," a rite that "draws us to long for the day of God's justice" and "provides sure and certain hope of the coming resurrection and eternal life" (from the ELCA's [Use of the Means of Grace](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The%20List%20Of%20The%20Means%20Of%20Grace.pdf)). At a time when physical contact is so limited, communing together virtually with our faith communities can affirm the reality that our [bodies are engaged in worship even when we're participating from our living room, that we're still connected to the other bodies gathered virtually for worship even when we can only see photos of them online, and that Christ comes to us in the gifts of bread and wine even when our pastors' Words of Institution are mediated by a screen.](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The%20List%20Of%20The%20Means%20Of%20Grace.pdf)

As I learned during my cancer quarantine, virtual connections can mediate the body of Christ to those who suffer. This time of mass quarantine invites creative theological reflection on how we might faithfully gather, worship and be nourished in spirit and body at a time when we need such nourishment more than ever.



Dr. Thompson holds the Martin E. Marty Regents Chair in Religion and the Academy at St. Olaf, and speaks and writes widely on the virtual body of Christ, Martin Luther, and faith in the midst of illness. She is the author of several books, including *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Abingdon, 2016).