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The Virtual Body of Christ in and Beyond Pandemic

Deanna A. Thompson¹

This paper relies heavily on my chapter “Toward a More Accessible Body of Christ” in the forthcoming *Church after the Corona Pandemic*, edited by the Rev. Dr. Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, due out in 2023. The book also includes a chapter by the Rev. Dr. Kayko Driedger Hesslein, one of the workshop leaders at this conference.

When *The Virtual Body of Christ* was released in 2016, the online forum Syndicate hosted a Symposium on the book,² and friend, colleague, Old Testament scholar, and fellow cancer survivor, the Rev. Dr. Rolf Jacobson, encouraged me to expand how I framed the relationship of the body of Christ to the weakest members of the body. Jacobson writes that “Paul emphasized that everyone in the congregation had all of the spiritual gifts only if they all belonged together. Those who speak in tongues need interpreters of tongues or they are merely clanging cymbals. Those who have prophetic powers but lack love are nothing. We only have all the gifts if we persist in the body together.” Jacobson then applies this insight to the status of the “weakest” members of the body:

those who are isolated and suffering are not merely in need of the care and gifts of the strong and healthy, the strong and healthy also need the spiritual gifts of the isolated and weak. . . . Grace and spiritual gifts flow both ways. In addition, we must remember what Paul taught about the spiritual gifts. Each of us has our own unique set of the lesser spiritual gifts, but everyone can seek the greater spiritual gifts: faith, hope, and the greatest of all, love.³

Jacobson’s insistence on highlighting the gifts brought to the body by the weakest members is an important expansion of my original point about the relationship between them.

Issues of Access to and in the Body of Christ

When I weighed in on the issue of whether it is theologically permissible to provide communion virtually (I suggest it is),⁴ one of the most consistent counterexamples brought up by other theologians and clergy was the issue of access to technology. Since there are real and present barriers for some members of the body of Christ to accessing worship online, so the argument goes, we should refrain from offering communion as part of online worship. Let me be clear: I think access to technology is a pressing issue for churches to address, especially when access to worship and other ways of being church together is primarily or

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² See Syndicate’s Symposium on *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*, April–May 2017, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-virtual-body-of-christ-in-a-suffering-world>

³ Rolf Jacobson, “Then and Now: Cancer and the Body of Christ Before and After the Digital Revolution,” a Syndicate Symposium on Deanna A. Thompson’s “The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World,” May 8, 2017, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-virtual-body-of-christ-in-a-suffering-world>

⁴ Deanna A. Thompson, “Christ Is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion,” *St. Olaf Lutheran Center Blog*, March 26, 2020, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion>.

only happening virtually, as has been the case for churches across the globe during the pandemic.⁵

While this issue of access to technology is one that must be addressed, what has become clearer to me since this discussion has begun is that access to the eucharistic banquet, to worship, to the body of Christ, has *always* been an issue for the church. Even though church bodies provide guidance on how to include those who are sick in the banquet, many who are ill are rarely or never offered the sacrament when they miss worship. During the worst months of my illness, I wasn't physically able to get to church and was never offered to have the sacrament brought to me at home. Sharing this story has elicited responses from many others that they too had not been brought the Eucharist at home or in the hospital when they were sick.

If we expand the lens beyond just those who are ill to those who care for ailing parents, a spouse, a child, or a friend we find that the challenges of access to communion, worship, and the church community are often paramount in these cases as well. And what about all those who long to be a part of worship but work during the times the church gathers for services? Medical staff in our local hospitals, gas station attendants, grocery store clerks, restaurants cooks, the list goes on. It could be that robust conversations have been occurring throughout the church about access to worship and the sacrament for those whose work lives make it impossible to be physically present for worship, and that I have been unaware of them. If the church is really serious about taking on issues of access to the eucharistic feast, there are a host of issues *far beyond* internet access that require our attention, especially when it comes time to gather again in person for worship.

There are also ways in which virtual worship and other ways of being church together online have increased access for visitors to church communities. My home church in St. Paul, MN, has seen several dozen people join during the pandemic without ever having set foot inside our physical church building. One twenty-something new member of our church shared her story of initially connecting with our church through a zoom session for young adults offered early in the pandemic. "It is much less intimidating to click on a zoom link than it is to enter a church building when you're young and single," this new member stated. Our pastor attending the young adult meeting sent her a message in the chat and asked if she'd like to set up a zoom coffee date. They met, and then the woman began attending virtual worship services. She so appreciated the welcome and the worship that she decided to join our church before having ever set foot in the church building.

I met this new member when she signed up to join a small group the summer after she became a member. "Now that I am part of the community, I jumped at the opportunity to get to meet other people from church in person," she told our small group one Monday evening as we gathered in our backyard to talk together about the stories of Genesis. Pre-pandemic theologian Serene Jones wrote about the "bounded openness" of the church. I think that in and beyond the pandemic this bounded openness has only become more pronounced through our experiences of virtual worship and being church together online. Jones writes:

⁵ See my initial discussion of the importance of access to technology in "Being the Body of Christ in a Time of Pandemic and Beyond," *St. Olaf Lutheran Center Blog*, April 2, 2020, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond>.

[The church] is continually undone by the word of God that breaks in upon it. This community . . . Does not possess itself but always receives itself from God. This community does not even own the terms by which it is collected, named, and defined; there too it receives. This community's core identity cannot therefore be defined by kinship ties, geographic region, and ethnicity . . . Thus, at the most fundamental level, the church knows itself to be constituted by its intrinsic openness to God.⁶

And in the middle of this digital revolution, we have an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ in virtual spaces. Theologian Meredith Gould returns to the prayer of St. Theresa and offers a revised version for the digital age:

Christ has no online presence but yours,
No blog, no Facebook page but yours,
Yours are the tweets through which love touches this world,
Yours are the posts through which the Gospel is shared,
Yours are the updates through which hope is revealed.
Christ has no online presence but yours,
No blog, no Facebook page but yours.⁷

Being the body of Christ in digital spaces may well be for many of us a vocation we wish we didn't have. Yet here we are. May we use these digital tools to help us better live out our vocation as the virtual body of Christ.

⁶ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 172.

⁷ Meredith Gould, "Christ Has No Online Presence but Yours," *IgnatianSpirituality.com*, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/christ-has-no-online-presence-but-yours/>.