What Constitutes the Gathered Eucharistic Assembly?

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Introduction: Movement over Time

As I recall, around Ash Wednesday 2020, toward the beginning of communal U.S. responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, the love of neighbor suggested a pause to in-building worship gatherings. At that time, I remember thinking, with eye-popping astonishment, "This could last so long—even a month!" With that retrospectively comical framework and as a liturgical theologian and religious ethicist pastoring the brave and gritty little congregation of JustChurch, my initial impulse was to preserve practice. This is a time, I thought, where we continue together worshipping God in the myriad ways still accessible; we resist potentially crushing isolation as we continue to gather online. The shift to gathering online was swift for us, but I wanted to think slowly and collectively about what I considered major decisions about how to receive Eucharist in this forced Covid diaspora. I also recognized we were experiencing traumas in various ways, and I generally have waited, when possible, to make new decisions and changes after processing trauma with intentionality and help. JustChurch moved to zooming a Service of the Word. At Easter we celebrated Eucharist in each person's driveway; through the summer we worshipped in our backyards with prepackaged wine and wafer; winter drove us back fully online. While our community implemented the best decisions we could come up with, I also started my characteristic process of long-pondering. I read books and articles, found conversation partners who asked good questions, led seminary discussions with the goal to unearth great and hard questions about Eucharist and online worship.

Over time, the JustChurch assembly taught me something different than what I could see in early 2020, so I had to reconsider my initial perspective theologically, ecclesially, and ethically. For one thing, the need to worship online was not temporary—social isolation lasted more than a month and, to this day, in the small JustChurch assembly, there are every-week worshippers whose immunocompromised health means they can only gather online. The fact is that the need for online worship and the presence of people who cannot worship in-building existed long before the pandemic walloped me into thinking about it. Across these disrupted years, I have been moved to wonder, with specific grounding in the question of online and hybrid assemblies, what all is happening

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in the Eucharist and how. Furthermore, what significance do those answers hold for worshippers and the church? What follows emerges from over two years of long-pondering, infused with collegial theological deliberation, research, and reading.

I can hear professor of mission H.S. Wilson saying, "I cannot limit the saving power of God." I have come to understand that God's presence in the sacrament—which is always mediated for humans in this temporal reality—is not where limitation lies in regard to potential efficacy of reception of Eucharist. God is capable. While people are connected in digital spaces like Zoom, God can mediate Godself however God chooses, including to people in-building and in-their-home through bread and wine. I cannot limit the presence of God in the Eucharist. Liturgical studies professor and author of *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* Teresa Berger says "God doesn't have any greater trouble encountering us in the digital social space than in a hospital room, a refugee camp, a middle-class parish in Connecticut, or in my own kitchen or garden." Speculations to the contrary that suggest communion can only be received in-building reinscribe an incorrect clericalism, coming too close to suggesting the ordained pastor has secret words or magic hands, or is a source of the meal's holiness and promise.

If digital media does not limit God—because God is capable of mediating God's presence through digital means, then what else is at stake as we ponder this question of Eucharist and online worship? Quite frankly, a lot. It matters, for instance, that the body of Christ is present—that is, the people of God. First Corinthians 11:29 says, "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body

eat and drink judgment against themselves." Elaborating on this passage, the *Use of the Means of Grace* says, "The body that Christians need to discern is the body of Christ which is the Church." My focus has turned toward what constitutes the body of Christ at worship.

The remainder of this short essay attempts to get at a key question: How do you know if the body is constituted? I begin to unpack three important considerations to support church leaders who are doing their own best thinking about decisions around Eucharist and online worship. First is a look at what Luther indicates about the constitution of the Eucharistic assembly; then, I offer challenge to one misconception; finally, and from a liturgical ethics perspective, I suggest that many factors contribute to any given assembly's discernment about the extent to which their body is constituted.

Luther on the Constitution of the Eucharistic Assembly

In his 1520 *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther addresses three captivities that wrongfully constrict the Eucharist:

1. Withholding the wine from people and giving only bread,

2. Disallowing views that differ from transubstantiation, and

3. Making mass into a sacrifice and good work.

The first and third are most germane here, even as we recall Luther was not thinking about online worship. Refuting the practice of withholding of the cup from laity, Luther repeatedly asserts that when people are present who desire Eucharist, then it is "impious" to withhold it. Luther points to Matthew 26 when he writes,

> What carries most weight with me, however, and quite decides the matter for me is this. Christ says: "This is my blood, which is shed for *you* and for *many* for the remission of sins." Here we see very plainly that the blood is given to all those for whose sins it was shed. … Doesn't He give it to all? Doesn't He say that it is shed for all? "For you," He says – Well, we will let these be the priests– "and for many"–these cannot be priests. Yet He says, "All of you, drink of it."

For Luther, as he discusses giving communion to all present who desire it, all means all. This necessitates us asking who is really present—who constitutes the present body of Christ—who constitutes the assembly?

Luther pushes on another tender spot regarding the first captivity:

> But where in all the world is the necessity, where the religious duty, where the practical use, of denying both kinds, i.e., the visible sign, to the laity, when every one concedes to them the grace of the sacrament without the sign? If they concede the grace, which is the greater,

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why not the sign, which is the lesser? For in every sacrament the sign as such is of far less importance than the thing signified.

If priests grant that the grace of Jesus Christ is present for the people, why not, he reasons, also grant the visible sign (bread and wine) of that grace to people. To whom does your assembly grant the grace of Jesus Christ? Can your online worshippers receive Christ's grace? Any liturgical participants present who can receive Christ's grace also can receive the visible sign of the Eucharist.

Now skipping to the third captivity that Luther refutes where he makes clear that the Eucharist is not our work but God's. Humans do not make Eucharist effective by some work we do or some virtue we possess. Luther's response to the third captivity was to recognize the sacrament bears God's promise. He writes, "From this you will see that nothing else is needed to have a worthy mass than a faith that confidently relies on this promise, believes these words of Christ are true." God's word of promise effects the reality declared. Humans do not add to the efficacy of the Eucharist by anything we do. A danger we currently face is this: how to keep worshipping in-building from becoming a work we do that is seen as making some of the assembly more worthy of God's promises?

Luther can help us raise apt questions about the significance of desiring Eucharist, the role of faith, and slippage toward good works. We are reminded of the unparalleled power of God's promises to effect the grace God declares, the situatedness of the Eucharistic meal in Christian community, and the presence of God's grace for all present. We now take a closer look at who is really present in a worshipping community with some participants in-building and some participants online.

Misconception

A misconception is being perpetuated. It is being named as though a universal fact, when it appears to be an opinion based on personal pre-judgements regarding technology. The idea that people joining worship online are not physically present is a misconception. In order to show up at worship, a person needs to be physically embodied and present. So, when someone enters church through the doors on College Street they are physically embodied and present ones, and when someone enters church through Zoom they,

too, are physically embodied and present—they are actively using their physical body to be there. There are ways either person can go to the proverbial back of the sanctuary or use the bathroom or leave entirely. Teresa Berger notes, "Digitally mediated practices of prayer and worship thus cannot be separated either from a physical body or from materiality." Many materialities accompany the worship of people joining in-building and online: they might sit on a bench or a chair, they might see or hear other worshippers, they can send greetings of peace by a message or a physical gesture. Singing, praying, pondering, lamenting, praising; online worshippers can participate in all these embodied actions.

Perhaps what people mean to argue is that online worshippers are not physically present to the in-building worshippers. But then the opposite would also be true and seems to pose no problem for those in-building. Perhaps then, it is really about one's proximity to the elements of bread and wine that are on the in-building table. We noted above that God is capable of mediating Godself through bread and wine in the home of the online liturgy participant where God is present to them. What, then, about the argument that one cannot hand themselves communion but must receive it as gift from another lest it become an individualistic act—an argument meant to challenge the reception of a solo online worshipper. From Luther's day to now, presiders have communed themselves. Luther wrote, "the priest…administers [the elements] to himself."

The Use of the Means of Grace states, "It is appropriate within the Lutheran tradition that the presiding minister commune [themselves] or receive the Sacrament from an assistant." If for hundreds of years presiders have been able to give themselves the elements, it stands to reason that communion would be as valid for a person worshipping with their assembly online as it has been for presiders across the decades. If accusations that giving elements to oneself is individualistic have not been leveled against rostered leaders and changed their practice, it is important not to level this critique against a person who receives alone.

Why are online worshippers receiving messages that they are less present than those who get to worship in-building? Is there a form of superiority at work in telling some physically present people (in-building) that they are seen as present and other physically present people (online) that they are seen as not physically present? Many people cannot be at in-building worship; immunocompromised health, contagious stages of illness, a family member dealing with autism, and more are all real things that make being in-building impossible. In these instances, getting to be in-building is not about choice or convenience.

One could retort, there is something different about sharing the in-building physical space. Yes, there is, and this is the privileged position. For many people it feels better to get to pass the peace while standing within arm's reach, to get anointing oil for healing put on your head by another, to feel the organ's lowest notes vibrate through the assembly. There is absolutely something to that. And for many it makes worshipping easier to have that in-building access. But for people who assent to extra complications to be present digitally, for those who *cannot* come into the

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building, peace, healing, music, and worship of God does occur online. The assembly, both in-building and online can be gathered together in place. The locally gathered assembly now contains physical bodies in-building and physical bodies online.

Discerning Multiple Vectors

So far I have asserted that, since God is capable of mediating Godself to online liturgical participants through whatever means God chooses including the bread and wine they have, a key concept in this potentially thorny conversation around Eucharist and online worship becomes discerning if or to what extent the body is constituted. I have argued that people who join worship on Zoom are physically present. However, all of this does not yet fully determine what any local assembly should decide regarding online distribution of communion. Although God can make Godself present and full of promise in, with, and under an online worshipper's elements and people can be physically present through Zoom, still a host of other factors exist. Just because the body of Christ *can be* constituted with online worshippers does not yet mean every assembly *is* constituted in this way. Thinking well about additional factors with a liturgical ethics lens can help local assemblies discern the extent to which their body is constituted online—a crucial understanding because if the body is not constituted, there is not Eucharist. Therefore, the final step of this essay is to begin identifying multiple factors at work in discerning how any given assembly is constituted.

I am going to use the term "vectors" to refer to these multivocal factors because of the way the term "vector" can convey dynamic, changing, and moving influences, with both magnitude and direction. One primary analogy might help visualize this (although the analogy will fall short of the complexity of the congregation where you worship). I am reaching back to the high school physics classroom for this one, where I was enthralled (yes, that was me) with adding vectors.

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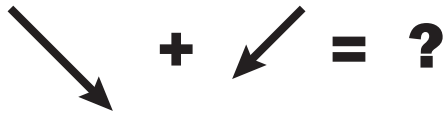
Maybe you recall a similar example: "An airplane flies at a velocity of 560 miles/hour (mph), bearing 152°. The 50mph wind is from the northeast 42°. Find the resultant magnitude and direction."

How can a story problem help us think about the degree to which one might say our assembly is constituted online? These are the pertinent points: multiple vectors impact the resultant position, and the key considerations are magnitude and direction. How does this translate out of physics and into liturgical ethics? Here, magnitude refers to how much something impacts a person or community (is it a big deal or a small thing), and direction indicates whether this vector would suggest the online worshipping assembly is present or absent. Multiple vectors influence how an assembly is constituted; added together these multiple influences and their dynamic interplay can help an assembly better understand the extent to which their body is constituted online—information that illumines good decision-making regarding online distribution of communion. In an assembly, there could be both vectors that suggest the assembly is constituted online and others that imply the opposite. From the outset of considering these vectors, it is crucial to acknowledge that, while the vectors can help identify the *extent to which* the body might be said to be constituted, they do not function as a binary "yes" or "no." Being constituted is a continuum in this world since no assembly is fully constituted until the consummation of God's coming. In current assemblies, we are only ever partially constituted because bodies are absent at each gathering. The messy reality is that a partially constituted assembly, which is the best possible in this temporality, can still be assembly.

I identify five vectors that are crucial to understanding whether an assembly is constituted online, to which you will add others occurring in your location. The five vectors I will name emerge from the perspective of an ethics of mutuality: connection, ability, access, faith, and belonging.

Connection

Principle thirty-nine in *The Use of the Means of Grace* states, "The **gathered** people of God celebrate the sacrament."[1] Communal worship of God occurs when we are gathered live—meaning both that it is an event in a particular and a passing moment—with a certain assembly on a certain day—and that it happens in the presence of a collective. Connection to the occurrence of liturgy and to this gathered people and to the liturgical day is crucial to the body being constituted in worship. Eucharist occurs in Christian community gathered together on this day.

On Zoom worshippers can be present synchronously, vis-

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ible as the gathered assembly on this liturgical day. An app with prerecorded words of institutions could not do these things: not connected as synchronous assembly and not connected to the specificity of a liturgical day. The Eucharist is a communal meal not intended for private reception.[2] The emphasis on it being the *gathered* assembly who celebrates Eucharist suggests we work hard to make online and in-building worshippers tangibly present to one another. This can occur through many means including many senses. At the same time, connection as gathered assembly can break down in so many ways; one such decomposition occurs when a group of worshippers is made invisible or inaudible to other worshippers throughout worship. How in various worship spaces, with the technology available can online and in-building worshippers be discernable to one another? How do online worshippers contribute to leading worship or responding in worship in ways that others can hear or read? To what extent are online worshippers connected in day and time, visibly and audibly and what does this suggest about the constitution of the body?

Ability

People all have different abilities and disabilities, and what we can do in worship differs. Who in your assembly can worship online but cannot worship in-building without suffering?[3] Hearing stories from this group of people and experiencing people's sanctuary/altar for online worship—or helping them imagine and create it—can reveal the magnitude of need. When getting to hear from people about the realities of their own lives, we start from a place of believing them. In the comments you receive about the need for and validity of online worship, how much difference is there between what people who can attend in-building worship say and what people for whom being in-building is untenable say? Where there is discrepancy, receive weightily the voices of those most affected.

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1. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 44.

2. What then about a small group on retreat who watched their assembly's worship service later in the day? I think that the assembly gathered at the time of the celebration of Eucharist constitutes that gathered Eucharistic assembly.

3. I do not explore in depth myriad reasons that in-building worship is impossible or difficult for people because of the brevity of the article and because, in this issue alone, Casey Sigmon and Deanna Thompson's articles address this topic in a more fulsome way. In addition, Thompson's book *The Virtual Body of Christ* provides a deeper exploration.

When we know that part of our assembly cannot be at in-building worship, then we know that our in-building worship alone cannot be our fully constituted body of Christ. At the same time, it is crucial not to use online worship as a tool to decelerate making buildings more accessible. Churches do not get to decide for someone, "You will prefer/be more comfortable worshiping online," especially if what that really means is "it is easier for those in charge if the online option can take care of your needs, so we do not have to change."[4] Congregations can continue learning from people about how they are able to worship and being guided into adjustments by those most affected.

Access

The hurdles for people to access worship differ for those coming in-building or online. Access to a car or public transit in addition to climate, walkability, or accessible design all affect people's ability to worship in-building. Internet and technology access impacts people's ability to worship online. About ten percent of people in the U.S. do not have access to internet.[5] In your assembly, whose worship participation is hampered due to access? How much is it hampered and why? What does your assembly's struggles with access to worship suggest about the degree to which your body can be constituted online?

Faith

The Eucharist is a gift received by faith.[6] "Such faith is not simply knowledge or intellectual understanding but trust in God's promises given in the Lord's Supper ('for you' and 'for the forgiveness of sin') for the support of the baptized."[7] The understanding of Eucharistic faith resists two reductions: first, the Eucharist is not "effective by its mere performance without faith" and second, we refuse to "narrow faith to intellectual understanding."[8] Faith relies on the promise given in Eucharist.

Faith is the one preparation for reception of Eucharist.[9] Luther cautioned against those things that threatened to smother faith in God's promises in the sacrament. Railing against God's Word of promise being obfuscated from people, Luther writes, "And the inevitable result of this extinguishing of faith is even now plainly to be seen—namely, the most godless superstition of works. For when faith dies and the word of faith is silent, works and the traditions of works immediately crowd into their place."[10] In the conversation of Eucharist and online worship, I sense a need to resist making Eucharist into something about our work of showing

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up in-building instead of God's decisive redeeming gift. What faith in God's promises given in the Eucharist do online and in-building worshippers bring?

Belonging

Principle forty-nine in *The Use of the Means of Grace* says the ELCA extends a sign of belonging: "Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church."[11] In addition to the church's welcome, people get to interpret and act on their own discernment of belonging. *The Use of the Means of Grace* says something similar to this when discussing the application to principle forty-nine. "Admission to the sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church. …[The hospitality of a] statement in worship which teaches Christ's presence in the sacrament…assists guests to decide whether they wish to accept the Lord's invitation."[12] As with the previous vector of faith, belonging gets assessed by the worshipper themselves asking "Do I deem I am part of this body?" Both online and in-building spaces can convey variously exclusion or belonging.

We've known for a long time that thresholds to worship spaces can be downright difficult for people to cross.[13] People harmed by church have told me of the prohibitive barrier posed by the doorway into some churchy-looking buildings. For some, crossing the threshold of a church building constitutes an immense strain due to trauma—the likes of which would disrupt anyone from a sense of being constituted as body of Christ. Bodies on-alert. Wondering from which pew rejection will come. Should this person select to enter an in-building sanctuary, then the community

4. Jessica Dragseth. Personal Communication. 3 November 2022.

5. "Internet Usage in the United Stated—Statistics and Facts" Oct. 18, 2022. Accessed on 10.24.2022 at https://www.statista.com/topics/2237/internet-usage-in-the-united-states .

6. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 36.

7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 42.

8. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 43.

9. Luther. *Babylonian Captivity* 2.61.

10. Luther. *Babylonian Captivity* 2.62.

11. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 52.

12. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 52.

13. I celebrate people showing up to worship in spaces where they sense belonging, and I recognize that, for many reasons, online worship spaces can communicate belonging in ways buildings are not communicating. Theologian Candice Marie Benbow says, "Black women are finding spiritual communities online and in digital spaces, because it is in these spaces where we actually get to see that our faith and feminism actually can fit—they don't have to be incongruent and they don't have to be in competition." ("Decolonizing Spirituality" on The Turning Point, September 14, 2020.)

does well to be open to them, but they are not obligated to be open to the community.

It turns out that digital worship space bears a threshold that proves difficult for some to cross. There is a whole set of the population who could delight in walking right through a gothic doorway and following organ music until they find the sanctuary, but crossing into worshipful space seated before a screen provides a prohibitive barrier. They cannot get comfortable. They don't feel close. They keep getting distracted. Should this person select to enter a sanctuary online, then the community does well to be open to them, but they are not obligated to be open to the community. If they discern they are not constituted to the body, then that is valuable information for them.

Conclusion

I conclude with a reality from the small JustChurch community that has impacted my embodied understanding of Eucharist and online worship. There are people who have been with JustChurch from the start, who attend weekly on Zoom, who regularly have leading roles in the assembly (lector, intercessor), and who are immunocompromised and ***cannot*** worship in-building. They are part of the body. They are present. If they are gone one week, JustChurch misses them. JustChurch is more fully constituted as the body of Christ when they are present online. God is capable. They yearn for Eucharist. Taste and see that the Lord is good.