

Eucharist and Online Worship: Toward Extended Theological Reflection



Introduction to This Issue

In this journal issue, the authors, from their varied perspectives, critically examine the topic of Eucharist and online/hybrid worship. No longer in the crush of emergency decision making that congregations and their leaders faced at the time of pandemic outbreak, we now have occasion to sustain deliberate, communal, and public theological reflection. Taking a step back to reflect can create a less anxious space in which to consider crisis-informed decisions that we do well to discontinue, emergent practices with nuanced theological integrity for the life of the church, faithful liturgical language for new practices from which the church might benefit, and more.

Sustained theological reflection around the precise and crucial topic of Eucharist and online worship has been asked for by rostered leaders and laity alike and is needed to discern faithful liturgical practices for the future. Nevertheless, barriers exist to even having this public dialog. Fears surrounding this topic arise for rostered leaders who do not want to “mess up” the sacraments, who feel the weight of their bishop’s and colleagues’ opinions and suggestions, who recognize they cannot possibly have fully considered every position. In addition, the pandemic triggered a string of losses that invoke grief; with change (in liturgical practice) comes another form of grief and loss. Dealing with layered, complex losses of patterns, stability, connection, etc. can increase the amplitude of these crucial conversations. Furthermore, a lot is at stake. We are talking about our sacramental theology, what we believe about the nature of the gathered assembly, and the power of God to act. Therefore, this journal issue is for rostered leaders, academics, ecumenical partners, synodical leaders, and all those who want to journey together in thinking well for themselves about the sacrament of Eucharist and the environment of online worship.

This journal issue contributes to a conversation already begun, and one that will continue into subsequent decades. In the sum-

No longer in the crush of emergency decision making that congregations and their leaders faced at the time of pandemic outbreak, we now have occasion to sustain deliberate, communal, and public theological reflection.

mer of 2020, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) hosted a webinar (“Communion & COVID: Eucharistic Practices and Perspectives”) that included some of the authors featured in this issue of *Currents*. Liturgy professor Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero published a 2020 editorial¹ in the theological journal *Dialog*. The ELCA Conference of Bishops took up this topic at its biannual meeting in the fall of 2021. After meeting several times, a group of ELCA bishops and professors in Region 8 named *key doctrines, commitments, and questions*. Pastor Joseph Natwick wrote his *DMin Thesis* on the topic. Many of the contributors to this issue reference a common set of books, articles, and blog posts. It seems safe to say that, if you are part of a worshipping community, someone you know is talking about online worship and Eucharistic practices. This journal issue joins these ongoing, diffuse, and sometimes private conversations and contributes an open-access, public piece of sustained theological reflection meant to help the church and its leaders do our best thinking around this topic.

A primary goal of the group of authors you encounter here

1. Kyle Kenneth Schiefelbein-Guerrero. “Whether One May Flee from Digital Worship: Reflections on Sacramental Ministry in a Public Health Crisis.” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 59, no. 2 (2020).

has been to expand this conversation, hearing from a variety of voices. In this moment, when it is clear that practices are changing at the local level, we have endeavored to engage what is happening currently in various local publics, what relationship that bears to our denominational and confessional history, and to define the sorts of questions liturgical theology is best suited to be asking and answering. This type of engagement—curiosity about local practice and theological integrity—has shaped this journal issue. You will not find here a proscriptive mandate for what to think or decide. This does not mean the authors come naively or without their own strong perspectives. It means that, throughout our conversations, we have tried to maintain a non-judgmental posture, seeking in this moment to discern the new thing God is doing, and asking, “What is best for the church? What most honors Christ?” Therefore, in this issue you will encounter authors who share a common commitment and goal: a desire to offer wise counsel for these unusual circumstances. Their labor on our behalf brings to mind Jesus’ description of those scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven, bringing forth from the treasury of the church’s wisdom “what is new and what is old.” (Matt 13:52) Here you will find theological reasoning and liturgical language that has emerged for these pastors and scholars over the past three years of study, discernment, and practice. A journal issue like this, which invites a range of views, is part of what it means to offer sacramental integrity to the wider church.

This *Currents* issue begins with perspectives from people in different expressions of the church. The co-authors of the first article, Pastor **Manuel Retamoza** and Pastor **Sarah Sumner-Eisenbraun**, intentionally model resistance to Eurocentric forms of superiority by choosing to write with a recognition of the need for antiracist structure. Their co-authored article includes three vignettes centered around the idea that Christ is present in ordinary things. They share stories and wisdom about their development of virtual communion practices during the early days of the pandemic, the connection technology facilitated for a worshipping body divided by a border wall, and the ongoing importance of technology as a means to connect the community of St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church (San Diego, California).

With the wide-angle lens granted him by virtue of his call to the ELCA churchwide organization as Executive for Worship, Deacon **John Weit** recognizes that conversation and guidance related to Holy Communion in digitally mediated communities is a topic that will be before the church well into the future. Like many theological matters, he has witnessed a variety of interpretations and understandings, so he highlights some of the high-level implications and future directions for this conversation as it relates to the various expressions of the ELCA.

The following two articles by Dr. Casey T. Sigmon and Dr. Deanna Thompson address the topic with a particular focus on digital technology and access. Dr. **Casey T. Sigmon** eschews dualistic schemas that propose online/hybrid communion to be virtual, fake, disembodied, and unholy. She shows in relation to 1 Cor. 11:29 that such schemas fail to discern those bodies who

In this moment, when it is clear that practices are changing at the local level, we have endeavored to engage what is happening currently in various local publics, what relationship that bears to our denominational and confessional history, and to define the sorts of questions liturgical theology is best suited to be asking and answering.

chose to or have no choice but to assemble for worship through digital means. Disabled, immunocompromised, and queer bodies are often pushed to the margins of the able-bodied and gender normative assembly gathered within one building. Yet, these are members of our holy communion who, for many justifiable reasons, cannot come to the closest physical table secured within the four walls of a church building. Sigmon finds that turning our backs to online and hybrid communion holds the Eucharist captive from these siblings.

Dr. **Deanna Thompson**’s article acknowledges that the global pandemic forced congregations to shift to online worship and to explore what it means to be the virtual body of Christ. She helps congregations moving into a new normal, post-pandemic, with needed ongoing reflection about what aspects of ministry should continue to remain online and what components should only be offered in-person. Thompson argues that continuing online worship with the sacrament of Holy Communion embodies the church’s call to attend to the weakest members of the body of Christ and extends God’s grace to those who have not returned (and may never) to corporate worship in a single, shared building.

In the next article, Rev. Dr. **Martin Lohrmann** offers the perspective of a Reformation historian, noting that it would be anachronistic to expect sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers to answer twenty-first-century questions about digital worship. Still, contemporary Lutherans have rich resources from the tradition for engaging challenging contextual issues. Lohrmann articulates how confessional Lutheran emphases on justification by faith, sacramental presence, open questions, and care for the implementation of worship reforms can inform our conversations today. Through faith in Christ and centered in the use of the means of grace, Lohrmann reassures us that Lutherans have reliable gospel foundations for discerning important matters of worship and life together.

The last four essayists call on either sacramental or liturgical theology as a primary lens for the questions with which they interrogate the topic of Eucharist and online worship. Rev. **Edy Santos**

is grounded in the experiences lived by Adventio Lutheran Church (Arlington, Texas) during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic as he considers the meaning of the Eucharist received online. Both ethnography and critical reflection lead him to describe a significance of the Eucharist that moves beyond Sunday morning. Santos advocates for a sacramental understanding that connects with parishioners' needs and expectations in these troubled times.

The Rev. **Kristian Kohler**, PhD student at Boston University, begins with questions congregations and worshippers are asking in light of pandemic realities and examines concepts of Christian assembly and digital space. He takes up issues related to the virtual celebration of the Eucharist in order to pose significant questions that can help faith communities think about concerns related to virtual Communion.

In the next article, Dr. **David Pitt** approaches the topic as a sacramental theologian and examines the extent to which we might consider those who participate in online worship services to be truly present. After describing an approach to online worship experienced in a Lutheran seminary, this Roman Catholic author considers two scriptural antecedents to the concept of virtuality: the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the presence of St. Paul in the reading of letters within worship.

Finally, **Jan Schnell**'s essay asks one key question: How do you know if the eucharistic body is constituted? She examines what Martin Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* indicates about the constitution of the Eucharistic assembly. She then addresses the physicality of worshippers joining online. From the perspective of liturgical ethics, Schnell identifies five factors that contribute to any given assembly's discernment about the extent to which their eucharistic body is constituted.

Jan Schnell

*Assistant Professor of Liturgics
Wartburg Theological Seminary*

Erik Christensen

*Pastor to the Community & Director of Strategic Initiatives at
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Enjoy reading *Currents*?

Get a notification of each issue of *Currents* as it is published!

Issues are published four times per year; for January, April, July, and October. You can receive an email notice of the publication of each issue by becoming a registered reader.

Register as a reader! Visit currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/user/register

From the General Co-Editors

We are deeply grateful to Jan Schnell and Erik Christensen, Guest Editors for the January issue of *Currents*, for the collaboration that has yielded such an important contribution to liturgical theology and the practice of the Holy Communion in Christian congregations. Their efforts are deeply rooted in their significant experiences as pastors and seminary educators and in their meaningful interactions with colleagues who have pondered together the issues addressed in this issue. Together they have brought theological scholarship to bear on the practical choices pastors and congregations have faced during a long pandemic and season of deep challenge and change to so many Christian communities. Their aim is to inspire theologically deep and mutually respectful conversation. We join their hope that this issue will stimulate just such conversation.

We are also grateful for two additional FOCUS essays that contribute to the first *Currents* issue of 2023. In his Focus article, **Hans Schwarz** explores how, if God is the creator of heaven and earth, then we must conclude that everything which occurs has something to do with God, including the Covid-19 pandemic. While we live on an earth tarnished by brokenness, death, and suffering, God upholds it against the destructive efforts of the anti-godly powers. Luther was convinced that God upholds the world, but also certain about a fight waged on earth between the kingdom of God and that of the devil. According to Luther, the devil is active in misfortune, diseases, life crises, and in death. While the devil, or the anti-godly powers, are destructive, God can use them to punish us in a lawful way for our sinful pride and egotism. While the anti-godly powers act truly destructive, God wants us through these trials to flee to the gospel of salvation. Through the Corona crisis, uncomfortable and life-threatening as it was, positive traits were rediscovered, such as community spirit and an appreciation for those on whom our earthly well-being depends. Yet we cannot say with certainty who was behind the pandemic, God or the anti-godly powers, or both.

Gregory Walter argues that in the modern era theology has been restricted to religious life. Instead, it should take God as its subject matter and resist the gerrymandering that has been urged on it. Julian of Norwich points the way forward to consider how theology ought to concern all things as well as how it should negotiate the differences that come about when theology primarily concerns God hidden and God crucified.

This issue of Preaching Helps takes us from New Year's Day to the last Sunday in Lent. The gospel of Matthew steps aside during Lent to make space for wonderful stories from the gospel of John (some of the longest stories in the New Testament). Hopefully, preachers will be meeting with other worship leaders in their settings so that people go out singing the gospel!

Kathleen D. Billman and Craig L. Nesson

General Editors, Currents in Theology and Mission

2023 Ad Pricing and Specifications

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is provided to readers as an online resource at <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents>.

Individual articles are provided to readers as a PDF download. We offer advertising opportunities in any of our articles, with premium rates for sections with high readership, including the issue’s Introduction article, the Book Review section and the Preaching Helps section.

As advertisements are viewed online, they are visible to the reader in full color and allow live web-links. However, if a reader elects to print out the PDF, we do not have control over whether it is printed in color or black only.

Publication Dates and Deadlines

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is published four times per year: January, April, July, and October. Ad deadlines for each issue are one month prior to publication (December 1, March 1, June 1, September 1). Late submissions may be published in the next issue. Issue-specific themes are available from the co-editors: [Craig Nesson](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

Print Advertising Specifications

Please provide ads as an email attachment to our designer at kathryn@brewer-com.com.

- 300 dpi JPEG or PDF at full size.
- Color ads should be converted to CMYK.
- Embed all fonts when creating a PDF.

Size and Placement Options

Full page ads are placed at the end of articles. Fractional page ads are placed within articles. (We do not offer a bleed option.) You may specify an author, the Introduction article, or any of our sections: Book Reviews, Preaching Helps, Currents Focus. For specific article or section content per issue, please contact the co-editors: [Craig Nesson](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

Premium placements are: at the end of the Introduction article, within Book Reviews, within Preaching Helps. These are our most popular sections.

FORMAT	SIZE	PREMIUM PLACEMENT	REGULAR PLACEMENT
• Full Page:	7.125” wide x 10” high	\$ 450	\$ 380
• One Column (vertical):	3.5” wide x 10” high	\$ 250	\$ 200
• Half Column:	3.5” wide x 4.75” high	\$ 135	\$ 115
• Half Page (horizontal):	7.125” wide x 4.75” high	\$ 250	\$ 200

25% discount for 4 consecutive placements from the same advertiser (content may change).

Website Advertising

We do not offer site advertising.

Billing

New advertisers must include payment with order. Checks should be made out to “Currents in Theology and Mission” and sent to: Currents in Theology and Mission, 1100 E. 55th Street, Box AA-1, Chicago, IL 60615. For questions or to pay by credit card, call the editorial offices at 773-256-0705.

Returning Advertisers: Bills are sent after publication.