



**uniting
church**

in Australia,
Synod of NSW & ACT

Holy Communion as COVID restrictions are eased

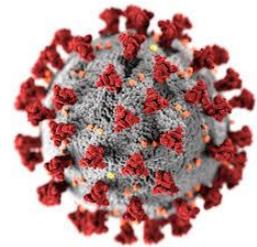
*Prepared in Canberra Region Presbytery
July 2020*

Opening introductions and prayer

*Where are you up to, in terms of preparing
to have communion services in person?*

1 Introduction

For some months, since the novel corona virus, COVID-19, began to impact our society, and restrictions on gathering together were put in place, people of faith have not been able to gather together to worship. This was a great challenge: for many people in the churches, gathering together in person was the primary way by which they nurtured their faith, sharing in fellowship with others and fostering their sense of being in communion with God.



In many Congregations, rapid response teams went into action, and various ways were devised for gathering-apart for worship each Sunday. So, for three months now, Congregations have met by ZOOM, others livestream by Facebook or YouTube, and many send resources for worship by email or as hard copy in the mail. Surely Australia Post, Telstra, Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, and ZOOM are all benefitting from the increased usage that these, and other activities, have generated!

Across many Congregations, in many denominations, there was initial sadness at the fact that this form of worship would not allow for the celebrating, together, of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

This time of sharing bread and wine, in the sacrament of Holy Communion, is important, of course, for many people across the Christian churches. The tradition that has developed within the Uniting Church is that, mostly, Congregations celebrate communion monthly. Some celebrate weekly. In other denominations, there is opportunity for daily communion.

Initially, restrictions on meeting together in groups means that these opportunities to share in communion have not been available. There were various responses to this situation. Some Congregations took up the provision offered by the Assembly Standing Committee, to provide online communion.

Others have decided not to offer communion in that way, but to encourage people to see this as a time of prayerful fasting whilst restrictions are in place. Some Congregations have offered a time where a “lament for communion” was offered, or a “liturgy of the empty hands” was followed. (See the links to these resources below.) I think that nobody regards the situation as ideal, whatever form has been taken locally.

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2 The situation: what is possible? what is not possible?

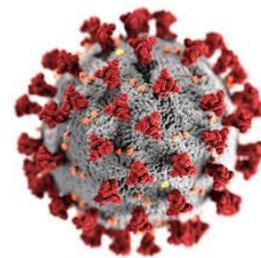
In recent weeks, as governments have been easing restrictions for social gatherings, Congregations have been making plans to regather in person. People are looking forward to being together with friends, worshipping and chatting. Church Councils are diligently preparing COVID Safety Plans. Halls will be able to be used once more. Worship services look set to resume soon.

We will gather again in person—but when we do so, things will be different:

- we will sit spaced apart (except for family groups), 1.5 metres from each other
- we will practice social distancing, and follow the 4 square metre rule
- we will provide contact details as we enter the building
- we will use hand sanitizers on entering the building

The NSW Government website advises, “Consider modifying religious rites or rituals to avoid direct contact where practical. Where this is not practical, ensure hands are washed before and after each interaction with soap and water or hand sanitiser.” This means that when we gather for worship, there will be:

- no hand shaking
- no singing in groups
- no passing the offering plate
- no printed notice sheet or order of service
- no hymn books or prayer books
- no morning tea after service



The NSW Government website advises churches to “have strategies in place to manage gatherings that may occur immediately outside the premises, such as at the conclusion of services”. This is good advice for us all to follow.

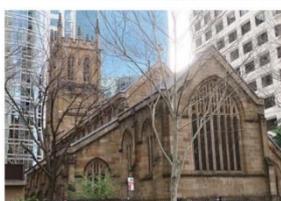
And when we regather, as we resume services, then people are anticipating that we will be able to share once again, in person, around the table, in holy communion. But how will this take place? There will need to be significant changes, in line with the guidance to “consider modifying religious rites or rituals to avoid direct contact where practical”. This applies especially to holy communion.



Multiple touching of the same surface is one of the ways that the virus can spread. No matter how the communion elements are prepared and distributed, there is still a risk in whatever form is chosen.



Physical items moving from one person to another carry the risk of spreading a virus. Multiple touching of the same surface adds to the risk factor.



And since the COVID19 virus can remain unnoticed, not manifesting in any symptoms, for up to 14 days, then the risk of infection is made more likely in such circumstances.

So common practices in communion must be modified to give consideration to this.

- There will be no passing the bread around from person to person. Each person will need to be given a piece of bread direct from a server, who has used hand sanitiser immediately before, and possibly even is wearing gloves.
- There will be no passing the tray of glasses from person to person, either. Each person participating will be handed a glass by a person whose hand may be in a glove. The wide range of possible ways of serving that have been in use in Congregations will be significantly limited, and the range of choices will no longer be possible.
- And certainly, most certainly, there will be no common cup, no sharing sips from the one goblet, and certainly no intincting, dipping the bread into the cup before eating.

These matters will present a challenge to many people. Church people, notoriously, are resistant to change in all areas of church life: how the seating is arranged, what songs we sing, what the minister wears, and so many other matters can become (and, indeed, have become) points of contention in even the most easy-going, cohesive congregations.



Changes to communion are also amongst the list of things that cause upset and generate divisions in churches. So adapting to these changes will be a challenge, for the people charged with arranging and leading worship, as well as for everyone who participates.

This raises the question: *should we be looking to hold services that include the sacrament of holy communion, when we regather?* Is this an advisable practice, given all the health warnings about so many matters, of recent times?

Holy communion has a deep meaning for people of faith. It may feel like a personal challenge to many, to propose that, when we meet in person to worship as a community, we do not include holy communion. Many people regard the celebration of the sacrament as a bedrock foundation for their life of faith. Many people of faith consider that this sacrament truly enables them to draw close to God, to remain in communion with God.

Perhaps the way ahead is for us to lay claim to this view; to focus on the question, “how can we continue in communion with God, in this COVID 19 time?”, rather than the question, “when can we have communion again?”

Before we consider that, however, let us think about communion in the context of key scriptural texts and our theological understandings.

For guidance in the NSW.ACT Synod, see <https://nswact.uca.org.au/covid19saferoadmap/>

For NSW Government advice regarding places of worship, see <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines/places-of-worship>

For ACT Government advice regarding places of worship, see <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/what-you-can-do/faqs-changes-to-restrictions/weddings-funeral-worship>

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3 Communion and key texts

3a Gathering as community

(1 Corinthians 11)

There are four places in the New Testament where we are told about the last meal that the disciples shared with Jesus. In each text, Jesus instructs the disciples to eat the bread and drink from the cup. In one of these texts (1 Cor 11), the wider context of this meal in the life of the church is signalled.



The section of text which recalls the words of Jesus (verses 23-26) is framed by discussion of the setting within which these words, and the resultant actions, take place. What precedes this section is a description of a disordered gathering in Corinth. There is division because of the factions that exist in the church (18-19). The Lord's supper occurs within a meal, and the lack of awareness of the communal dimension of that meal is striking. Some overindulge whilst others starve (21).

So the sacramental moment of remembering the words and repeating the actions needs not be in a context where some can participate, and others cannot. Paul has stern words to say about this disordered and disrespectful way of proceeding (22).

This speaks in a striking way to the current situation. If some people are able to attend worship in person, and the sacrament of holy communion is celebrated, then those who are present in person can "eat and drink" together. But the community is more than just those who are able to gather in person. There are others who are not able to be present in person. They have chronic medical conditions, their immune systems are impaired, or they are aged. This places them into a higher risk category. Being present in groups in person, for such people, is not recommended. How can they take part in the communal celebration of the sacrament, if they are unable to attend in person?

The words which follow after the recollection of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples also offers stern and direct words (27-32). Paul reprimands the Corinthians for eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner" (27). This sense of unworthiness comes directly from the lack of attention to the communal dimension (17-22). The instruction is clear: "examine yourselves" (28) and only take part when you have been "discerning the body" (29).

Once again, this speaks clearly and directly to our current situation. Going ahead with a sacramental remembrance in a manner that intentionally excludes others, is not recommended. We shall be "judged by the Lord" (32). Discerning the body means acting communally, as a whole body, not independently, as individual parts of that body. (Yes, this is explained in more detail in what follows, in 1 Cor 12.)

So the closing instructions in this chapter (33-34) encourage us to consider the needs of others and give that priority when we gather as a community of faith. And in our current situation, a good case can be made that this means, not celebrating communion together, because of the fractured nature of the body during this pandemic scenario.

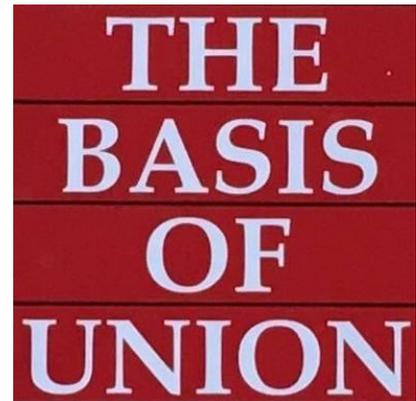
3b Seeking the continuing presence of Christ (*Basis of Union*)

There are four places in the New Testament where we are told about the last meal that the disciples shared with Jesus (Mark 14, Matt 26, Luke 22, and 1 Cor 11). In each text, Jesus instructs the disciples to eat the bread and drink from the cup. In two of these texts, we find the words of Jesus, “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19: 1 Cor 11:24,25).

In Reformed theology, these texts provide a warrant for the church, instructing us to be faithful in obedience to the command of Jesus. We hold services of holy communion in obedience to this command (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 6). However, in the Uniting Church, there is more to say about the place of the sacraments in the life of the church. This is clear from paragraph 8 of the *Basis of Union*.

“The Uniting Church acknowledges that the continuing presence of Christ with his people is signified and sealed by Christ in the Lord’s Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church. In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptised people on their way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom. Thus the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord’s death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.”

Basis of Union, paragraph 8



This paragraph makes a basic affirmation about the sacraments (and particularly holy communion). The fundamental matter which is in view is “the continuing presence of Christ with his people”. *Christ* is the primary focus of a sacrament – not our obedience to his command – and the church shares this meal not to signal obedience, but as one way we bear witness to the risen Christ among us.

The flow of argument in this paragraph makes it clear that *the means* by which we bear witness to that presence is a secondary matter. Thus, holy communion is always and only a means to an end—a means to enable the people of God to know and experience “the continuing presence of Christ with his people”.

So paragraph 8 affirms that this presence is “signified and sealed” in the practice of this sacrament. Holy communion is a sign of the presence of Christ. In this way, it parallels the function of preaching, which is a sign of the Gospel, a way of making manifest the good news. This clear relationship is signalled in paragraph 4, where Christ’s ‘presence’ is explicitly linked to preaching: “Christ, who is present when he is preached....”. It is further reinforced in paragraph 5, which commits UCA ministers to “preach from [the scriptures] and to administer the sacraments ... as effective signs of the Gospel”.

Communion takes place “through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit”. The primary aspect, according to paragraph 8, is what we might call the faith element, or perhaps the spiritual dimension, of the sacramental moment. The precise means by which that sacrament is conducted can vary.

Indeed, within the Uniting Church, we allow for a variety of practices, both in baptism and in holy communion. Receiving in the pews or at the front, using pre-cut pieces of bread or a common loaf that is manually broken, the use of a common cup or individual glasses (or the provision of both), the use of gluten free bread or crackers alongside regular bread, the use of wine or of juice, drinking from the common cup or intincting—all of these variations are permitted, and, indeed, celebrated. See

https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/Theology_Discipleship/pdf/Serving_Holy_Communion_2015.pdf

Therefore, in this current time, there will be those congregations which gather in person but take up the option of not having a regular time of communion in worship because of the risks of our regular practices in that sacrament. This does not mean that the people of God in that congregation are deprived of the opportunity to have communion with God. Alternative prayers and reflections can provide means by which their faith is nourished and their sense of communion with God is nurtured.

Indeed, what is implied in paragraph 8 is that participation in holy communion is understood to foster a particular combination of goals: having communion with Christ, offering praise, proclaiming the story, growing in faith, being strengthened for mission, and glimpsing the promised kingdom. Sharing in holy communion is one way of attaining these goals. That doesn't mean that any one of those goals still can't be met by encountering Christ in other, different, ways. Holy communion is but one means to that important goal.

4 Finding communion with God

Holy communion is not the only way that we enter into communion with God. Prayer and meditation; reading scriptures and reflecting on the words we read; fasting, often in association with prayer; these are ways by which we set aside time and focus our actions so that we might enter more deeply into communion with God.



Sharing with a small group of people in fellowship, conversation, and prayer for one another; a sabbath time for rest and focussing attention on God; these also are traditional ways by which we create a space in which we embrace the communion of God.

Throughout much of Christian history, the threefold means of chastity, poverty, and obedience, were the particular classic “counsels of perfection” which were employed in orders of monks and nuns, to assist members of the orders in maintaining a strong sense of communion with God.

These classic means of developing and maintaining communion with God have endured well over the centuries. They can each be practised in our own time, in ways that are appropriate and relevant (although not many are putting their hands up for the “counsels of perfection” these days).

Not sharing in communion in worship gatherings does not mean that we cannot have communion with God. Many of the classic means of entering into communion with God can be undertaken individually, or in a family group. We can still nurture our sense of being connected with God, even if we cannot gather together.

In some traditions, there is reference to “the means of grace”. This includes preaching the Word, the sacraments of holy communion and baptism, and the practices of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting (drawn from the Sermon on the Mount).

In the Wesleyan tradition, there are also “works of mercy” which are regarded as providing “the means of grace”. These works include activity focused toward individual needs, such as doing good, visiting the sick and those imprisoned, feeding and clothing those in need (drawn from Matt 25); financial activities such as earning, saving, and giving; and service focused toward communal or societal needs, such as the seeking of justice, opposition to slavery, and other social justice issues.

So there are a number of ways by which we seeking to experience communion with God, and deepen our sense of being in communion with God. Could it be possible that we continue as people of faith, in communion with God, without times of explicit “holy communion” as a gathered community of faith? Can we still have communion with God, without celebrating holy communion, as we begin to gather together in person for worship?

I believe we can.

5a Communion: the practicalities

Careful attention will need to be paid to the way in which communion is offered.

- *If communion is offered, then those who prepare communion will need to be scrupulous in the way that they prepare the elements*
- A common cup should not be used
- Passing trays of individual glasses from person to person along the row runs the risk of multiple touching of the same object
- Passing a loaf of bread for each person to break off a piece also involves multiple touching
- How the bread and the wine are distributed need to be carefully explored
- One person at the front passing each item to each participant also means that multiple touching is involved
- For a congregation with smaller numbers, placing the elements spaced out on the table for each individual to collect their own piece of bread and glass could be an option
- Another option is that individuals or family groups could continue to do what they have done during the period of online worship—prepare their own bread and wine or juice—and bring that from their home to the worship service
[This minimises multiple touching, but also runs the risk that people will arrive not having realised they needed to do this, or forgetting that they had been asked to do this, meaning that they will not be able to share in communion in person]
- *If communion is offered, then those responsible for collecting and cleaning the communion items will also need to be scrupulous in minimising their physical contact with places in the building, and also meticulous in cleaning and storing the communion items*



It may be that a Church Council decides that the Congregation will forgo communion whilst meeting in person, until a vaccine has been developed and made available. If so, there are some fine liturgies that could be used during this time:

A Lament for Communion, written by the Rev. Elizabeth Raine

<https://ruralreverend.blogspot.com/2020/03/a-lament-for-communion.html>

A Liturgy of the Empty Hands by the Rev. Dr Amelia Koh-Butler

<https://ameliakoh-butler.blogspot.com/p/the-sacrament-of-empty-hands.html>

5b Contactless communion?

One enterprising Australian company has been marketing their goods for use in services of communion during COVID19. For a time, the Synod's COVID Safety Plan website indicated "there is a supplier that provides materials for contactless communion", and provides a link to "prefilled communion cups with a round altar bread and blackcurrant juice in one small package" sold by a Sydney-based company. (At my request, the link has been taken down from the Synod website.)

But there are issues in using such a product. First, it is not environmentally responsible. I have asked the company about this, and they have replied that "the plastic cup [is] made from Polypropylene (PP) i.e. symbol number 5, which is recyclable".

In exploring this claim, I have read that "while PP is easily among the most popular plastic packaging materials in the world, only around 1% is recycled, which means most PP is headed for the landfill. These decompose slowly over 20-30 years."

This in itself raises severe environmental issues about whether such recycling will actually occur. Then, there are toxic additives in PP, such as lead and cadmium. If we burn it, this can release dioxins and vinyl chloride, both of which are poisonous. We should not be encouraging the use of such an item. See <https://www.azocleantech.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=240>

I have also asked the company whether their products have been fairly made, and fairly traded. They responded by indicating that "our product is made in Australia using local and imported materials. The bread is sourced from the USA and blackcurrant juice from Malaysia. Apologies we do not have any supply chain certifications that we can provide."

Given the price of this product—it is economically cheap—it is highly suggestive that it was made under conditions that we would find unacceptable. Any cheap product on the market these days most likely has components made outside Australia, in conditions that are not governed by Australian legislation. The possibility—indeed, the probability—that this involves slave labour is high. At the very least, the product is most likely manufactured in working conditions that we would deem as completely unacceptable in our own country.

So there are some deeply significant questions involved in rushing to use these products, simply to ensure that we can resume old practices in a modified way. We will not be treating our environment in a responsible way as we use this product. And we may well be supporting slave labour or unjust workplace practices in using this product.

6 Conclusion

How do we work locally to make decisions and communicate those decisions?

Ministers and Pastors—Elders—Lay Presiders—Church Council

Congregational Meeting

emails—newsletters—social media



Resources prepared by the Rev. Dr John Squires, Presbytery Minister—Wellbeing, Canberra Region Presbytery (johns@nswact.uca.org.au)

With thanks for input and advice from colleagues Amelia Koh-Butler, Elizabeth Raine, Andrew Smith, Peter Walker, and Geoff Thompson.