

Transgressing Borders in the Celebration of the Lord's Supper: New Liturgical Practices and Theological Arguments



In the following article I consider a topic that has been very controversial in the theology and practice of the Protestant Church throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, from the first year (2020) until now: it is about alternative forms for the celebration of the Lord's Supper and their theological interpretations in the protestant German context. The aim is, on the one hand, to document new practices developed during the pandemic related to home communion and digital celebrations, and on the other hand, to give an overview of the theological discussion (*pro* and *contra*) of these innovations. After a short evaluation, I discuss the consequences for eucharistic practices after the pandemic and name further challenges.

During the first lockdown in spring 2020, we had to witness in many places that people suffering from the Covid-19 virus were isolated and even died. Especially the first pictures from northern Italy were oppressive and moving at the same time. It was therefore clear to many that our society, including our church, was in an exceptional situation (cf. Kunert 2020). The fact that church services, and thus also the Lord's Supper, were forbidden from one day to the next in public places was perceived by many as a massive challenge and real 'spiritual' hardship.¹ As a consequence of these conditions, many traditional (theological and liturgical) boundaries have shifted or have been transgressed.

For the Reformers it was 'just unthinkable', that for instance, during a plague 'people would not be able to attend worship' (Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2020: 49). Therefore, it was a challenge to find theological arguments to deal with the situation. For the proclamation of the word, technical solutions were soon found, but what about the sacrament? The first option – and certainly the easiest – was just to stop any celebration.

¹ In individual statements, on the other hand, the talk of 'an emergency situation' was relativised or even denied; cf. notes on dealing with the Lord's Supper in the Covid-19 crisis, signed by the leading clergy and the president of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) on 3 April 2020.

Fasten

Some church leaders and members of theological faculties (e.g., Leppin 2020) stated that during the pandemic, it would be possible and even better to trust in the proclamation of the word as the first medium to spread the gospel and bring to us God's grace. The so-called *sacramentum audibile*² should be enough to nourish souls (at least) for a certain time (cf. Arnold 2020: 351–356). Theologically spoken, the whole Christ is coming to us by his Word and the Spirit to announce his grace. The lack of clarity in the digital field without a communion in the assembly and the danger of 'free floating home communion' (which might not be controlled) were mentioned as well. Finally, the chance to increase the hunger and desire for the sacrament in a new way was also brought into the discussion. Others however asked: is this the right way to deal with a crisis? They argued on the pastoral level asking, is it not necessary more than ever to be at the side of the sick showing them the fullness of his grace? Some gave theological arguments, that we are not just 'the Church of the Word' (*Kirche des Wortes*) but also 'the Church of the Sacraments' (cf. Augsburg Confession V & VII; Bekenntnisschriften 2014: 125–127). We will miss something; or, to put it even more strongly, Christian people do have the right to receive what Jesus himself ordered and promised!

The leaders of several churches (*Landeskirchen*) in Germany discussed possibilities of how the Lord's Supper with 'real' communion could be celebrated. Some bishops or leading clergy of regional churches discussed and checked their Constitutions because it had never happened before that services were forbidden. Our attention goes first to the practice of home communion.

Home communion

If we look at traditional practices, there are two options which – due to the great danger of disease – were not easily possible anymore. The first is described by Justin Martyr in his first Apology: deacons brought the already consecrated elements of the Lord's Table into the houses of those who were not able to participate in the worship (cf. Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2020: 52). The second one is that ministers themselves go to the sick – keeping a distance – and celebrate the sacrament.

All in all, we must state that the celebration of eucharistic meals in private homes has been increasingly marginalised since 1970. Traugott Roser (2020) shows, based on

² The expression *sacramentum audibile* indicates the bodily and sacramental character of the Word in analogy to the 'wordy quality' of the sacrament which is sometimes called *verbum visibile*.

empirical studies, that the celebration of eucharistic meals in private homes has declined within the last five decades. Consequently, Christians seem to be less familiar with asking for Holy Communion in times of sickness or crisis. Roser considers this development the result of ‘congregationalisation’ or ‘ecclesialisation’ of the Christian meal communion in contrast to Pauline and Gospel texts, as well as early Christian eucharistic practice. He pleads for a contextual understanding of the liturgical meal community informed by the civil and societal practice of eating and drinking in community, exemplified by the popular German TV format *Das Perfekte Dinner*. Nevertheless, the survey sent out to CPCE Churches (Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe) in 2021 on Practice and Theology of the Lord’s Supper, showed the interesting result that three-quarters of Lutheran and about sixty per cent of Reformed churches practised home communion during the pandemic. What does that mean?

Because the leadership of the sacraments’ service is restricted to ordained people, it was important to deal with this problem of authority. One idea for a theological argumentation was the analogy to baptism, which *in case of emergency* may be administered by each Christian to either a new-born child or a sick person. For this case, the constitution of the Lutheran Church of Hanover (2020) says: ‘In case of emergency, all members of the Church may, by virtue of their baptism, perform duties of the office of public proclamation.’³ Similarly, the United Evangelical Church in Rhineland treated the subject: ‘The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is led by ordained persons. Presbyters and other members of the church congregation may participate. In emergencies, they may also lead the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.’⁴

How were these things regulated, then? Some bishops or leading clergy of regional churches wrote letters with recommendations to their congregations to practise home communion according to the early Christian practice mentioned in Acts 2 (e.g., in Baden, Hessen-Nassau, Kurhessen-Waldeck, and Rhineland). In Württemberg, where pietism is very strong and church leaders were afraid that things could get out of control in sorts of *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*, it went differently: a ‘permit *pro loco et tempore*’ for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday was given. In this action, the original Christian practice (Acts 2) was also mentioned as a model (Zeeb 2020).

The leading Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, together with me and some colleagues of Michaeliskloster, decided that there should also be a special emphasis on home communion. Baptised people should be encouraged to celebrate at

3 ‘Im Notfall können alle Mitglieder der Kirche aufgrund ihrer Taufe Aufgaben des Amtes der öffentlichen Verkündigung wahrnehmen.’

4 ‘Die Feier des Abendmahls wird von Ordinierten geleitet. Presbyterinnen und Presbyter und andere Mitglieder der Kirchengemeinde können mitwirken. In Notfällen können sie auch die Feier des Abendmahls leiten.’ (Art. 74§3) Something similar is also found in the EKHN’s *Lebensordnung* (Section II, No. 125).

home in a familial context or with a few neighbours. The worship-format *Zeitgleich* was created by Michaeliskloster in April 2020, and in addition to readings of the Scripture, a short sermon, prayer, music, and blessing, it gave instructions and material to celebrate the sacrament in a domestic context without ordained leadership. The prerequisite for those who were responsible was commented with a quotation from the Constitution: ‘In an emergency, all members of the church can perform tasks of the office of public proclamation on the basis of their baptism’ (cf. Footnote 3). In other words: anyone who is permitted to perform an emergency baptism, or a baptism of youth may also preside over a celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The term ‘office of public preaching’ (Augsburg Confession XIV) is thus deliberately extended to the sacraments in the sense of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession (Bekennnisschriften 2014: 127).

With a simple liturgy of the Lord’s Supper, a small house congregation was enabled to celebrate the sacrament on, say, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or Easter itself. The liturgy, including the song texts, was completely available for download. Michaeliskloster Hildesheim also produced audio files with hymns and especially with the words of the institution, which could be played from the website. The intention in doing this action was to avoid a person having to say these words to themselves. The (Lutheran) *extra nos* of faith was to be made explicitly audible, as it were.

The question of whether the celebration of the Lord’s Supper by an individual with elements prepared by themselves is in itself unacceptable was discussed a lot and remains controversial. Certainly, it is not theologically and dramaturgically plausible in itself for an individual to administer the meal to themselves. It needs, if at all possible, the counterpart who says: ‘Given for you.’ Nevertheless, it is indisputable that it is not a certain number of people – as a ‘quorum of communicants’ – but the promise of Christ that constitutes the sacrament. From this point of view, it should be considered whether, in an exceptional situation, the words of the institution and administration can also be heard ‘from the tape’ and/or, if necessary, spoken aloud. Occasionally, it has been questioned whether such a ‘fragmentary’ liturgical celebration is the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper at all (or not only an *agape* celebration or something like that). However, if one looks at the argumentation with caution, this criticism might not be relevant if, on the one hand, the words of the institution are read or heard, and on the other hand, bread is eaten, and wine or grape juice is drunk.

The positive effects of a domestic celebration of the meal for the life of the congregation can hardly be valued highly enough. Where this happens, the Lord’s Supper again ties itself sensuously to its biblical roots (cf. Acts 2:42–47) and acquires pastoral depth. House churches quickly develop a sense of mutual need. They experience the strengthening and comfort of the sacrament much more clearly than larger *ad hoc* communities. Moreover, this is how the Pauline conviction is lived out – there is no sharp division between worship

on Sunday and in everyday life (cf. Rom 12:1f). The profane and sacred cross–fertilise each other, and the living room becomes a temple.

We also experienced a catechetical effect. Children learned about the appropriate use of the sacrament in the preparation. They were given small active roles in reading biblical texts, setting the table, cutting the bread, *et cetera*. Listening to and singing the ‘primal story’ of the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12), they became aware of the plight in which the people of Israel celebrated the first Passover, and they were able to identify with it in the face of the pandemic.

The experiences from the Covid-19 period show that, on the one hand, the church is flexible and can adjust liturgically to such situations. On the other hand, there was also a lot of anxiety in theological debate: there was concern about hurting the ecumenical brothers and sisters, because on the Roman Catholic side, home communion without a priest was not an option at all. There was, and is, the need to clarify things carefully theologically before creating irretrievable facts through practice.

Such concerns must be taken seriously. However, now one thing seems clear: when a Christian congregation gathers on the word of Christ, shares bread, and trusts that Christ is present, this should not harm (or even judge) any church even in the modern age. Rather, it can be experienced that Christ is with his church even under difficult conditions and that He can be tasted and seen (cf. Psalms 34:9). This applies – with ever more conviction – beyond the times of the pandemic.

The experience of home communion makes clear in a concise way how ministry and sacrament have grown together over the centuries – a topic that has played a central role in ecumenical debates for decades. In my opinion, however, the experience in the Protestant context and the productive handling of the ‘emergency situation’ in many places also show that the order of office is made by human beings (*de iure humano*), which in case of doubt must take a back seat to Christ’s invitation and mandate (‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ 1 Cor 11:24; cf. Luke 22:19). The experience of the pandemic should be an impetus for further conversations at this point based on the Magdeburg Declaration on Baptism (2007).⁵ Its main sentence is:

⁵ The declaration is signed by following (German) churches: *Römisch-katholische Kirche im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz* (Roman Catholic Church in the area of the German Bishops’ Conference), *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (Protestant Church in Germany), *Orthodoxe Kirche in Deutschland* (Orthodox Church in Germany), *Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche* (Evangelical Methodist Church), *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church), *Armenisch-Apostolische Orthodoxe Kirche in Deutschland* (Armenian-Apostolic Orthodox Church in Germany), *Katholisches Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland* (Catholic Bishopric of the Old Catholics in Germany), *Äthiopisch-Orthodoxe Kirche in Deutschland* (Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Germany), *Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirche in Niedersachsen* (Evangelical Old Reformed Church in Lower Saxony), *Evangelische Brüder-Unität – Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine* (Evangelical Church of the Brethren), and *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Anglikanisch-Episkopaler Gemeinden in Deutschland* (Working Group of Anglican-Episcopal Congregations in Germany; Fauzi 2007).

As a sign of the unity of all Christians, baptism connects us with Jesus Christ, the foundation of this unity. Despite differences in the understanding of the church, there is a basic understanding among us about baptism. Therefore, we recognise every baptism performed according to the command of Jesus in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, with the sign of immersion in water or of the pouring over of water, and we rejoice over every person who is baptized. This mutual recognition of baptism is an expression of the bond of unity founded in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6).⁶

Other doctrinal conversations such as the document *Together at the Lord's Table* (2019), underline the high dignity of baptism as the fundament of eucharistic hospitality, which means that churches or congregations of different denominations might welcome each other in the celebration of the Eucharist. Further questions, which have not been discussed, might be as follows:

1. What is the connection between the Lord's Supper and the 'normal' dinner? Could re-discovering the connection and proximity of the supper and the Lord's Supper open a new approach to the original satiation dimension of the Lord's Supper? Would participation in the community of discipleship, even as a community of suffering, failure, backbiting, and betrayal, be one that 'lifts up' (i.e., illuminates and resolves) the ambivalences of life amid everyday life in both senses of the word?
2. The private or semi-public context of home communion raises the question of 'proper' commissioning for homes even beyond the emergency situation. The critical question of the leadership of such a celebration touches on diaconal-pastoral visits of volunteers in congregations. Depending on the answer to this question, broad preparation for this would have to be provided in volunteer trainings. Do we learn from the pandemic that home communion can be a new 'discovery' for pastoral care?

⁶ 'Als ein Zeichen der Einheit aller Christen verbindet die Taufe mit Jesus Christus, dem Fundament dieser Einheit. Trotz Unterschieden im Verständnis von Kirche besteht zwischen uns ein Grundeinverständnis über die Taufe. Deshalb erkennen wir jede nach dem Auftrag Jesu im Namen des Vaters und des Sohnes und des Heiligen Geistes mit der Zeichenhandlung des Untertauchens im Wasser bzw. des Übergießens mit Wasser vollzogene Taufe an und freuen uns über jeden Menschen, der getauft wird. Diese wechselseitige Anerkennung der Taufe ist Ausdruck des in Jesus Christus gründenden Bandes der Einheit (Epheser 4,4-6). (Fauzi 2007.)

Digital celebrations

When in 2018 the Liturgical Conference in Germany looked at digital worship, including digital communion, we could not have imagined the explosive nature of this practice two years later. However, there were practices and studies before this time (cf. Böntert 2005). For example, Teresa Berger (2016) and Christian Grethlein (2019) mention various experiences and options in publications that appeared before the pandemic.

The first option is the participation in livestream services with communion, which have been taking place in various congregations around the world for more than 20 years. People from a large online congregation have taken part in such celebrations, sometimes as a matter of course. In some cases, these celebrations have also been transmitted to hospital wards. In my opinion, they do not differ substantially from a service that is transmitted live from the hospital chapel to the hospital. Television services with eucharistic celebrations also fall more or less under this heading. Roman Catholic Christians call that 'spiritual or mental communion'. However, they just watch the celebration, they do not eat bread or drink wine in front of the stream audience.

The second option is a Eucharist app which provides access to Mass texts and songs on smartphones, as has happened since 2015 mainly in the Roman Catholic context. This is not just about reading up or downloading texts for worship preparation, but also about active liturgical use: 'May I use a Missal app during a Mass?' somebody asks and receives the following answer: 'Unless instructed not to, the answer is yes.' These apps were designed for that purpose and some even carry approval from diocesan and Vatican authorities (Kane 2016).⁷

A variation or linking of both forms is the initiative of a worldwide synchronisation of eucharistic adoration already propagated by Pope Francis in 2013 (2 June), in which every parish on the globe can link up with the celebration in the Roman Basilica of Saint Peter. On-site, of course, there was still to be a 'live communion' led by an ordained priest at the same time. In the accompanying digital media, the actual goal of the mission was understood (retrospectively?) not only in the sense of a global spatial expansion, but also a temporal dissolution of boundaries:

⁷ Prayer apps also exist in German-speaking countries, including the prayer app from Herder Verlag (Wilke 2020).

*The goal of on-line adoration is not to replace or to minimize the hours spent in the PHYSICAL presence of the Blessed Sacrament, but rather to multiply them. Our mission is to bring the live electronic image of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament to those who can't be physically present in Adoration. (On-line Adoration 2003.)*⁸

The third option, also clearly different from these other forms, is staged performances on the internet. Avatars are used here, who take part in a meal celebration on behalf of real people to support the imagination of the participants on the screen (Avatar inklusive 2020, cf. Grethlein 2019).

Before 2020, my personal assessment was that this subject might be an exciting theological topic, but we will still need decades before we celebrate the Lord's Supper digitally. Nevertheless, it turned out differently. In May 2020, I and two colleagues designed and realised a celebration with about twenty young vicars of the regional Church of Hanover in a digital Zoom meeting which was a challenging but also encouraging experience. On the other side, i.e., among the participants, it was the same, even if not all of them 'mutated' into enthusiastic supporters.

We arranged the setting in such a way that two ordained persons 'properly' instituted the Lord's Supper. They also actively participated in the meal themselves and handed the gifts to each other. One person was responsible for the camera and the light. Another person accompanied the singing on the piano. The whole event was held live and deliberately not recorded to be played back later.

It was important for the preparation that each participant had the elements of bread and wine and/or juice (a chalice) ready at home so that they could take or receive the gifts themselves at the time of the 'distribution'. As a rule, the people on the other side were in any case alone and not together in a group. Music also played an important role. Recurring pieces (such as *Holy* and *Lamb of God*) as well as the song 'Connected' (Til von Dombois) were sung, and a string or cable was held across the screen. This made it symbolically clear that in prayer, in singing, and in the common celebration of the sacrament, we were connected across the boundaries of the digital medium.

Many experienced this celebration as a challenging crossing of boundaries in the best sense of the word: boundaries of human imagination and church regulations, but also boundaries of theological thinking were crossed. This experience is just personal. What do studies, such as Churches Online in Times of Corona (CONTOC), determine about the practice of digital communion? How did Protestant and Catholic churches react during the first and second lockdown in the pandemic? In the multiple responses to online

⁸ In 2019, the Pope also invited people to pray the Angelus in Saint Peter's Square under his 'Click to pray' App (von Kempis 2020).

forms of worship, 4 per cent of Protestant respondents said they were celebrating the Lord's Supper, while 24 per cent of Catholic respondents said they were celebrating the Eucharist. Here, the fundamental differences in the understanding of worship (and their consequences in practice), the 'priority of the sacrament' as well as the discussion about a 'digital communion' may have had a strong influence, which is why the results should be interpreted rather cautiously. Nevertheless, they suggest that a discussion about the digital form of the Eucharist and Lord's Supper is necessary, or at least desirable. Regarding the form of worship of a digital celebration of the Lord's Supper, or a so-called digital Eucharist celebration among Catholic respondents, denominational differences emerge clearly (CONTOC 2021).⁹

The above-mentioned survey within the study process of the Lord's Supper in the Communion of Protestant Churches of Europe (CPCE) also yielded results on the digital practice of the Lord's Supper: 34 per cent of the participants said they had experience with digital Lord's Supper in their churches, and 9 per cent only in special cases. Fifteen per cent said they were considering the introduction of digital communion. Forty-two per cent said no. Unsurprisingly, 50 per cent said they had changed their minds during the pandemic. Fifty-nine per cent said they had participated passively, 66 per cent named an interactive form by participating in a video conference, and 35 per cent used a podcast (with a time lag; SURVEY).

Comparing these two surveys evaluated by the same institution, it is clear that in the first case, Roman Catholic participants do not eat and drink the elements during the celebration, they just watch the priest taking it. The differing numbers in Protestant churches might be explained by the difference in survey participants: church leaders looking at the liturgical life in general (CPCE), and single participants (CONTOC).

To gain a further understanding of the different types of celebration, I will try to list a short typology of digital and hybrid practices that can be differentiated at the moment.

First of all, it has to be stated that normally a digital celebration is led by an ordained person (or person with a particular qualifying title), participants are on screen, a laptop or smartphone.

⁹ It might also be important to say, that even if Roman Catholic churches celebrated online Eucharist this does not, at the same time, mean that people on the screens really took bread and wine. In the Catholic way of thinking, the 'spiritual communion' (criticised by the Reformers as still Mass) has always been an option.

1. *Streamed and recorded service* (the stream is available with a time lag)
2. *Live worship service with 'analogue' congregation and 'digital guests'*
 - A. Spiritual participation (no real communion, cf. Catholic practice)
 - B. Active participation with elements brought by oneself in front of the screen without interaction
 - C. Interactive participation (e.g., live link to location x or y), so 'hybrid'. In this case the digital participants may be seen on a big screen in the church
3. *Digital worship service as a video conference* (Zoom or others)

Individuals or groups at home celebrate in an interactive setting (e.g., intercessions in chat) where guidance is sent in advance. Faces are visible in the tiles. There is not one, but two appointed distributors.

Theological arguments

The theological debates connected with such celebrations were ignited particularly by the question of whether a celebration without so-called 'bodily co-presence', i.e., without the joint presence of celebrant and communicants in one physical room, was theologically appropriate or, in the sense of Jesus, in keeping up with the foundation. Concerning the biblical institution ('Do this...'), some felt that a digital celebration was not a celebration in the full sense, because the unity of space and time was not there in a satisfying way or that the wholeness of action was separated in two parts. Another argument was the Christological aspect of incarnation, that Jesus, who became flesh and blood, needed the receiver's bodily presence as the counterpart.

Yet another objection is explained well by Kenneth Schiefelbein-Guerrero. He argues for a ritual which 'receives its high plausibility' through the distribution from person to person: '[G]enerations of Christians have gathered physically to participate as the ecclesial Body of Christ in the sacramental Body of Christ. Distribution is important in Lutheran theology, which regularly happens from person-to-person.' (Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2020: 53.) Another argument was already mentioned in the context of home communion saying that the service of the Proclamation (only) is enough to keep the church alive as a church. For Reformed churches, this might even be more acceptable because the dignity of the sacraments is less high than in the Lutheran or even Catholic context. Another argument seems strong for me, too. It is the question of 'unity': if Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper digitally, the problem of disorder and arbitrariness might come up. Many solutions and liturgies come up at the same time. There is no rule and experience. The church might lose the overview and even the control, if congregations, parishes or even 'free' groups

start to celebrate the sacrament ‘in their own way’. Consequently, people might even get insecure or unsettled. Paul would probably ask if we would care enough for the weak (Romans 14).

To this, it must be said: of course, the setting of such a communion in the digital space is new and strange for many people. The few experiences we have had so far stand in contrast to a treasure of experiences from almost two thousand years. The suspicion that liturgical experiments could all too quickly become the rule is also not entirely unfounded. However, my impression is that theological arguments and personal ‘decisions’ were often confused with each other. Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper scene, or – more commonly – the celebration of the Eucharist in a semicircle, has been implanted in us as a ‘primal situation’ from childhood, as it were, and continues to have an effect to this day, so that a change in this setting is automatically accompanied by great irritation.

Having mentioned the critical arguments, let us look at those who are in favour.

First of all, digital celebrations are not that different from the ‘classic communion’ as they seem to be; after all, real people (not avatars) gather here, and on a video conference they often see each other even better than in the ‘analogue’ service. They come of their own free will. Most importantly, they eat and drink, which means that they are not – as usual in the Catholic context of TV services – only communicants in Spirit. They hear the words of the institution and pray the Lord’s Prayer or sing parts of the liturgy. They can also give to each other a sign of Peace by sending a message.

What is missing then, except that they cannot touch each other, smell the air of the church space, or hear the singing of their neighbour? For many of our church members, these aspects mean a lot; they like touching hands and the hug as a sign of Peace, while others say: ‘I am missing nothing. And I am not afraid to join the digital celebration as I used to do for a long time due to the danger of infection.’

Another theological argument for digital celebration – highlighting the theology of the cross – is the fact that every form of sacramental administration or celebration is accompanied by (medial) refractions. This was true in the past as well. God does not speak and come to us directly, but always works through sinful people and corruptible natural (or cultural) things. He acts *in, mitten und unter* the broken world (cf. Romans 8:19–23). This brings us to the strong Lutheran argument of Christ’s ubiquity. The crucified and risen Lord is present everywhere. Therefore, the elements of bread and wine stand for the fact that God the Triune makes available the gifts of his creation also for the redemption and life of humans (cf. Arnold 2021). Pneumatologically speaking, the Holy Spirit blows wherever it pleases (cf. John 3:8f). The Spirit can bring the gift of grace even through virtual channels.

Hence there is a *theo*-logical question: should God, in his infinitely great creativity and vastness, not be able to use even modern digital media for the work of his Spirit? At

all times, sacraments were mediated medially and at the same time 'bodily'. Therefore, we can answer frankly: 'God is not the problem here at least not in terms of theological reflection' (Berger 2016: 94).

Finally, we must consider the technical possibilities of transgressing global boundaries through hybrid celebrations. One congregation (or small group) might gather for worship with people physically present. Others might connect online. In the best case, their faces can be seen on a screen, but this is not absolutely necessary. This might be a problem for the feeling of 'communion'. The opportunities are huge: the digital participants see and hear everything that is happening in the church and can participate in the chat during prayers. It is even possible that individuals from the digital space are connected to the 'live service', which can be easily perceived by the other participants. In this way, fellowship may occur across global boundaries, or boundaries of illness and isolation.

The fact that the boundaries of previous language and thought worlds are more easily crossed in the digital space is manifested, among other things, in an exemplary way in the new service format *Brot & Liebe* ('Bread and Love'; Niemeyer & Lemme 2022) in which this leading heart prayer occurs:

*einmal, G*tt,
da hast du
alles gegeben
hast gelebt und geliebt
bis zum letzten Hemd – auch für mich*

*dass ich weiß:
ich fall nicht,
ich flieg
vergeh nicht,
ich leb.*

*heute öffne ich dir
meine Herzenstür
hinterm Zentimeter Licht
geht die Sonne auf
und meine Fingerspitzen streifen sachte
ihren ersten Morgenglanz.*

*heute will ich dir glauben, G*tt:
zu meinem fast*

*legst du dein geschafft
und teilst mit mir dein Brot.*
(Kuhla & Brückner 2023: 121.)¹⁰

From what has been said so far, we can formulate the following further questions, among others:

1. What can be learned from the digital experience for a renewed analogue (i.e., classical) liturgy of the Lord's Supper? Can we helpfully design the space of celebration, more consciously, and in a more differentiated way? How can we prepare the congregation and the liturgy even better?
2. What new forms can we develop from the digital-hybrid table fellowship? What chalices/vessels/plates do we use at home? Is there such a thing as a family chalice in worship as an alternative between a single chalice and communal chalice?
3. Could there be a liturgical church-wide 'communion-creativity' seeking to rethink liturgy, agendas, and forms after the pandemic experiences? Would an art competition for the design of a set with a group chalice, pouring chalice and individual chalices be helpful?
4. Does the digital format allow the possibility to open church doors figuratively in the twenty-first century? How do we move from regulating admission to a more unifying basic attitude to invite people to the Lord's supper?
5. Digital baptisms still seem to be far away from congregational practice. Knowing that the setting of the actors is also complex or even more complex here, one may ask how the church can behave on demand, for example, when godparents live 500 or 1,000 kilometres away. Should we not make that situation possible with a hybrid celebration?

After all, my conviction is that – in all that we do – we should ask the Triune for his/her presence, at the same time trusting that the Spirit does what Christ promised: 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.' (Mt 18:20) Taking that seriously we might say that digital communion even in a small group has strong promise. Christ will be there.

¹⁰ 'once, God, / you have / given everything / lived and loved / to the last shirt – also for me

that I know / I will not fall, / I fly / do not perish, / I'm alive

today I open for you / my heart's door / behind the centimetre of light / the sun rises / and my fingertips
gently touch / its first morning glow

today I want to believe in you, God: / to know that I can do without being perfect / and for you to share with
me your bread.' Translation by the author.

Further questions for the development of our sacramental practice

With all that has been possible in recent months and years in terms of new departures, especially in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the fact cannot and must not be concealed that the 'frequency' of the offer and the actual participation in celebrations of the Lord's Supper during the pandemic declined significantly, not to say dramatically. The high risk of infection – especially through the use of a common cup – is undisputed. This is not even minimised by a possible *intinctio* (dipping the host into the communal chalice), on the contrary. This fact is simply to be deplored. In the meantime, congregations have celebrated *sub una* (just with bread) or have created appropriate conditions with high safety measures (tongs, gloves, pre-packaged hosts, or small vials) to help prevent infection during the celebration.

A most welcome measure is the purchase of individual goblets, possibly combined with a pouring goblet, as has been used in Scandinavian countries for years. Then, during the celebration, the wine or grape juice is poured from the pouring goblet into the individual goblets. Beautiful individual chalices made of clay and metal are now available at reasonable prices, for about five to ten euros.

In many places there are also encouragingly good experiences. The distribution at designated stations (*Wandelkommunion*) remains a good possibility to receive the elements with eye contact and distance. In addition, the classical circle or semicircle is still practicable, if the distance is kept and the distributors disinfect their hands beforehand. Families can – as on the eve of the Confirmation – also stand closer together in small groups, possibly passing the bread and chalice to each other, or sit at several individual tables.

This also leads to these further questions, among others:

1. How can we invite people to the Lord's Supper in new and imaginative ways?
2. Whom do we want to invite? Baptised members or even people who are not yet baptised or confirmed members of our church?
3. Can the highly-charged and justified criticisms about the questions of hygiene be 'neutralised'; for instance, by individual chalices and pouring chalices?
4. How can children gain their first experiences in children's services or together with adults, so that the meal becomes a matter of course for them?
5. Does the children's way of receiving also open the eyes of adults to the significance of the invitation to the Lord's table as a gift and a distinction (cf. Mark 10:15)?

Sacraments outdoors?

Little has become known about celebrations of the Lord's Supper outside. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the risk of infection is not significantly reduced. In fact, some congregations have celebrated their confirmation suppers outside. The congregation set up tables in the outdoor area, and one family sat at each table. The celebration of the Lord's Supper itself was quite classical, but the setting made it something special.

Hanna Dallmeier staged a station service on the Passion and at Easter with confirmands and then also celebrated communion outdoors. Each station was prepared with a different group of confirmands, so that the young people were also actively involved liturgically.

Under the direction of Frank Muchlinsky, a street theatre group performed the sacrament nightly in the style of Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper with 13 people at a long table. This took place in several major cities in Germany, an initiative that generated much media interest and may have significantly increased the desire to participate (Grau 2018). However, it must be asked whether a theatre play that does not include an invitation to join in the celebration can be called a sacrament. I would clearly say no; this arrangement is not a Eucharist in Christ's sense.

It should also be borne in mind that the classic 'church coffee' following the service is again often very popular in many places. Therefore, a communal Lord's Supper outside the church in the transition to a communal meal would also be an inviting statement for the public.

At this point, however, it should be noted that during the entire pandemic – but especially in the summer months – baptisms were increasingly held outdoors. Parishes and regions followed up on so-called baptismal festivals (with more than a hundred baptised persons, including adults) at rivers or lakes, which had already been very popular in the past. Other congregations opted for garden baptisms in a small circle, where the laying on of hands and wetting with water was often 'delegated' to the parents or godparents, while the pastor spoke the words. Many young parents found this form especially beautiful and would like to see this offered in the future. The same applies to confirmations in the garden and weddings in special places outside.

Theological perspectives: How can we be a welcoming church?

For many people, the Lord's Supper is an indispensable part of their faith practice and spirituality; however, this conviction cannot be assumed or even demanded of all other church members. Even more important is the fact that the Lord's Supper is not an arbitrary

matter that we could simply 'leave out'. The Church of Jesus is the Church of the Word and the sacraments (Augsburg Confession V & VII; Bekenntnisschriften 2014: 125–127). His voice can be heard in it, and his body and his blood – or more carefully: signs of his corporeality – can be tasted in it. A look at our biblical sources, and also at the confessions of the Reformation, shows that the 'breaking of bread in the name of Christ' has always had a decisive effect. Eating and drinking together on his behalf and under his promise creates community and enables personal assurance of God's love. Finally, it makes the church visible and recognisable to the outside world (cf. *notae ecclesiae*).

However, to make this latter statement is not enough. We have to work on our attitude and our 'celebration' of the sacrament: it is important that the 'bitter seriousness' which still hangs over many celebrations and which, due to the pandemic, has now also absorbed the fear of the risk of infection, be overcome. The Lord's Supper should therefore not be celebrated only on Good Friday and the Day of Repentance or on the eve of confirmation (with confession). The danger at that time that the focus will only be on repentance and forgiveness is too high. This does not mean that the central soteriological meaning should be completely omitted, but it should not be the only one. The Lord's Supper should also be celebrated as a feast of joy or heavenly anticipation, as described in Isajah 25:6–9. It stands under the ports of the Kingdom of God which has already dawned, in which all people are welcome. The political relevance of this is striking – where does this exist today, a true table fellowship of poor and rich? In this respect, the Lord's Supper is a cross-border provocation of the highest inclusive or universal significance.

Therefore, we are constantly challenged to examine what it means when we say, 'All are invited!' Do we mean everyone or just all the baptised or confirmed or those 'who feel invited'? For centuries, the Methodist Church has taken a different approach than the other large denominations and practices by the so-called 'Open Table'; here, everyone is truly invited – without any preconditions.¹¹ Consequently, we have to ask ourselves in the coming years how we want to deal with the 'conditions of access' to the Lord's Supper (baptism). In addition, we should offer multilingual services (or at least parts of them) – especially in the city churches – and consider how people with handicaps (wheelchairs, hearing aids, etc.) can be integrated into our celebrations.

¹¹ 'Nonbaptised people who respond in faith to the invitation in our liturgy will be welcomed to the Table. They should receive teaching about Holy Baptism as the sacrament of entrance into the community of faith—needed only once by each individual—and Holy Communion as the sacrament of sustenance for the journey of faith and growth in holiness—needed and received frequently.' (This Holy Mystery 2004, 15.)

Balance sheet and outlook

The pandemic has confronted us with major challenges. The experiences already reflected here should continue to be evaluated regularly in the future. This includes surveys in the congregations, which provide feedback to the church leadership.

Liturgy-theologically, further work is needed on the central aspects of the theology of the Lord's Supper. How can the diverse theological points like Christ's presence, forgiveness of sins, community, celebration of the new world, sharing with the poor, *et cetera* resonate and shine in the celebration? What variety is needed on the one hand, and what reliability of recurring forms or songs on the other?

Clearly we cannot simply return to the usual practice for the Lord's Supper. Digital options of celebration are still needed, even if not in every congregation. How we deal with home communion in the future must be discussed further and then also decided consciously. The theological core of the celebration, however, seems undisputed: Jesus promises that he gives himself in the bread and cup and thus comforts, reassures, uplifts, and strengthens people on the way. The Lord's Supper connects the gifts of creation with spiritual strengthening. This connection must be considered also in the future (climate change, preservation of creation, sharing with all people) and thus one must not lose sight of the ethical aspect.

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