

Dear Museum Street members and friends,

#### BRIEF SUMMARY:

In 2022, beginning on 2<sup>nd</sup> January, we will be offering online communion to those watching the Livestream of our worship services when we celebrate Holy Communion. This will only be available to those who watch the livestream as the service is actually occurring. Also, in the event of a return to ZOOM worship because of COVID, then we will offer Holy Communion over Zoom. **You will need to provide your own bread and wine** and any leftovers should be disposed of reverently. Methodist stipulations say that the wine should be from the juice of the grape and should not be alcoholic. You might like to put your plate and cup on a small table and cover it with a white cloth until we reach that point in the service, when we will uncover the elements together, participate in the Great Thanksgiving and the blessing of the elements and then we will eat them together. For the privacy of those attending in-person, we will not film them coming forward; you will hear the music and see a picture. Please note that if you watch the livestream later in the day, then you will be unable to see or participate in the Holy Communion portion of the service.

#### FULL DETAILS:

The 2021 Methodist Conference passed a motion to adopt a three-year period of discernment (to August 2024) to allow celebrations of Holy Communion to be led where some or all of the worshippers gather together online. Up until last summer, no online communion had been allowed. There is a report with some further guidance, and Holy Communion services during this period of discernment are required to be limited to participation at a common time. Churches that wish to offer online communion must first seek the approval of their Circuit Superintendent.

As we have begun Livestreaming some of our Sunday morning services, the Museum Street Leadership Team with approval from the AGM has sought and received permission from the Circuit Superintendent to offer online communion to those participating via the livestream.

We will therefore offer Holy Communion both in-person and to those watching the Livestream for the first time next Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2022. Please note, that since there is a requirement that participation must be at a common time, those who watch the video later in the day (rather than live) will be unable to participate in the communion, and the service will be edited to have that portion removed.

Also, in the event of a return to ZOOM worship because of COVID, then we will offer Holy Communion over Zoom.

We will be seeking feedback afterwards and in the next few months from those of you online as to how receiving Holy Communion in this way was perceived and how it felt.

A few things that you need to know first.

- While Holy Communion is rightly seen as an opportunity to deepen individual discipleship, it is not an individualistic act of devotion, but one shared with a gathered community. There will be some Methodists for whom online worship does not sufficiently evoke the gathered, corporate nature of the Church and Eucharist. If you are worshipping online and do not wish to participate in Holy Communion, there will be a blessing and dismissal for those who prefer not to stay (and those unable to watch it live at the common time) before the Great Thanksgiving begins.
- **Practicalities - You will need to provide your own bread and wine** and something to place it upon and any leftovers should be disposed of reverently.

It has not been the custom of the Methodist Church to specify in detail the nature of bread and wine that are acceptable to be used in the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is good for us to adopt the general principle that we offer to God of our best. This is the advice we have been given:

- **Bread.** The approach that the bread be 'such as is usual to be eaten' is a good guide and in a contemporary context that would certainly include gluten-free breads as well as wheat breads. While it is inevitable that participants will not have identical bread, remembering the Biblical teaching that 'we who are many are one body because we all share in one bread' (1 Corinthians 10:17), the important thing is its *sameness* not its *difference*. We are sharing bread together.
- **Wine.** The Methodist Church does have two stipulations regarding the wine at Holy Communion – that the **juice of the grape shall be used and that the wine used shall be non-alcoholic**. The first of these is of particular importance because it links us to key Biblical imagery, especially Jesus' statement 'I am the vine' (John 15:5) and his saying on the night in which he instituted this sacrament that he would not again drink of the fruit of the vine until he did so in his Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29, Luke 22:18). Alternative juices and drinks that are not made from 'the juice of the grape' are therefore not appropriate for use in Holy Communion. Pure grape juice or non-alcoholic wine is to be preferred (though it is not necessary to have a non-alcoholic wine specifically produced for communion – those available in supermarkets and other shops are suitable). Like the bread, because we are sharing, even if metaphorically, in one cup the important thing is its *sameness* not its *difference*.
- **Table.** You might like to put your plate and cup on a small table and cover it with a white cloth until we reach that point in the service, when we will uncover the elements together, participate in the Great Thanksgiving where the elements will be blessed and we will then eat them together.
- **Leftovers.** The simplest approach to the disposal of the elements is that only sufficient for the purposes of communion should be prepared so that they are all consumed as part of the service and none remain. Otherwise, leftovers should be disposed of reverently which means *not* throwing in the bin or tipping it down the sink, but it can include sharing with the birds or returning to the earth.
- **Why offer online communion?**

Methodism has long emphasised both that the Church is to be open and inclusive and also that it invites commitment and shared responsibility. Online worship invites us to think again creatively about how both of these emphases can be maintained. Worship during the pandemic has allowed some to be included who were previously excluded, such as those who are housebound or shift-workers, and Local Churches are faced with the challenge of continuing to include such people in worship and not just in their pastoral care. In considering what it means to be an inclusive church serious consideration must be given to the needs of those who can only be present via online or other electronic means. It is always possible in worship for the congregation to become observers rather than participants and joining worship using a screen of some kind may make this a particular issue, but such difficulties can be overcome with careful, creative attention.

- **Theological Understanding**

There is no one Methodist understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist. The Methodist Conference has recognised that a range of understandings is expressed in the Methodist Church's hymns and liturgies and its practice as much as in its doctrinal statements. While

the Conference has commended reports on Holy Communion which explore theological understandings of the Eucharist, most notably *His Presence Makes the Feast*,<sup>1</sup> those reports have been careful to recognise and honour the breadth of understandings among Methodists.

Below follows a summary of the **nine essential components or themes of the Methodist Church's theology of Holy Communion**:

- **Thanksgiving** – giving thanks for the totality of God's work, and not just a solemn memorial.
- **Life in Unity** – the Lord's Supper both demonstrates the oneness of Christ and his people and also creates and expresses the one communion and fellowship of all Christians.
- **Remembering** – some see it as a simple act of thankful remembrance of Christ's sacrifice; others see it as a very vivid 'calling to mind' and 'making present' sacramentally of Christ's victory.
- **Sacrifice** – the community both offers the sacrifice of its own self in obedience, service and commitment - a living sacrifice - and proclaims the atoning sacrifice of Christ
- **Presence** – the general presence of the risen and ascended Christ who is with us always, the presence of Christ as 'invisible host', welcoming us to His table, the presence of Christ in the action of 'breaking bread', the presence of Christ in the act of sharing in the consecrated bread and wine and the fellowship expressed and created by it, and the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements.
- **The work of the Spirit** – Holy Communion is a vehicle of God's grace through the action of the Holy Spirit. The liturgy includes a prayer for the Spirit to descend on both the gifts and the people.
- **Anticipation** – a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.
- **Mission and Justice** – Holy Communion has been seen as implying a personal and corporate commitment to mission and justice and the biblical call to live justly.
- **Personal Devotion** – food to nourish the flock and a significant element in Christian devotion; not to be denied to those who seek and can be a means of conversion.

The question, therefore, is not whether online communion can meet some minimum legalistic definition of Holy Communion, but whether in celebrating the Lord's Supper, the breadth and ultimate mystery of the Eucharist can be expressed.

Celebrating Holy Communion online will challenge us all to ponder what it means to bring our whole authentic selves into worship, just as onsite worship does. Equally, the online world stands in need of the renewal of Christ in the same way as every other arena of human activity. Methodists have proudly emphasised that all without exception are offered the opportunity to experience God's freely given grace. To celebrate the Eucharist is to celebrate the redemptive work of Christ for all, including the world online.

Should you wish to explore this further, you can read the full report the went to the 2021 Methodist Conference here: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21765/conf-2021-39-holy-communion-and-online-worship.pdf>.

If you have any concerns or questions now or later, please contact me.

In Christ  
--Rev. Joan Pell

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<sup>1</sup> *Methodist Conference 2003 Report. Holy Communion in the Methodist Church: 'His presence makes the feast'*  
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-holy-communion-in-methodist-church-2003.pdf>