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Religious Community in a Digital World

Gordon A. Jensen

The COVID-19 pandemic caused churches to shift rapidly to online services—a new experience for many—and to reimagine being the church in a digital age. This rapid shift was welcomed by some worship leaders and created great angst and stress for others. It also came with advantages and challenges for all who gathered for worship on any given Sunday. Younger people, for the most part, have had no difficulty adapting to or making use of the technology incorporated to allow people to gather for worship. But the online worship, or mediated worship as Sherry Coman calls it in her article in this volume, has not only benefitted the tech-savvy younger generation who still show interest in the church; it has also brought the worshipping community into the homes of countless numbers of congregation members who have traditionally been labelled as “shut-ins”: those who, for various reasons, cannot attend worship in their desired or home congregations. This opportunity for mediated worship experiences can be very important for those in hospitals, care facilities, or on assignments that take them away from their home worshipping communities. Mediated worship has given them a way to re-engage with their worshipping communities.

It is not only online or mediated worship, however, that has experienced a departure from the traditional ways of worship for a congregation in these pandemic times. With the increasingly common practice of weekly communion has come the question of online or mediated communion. It is here that the church is experiencing a seismic challenge, and the approaches taken by congregations and worship presiders cover a broad spectrum. Some worship leaders and congregations in various denominations quickly adapted to provide online communion, based on their understanding of theology and pastoral practices, and are now looking for guidelines on “best practices” for continuing the practice. Other worshipping communities have wrestled with questions of whether online communion is even theologically valid and pastorally helpful. It is a time of great chaos and consternation on the one hand, and great opportunities for creativity and reimagining a church for the twenty-first century on the other. The Faith, Order, and Doctrine committee of the ELCIC was asked by the church to study the practice of administering communion online, and their report is currently before the National Bishop of the ELCIC and the National Church Council. Some congregations are thus seeking affirmation of their still-evolving practices, and others are wanting to return to pre-COVID practices.

This volume of *Consensus* addresses some of the questions being raised about worship in a digital world. Many of these questions were addressed at an online conference held in June 2022 and hosted by the schools of the Saskatoon Theological Union (College of Emmanuel and St. Chad, St. Andrew’s College, and Lutheran Theological Seminary) and St. Thomas More College. This conference, entitled “Religious Community in a Digital World,” included two keynote speakers as well as a number of workshops, and we are delighted to include in this volume of *Consensus* three presentations given by each of the keynote speakers. The first keynote speaker was Dr. Deanna A. Thompson, Director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community, and the Martin E. Marty Regents Chair in Religion

and the Academy at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. The second keynote speaker was Dr. Jeffrey H. Mahan, who holds the Ralph E. and Norma E. Peck Chair in Religion and Public Communication at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, and is a resident fellow at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado Boulder. Both keynote speakers gave three presentations at a conference that was held, not surprisingly, in an online format. We are grateful that Drs. Thompson and Mahan graciously agreed to allow *Consensus* to publish their presentations in this volume.

This volume also includes two other papers that were submitted in response to the call for papers issued in the previous volume of *Consensus*. Sherry Coman, an Associate Professional Faculty member at Martin Luther University College and Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media, explores the experience of online worship from the perspective of a “film theological” and “cultural critical” reflection, along with insights from Benedict Biscop, a late seventh-century abbot. Worship provides an intersection between personal contemplation and devotion along with engagement with others, and Coman argues that mediated worship continues this practice. David Harrison, the DMin director of the Saskatoon Theological Union and an Anglican Priest, is the final contributor to the theme of digitally mediated worship. His DMin work has focused on online worship. In his paper, he addresses the question about online Eucharist and whether “an online celebration of the Eucharist is really a Eucharist” from the perspective of communications theory. Using communications theory, he looks at issues of reception, the active nature of the audience, new medias and networked societies, and ritual transfer theories, and concludes that people using digital technology can have authentic liturgical experiences.

These essays address many questions and ask many questions of the church as a gathered assembly. Yet there are still more questions that need to be addressed. For example: How will the new reality of digital worship impact the assembly of worshippers? What kind of impact will digital worship have on the size of worship spaces, stewardship, the support of the institutional church, and the training of worship leaders and presiders? Who will be alienated, and who will be included? Will this new model of church exclude anyone without access to technology and the internet? Will it include, in new ways, those who had been isolated from worship in the past? Further, will the ability for worshippers to selectively choose which congregation to worship in on any given Sunday lead to virtual, rather than spatially located, congregations? Will preachers, knowing that they may be watched by people from all over the world, consciously work on improving the craft of preaching the gospel? With regard to mediated communion, ever-new questions are being asked. The age-old debates of whether to use a common cup or individual glasses have become largely irrelevant when communicants, in their own homes, can choose for themselves how they will participate. Ultimately, depending on how you look at it, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought us, either with fear and trepidation or with excitement for a new way of being church, into the present—ready or not. The challenge for the church is how to “be and do” church in the future before us. How we meet that challenge remains to be seen.

The editors of *Consensus* are also delighted to welcome Dr. John Milloy as our book review editor and the Rev. Janaki Bandara as our sermon editor. Mary Joy Philips and I appreciate their willingness to assume these roles. Also, this will be the last volume of *Consensus* that I will work on in my role as co-editor with Dr. Philips and with the Associate Editor Greg Sennema. I retire at the end of December 2022, and so I will pass the baton to

another. My position as co-editor will be taken by one of my colleagues at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. Finally, to all who have contributed such wonderful articles, sermons, and book reviews, I say a heartfelt thanks! *Soli Deo gloria!*—To God alone, glory!