THE BODY OF CHRIST: TOGETHER IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE
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My young pastor friend spoke with excitement over the phone about her church: "We have found that we are the body of Christ in more ways than one!" she exclaimed. Her church was exploring the use of multi-faceted online media, both because of and in spite of COVID-19. She was equally optimistic about the future prospect and promise of strengthened connections continuing for her church, even after quarantines are lifted.

The next week I had a conversation with a lay leader in my own congregation. He spoke with deep disappointment about his experience with a church Bible study online. This group had met exclusively in a physical church building until the recent quarantine. When the group transferred to meeting online, to their surprise they found a high degree of bonding, community building, and fruitful study of the Scripture. Yet recently when class was supposed to meet in cyberspace, something disconcerting happened: no one showed up.

The lay leader wondered if the online experience had somehow become less meaningful to his group over time- in his mind the connection had become more meaningful. Then he discovered something he had not anticipated: the group had been meeting using another social media app, just to "hangout" rather than study the Bible. When we spoke, he was still processing his astonishment. Apparently, the new meeting was intended as an online "party." However, this was a party in which the members "forgot" to invite him. When he inquired why, most participants reacted with incredulity. "Well," one said, "its just online, don't take it personally." He experienced the same sinking feeling in his gut he had a year prior when he was the only guy in the office not invited to a golf outing hosted by his boss.

The lay leader found out that the instigator for the online "party" was someone who he believed lacked courage and the social clout to confront him about the things that she didn't like about this man and his teaching in physical space. The instigator later admitted that she enjoyed hosting a party online, which she could not normally do in her small apartment in physical space. It was more fun for her to have others take the time to drop by her virtual party, instead of attending a Bible study group. She had found new power and influence as an online "avatar" in virtual space.

Yet another lay leader of a Sunday School class that has met in physical space for many years, weathered the quarantine together using Zoom, and although they are planning to meet again soon in physical space, the leader gave many examples of ways in which their sense of togetherness was strengthened during their online video conferencing and sharing times. A shy man who had attended the class for eight years in physical space, lead in prayer for the first time online, and there is every indication that he will do it again next time in physical space with his new-found confidence. Two women in the class, one in Florida and the other in Michigan began a deeper friendship because of the online format and are now pursuing this new level of friendship upon the former's return to Michigan. Additionally, this same lay leader plans to move out of state yet is exploring the possibility of blending her virtual presence from a distance

(using a large monitor in the physical class to teach each week) with periodic face to face visits. While "gone," she will have in place a team of leaders in Michigan to carry forward the aspects of class life needed for physical space.

What do these real-life scenarios suggest? These scenarios suggest that online life is real for most today and that it is here to stay in some form even when the Covid-19 quarantines are lifted. They also suggest that people are going to continue to explore their sense of self and community online, including their church life. This being so, churches should consider ways to prioritize their engagement in and with online life in an unprecedented manner. Such conversations among a church's pastoral staff and lay leadership must also occur in a theologically sound manner. The body of Christ is finding itself together in more ways than one through new ways to share the same kinds of joys and challenges of community online, normally encountered in physical space.

Three baseline contentions should be considered for churches of any theological tradition. These are: that online life qualifies as community; that the holistic human self cannot be splintered; and that virtual reality need not attenuate life in a material world. After grappling with these baseline contentions, the church would do well to consider a *creative integration* of life online with life offline.

Creative integration becomes a commitment when the church understands that communities are primarily network connections. Networks have to do with sharing life in profound ways, primarily based on shared affinities. For example, a clique of colleagues from graduate school days who are spread out all over the world, with whom one shares ideas, papers and communication of various types might be one's primary community. This example of a significant network in which personal hopes and dreams are also shared on a regular basis can constitute a more meaningful community than one's physical neighbors.

Consideration of a creative integration of online spaces and physical spaces should preclude knee-jerk, Luddite, dystopian fears of "replacing" on-ground with online life. Too many get stuck here with the fear of replacement rather than adopting a positive stance of integration of online and on-ground in the life of a church with an eye toward developing creative new possibilities. A recent article in *The Christian Century Magazine* is a case in point in which the obsession with "either/or" caused a pastor to miss the joy and possibilities of integration of online and physical space. Although he noted that twelve people in his church took a turn leading an aspect of the online worship service, he was still concerned about his parishioners who made altars of their coffee tables in what he called "a collection of hospitality to one another and to God." Sadly, he "reveals" to us, they were actually hiding their real selves. Online they were inauthentic, in fact, "voyeurs of virtual social relations." He hoped to enlighten his readers that they must surely understand that sadly and truly, Zoom can't be church as these are "symbolic gestures of community, a simulacrum of communion…digital prayers for the restoration of worship in the flesh."[1]

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[1] Isaac S. Villegas, "A pastor's pandemic diary: Becoming the church," *The Christian Century* 137, no.12 (June 3, 2020): 35.

Online life need not be a splintered-self phenomenon because commitment to a theologically holistic anthropology works either way: people express their identities using their whole selves in virtual space (or they should admit that they do) as much as they express their identities in physical space. Such experiences will prove that humans are equally physical and spiritual beings and cannot be separated selves in a virtual world. Therefore, virtual reality, although able to provide a similarly integrated virtual experience, can never provide an equivalent level of satisfaction that physically integrated life affords. Yet, physical reality might also lack a level of satisfying experience that only the virtual can afford. Virtual reality need not cause someone to completely reject physical encounters, face- to-face communities or desires to experience the material earth. Neither should commitment to physical reality truncate what virtual life might be able to offer. The online and on-ground can be complementary, thus integrated by creative practices that highlight this compatibility.

Perhaps the best illustration of a Church integrating creatively online and physical space is the offering of the Eucharist in which those in physical space share this sacrament with online live streaming participants. Can this be done while also retaining the important elements of sacramental observance for the Church of the Nazarene? Yes, but if and only if the essential ecclesiastical characteristics of what it means to be the church AND the criteria of what constitutes a theologically valid observance of Eucharist according to our tradition are met. Such criteria can be met for an online observance if:

First a given local Nazarene Church's online observance is facilitated by a Nazarene minister who is conducting the online service from a central location acknowledged by all online participants as a valid sacred space occupied by a religious authority who is providing the validation of this moment of Eucharist.

Second, if each participant has a material piece of bread and grape juice in their possession, in order to emphasize the materiality of the sacrament and the importance and nature of partaking of actual symbols as the outward signs of an inward grace. Yet again, a digital image of bread and juice can suffice. I once did a virtual Eucharist for a young man in advanced stages of muscular dystrophy who was on a feeding tube. As his mother and I sat at his bedside with she and I having our own wafer and grape juice, he had in front of him a picture of bread and chalice. When we partook of the elements at the designated times, he with his computer cursor, which he could only move with one finger, would move the cursor in circular motions surrounding the picture of the elements on the screen, as he "ate" and "drank" with us.

Third, if all involved are helped to understand that the essential nature of the Eucharist is both a reflection of community and a facilitation of community among believers. If all involved are ushered into a unique sense of the presence of Christ who is spiritually present, beyond physical space, Christ's church is spiritually connected to God and to one another in cyberspace. (Forgive me here, but I will not be able to go into the rather long discussion in my doctoral dissertation comparing Wesley and Calvin's understanding of "real presence.") Wesley and Calvin are in approximately the same camp of the sense in which there is a real presence of Christ with His church during Eucharist. Thus, I can't help but share a quote from Calvin's Institutes in which he writes, what sounds like he could be writing today on our topic: "Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so

that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What then, our minds do not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space"[2]

Present experiences with virtual reality indicates that if you draw people to a virtual experience it need not create an either/or dilemma between the virtual and completely physical. [3] Therefore an opportunity to participate online in the Eucharist need **_not_** dissolve the desire to join in the future in on-ground physically present communal Eucharist. The effect can be just the opposite. The uniqueness of this online experience can be a catalyst motivating participants to hunger and thirst to come together with others in a physical room.

In conclusion, whether providing online groups, church services, or even the Eucharist, church leaders need to be in dialogue with their respective traditions' theological commitments. Negotiation from such dialogue should result in adaptations, fashioning church worship and practices with a commitment to integration. When no negotiation happens among those who need to address the issues of online and on-ground integration, then it is left to whatever designs other uninformed theologically religious entities wish to impose upon it. The result is that the church takes on a reactionary stance rather than proactively finding ways for the body of Christ to be together in more ways than one.

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[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans Ford Lewis Battles, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1370.
[3] Peter Rubin, *Future Presence: How Virtual Reality Is Changing Human Connection, Intimacy, And The Limits of Ordinary Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).