

Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero *Editor*

Church After the Corona Pandemic

Consequences for Worship and Theology

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Preface

For several years, I have been reflecting on the intersection of worship and digital theology. My academic career has always been two-fold: teaching and research on worship and theology, and administrative work with digital learning. When I started my first post-dissertation administrative position, a colleague introduced me to a Finnish scholar working at the intersection of theology and computer science. That began my exploration of the emerging field of “digital theology,” one to which I have contributed through publications and presentations. Even though I had been engaged in the literature and research, the ideas were still somewhat abstract, not yet connecting this work concretely with weekly Christian worship. On occasion, I would lead prayer in Zoom meetings or post a video recording of a sermon on Facebook, but I had not yet thought about an immersive experience.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Governments mandated public health restrictions, including the banning of mass gatherings. That following Sunday (March 15, 2020), I was thrust into the practicality of digital theology. Although I had already planned my cross-country trip for spring break and volunteered to preach at my former congregation upon my return, stay-at-home orders were already on the horizon. My congregation knew this would be the last Sunday for in-person worship, but no one knew how long the “exile” from the physical worship space would last. Like most congregations, we had to cobble-together some technology to livestream this worship service, knowing that subsequent ones would be online-only.

Throughout the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester, I was drawn into discussions about how worship and technology impacted one another. At the request of a colleague who had begun to explore the option of celebrating Holy Communion online, I penned an essay that entertained that possibility, which was later published, and upon which I expand in my chapter of this book.

A larger conversation among faculty at United Lutheran Seminary and regional Lutheran bishops emerged. What began as a narrow discussion about online sacramental practices quickly evolved into a broader discussion about theological commitments regarding online worship. Three of the four faculty members in that conversation are contributors to this book.

With contributions from scholars and practitioners, this book continues those initial conversations and advances the larger discourse about worship and theology. Exploring the lessons learned from the ongoing pandemic, the authors acknowledge that some assumptions cannot continue into the future. Although many of the contributors are Lutheran, COVID and post-COVID concerns are not limited to one theological tradition. This book does not provide a simple “solution” to liturgical and theological life in the future but rather serves as a conversation partner for readers in thinking through important topics moving forward.

While this book is a contribution to the emerging discipline of digital theology and may sound like an *apologia* for online church or digital worship, that is not entirely the case. The authors contributing to this book operate with different theological presuppositions and come to different conclusions on what post-pandemic worship and theology is and can be. While many articles, blog posts, and books have been published in the last two years that can serve as a “how-to” when it comes to livestreaming worship or engaging in pastoral practices through Zoom, this book treats those practices only in passing. Rather, this book assumes that the church will not return to its pre-pandemic life, and thus the changes wrought by the pandemic are now part of the church’s identity and life.

Contributed essays in this book are the result of pandemic-affected ministries. Authors share their reflections on how digital ministry is theologically and liturgically grounded. Using the four-fold pattern of the historic Western Christian mass structure of worship—Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending (with God as the one who initiates these movements)—as an organizational structure, this collection of essays discerns how the church exists during and after the pandemic. The essays provide source material for theological discernment and practical implementation, and an appendix provides some questions and activities that can augment discussions around the topics presented.

Thanks are due to my colleagues at United Lutheran Seminary and new colleagues I met through this project. Special thanks are due for the copyediting work of Aileen G. Zaballero, and for contributor Kayko Driedger Hesslein who served as a conversation partner throughout this project.

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Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero

Introduction

It would be an understatement to say that the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic changed the world; from domestic and international travel to education at all levels, from local economies to global relations—the pandemic drastically altered assumptions about public spaces. A whole host of activities were prioritized as health-related precautions, including physical distancing, wearing masks, avoiding crowds, and handwashing. While some of these practices have returned to a so-called state of “normal,” the world has changed and continues to change as the pandemic prevails. One significant (and historically central) aspect of life that changed was the church, both in its worship practices and in its theological reflections.

Worship and Theology Before COVID

In February 2020, *Living Lutheran*, the official monthly magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, published an issue devoted to “technology and the church.” One article is about living together in the digital age, written by one of this book’s contributors, as well as articles that highlight concrete tech-enabled worship and formation practices: using video conferencing to make baptismal sponsors present in worship, using technology to augment in-person worship, and constructing a tablet app for children to learn central biblical stories (Saunders 2020; Healy 2020; Favre 2020). For the most part, these latter articles deal primarily with in-person religious expression that has a technological component.

An additional article goes to the next level by asking how congregations can have an online presence without necessarily tying it back to an in-person gathering. One pastor notes how congregations like his are “using the technology of our day to supplement the institution ... We’re unbelievably connected, [like] no other generation has been. We’re trying to take advantage of that” (Grimoldby 2020, 27). In the same article, another pastor makes an even stronger case, arguing that avoiding technology could prevent people from encountering the world.

Although not the first to address digital/online spaces regarding worship and theology seriously, the articles in *Living Lutheran* were published a mere month before congregations had to scramble to figure out the role of technology during a pandemic. Theologians and scholars of religion have debated the merits of technology for generations, and most congregations have incorporated some level of technology into worship spaces. While it is not possible to detail all the literature here, a couple of notable contributions shall suffice (see also Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019; Sutinen and Cooper 2021). In her book *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, liturgical scholar Susan White was one of the earliest to look at technology's impact on worship (1994). Heidi Campbell's works on online religious communities and digital religion have assisted scholars in deciphering the interplay between technology and theology (2005; 2012; Campbell and Garner 2016). Liturgical scholar Teresa Berger's *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* brought new insights into White's original observations, delving into specific worship practices happening in the online environment (2018).¹

Then COVID Occurred

This brief survey of the literature demonstrates that technology had already been on the minds of scholars and practitioners when the pandemic forced quick adjustments in March 2020. Yet, many seemed ill-prepared—for some, the intersection of theology and digitality was still an academic exercise, or seen as something only wealthy congregations could accomplish, or that such experience was less-than the “authentic” in-person gathering. Others had incorporated some level of technology into their congregational experience, but not to the level demanded by the pandemic's restrictions.

The quick shift to alternative forms of gathering for worship, whether online or outdoors, left little room to theologically reflect on what was happening, let alone what the church might be or do once the pandemic had dissipated. For some, there was denial that the pandemic would last as long as it has and that such anomaly would not impact the regular everyday operation of the church. Pastors adapted the best they could, quickly moving worship to pandemic-friendly spaces, venturing further into digital formats, and finding ways to connect with their parishioners when they physically cannot be present. Scholars dug into scriptural and theological sources from their traditions to speak about theodicy, presence, sacramental efficacy, and many other topics.

Some pastors and theologians quickly responded to the pandemic by adapting practices to the context, while others advocated for a slower, reflective approach. One specific argument among some was the issue of communion, which for many

¹Berger (2020) more recently expanded on her thoughts in “@Worship Goes Viral: Catholic Liturgy Online in a COVID-19 World.”

Christians, is a central part of Sunday worship and thus a place where many theological topics come together. The topic of online communion spurred a meeting among my colleagues, me, and some of the regional Lutheran bishops. While communion was the immediate cause of the meetings, the participants soon realized that much larger theological and pastoral questions needed to be addressed. The group established a set of “key doctrines and shared affirmations” designed to guide further conversations about online communion specifically and worship in general. Some of those statements include (Happy Lutheran: Relating Faith to Life in Love & Hope, 19 June 2020):

- [#1] The foundation of our faith is God’s love for God’s whole creation seen in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.
- [#3] Theology and doctrine are always concerned about the *usus practicus* (the practical use)—theology is not done for the sake of argument alone.
- [#7] Through the power of the Holy Spirit, humans across time and space, including technologically mediated spaces, are held together as the one body of Christ. Holy Communion is an essential, necessary sign of this union, and a means to grow that union.
- [#8] Context matters. Even as we respect practices that unify us, congregational and denominational practices always should be interpreted faithfully by a specific community in a given situation, with particular attention paid to diverse voices that are too often marginalized or ignored.

These statements can serve as a guide throughout this book.

Looking Ahead

Organized around the four-fold pattern of Sunday worship—Called Together, Engaged in the Word, Fed by the Meal, Led Out into the World²—this collection of essays guides the reader to discern how the church exists during and after the pandemic, learning from the ever-evolving ministry practices during the pandemic. Each contributing author provides an informed opinion about the future of worship and theology.

Scholar of digital religion Heidi Campbell identifies three strategies toward digitally mediated worship (2020, 51). The first is *transferring*, which attempts to move the standard physical in-person worship to the online environment. Many congregations accomplished this by engaging audio and video capturing equipment in their existing sanctuaries, like livestreaming via YouTube or Facebook. Minimal

²Sometimes abbreviated as Gathering, Word, Meal and Sending, this four-fold pattern draws on the second-century writings of Justin Martyr as an origin for the structure of Christian worship throughout history, at least in those traditions that have followed the western mass (Lathrop 1996, 67–75). The alternative language used above emphasizes God’s initiative in each section.

modifications were made to ritual practices, although some refrained from sacramental rites during this time. The second is *translating*, in which worship leaders modified their ritual practices to fit the digital environment—for example, altering how the congregation engages in communal singing, including what styles/approaches to music were better suited for the digital environment. The primary space conveyed through the digital environment was often the physical worship environment. These first two strategies attempt to replicate standard pre-pandemic practices.

The third strategy that Campbell identifies is *transforming*, in which communities significantly change their worship practices and spaces specific to the digital environment. This could include creating new rituals that could only work in the digital space, altering how worship occurs, and employing digital art. Debates about digital communion or online Eucharist are often connected to this third strategy.

However, this book is not an overall *apologia* for digital worship or online church.³ The fact that these authors do not agree on that overall subject allows the various essays to be in dialogue with one another, and thus groups of readers can model this dialogue when engaging in these very topics for themselves. Thus, the essays provide source material for both theological discernment and practical implementation. Together, these essays will help the reader envision worship and theology as the COVID pandemic wanes, and the church prepares for the ministry of the future.

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³Such works include Kurlberg and Phillips (2020), and Campbell and Dyer (2021).

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Part I
Called Together

Chapter 1

Worship in the Face of Corona: Ritual, Place, People, and Polymodality



Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero 

Introduction

Setting the Scene

The drastic changes in worship due to the COVID-19 pandemic have no comparison in church history. Although the world has previously been plagued by pandemics, such as the Great Influenza epidemic of 1918, and congregations responded accordingly, the possibilities of alternate forms of gathering have and continue to make this current pandemic unique. Some congregations were already prepared to shift and incorporate technological tools to extend their worship. However, many were building their systems day-by-day or Sunday-by-Sunday, tweaking the infrastructure after each iteration of worship to address any issues. In some communities, the turnaround time between deciding to suspend in-person worship and constructing plans to livestream, video conference, gather outdoors, or identify alternative forms of worship were implemented only within a couple of days.

The immediacy of the situation required worship leaders and planners to focus on the question of “how.” How are we going to make this work? For those congregations where leaders preached from traditional worship spaces, this meant replicating the in-person worship experience with those outside the church building. Alternatively, worship leaders who could not physically be in their church created a different form of gathering from their homes or offices, some of which resembled a Bible study.

No matter the place, worship leaders continue to focus on their mission to gather the faithful around the Word (and sometimes the Sacrament), pray communally, and join in the treasury of church music both past and present. The answers to the “how”

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have fallen into place for most congregations, and while it is tempting to construct a guide to implementing COVID and post-COVID liturgy, that is not the intention of this essay. Rather, this essay focuses on the “why” and “what” of Christian worship events with implications of “how” to worship in the future, with specific attention to ritual and interaction, space and place, community participation, and modality.¹ Throughout this essay, I use the language of “event” as a reminder of the incarnational nature of the bodies that participate, no matter the mode(s) in which worship occurs, which prevents seeing the body as an object on the same level as others (Empereur 1999, 145).

Theologizing Worship

At the outset, it is important to define what is meant by “worship” and why it is done before addressing how such worship practices may look. I draw on liturgical scholar Ruth Duck’s five theological emphases (ritual, revelation, response, relationship, and rehearsal) as a theological framework for this chapter.

The first emphasis is “ritual,” which focuses on words and actions that help coalesce the community that performs them, and helps shape the participants’ personal and corporate identities (Duck 2021, 8). It is through these practices that congregations communicate and make meaning from one generation to the next. In one sense, the lack of this worship-as-ritual theology could be what separates digitally-mediated worship from an online Bible study; the former has the structure while the latter focuses on the proclamatory moment. As noted in the section below, rituals help create situations in which worship can occur and demarcate space (in this case, cyberspace) specific for worship; this is especially important for worshippers who use their computers for non-worship-related tasks.

The second emphasis is “revelation,” which emphasizes God’s real presence among those gathered for worship, in which God makes God’s self known among the worshippers (Duck 2021, 10). Various theological traditions locate God’s presence in worship in different places: in the preached Word (sermon), in the sacramental word (Lord’s Supper, Eucharist), among the gathered community, in sung and/or heard music, through ritual practices, or a combination of these. God can also reveal God’s self through art, architecture, and ritual objects, which speaks to the presence of these things being incorporated into digitally-mediated worship. Like ritual described above, the presence of revelatory items and speech can provide the operations to understand God’s ubiquitous presence among those gathered in-person, online, or in some hybrid fashion.

The third emphasis is “response,” which highlights the congregation’s “thank you” to what God has done and is doing in the world (Duck 2021, 11). Unlike the previous two emphases, this theological approach to worship often views God’s

¹Liturgical scholar Teresa Berger notes that these categories require attention by liturgical scholars, especially when inhabiting the digital world (2018, 5).

presence as outside of the worship space itself (primarily because God cannot be contained but rather is Sovereign) and that the worshipper's role is to respond by witnessing to what God has done in their life. Traditions that highlight *praise and worship* as the main reason for gathering align with this response emphasis. This theology of worship may influence decisions of what kind of interactivity (and thus what technology platform) is necessary for worship: synchronous in which all participants can interact with one another, limited-synchronous that is live but does not allow for bidirectional participation, or asynchronous, which is usually recorded at a different time.²

The fourth emphasis is "relationship," which can be understood as a combination of revelation and response (Duck 2021, 13). In his sermon at the dedication of the first newly-built Lutheran church, reformer Martin Luther describes worship in this relational way, such that nothing should happen in the worship space except that "our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise" (Luther 1959, 333). Some literature describes this as the word-answer (*Wort-Antwort* in German) approach to worship, setting up a dialogue between God and the worshipper. The dialogical understanding certainly has implications for the "how" of worship in that it assumes a to-and-fro that could be assisted or hindered by particular operational practices.

The fifth emphasis is "rehearsal," which understands worship as participating in God's work of justice and peace in the world (Duck 2021, 14). This approach brings together past, present and future, not by collapsing them but by describing them as part of God's all-encompassing time. Duck notes that of all the emphases described, rehearsal is the one that is usually neglected in the United States, but that some resurgence in the relationship between worship and discipleship has called attention to it again (Duck 2021, 16). Concerns about ability and access to technology in digitally-mediated worship would connect to this emphasis.

Most worshippers (scholars and practitioners) can find themselves in one or more of these five emphases. This theologizing of worship should be at the heart of determining worship practices in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. However worship is theologized, it can be assumed that the gospel in a multisensory and incarnational way through gestures, music, spoken and sung texts, and the like. Specifically, this chapter deals with three aspects: ritual, place, and people.³ Questions about liturgical participation are included in the section about people. These three aspects have been chosen because they tend to be the most changed aspects when engaging in alternative forms of gathering, whether in-person, online or a combination of the two.

²For further reflections on these modalities with regard to sacramental ministry, see Schiefelbein-Guerrero (2020b). Scholar of digital religion John Dyer uses different descriptors for these various modalities (2021, 11–13): "interactive" for synchronous, and "broadcast" for limited-synchronous.

³Liturgical scholar Ruth Meyers describes these "dimensions of worship" as action, space, and people (2014, 201).

Hybridity and Polymodality in Worship

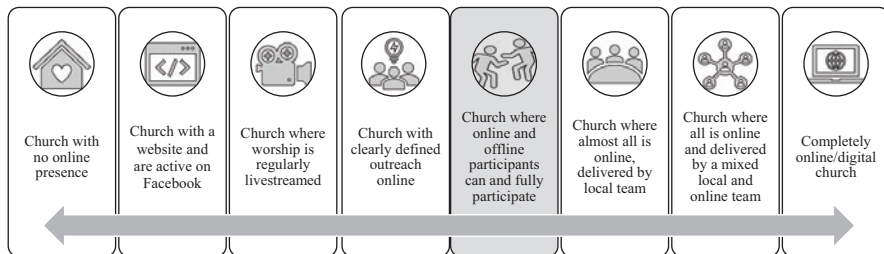
Before delving into those three aspects, it is necessary to go deeper into the phrase *alternative forms of gathering*. Technology has a permanent place in worship moving forward, although such places will differ in varying contexts. While some ministry leaders and congregations had already engaged with technology in a positive way, the pandemic has opened the possibility to others, including finding ways of bringing together the digital and in-person experience of worship and ministry.

Since the global pandemic, literature about *hybrid church* has emerged, calling on scholars and practitioners to think through what *church* (loosely defined) may look like once pandemic-related restrictions are lifted, and worshipers re-enter the customary church spaces.⁴ A common definition from the literature describes *hybrid church* as the blending of in-person and online environments, allowing for interaction between the two, not privileging one over the other. This definition relates to worship and includes outreach, fellowship, education, stewardship, and the other ministries found in a congregation. Digital theologian Peter Phillips notes that hybrid church is not just about “digital communications, or God online,” but instead is about how the church can operate “beyond walls” (2020, 5). This claim is one reason I have opted to use *alternative forms of gathering* in what I described to include gathering through non-technological means.

Even though the language of *hybrid worship* has appeared throughout the literature (see Dyer 2021, 13), I have opted for a different term, *polymodal worship*. I first encountered the adjective *polymodal* at a conference about inclusivity in online learning, which described different educational modalities coming together to construct a unique learning experience (Darby 2021). Due to my dual experience as a liturgical scholar and educational technologist, I saw parallels between what this pedagogical concept my emerging digital worship research about how it relates to in-person worship.

Polymodal as the descriptor of worship has the advantage of preventing confusion around how hybrid (and its related word ‘blended’) has been used in the past, which usually has dealt with concerns about style. In fact, some have observed that the disagreement around modality can be similar to the so-called *worship wars* about musical styles (Daubert and Jorgensen 2020, 19).

⁴As the reader will note below, my use of the term ‘hybrid’ deals primarily with modality (hence, my preference for ‘polymodal’). For a phenomenological overview of ‘hybridity’ and the related concept of ‘third space,’ see Bhabha (2004).



Polymodal Worship

Fig. 1.1 Spectrum of hybrid church. (Adapted from Sanders)

Spectrum of a Hybrid Church and Polymodality

Adam Sanders, mission advisor for the Birmingham District of the British Methodist Church, has proposed an eight-part spectrum of a hybrid church to account for the diversity of approaches as illustrated in Fig. 1.1 *Spectrum of Hybrid Church* (personal communication, 15 January 2021). In terms of worship, most pre-pandemic congregations were on the left side of the spectrum, either with technology having no role in the weekly Sunday gathering or with livestreaming as a secondary component to the worship space. However, the rush to alternative forms of gathering shifted most congregations toward the right of the spectrum. Some churches stopped at livestreaming (3rd on the spectrum), while others shifted to the furthest right-end, completely providing online/digital worship experience.

As the current pandemic continues to wane and more congregations return to their buildings, some congregations have resumed their pre-pandemic practices as a whole, with *alternative forms of gathering* as a secondary option. However, as illustrated in Fig. 1.1, *polymodal worship* (to the right of center on the spectrum), allows worshipers to fully participate in-person and at alternative places (including online). The alternative environment is not secondary to the in-person.

At United Lutheran Seminary (ULS), my current institution, we implemented a Polymodal Service of the Word, which is the institution’s primary weekly worship service. Not only did ULS have to bridge the in-person and online communities, but it also had to bridge the two physical campuses (Gettysburg and Philadelphia). Before the pandemic, each campus worshiped in their own physical chapel, and the only events that brought the two together were institutional events like Commencement that would happen off-campus in a neutral location. Figure 1.2 *Three “Locations” in Polymodal Worship* and corresponding Fig. 1.3 *Photos of “Locations”* illustrate how each community was brought together through video conferencing software. Each location can see the other two during the weekly liturgy, modeling the worship-as-relationship emphasis, especially as the community connects to one another and to God. The two physical chapels have screens, webcams, and microphones. Worship leaders can be in any location, but ideally, the