How we shared the bread and wine on Zoom **14 APRIL 2020**

Parishioners were asking for communion on Easter Day, says *Dana Delap*, and she wanted to feed them

WHY was I ordained? Because I felt a calling to feed God’s people. I had worked as a lay [prison](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/prisons) chaplain for eight years at HM Prison Low Newton. During those years, I became increasingly frustrated that, although I could preach, teach, and offer pastoral support, I couldn’t feed those who were imprisoned. I believed that the Christians inside needed the [Eucharist](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/holy-communionthe-eucharistmass) to sustain them on their journey of faith, just as I needed it. Ordination, for me, means the privilege of offering sustenance to those who want communion with Christ to grow in faith. And, at my ordination, I promised to faithfully minister the sacraments as the Church of England has received them.

Last month, I was locked out of my church in the beautiful village of Blockley in the north Cotswolds. We are the only church in the village, and, as such, we welcome Christians of every sort — high and low Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists, Roman Catholics, practising and lapsed — held together by our love of God, our close church community, and the Holy Spirit. As a church in lockdown, we have continued to pray together by using liturgy shared by emails, social media, pre-recorded services online, and even the post. There is no doubt in my mind that these were not sufficiently interactive to constitute “gatherings” in which the Eucharist could be celebrated. But, as [Easter](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/easter) approached, I began to wonder whether we could gather through Zoom and feel that familiar community connection. And I began to wonder about whether there was any way we could share Holy Communion together.

WHAT, then, could I do? What choices did I have? I could continue my fast from communion, but I was reluctant to forgo an Easter Eucharist. People in the church were asking for it, and I wanted to feed them. Easter is the time of the year when remembering Jesus through bread and wine is most important to me, too. After all, it was Jesus’ physical presence that caused Mary Magdalene and Thomas to profess their faith. Like a small child who cries when left alone, I had been crying out for the presence of Jesus in the sacrament of Holy Communion (and, before you ask, an *agape*meal is not the same).

I certainty could not distribute consecrated wafers to those who would normally come to church by some sort of socially distanced communion by extension. But neither could I preside privately at home for me alone, or exclusively for my household, while being live-streamed. To do that would mean that my community would go hungry, while watching me eat.

The Archbishops have described the watchers as receiving [spiritual communion](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/27-march/news/uk/churches-prepare-for-their-first-ever-serviceless-sunday). Priests in my diocese have been told not to preside at digital communion services at which those participating bring their own elements “to the screen”. Rather than encourage a remote consecration, I was to teach the watching laity that, as the priest presides and consumes the elements, they are taking spiritual communion.

I believe the historic concept of spiritual communion comes from the ministry to the sick, in cases where the person is physically unable to receive the Eucharist owing to illness. I am not convinced that it can be shoehorned into the extraordinary and unprecedented times through which we are living. As I understand it, the problem that spiritual communion seeks to address is an inability to consume the elements; that is not our current challenge. The question that faces us today is about physical consecration and physically gathered community, not consumption.

[Advice on the C of E website](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Guidance%20on%20Spiritual%20Communion%20and%20Coronavirus.pdf) says that the Church is not defined by the building, but by being together as members of the Body of Christ. At a time when we are working to “set God’s people free”, it seems strange to encourage them to celebrate the Eucharist on their own, while the laity receive a spiritual communion that lacks any physicality. If we are genuinely setting God’s people free, then such clericalism is surely an anathema. It is exclusive and excluding. Canon B5 allows clergy to lead worship appropriately in unusual circumstances. Surely, the [Covid-19](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/coronavirus) lockdown is one such context.

WHAT does it mean to believe in a priesthood of all believers? We celebrate the Eucharist among the People of God never privately, but in a gathering of two or more. Do we need to be physically present together? Possibly. But we seem to have made a physically gathered community paramount. Usually, and in more normal times, we are more pragmatic about who can receive. We know that there will be people present at our services who do not have a significant intellectual understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist, but we no longer exclude them from receiving bread and wine. Nor do we demand attendance at the confession or the consecration if carers and junior church leaders want to receive communion. When it is not possible to gather physically, can we gather online to talk, laugh, exchange the Peace, offer pastoral care, and genuinely be Christ-like to one another? Yes, we can.

What is the essence of consecration? Surely, it is the work of the Holy Spirit, whose action is not contained within the crusts of a loaf, the walls of a church, or the doctrines of the Church, but who, through God’s grace, meets us in bread and wine. We unite with one another when we gather for communion, but also with the saints and witnesses of our faith through history. And what part does intention play, both mine and my congregation? There are so many more questions and an understandable reluctance by our church leadership to make a theological statement without consideration.

LAST Sunday morning, the glorious first Sunday of Easter, I asked my congregation to bring bread and wine to their front rooms and kitchen tables. I was aware that the situation was domestic, but I want to believe in a God who meets us in our homes and places of work, as well as in our churches. We had a short service of Holy Communion on Zoom, at which I and many of the 90-plus people who joined me shared together, as our Saviour taught us whenever we gather together. They intended to be fed by Christ with the sustenance that they need for their ongoing journey during their isolation, lockdown, and Covid-19 illness.

As I reflect on the service, I think that it was the least-worst way to offer Holy Communion. I do not think that I will need to offer it again, unless we are still locked down at Christmas. But it was a gathered community, it was seemly and reverent, and people who were there have described it as a community communion. Maybe it was even a little more inclusive than communion in church might have been, because I was in my home and so were the congregation. We made a holy space for God into our Sunday to Saturday lives.

Our sisters and brothers in other denominations have been pondering the same big theological questions during this pandemic. I hope that the [House of Bishops](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/house-of-bishops) will spend some time considering the work of those whose area of study is of digital worship — for example, as [CODEC](https://www.dur.ac.uk/digitaltheology/) (Centre for Digital Theology) at Durham University.

IT MAY be that I am clinging to the Eucharist as Mary did to Jesus. I know that, in presiding, I have broken my promise of obedience to my bishop. I am sorry that I could not find a way to reconcile obedience with what seemed to me a deep need among my congregation. As one member of my congregation put it, “whilst we may not have celebrated Easter today as we normally would, God doesn’t wait for when we’re ‘ready’ — if anything, the resurrection is all the more powerful amongst time of distance and suffering. That’s not to make suffering trivial, but, to me, that’s why we had communion today — we do what we can, and that’s okay.”

When I was part of the Liturgical Commission group working on the Ordinal, we considered long and hard the word “watchman”. We looked in vain for a word that was less gender-specific, and failed to come up with anything better. Yet, I know that in this issue we need some watchmen who can look at the signs of the times and debate well the issues that I have raised. But I do feel that I have been in good company. Jesus was always getting in trouble for the things that he ate and the people with whom he ate them. But he asked us to eat with him whenever we gathered, and his calling to feed his sheep is ringing in my ears as the farmer on the hillside opposite the vicarage checks his flock.