Virtual worship has become the people’s work

Discovering the limits—and possibilities—of common prayer via Zoom

by Bryan Cones in the August 26, 2020 issue

Every Window in My House, Window 2, by Hannah Smith Allen

When news broke in March that COVID-19 was closing churches in my state, it took a few days for the reality to sink in: How, if at all, should the church gather? Like other church leaders, I felt caught between congregational expectations, denominational restrictions, and the pressure to reinvent the liturgical wheel. My midsize, suburban congregation had been trying to nurture the full participation of the people in worship. How would we continue this effort without meeting in person?

An even greater challenge was posed by another liturgical principle: that the primary symbol of the liturgy is the gathered assembly itself, which refracts grace in its gathering and movement, its word and song, its washing in baptism, and its sharing the eucharistic meal at the common table. In the absence of actual bodies, such a symbol seemed impossible.

Something adaptive was in order, a wedding of the scattered accessible pieces of the liturgical storehouse and the brave new world of video conferencing and social media. My church decided to use Zoom—and soon made some surprising discoveries about our common prayer.

At the heart of liturgy lie the people's work and public service. To even try to engage these things, we needed to gather and greet one another in real time. On this front, it turns out Zoom is an improvement on the banks of forward-facing pews in our church building. Instead of the back of so many heads, we see a sea of faces—which casts in digital relief the idea that the church is simply people joined in common prayer and purpose. The ten minutes we give to gathering and greeting one another helps to build the relational component that shifts a group from a social gathering to an assembly ready to do its work.

What's more, in the absence of table, bread, wine, water, and font, that primary symbol of the liturgy—the assembly—has no competitors. Yes, without gathering in person that symbol is limited in the shapes it can reveal. Yet the absence of the building and its hierarchical sorting of people—pews for some, chairs for leaders, all in greater or lesser proximity to the table—also serves to level the assembly: on Zoom, everyone gets the same box. My collar might mark me as presider, but most screens only show a few people at a time anyway and won't always show me. I may speak more often than most, but when I am not leading prayer, my image settles among the rest.

If anything the role of presider has been eclipsed by the “virtual verger”—a digital minister of ceremonies who manages muting and screen sharing and generally keeps us moving through the service. So while the mediation of Zoom diminishes the thick, embodied interaction of gathering in person, it also makes room for a differently ordered gathering marked by a greater equality, one that our church building inhibits by its very shape.

Given the limits imposed by screens, cameras, and microphones, our worship is inevitably heavy on words. The big question is who says those words and how.

I have limited my presiding role to opening and concluding prayers, leading a remembrance of baptism over bring-your-own bowls of water, and occasional preaching. While in Episcopal churches the reading of the Gospel is generally done by a deacon or priest, this seemed like a good time to join other Christian churches in giving others among the baptized a chance to read the stories of Jesus and speak in his voice, along with proclaiming other readings as usual. We have also been breaking up longer prayers with additional responses, as well as adding call-and-response litanies. Each week we designate a person or family to serve audibly as the assembly while others remain muted.

The chat feature within Zoom has become another place for the assembly to speak up—something that rarely happens in person at this relatively formal, overwhelmingly white congregation. The chat box chirps here and there with thanks to the leaders or responses to the readings and preaching. During the prayers of the people, it hums with specific intentions during the longer-than-usual silences built into the prayers; one leader described it as a “microwave popcorn” sort of prayer, with each invitation bringing first a few pops and then a burst that trickles back into silence.

Sometimes the chat box has a hard time keeping up. The result is that it seems there are more voices active than during an in-person service—including some we never hear there. The prayers of the people have become just that. The number of voices suggests to me what liturgical theologian Aidan Kavanagh describes as the “many-to-many” interaction that is a hallmark of rich common prayer.

While the expansion of voices on Zoom has been a happy surprise, there are some limits, too. Screen-sharing a service bulletin intensifies the already text-heavy nature of our Episcopalian modes of prayer. We have made attempts at some

embodied gestures: I extend my hands in greeting and blessing and to lead prayer; those gathered pour water and sprinkle one another for our remembrance of baptism. Still, it is hard to call our Zoom service ritual. The absence of bodies rules out their movement together, along with any touch associated with the sign of peace, blessing, or communion. Overall our time together remains a service of the word.

Nor is it really possible to blend our voices in song, though we are singing together on mute. The limits of the platform prevent any sung liturgical prayer. It's mostly words, then music, then words.

Then of course there is our hunger for communion, which this congregation celebrated weekly before the suspension. I know of many congregations that so value a weekly Eucharist that they have continued the practice in ways adapted for online celebration. I know this decision is driven by pastoral concern and a hunger for all that Eucharist can mean. I also worry that such adaptations tend toward a medieval understanding of the transformation of bread and wine—and at times a tight focus on the presider. The primary symbol of the assembly blessing and sharing a thanksgiving meal is hard to discern.

At the same time, I have heard from some parishioners that they are celebrating a kind of "home eucharist" with bread and wine of their own. I had prepared and sent people a prayer book for that purpose, which includes a longer table prayer for Sunday that echoes the Great Thanksgiving. Now I wonder if we might attempt a group prayer over Zoom, not a Eucharist but Eucharist shaped, with each household preparing and setting its own table.

Following some Reformed traditions, we could have a leader read a scriptural warrant before praying a Great Thanksgiving, leaving out the words of Jesus on the night before he died. A more communalized prayer—such as the United Methodist Great Thanksgiving for Laity Sunday, which includes parts for various leaders other than the presider—might enhance the difference in a helpful way as well.

There are limits to such a practice, in particular the loss of shared bread and common cup beyond one's own household. And many of our members live alone. But my hope is that trying this might suggest communion in a different key. It could point to the eucharistic dimension of all meals. It could empower all Christians to "do this in remembrance of me." And "making eucharist" in multiple locations while

joined over Zoom might reveal a dimension of the eucharistic mystery that isn't always clear: the sending of those who celebrate it out to refresh and nourish the world.

The question I have been asking myself through all this boils down to something like this: But is it liturgy? Is it liturgy as my congregation has understood and practiced it—the full, conscious, and active work of a Christian assembly that makes present, renews, and carries forward in a living symbol the saving work of God in Christ?

It isn't Eucharist. But the genus liturgy extends beyond the table. The liturgical hours of prayer at morning, evening, and night rely solely on the assembly gathered through word, prayer, and song. Liturgy does not require a meal.

What liturgy has required, however, is an actual living and gathered assembly as its symbol (even if at times in history that group was reduced to a priest and an acolyte). At best, online prayer offers only an approximation of that primary symbol, present yet mediated through digital technology and flattened in the process. If the human body is the "arch-symbol" of the church's prayer, as theologians such as Louis-Marie Chauvet insist, then the inability to gather physically makes it hard to identify our Zoom gatherings with our in-person worship.

Comparison may not be helpful here. It is likely to lead only to disappointment, to regular references to exile and the other metaphors for lack that have marked, with good reason, much theological reflection on the pandemic. At my congregation, however—and I doubt we are alone in this—it seems we are indeed doing something new, reconfiguring what we have and modifying what we can to produce a new pattern of prayer. What I am hearing from our members is that whatever this online thing is, they are finding it nourishing. They are noticing the value of hearing from many voices. While they miss gathering in person, they are eager to continue this form of prayer even after it is safe enough to reunite.

This online service has become the people's work, and I am noticing that members are taking up roles that they might not try out in person. They seem more willing to share their own unique contribution to the gathered symbol of the assembly—including suggesting alterations to our prayer. Our prayer book didn't anticipate an event like this (how could it?), and this seems to have released any constraint people had regarding common prayer. We are diving into something like the "ordered liberty" of the Reformed traditions, with more emphasis on the

“liberty” than ever before. And I suspect that the expansion of leadership and voices will influence our common prayer when we gather again, too.

Do our Zoom services function as public service, the way liturgy should? They are certainly prayer, and they are reasonably public (though you do need the link to join). Live-streaming the Zoom gathering on Facebook allows another form of participation: less active than Zoom itself but more outward-facing even than our in-church gatherings. And here is where I see public service at play: the image that appears on Facebook is precisely that sea of faces gathered for prayer, no longer hidden in a building. It reveals a church not hierarchically ordered—not even particularly organized at all—yet still able do its work, modeling a kind of fundamental equality while doing so.

Kavanagh says that Christian liturgy is not prayer so much as a way of “church doing world.” If so, I think my congregation and others are getting at some new form of the church’s common prayer. It’s a form that proposes in its primary symbol a discipleship of equals emerging into a new space for mission.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “How do we gather now?”