

A question of digital Church

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As I navigate the complexities of life during the pandemic of 2020, I keep coming back to Theological Surprise. I call it surprise, because the places and faith conversations I have been called into have been completely unexpected, astonishing, and exciting. My imagination has been fired in ways that it never had been before. The adventure of helping people become disciples has never been so rich. God started surprising me the first week after we closed the church, as I started pondering the question many priests were asking: “What are we going to do now?”

I am a priest serving in the Diocese of Edmonton. If you had asked me before this pandemic if I should be leading services online, I probably would have laughed at you. One of the reasons that I love our Christian faith is that it is so incarnational. Faith is expressed in the specificity of a particular place, with flesh and blood people who laugh and argue and drink coffee together. We celebrate in a building that has been loved for several generations. Our Altar Guild sets out the bread and we physically drink from a common cup. I love the whole drama of Sunday morning: from opening the building while it is still dark, to practicing my sermon, greeting people as they come in, celebrating Eucharist, praying with someone in the foyer, laughing over coffee, and being the last to lock up. Other than having a website, digital was not part of our community life before the pandemic.

When COVID-19 happened, my first thought was about the people in the congregation who would be isolated and nervous. Their weekly church routine was gone. The first thing we did was set up a phone tree to check in with everyone in the parish. The second was that I subscribed to a digital platform that I had heard of but never used: Zoom. This marked the beginning of my Theological Surprise education.

My first thought was that, since people were at home anyway, why not invite them to pray the Morning Office with me? I sent out a parish wide

email with an invitation to pray with me and instructions for joining over Zoom. That first Morning Prayer had a few people. We read the readings, and I gave a reflection. The next day, there were more people, and then a few more joined, until we had between 25-30 per day regularly attending. I learned to stop giving reflections and to open the floor to what I called ‘Holy Conversations about the readings.’ People asked questions; shared concerns and fears; explored faith and grace. After the service, we stayed around for ‘virtual coffee hours.’ A couple of weeks later, we started to meet online on Sundays as well. There were too many people for conversations but we’re still grateful that we were able to see other people and to worship together.

The Theological Surprise came to me when I realized that we were really connected across our screens. The people gathered for daily and Sunday worship were not a pseudo-community; it was real. I looked forward to visiting and praying with my daily prayer community. It struck me that, if I had tried to gather a worshipping community rooted in the Daily Office at the church, then, at best, I would have gotten a couple of people. To have 25-30 people praying regularly was something just shy of a miracle. In fact, it has been one of the best things to happen to me in all of my 17 years of ordained ministry.

People supported each other, shared with one another, and prayed for each other. When people started asking if we could do communion online, I didn’t know what I thought. Before COVID-19, I would have passed over the suggestion of online communion with hardly a thought. But now, given the depth and reality of our digital community, I started to wonder and pray about the idea. Of course, I stayed within the bounds of Canadian Anglican practice. But I did start to ask the question: what if...

Once I started asking this question of myself, I got a phone call from a parishioner. She was in tears of joy. I wanted to know what had moved her so much. She told me that she had been watching a Roman Catholic Mass on television with Pope Francis presiding. She told me that she had had this really sudden and strong desire to have communion, so she got bread and a little bit of wine. She placed them on a little table in front of her and prayed until the pope “consecrated” her small offering. Then she communicated herself. I wasn’t sure how to respond. It is not in my nature to tell her that she shouldn’t have done that. Instead, I decided to explore a little more what happened in her living room. I asked, “and how was that for you?” And she said, “Oh, Steve, I wept and wept and wept. The Holy Spirit was right there with me. The love of God is so beautiful.”

I still don't know what to think of this. I don't believe that we can do theology based only on a personal incident. But what struck me was the surprise of the situation. Here was a parishioner who was closed in her home, hungering for communion. Something powerful happened. We can call it spiritual communion, perhaps. Only God knows, but it captured my Theological Imagination. It occurred to me that as Christians, we already believe in deep Theological Surprises. We believe that the infinite God became flesh in a tiny child. We believe that the small piece of bread I pray over becomes the life-giving body of Christ. After these profound Theological Surprises, it seems quite a small movement of the Theological Imagination to see God feeding his people, gathered in digital worship, with the Body and Blood of Christ.