

Editorial: Church, virtual and physical

Questions about different forms of church and the role of technology are not new – but they have come to the fore in a particularly palpable way during the experience of Covid-19 lockdowns. What role do, should, or could buildings play in the life of a faith community? What does church mission and ministry look like without a physical gathering space? And what potential do technological solutions carry in such cases? The restrictions imposed on on-site public gatherings have generated a whole range of responses and adaptations – but are there some essential aspects of church life that are simply impossible without a physical expression, and if so, how do we respond to this problem theologically as well as practically? Although answers are inevitably provisional and highly contextual, they do begin to point to some important avenues to explore in reflecting on the future shape(s) of the life of the Church – even after we will be able to confidently talk about a ‘post-pandemic’ era.

One of the key examples of diverse views taken by different denominational stances (and at times varying views within the same tradition) regards the celebration of the Eucharist/Communion/the Lord’s Supper. (The preference for different terms for this central ecclesial practice is in itself a reflection of different theologies which play out in our navigating the world of physical and virtual expressions of the Church!) Several of this issue’s contributions touch on this key issue in Church life.

Tom Shields, writing from within the Roman Catholic tradition and his own experience as a parish priest, reflects on the sacramental aspects of online worship as well as the limitations of the latter. In situations where no full celebration of the Mass is possible, Shields is interested in the function which the priest performs in relation to authority, authenticity, and assurance – aspects he explores in dialogue with Katherine G. Schmidt and her own use of Louis-Marie Chauvet’s sacramental theology. For Shields, a virtual celebration of the Mass by the priest alone is rooted in the priest’s authority of acting in the power of Christ *and* in the name of the Church. Such an experience also highlights the personal nature of the priest’s own relationship to the sacramental communion and assures the visibility of the essential life of the Church.



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Coming from a Scottish Episcopalian perspective, Michael Hull argues a different line. Like Shields, he considers the notion of presence – that of God to us as well as that of us to one another. Whilst acknowledging God’s unquestionable presence in online or hybrid worship settings, Hull argues for the absolute necessity of a physical gathering for the celebration of the Eucharist in order for people to be present to one another. At the same time, he highlights the importance of a theology of spiritual communion – that is, a devotional practice which expresses the desire for Eucharistic communion. He maintains it is a gift in times of physical isolation, and a reminder of the impossibility of reducing the corporeal nature of the Eucharist to anything less than physical and bodily gathered.

Quite a different picture emerges out of a conversation between Ruth Gouldbourne and Steve Holmes, both reflecting a Baptist ecclesiology, and thus a very different starting point. Exploring a theology of ‘gathering’, they find themselves wanting to distinguish between ideal and ‘adequate’ ways of being church: the significance and different expressions of people seeing each other ‘face to face’, the experience of virtual gatherings around the Lord’s Table, and the anticipatory, provisional nature of any church expression. In this perspective, celebrating the Communion while being separated physically is not only possible, but an essential expression of the creative nature of a gathering community in continuation with the Church across the ages. They also note the communicative power carried by physical spaces and objects used in the life of the church, as well as all other nonverbal cues.

An emphasis on the language of the gathering space is also explored by Adam Hood, albeit in light of a distinctly different ecclesial context and concern. Reflecting on the role church buildings play in the life of the Church of Scotland, Adam Hood presents an argument for approaching church sanctuaries as a vital expression of the Church’s presence in local communities. He recognises the challenge facing the Church of Scotland as the custodian of numerous sanctuaries amidst swiftly diminishing numbers of churchgoers, but calls for a theological, rather than merely pragmatic, approach, and an embrace of a ‘parochial outlook’ understood positively. He draws attention to the role buildings play in people’s spiritual journeys, and invites readers to consider this role from both missiological and faith-formative, or pedagogical, points of view.

These four contributions reflect some of the theological range which characterises church life in Scotland. Whilst some of the ideas being put



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forward can be perceived to be in tension with one another, they also reflect common threads: the presence of God in different forms of Christian gatherings; theologies of embodiment and different ways in which the people may or may not be present for and with each other as they participate in worship services; the dynamic tension between continuity and change in the life of the Church; the inescapability of the ‘language’ of our gathering spaces as well as other nonverbal aspects of ecclesial life; and missiological possibilities and barriers inherent in online and on-site forms of worship.

A piece in the ‘Arts and Culture’ corner – a poem by Sorrel Shamel-Wood – also reflects this issue’s theme. In our Gifford Lectures corner, Jonathan Birch discusses physical spaces of a different kind – natural and urban sites of destruction – in assessing Jack Halberstam’s September Gifford lecture, “Unworlding: An Aesthetics of Collapse”. Finally, in our Book Reviews section, Jonathan Birch leads the way with a review essay which puts two publications in an unusual conversation, by authors who are famous for their collaborations: Frank Skinner’s *A Comedian’s Prayer Book* and David Baddiel’s *Jews Don’t Count: How Identity Politics Failed One Particular Identity*. This is followed by several shorter reviews. We hope to help these publications find their readers.

As we continue to inhabit this not-quite-post-pandemic world, and grapple with the fact that, at least in some contexts and some forms, online participation is here to stay, questions around the relationship between the physical and the virtual in the life of the Church will need some sustained theological conversation. We hope that this issue of *Theology in Scotland* has contributed to a start of such conversation.

Lina Toth
Editor

Date for your diary: D. W. D. Shaw Lecture

Prof Paul Nimmo (University of Aberdeen) will give the second in the annual series of lectures honouring *Theology in Scotland’s* founding editor, Prof Bill Shaw. The lecture, on ecumenism, will take place on 21 February 2023 in Parliament Hall, St Andrews. (Further details will be announced on our website and via social media.)

