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Thinking Again about Assembly in a Time of Pandemic

by Gordon W. Lathrop

I pour out my soul when I think on these things; how I went with the multitude and led them into the house of God, with shouts of thanksgiving, among those keeping festival. Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul, and why are you so disquieted within me? Put your trust in God, for I will yet give thanks to the one who is my help and my God.

(Psalm 42:4–5; *ELW*)

I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches."

(Revelation 1:9–11a; *NRSV*)

I hope that our churches continue to stay closed for some time—indeed, perhaps for a long time. And I hope that the churches that have partially reopened will seriously consider closing again. Reopening now is simply not yet wise. I actually hope that church will be the last public institution to reopen. It is not that I want that closure. I live from the assembly of the church. I have come to believe and trust in God again and again because of that assembly. I have been rightly turned toward the needy world there. And I have spent my life teaching the practice of this assembly and its meaning.

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KATHRYN BREWER

The Freedom to Close

But we cannot continue even this most central practice of our Christian faith if we do it to the hurt of our neighbors. Right now—and for the foreseeable future—our gathering would create such hurt. It was a church insisting on a public gathering after such gatherings were to be stopped that seems to have begun the devastating and killing spread of the novel coronavirus on the Navajo reservation. One Navajo woman—a woman responsible for a local senior center—lamented, in



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words that should burn in Christian ears, “Why did the church do that?”¹ But then it was a choir rehearsing in a church building, even while maintaining physical distance and safety practices, that contributed to the massive spread of COVID-19 in Washington State.² And a German Baptist church held a service on May 10, when careful opening was again allowed in Frankfurt; at least 40 people subsequently tested positive, with several hospitalized. The leadership of the church said that they very carefully observed all the rules.³ The examples could continue. In mid-summer, *The New York Times* reported that reopened churches had become a major source of coronavirus cases.⁴

More: as I write, we have no vaccine. Developing one and distributing it throughout the world will take some time. This virus largely remains a mystery that calls for our humility. We think we know that it is spread by social encounters, especially in closed spaces, not just by coughing or sneezing but also by singing—or simply speaking and breathing when we are near to each other. Assembly necessarily involves social encounters and certainly involves breathing, speaking, and singing! We do not yet even know if antibodies present in people who have recovered from COVID-19 or who have had the disease without symptoms are able to protect from further infection. Even if we are willing to undergo the risks of gathering for ourselves and as an expression of our own freedom, that Navajo woman reminds us that such risks are not just about ourselves.

Our freedom in Christ must always be about serving our neighbor. “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Galatians: 5:1). It is active, wise, practical love that rightly keeps our churches closed. And, as Paul says, “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

Martin Luther, in the midst of the Black Death afflicting Germany in 1527, writing to a plague-weary people, rightly complained of those who avoided careful sanitary practice, people whom Luther said wished to “prove how independent they are.” He went on:

If they make no use of intelligence or medicine when they could do so without detriment to their neighbors, such people injure their bodies and must beware lest they become a suicide in God’s eyes. ... It is even more shameful for them to pay no heed to their own bodies and fail to protect them against the plague the best they are able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if they had taken care of their bodies as they should have. ... No, my dear friends, that is not good. Use medicine; ... fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence, ... and act like someone who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body?⁵

Luther wrote this in a time when people had little idea of how disease spread, thinking the plague resulted from “bad air.” But his call for using intelligence and medicine as a means of caring for the neighbor and the city is still amazingly apt. We also now need to avoid places except those where our neighbor may need us: as in health workers needing to be in hospitals, grocers needing to be in grocery stores, or volunteers needing to be at food banks. If that means avoiding also the assembling of the church, then it must be so. Luther’s advice is exactly right. To the extent that we can, the burning city still needs us to stay home. That is how we may protect our neighbor and how we may begin to put out the fire.

Such staying home is not new. As Luther’s writing evidences, there have been plagues before that have elicited profound Christian responses. During the 1918–19 Spanish Flu pandemic, churches in

many parts of North America were indeed shuttered, with no liturgies held. Places that practiced closure (like Seattle), including in churches, experienced many fewer deaths than places that did not (like Philadelphia).

I know that so-called “Phase 1” or “Phase 2” reopening plans sometimes include provisions for physically distanced liturgies, with fierce cleaning, severely limited attendance, no communal speaking or singing, the font empty, and holy communion absent or practiced partially, for only a few or only in one kind. I do not mean to complain about any church that decides to do this. There are places in North America—albeit fewer and fewer as days and weeks pass—that have not yet seen widespread infection. Still, I do think that such an assembly in this time runs significant dangers, not only for itself but for the city, for the neighbors. We now know that even from such careful reopenings many cases of infection have followed. But more, I think that such an assembly has been robbed of many matters that make it church. Or, to say it more plainly, it strikes me that such a partial assembly is not worth the risk and the potential harm.

What Is Assembly?

So what is “the assembly,” that thing that we are so much missing? I think that this time of absence gives us a stunning opportunity to learn once again what we mean by that word. For Lutheran Christians—and for most other catholic Christians, as well—the assembly is a public gathering of people around the reading of Scripture, the singing of psalms and hymns, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the remembrance or lively practice of baptism, the intercession for the needs of church and world, the collection for mission and for the wretched and poor of the world, the thanksgiving over bread and wine that the community has set out, the mutual receiving of the body and blood of Christ in these gifts, the in-person sending of the bread and cup to those who cannot be with us, and the final sending of this whole company to be servants and witnesses in the world. To write the

Love of neighbor comes first.

details of this description now almost makes me weep at their current absence.

More, and to add to my longing: in assembly, all of these things are done as much as possible musically, singing through the whole event. And all of these things are done together, all of us participating. They are not done for us by someone else whom we watch. There will be a presider who serves

the gathering by leading us and there will be other ministers who assist us, but these are caregivers for our common action, not actors for our observation. The whole event is a bodily event, as if we all are one body. In fact, Paul called the assembly “the body of Christ.” And, as Paul himself fiercely argued in 1 Corinthians 11, the whole event needs to be open to all who belong to Christ, not excluding some on economic grounds or, to say the matter in our terms, on the basis of class, gender, age, or race.

This all is what we mean, in the first place, by “church.” Indeed, our word “church” is an English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means a gathering of people, an assembly. It was that word that the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures used to speak about “the whole assembly of Israel.” And it was that word that Paul—and then the author of Matthew and other New Testament writers—used for the Christian meeting, the meeting that came to be held especially on Sunday as an encounter with the resurrection of Jesus.⁶ For Christians, the whole church is a communion between these local churches, these local events in Christ, for church is, in the first place, an event.⁷ Prayer for Christian unity is prayer for the strength and truth of that communion, for serious links between these local events. So, our local assemblies, no matter how small (“where two or three”) or large, always need signs and instruments of that communion: our presider needs to be a minister who is recognized as much as possible by the whole church; our Scripture readings are best drawn from a lectionary the whole church uses; the gospel we hear needs to be the faith of the whole church brought to expression here and now; our liturgy and our hymns need to be the whole church’s liturgy and hymns. And, in communion with the other churches and in cooperation with them, we need to collect money and food to be used for the suffering and hungry poor outside of our community and to support the whole church in mission.

That is *assembly*. And speaking of my own faith, I, for one, cannot live without it. I think that no Christian can.



ISTOCK/LARS FORUJ LARSON

While singing may not yet be able to take place in assembly, it can take place at home. Many people have long since stopped singing; this is a time to begin again, and church resources and the church's cantors can help people sing.

But, even so, love of neighbor comes first. We cannot now meet. And if we meet in the partial way being described as a “phased” or “careful” reopening, there are serious questions about whether that meeting will actually be church. It may be something for some people. It may be a dear reminder of church, and that is not nothing! But if the body cannot act and sing together, if the event is largely done by a single minister, if not everyone can come, if attendance is limited and thus largely by invitation, if the vulnerable cannot attend, if people *from* the assembly *representing* the assembly cannot be sent carrying the holy communion in person to those who are sick, imprisoned, or otherwise absent, indeed if all the baptized cannot commune, the reality of “church” will be seriously compromised. Paul calls us to discern the body (1 Corinthians 11:29), and we now know that he means the whole, diverse, multi-gifted, non-exclusionary body of Christ that he celebrates in the very next chapter of 1 Corinthians. We cannot celebrate the eucharist in a way that intentionally keeps the members of Christ away. Holding the Lord’s Supper without discerning the body means eating and drinking God’s judgment.

Then, what are we to do?

Doing Without Assembly

I think we should simply dwell in the truth of our situation. We should wait. We should not try to fix quickly what is rightly missing. We should yearn for the assembly, but we should not pretend it can happen when it cannot. We have had too much of such pretense from our national governmental leadership. Now is a time for truth. But we should also receive gladly the gifts that we do have. And we should do whatever we can to help the many people who in many ways are suffering from this pandemic.

And what are those gifts? And how can we help?

We can help, in the first place, by not gathering. It is so ironic for me to write this when most of my life has been spent teaching and supporting the

weekly celebration of eucharist. But there it is: we can help especially by not gathering. Yet, we can still send financial support to our local congregation. We can also send such support to local food banks and various reliable disaster relief organizations. I know of one congregation where two people stand on the front porch of the church building at the usual hour of the Sunday assembly to receive—in a physically distanced way—contributions of food given to the food bank by people who drive their cars up to the nearby sidewalk. Others deliver groceries to the front porches of people who cannot leave their homes. Others use the telephone to stay in touch with people living alone and people who are among the vulnerable. We can call upon local and national governments to act more responsibly and honestly, with the needs of the increasing numbers of the poor in mind.

And the gifts we already have? Here is the root gift: we may trust the presence of Jesus Christ in his word. Martin Luther also wrote:

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.

After that it is necessary that you turn this into an example and deal with your neighbor in the very same way, be given also to him as a gift and an example.⁸

When we read the Scriptures in our homes, we may trust that this presence comes there, as a gift. The same risen Christ who interpreted to the disciples on the way to Emmaus the things in all the Scripture concerning himself (Luke 24:27) also comes now to us. This is the same Christ who, by the power of the Spirit in the assembly, gives himself in body and blood, feeds and forms the assembly to be the body of Christ. The Scripture we read always points us toward the eucharist, to eat and drink what we have heard. Although we cannot hold that meal now, we can recall that pointing: we can remember the supper and long for it. Remembering is deeply important, a cause for thanksgiving. But we can also know that our own meals, our own eating of the “daily bread” that is God’s gift, echoes the church’s eucharist as we give thanks at our table and as we seek to share food resources beyond our own tables.⁹ It is quite right that some of us pray, remembering Emmaus,

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest
And let these gifts to us be blessed.
Blessed be God, who is our bread,
May all the world be clothed and fed.¹⁰

Using the necessary restrictions of this time, the church that cannot meet *can* learn again to pray at home.

Praying at Home

One of the significant things that congregations can do is to help their members to pray, to be actively responsible for their own devotion. People can be encouraged to procure their own hymnals, their own books of liturgical and hymnic texts. Some congregations have invited members to borrow hymnals for a time. Symbolic practices—the sign of the cross, a bowl of water to remember baptism, burning candles, icons, a home altar—can be described and encouraged. A sermon from the

pastor, interpreting the readings as law and gospel in our time, can be distributed by post and, for those who have such access, by any number of digital platforms.

While singing may not yet be able to take place in assembly, it *can* take place at home. Many people have long since stopped singing; this is a time to begin again, and church resources and the church’s cantors can help people sing. In families that have musical instruments, their use to accompany singing or their use to introduce or follow common prayer can be encouraged.

Many people have also long since stopped reading the Bible and praying at home. Now is a time to relearn that gift. A letter from the pastor might help people find the church’s lectionary, help them find Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline, and help them learn how to use these resources themselves. Sunday intercessions used in the congregation can be distributed for people to pray themselves at home. A time on Sunday can be set so that the congregation knows that everyone, insofar as possible, is reading the Sunday readings, singing the Sunday hymns, and praying the Sunday intercessions at the same time.

And while the public forgiveness of sins, which also belongs in assembly, will be much missed by Lutherans, this can be a time when individual confession and forgiveness can be recovered and the “mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters,” which for Lutherans is also a means of absolution,¹¹ can be encouraged. Pastors can offer to meet a penitent online or in an appropriately distanced way, perhaps outdoors, to hear a confession and proclaim absolution. And pastors can teach the congregation the grace-giving importance that can be borne by conversations between lay Christians, perhaps by telephone or in a backyard.

I know that people are much tempted to add more to this list of what we can do now. Because of the widespread availability of electronic tools for social interaction, a variety of electronic “assembly” experiments are being made. I hope we will stop. A “virtual assembly” is not the assembly, nor is bread

and wine that I set out in front of the computer screen the holy supper of the body and blood of Christ. Here are reasons why:

- Not everyone has internet access and computer skills; the church must not be selective in its attendance; we are called to discern the body. Furthermore, in homes where there is a great deal of computer use during this pandemic time, it probably would be wise to turn off the machines in order to pray, to give the family a sort of sabbath from electronics. And folding the laundry or balancing the checkbook while the live-streamed liturgy is on the computer screen will not help our sense of engagement.
- Reading Scripture, playing recorded music, and preaching can work at a distance over such media, and for some people these can be helpfully integrated into the in-home common prayer, without taking it over. The internet would then be a good tool, not the whole message. But the body cannot be there, and the assembly is made up of bodies and the body, breathing together, praying and singing together, side-by-side.
- The eucharist takes place in the assembly, for the assembly, and by the assembly. We do not give the eucharist to ourselves, with our own bread and wine. Communion is not a thing we “get,” a commodity, but an event that happens to us and the whole assembly amid what the Formula of Concord calls “the entire action of the Supper.” Our Confessions thus say it this way:

But ... the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ by itself does not make a valid sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as Christ administered it, is not observed. ... On the contrary, Christ’s command, “Do this,” must be observed without division or confusion. For it includes the entire action or administration of this sacrament, that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are



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taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed.¹²

Note: “in a Christian assembly”! This passage may be surprising to some. Holy Communion is not consecrated by words from afar, over electronic media, even clerical words or biblical words, but by that entire action: a people together in thanksgiving to God, remembering and proclaiming the promise of Christ, excluding no one, and then turning to the needs of their neighbors. Reverence for the words of institution cannot be made again into medieval priestcraft. And the offertory in the church matters: bread and wine are brought by the community, but then they are presented, put on the table for the thanksgiving and to be given and received by all, while at the same time a collection is made for the hungry and for mission. Such an offertory does not take place in communion using a computer.

- Eucharist, similarly, ought not be celebrated by a few clergy, while other people watch electronically. The very clericalism which the modern liturgical movement sought to end could come

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alive again there. Indeed, our pastors should also be joining in the truth of our time, longing for the assembly to return, not using their office—an office given to them for the sake of the *assembly*—to have private eucharists for themselves.

- Eucharist cannot, as a solution, simply be left at a front door. Even in the communion of those absent from the assembly, the presence of a body and bodily words sent from the assembly are needed.
- In addition, the video recording or live broadcasting of complete services could once again, even if it includes a few lay assisting ministers, have the effect of making the people of the God passive, while it seems to give the pastor and the cantor something to do. Choices about making worship available should not only be about the pastor or the cantor having something to do. On the contrary, there is plenty of appropriate need for both to teach and counsel and help the congregation in the model that calls for Christians to pray and sing at home in this necessary time of distancing. There are certainly congregations gifted with brilliant online skills (and with no members without internet connections) who have found ways to strengthen community—amazing and inclusive uses of Zoom, for example—while continuing to know these are home devotions that are being strengthened, not substitutes for the assembly.
- If taken as substitutes for assembly, sustained use of these electronic means can have deleterious effects in the long run: worship once again thought of as a thing we watch; the bodily assembly thought of as unnecessary; the sacraments turned into commodities that we “get” for ourselves; the poor forgotten.

Rather, may we pray at home, treasure the gospel as Christ present with us, remember that we are baptized, stay in loving touch with one another,

remember the poor in our actions, and yearn for assembly. There is a long and beautiful Lutheran history of such prayer in the home. I think especially of the Lutheran Christians in Iceland, where through much of the time in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries the weather, the distances, and devastating volcanic eruptions made it difficult for the largely isolated farm families to get regularly to church. One important and beloved bishop of the church, Jón Vídalín (1666–1720), provided a “house-postil,” a collection of sermons for every Sunday.¹³ Well into the twentieth century, that book, along with the Bible and the hymnbook, could be found in every Icelandic home. These books did not supplant the parish church. Far from it: they kept its memory alive; they awakened the hunger for it. Could we claim that history again as our own?

I do think that the necessary absence of assembly may now teach us what assembly really is. In the mercy of God, may we come there again. And when we come may we celebrate with joy all that marks assembly, including singing and a full eucharist and sending to the absent and those in need. I do think we will need to be more careful. Perhaps we will bring our own hymnals again, while there are still a few books at the church that are designated for those who have none and that are regularly cleaned. Perhaps we will retain bowing to each other at the peace for a little while. Perhaps the washing of hands—not just of the presider but of all the ministers of communion, and not just symbolically—will become a regular feature of our eucharists. And perhaps intinction—long the most unclean means of communion—will disappear. Perhaps we will remember more urgently the collection for the poor and for mission.

The Bible on Waiting

While we wait, two passages from the Bible can help us. The psalmist remembers yearningly, as from a kind of depression, that there was a time when he or she went rejoicing among the liturgical assembly of Israel. We are like the psalmist. We

are right to pour out our soul when we “remember these things.” But then the psalmist and we all are called to trust in God. We will come to that assembly again.

And John, the seer of the Revelation, was in exile, alone as far as we know. But he could keep the Lord’s day, the day of the resurrection. In the Spirit, he sees the presence of the risen one, the very one who holds the churches in his hand, the one who has the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1:12–20). The seer is not in church; he is alone. He can think about the word alive in the churches and about the holy meal, “the marriage feast of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9; cf. 2:7,17; 3:20; 22:1–2), but he is not celebrating it. Still, by seeing the presence of the risen one, he is put in communion with the churches. And he is given the task to be in touch with them by letter, encouraging and correcting them. We, too, can see the presence of the risen one with us in prayer and the word, on the Lord’s day, in the Spirit. In the risen Christ, we can be in communion with the whole church, not least through the written Scriptures, even though we cannot now be together. But we can wait together until our exile is over to come, in love and great joy, to the Lamb’s feast.

The Scriptures give us words for our waiting.



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Notes

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6. On the biblical meanings of “assembly,” see Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 31–37.
7. On church as an event, see Timothy J. Wengert, “A Brief History of the Marks of the Church,” in Gordon W. Lathrop and Timothy J. Wengert, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 27–28.
8. Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels,” in *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 2, *Word and Faith*, ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 32–33.
9. On the important idea that the Lord’s Prayer indicates that our daily meals are holy and that they are meals of the kingdom, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 101–102; see also Lathrop, 76–77.
10. Common table prayer.
11. “The Smalcald Articles,” III:4, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 319.
12. “Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration,” VII:83–84, in Kolb and Wengert, 607.
13. See Jón Vidalín, *Whom Word & Waves Obey: Selected Sermons of Bishop Jón Vidalín*, trans. and ed. Michael Fell (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).