

ACTING OUT AND ACTING IN: ANALYZING DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL LITURGY

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ABSTRACT: Liturgical practices are ways in which we act our faith out — expressing it to one another and the world — and ways that we act our faith in — shaping and sustaining ourselves as members of the body of Christ. Acting out and acting in are not separate, opposed, or sequential. Rather, they are two different aspects of the same human actions. Within this broader framework, I offer six functions of human action in Christian worship services and ask how well they work in digital settings. 1. Rehearsal: Christian liturgy is a pedagogy for the whole self–body, intellect, emotion, and will — that rehearses the congregation in Christian affections. 2. Recognize: During worship services, Christians recognize one another as beloved children of God, which helps them to live into that identity. 3. Regulate: Human beings are socially regulated beings, taking cues from one another about when we are safe and how we should respond to our environments. Elements of liturgy enable communal regulation of our nervous systems, emotions, and sense of well-being. 4. Remember: Our most treasured knowledge is stored in our bodies through communal ritual. 5. Resist: Congregations serve as social bodies that can resist oppression. 6. Rejoice: Worship services are often events of praise and joy. Online and virtual liturgies are very strong media through which Christians can act out our faith. We can recognize ourselves and one another, as digital media can allow for intimacy and bypass stigmatizing social norms. Sustaining and empowering social bodies capable of resistance is another strength of digital liturgy and technology. These are primarily ways of acting out Christian faith. The means by which Christians act their faith in — rehearsal, regulation, and remembrance — are more difficult in digital and even virtual contexts, as they emphasize bodies in context and proximity. Christianity involves not only the whole person, but a community of people whose bodies respond to one another. Some of the challenges — such as inculcating muscle memory and facilitating synchronized speech and action — might be solvable in a virtual context. Others, such as embedding sacred memories in communal rituals, might not. In regards to still other functions, such as rejoicing, we know enough to appreciate the limits of our knowledge — including what might be gained, lost, or altered by digital mediation.

Le pratiche liturgiche sono i modi con cui esprimiamo la nostra fede — manifestandola verso gli altri e verso il mondo — e i modi attraverso cui esperiamo la nostra fede — modellando e sostenendo noi stessi come membri del corpo di Cristo. Agire ed esprimere non sono azioni separate, opposte né sequenziali. Si tratta piuttosto di due aspetti della stessa azione umana. All'interno di questa struttura più ampia, offro sei funzioni dell'azione umana nei servizi di culto cristiano e mi interrogo su quanto funzionino nel contesto digitale. 1. Esercizio: la liturgia Cristiana è una pedagogia per tutto il proprio corpo, intelletto, emozione e la volontà — che esercita la congregazione negli affetti cristiani. 2. Riconoscimento: durante l'esercizio del culto, i cristiani si riconoscono gli uni con gli altri come amati figli di Dio, e ciò li aiuta a vivere in questa identità. 3. Disciplina: gli esseri umani sono esseri disciplinati socialmente, che traggono spunto gli uni dagli altri su quando siamo salvi e su come dovremmo rispondere ai nostri ambienti. Elementi della liturgia attivano la regolazione comune dei nostri sistemi nervosi, emozioni e senso di benessere. 4. Ricorda: la nostra conoscenza più apprezzata è memorizzata nei nostri corpi attraverso rituali comuni. 5. Resiste: Le congregazioni servono come corpo comune che può resistere alle oppressioni. 6. Rallegra: i servizi del culto spesso sono eventi di lode e gioia. Le liturgie online e virtuali sono dei mezzi molto forti attraverso cui i cristiani possono esprimere la loro fede. Possiamo riconoscere noi stessi e gli altri, in quanto i media digitali consentono l'intimità ed evitano la stigmatizzazione delle norme sociali. Sostenere e rafforzare corpi sociali capaci di resistenza è un'altra forza della liturgia digitale e della tecnologia. Queste sono vie primarie di espressione delle fede cristiana. I mezzi attraverso cui i cristiani esperiscono la loro fede — l'esercizio, la regolazione e il ricordo — sono più difficili nei contesti digitali e perfino in quelli virtuali, in quanto enfatizzano il corpo nel contesto e nella prossimità. La cristianità coinvolge non solo l'intera persona, ma una comunità di persone i cui corpi rispondono uno all'altro. Alcune delle sfide — come inculcare una memoria ai muscoli e facilitare discorso e azioni sincronizzate — potrebbero essere risolte in un contesto virtuale. Altre sfide, come fissare memorie sacre in rituali comuni, al contrario non lo sono. Riguardo ad altre funzioni, come la celebrazione, ne sappiamo a sufficienza per apprezzare i limiti della nostra conoscenza — incluso quello che potrebbe essere guadagnato, perso o alterato dalla mediazione digitale.

KEYWORDS: Liturgy, Digital Worship, Ecclesiology, Christian practice, Online Church

PAROLE CHIAVE: Liturgia, Culto digitale, Ecclesiologia, Pratica cristiana, Chiesa online

Experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic have changed the conversation about the use of digital and virtual technology in church. While some theologians previously argued about whether digital mediation

was good or bad for churches, such binary framing was never particularly useful. In this article, I ask the more granular question of what particular functions of human actions in liturgy are more or less well suited for digital mediation. My goal is to assist theologians and church leaders in nuanced consideration of liturgy during a period of rapid change. My theological emphasis is epistemic humility concerning both Divine and human activity in church services.

By focusing on liturgy, I am taking a very different tack from communications scholar Heidi Campbell, a leading expert on digital church. For her 2005 book, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, Campbell studied three online religious communities. She describes these communities as social networks formed around shared religious narratives. They excel in offering supportive relationships of care, reflecting a shift “toward relationships over structures in traditional religious practice” (Campbell 2005, p. 193). In an essay published in 2022, Campbell shifts her description of online church from a descriptive to a constructive mode. She asserts that “[c]hurches have primarily become about producing a programmed event rather than building communal interactions and relationships” (Campbell 2022, p. 60). Campbell suggests that the event-based focus stems from a model of the church as *ekklesia* (assembly) and “an understanding of community that is defined by static institutional and familial boundaries, as well as spatial associations” (*ibid.*, p. 60). This model, Campbell argues, is inadequate to contemporary realities, whereas another deeply traditional model of church as *koinonia* (community), defined by relationships among the people of God, is more fitting and useful today (*ibid.*, pp. 70–71). By focusing on liturgy, I am not declaring myself a proponent of a particularly event-based view of the church. I am, however, acknowledging that church services have been an important part of Christian life for millennia and continue to be so.

Throughout this essay I will take as given that our lives are, in Teresa Berger’s phrase, “digitally infused” (Berger 2018, pp. 16–21). Further, I do not imagine that online experiences are somehow disembodied. Human beings are always embodied, even when looking at a screen. Theologian Deanna Thompson emphasizes that virtual reality is continuous rather than discontinuous with embodied existence (Thompson 2016, p. 11). I also take as given that God can do whatever

God chooses. The most basic description of what happens in church is a description of the actions of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that gathers the people; worship is received by Christians as a gift. I do not imagine that God is hindered by digital mediation. At the same time, liturgy, “the work of the people”, describes the actions of the worshippers. These actions — singing, praying, listening to sermons, partaking of the Eucharist, and so forth — differ in in-person, digital, and virtual settings. These differences are the subject of this paper.

Liturgical practices are ways in which we act our faith out — expressing it to one another and the world — and ways that we act our faith in — shaping and sustaining ourselves as members of the body of Christ. Acting out and acting in are not separate, opposed, or sequential. Rather, they are two different aspects of the same human actions. Within this broader framework, I offer six functions of human action in Christian worship services and ask how well they work in digital settings.

1. Rehearse

Christian liturgy is a pedagogy for the whole self — body, intellect, emotion, and will — that rehearses the congregation in Christian affections⁽¹⁾.

The theological term “affections” refers to deep-seated attitudes to the world that necessarily involve the intellect, emotions, will, and body (Craigo-Snell 2014, p. 46). One example of an affection is my recognition of my own sinfulness. This includes an intellectual assessment of my behavior, an emotion of regret, an ache in the pit of my stomach, and a will to do better. Another example is praise. The knowledge that God is worthy of praise includes an intellectual truth claim, an emotion of joy, bodily sensations and responses from chill bumps to shouting, and a will to praise God.

Theologian Don Saliers describes Christianity as a distinctive pattern of affections (Saliers 1980, pp. 8 and 11)⁽²⁾. Christians are formed

(1) I have written about this extensively in S. Craigo-Snell, *The Empty Church: Theater, Theology, and Bodily Hope*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

(2) Saliers interpretation of “affections” does not explicitly include embodiment.

in this pattern of affections through practices such as prayer and song, in which they engage their whole selves. In the various elements of liturgy, over the course of the liturgical year, Christians rehearse affections such as gratitude and lament. We do not rehearse bitterness and despair. Furthermore, each individual affection is held in relation with others in the larger pattern. For example, the Christian affection of praise is not mere admiration, but a praise for God's grace held in tension with the awareness of sin and lament for suffering. Liturgy is the rehearsal that shapes the participant in Christian affections and in a coherence of the self in which intellect, emotion, will, and body align (Craig-Snell 2020).

Jonas Kurlberg uses the term "persuasive technology" to understand some of the formative power of liturgy. Persuasive technology is a "design mechanism that seeks to sway an individual's behaviour and thought" (Kurlberg 2022, p. 132). Commonly used in the tech world, this term can be applied to everything from road signs to propaganda. Kurlberg frames liturgy as a form of persuasive technology that is distinguished from others by its aim, which is to draw "the gathered community into a dynamic and formative experience of faith" (*ibid.*, p. 131). This highlights both the possibilities and dangers of online worship. On one hand, "the digital application of persuasive technology is particularly potent for liturgical formation as it can utilize machine learning to precisely and repeatedly shape individuals through emotional triggers" (*ibid.*, p. 135). The same power that keeps us scrolling on social media could be harnessed, possibly, to turn our hearts to God. On the other hand, medium and message are always intertwined, and any persuasive technology "includes power dynamics and an element of tacit manipulation, or at least the danger thereof" (*ibid.*, p. 138). I note Kurlberg's helpful frame as quite distinct from my own. Rehearsal emphasizes the coherent integration of the whole self in Christian affections — including intellect, emotion, will, and body.

Digitally mediated worship services allowed some of this rehearsal function to continue safely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, digital mediation changes the bodily and sensory participation in liturgy in ways that might decrease the rehearsal function of church services. Watching church on a screen while sitting on a couch is a less immersive

experience of liturgy than being in a church building. Stained glass or sacred art is miniaturized or left off-screen. Incense does not translate. We are less likely to stand, kneel, or sing out loud. The sensations of a hard wooden pew or a folding chair, the vibrations of the organ or the drum, do not yet carry through computers. Even with a virtual reality headset that allows for an enhanced level of bodily engagement, the integration of the whole self in affections diminishes⁽³⁾.

2. Recognize

During worship services, Christians recognize one another as beloved children of God, which helps them to live into that identity.

Theologian Natalia Marandiuc writes about the process of becoming a self, describing recognition as a key element in this process. In this technical sense, recognition is an exchange with another person that “validates who, what, and how the person is” (Marandiuc 2018, p. 53). Marandiuc argues that “the self as such is formed and actualized in such exchanges” (*ibid.*). For example, a person who sees herself as compassionate is affirmed and encouraged when another recognizes her compassion. This is not simply a matter of acknowledging what is already true. Rather, it is through the (ongoing) process of recognition that it becomes true, that this person becomes compassionate. In Marandiuc’s root metaphor of home, the process ideally goes like this: A child is born into a home comprising loving attachment relationships. The others in this child’s home recognize him as a person who is loving and beloved, thereby creating the conditions in which his identity as a loving and beloved person comes to be.

This process can go awry. When misrecognition occurs, the process of self-becoming is inhibited or distorted. This happens individually, when

(3) The bodily and sensory participation varies from one member of a congregation to another based on levels of health, mobility, preference, and more. In listing a variety of possible sensory inputs, I do not imagine that every Christian experiences all of them. One of the most significant issues regarding digital and virtual worship is that of access: digital mediation provides access to many worshippers who have mobility issues or health concerns, while limiting availability to worshippers who lack reliable internet access, computers, or experience with computers.

a particular child is misrecognized as unlovable, and communally, when whole groups of people are misrecognized as inferior (*ibid.*, p. 55).

While Marandiuc focuses on home as the site of recognition, it is easy to see how congregations are also spaces where people can be recognized or misrecognized. There are several moments in a church service where recognition can happen, including the informal greetings when the congregation gathers, the passing of the peace, the sharing of prayer requests that honor the particular struggles and joys a person is facing, and singular moments such as baptism and ordination.

When I first watched a virtual reality church service, I was taken aback by the variety of avatars. While some people looked like animated versions of human beings, others were represented as cartoon characters, animals, and even fruit. The pastor of the service (a chimpanzee) greeted each one, including the banana, and spoke about the love of God in Jesus Christ, available to each and all. My initial surprise gave way to an overpowering sense of fittingness; that this is recognition at its best⁽⁴⁾.

I myself am Presbyterian, one of “the frozen chosen”. Pre-Covid, I would rush on Sunday mornings to get my whole family looking presentable before we went to church — like we didn’t just have a meltdown over something trivial. We tried to look like a family is “supposed” to look, unintentionally hindering the process of recognition.

In this virtual church, there was not a detailed sense of what avatars are “supposed” to look like. Each person chose how to present themselves from an enormously wide array of possibilities. The pastor and the other members of the congregation recognized them as beloved children of God. Particularity was not lost — rather, it was chosen. Bias and prejudice were, in this instance, thwarted by mad creativity.

Campbell finds recognition to be a strength of online religious communities. Although online anonymity can breed deception, “[s]elf-disclosure online can be easier for some individuals” (Campbell 2005, pp. 124 and 182). Campbell found strong behavior expectations within the communities she studied, stating: “[o]nline community members are to be treated with respect as people made in the image of God” (*ibid.*,

(4) I give thanks to Lilly Glover, a scholar doing exciting work on technology and theology, for introducing me to metaversal spaces and virtual church.

p. 186). Negative judgments based on physical appearances, clothes, or mannerisms do not happen in online communities the way they do in in-person churches (*ibid.*, pp. 177 and 183).

Of course, it is also possible that Christians turn their cameras off on Zoom or watch live-streamed services without ever communicating their presence. Understanding that recognition is an important function of liturgy might help church leaders address such issues.

3. Regulate

Human beings are socially regulated beings, taking cues from one another about when we are safe and how we should respond to our environments. Elements of liturgy enable communal regulation of our nervous systems, emotions, and sense of well-being.

Humans communicate and get in sync with each other through a lot of different mechanisms, including eye contact, brain waves, heart rhythms—the studies are numerous and overwhelming (Paul 2021, p. 216–239). I will focus on the example: body odor. Sweat contains an enormous amount of information that we pick up on — largely unconsciously — including: gender, age, health, and emotions such as happiness, aggression, disgust, and fear (de Groot, Kirk and Gottfried 2020). One study collected the sweat of people on their first skydive, a tandem jump during which they were very likely afraid. The same people, on a different day, exercised until they got sweaty and that sweat was also collected. Volunteers smelled both types of sweat while being monitored. Although the volunteers could not consciously detect a difference between the exercise sweat and the fear sweat, breathing in the fear sweat resulted in increased activity in the regions of the brain associated with fear (Randerson 2008), as well as heightened awareness of threat (Williams 2009). This suggests that emotional stress is “contagious” (*ibid.*)⁽⁵⁾. We even respond to the intensity of fear communicated in the sweat (de Groot, Kirk and Gottfried 2020). We know that other animals communicate with one another through subtle physical clues, but because we focus so much on intentional, verbal

(5) This was articulated by Dr. Mujica-Parodi, who performed the study.

communication among humans, it is easy to overlook that we, too, are animals who communicate important information — such as safety and danger — in myriad bodily ways.

Such communication is particularly important for people who have experienced trauma. Bessel Van der Kolk explains that during a traumatic event, the neocortex — the part of the brain responsible for language and time-keeping — is nearly shut down and the limbic brain takes over. Van der Kolk states, “[t]rauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past” (Van der Kolk 2014, p. 43). Trauma survivors can develop a “cover story” that explains, in some ways, what happened to them and their symptoms (*ibid.*). However, “[n]o matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality” (*ibid.*, p. 47). Van der Kolk names two paths towards healing from trauma: “top down” and “bottom up” (*ibid.*, p. 63). Top down approaches work through the neocortex and include talk therapy that aims to help survivors narratively frame their experiences and thoughtfully regulate their responses to the world around them. Bottom up approaches begin with the body, working through the brain stem to address symptoms of trauma. These include practices such as movement, rhythm, and touch in order to regulate the nervous system. Activities that involve people keeping time with one another — such as drumming, singing, chanting, and dancing — are particularly useful for helping survivors respond appropriately to present contexts rather than acting out of trauma-induced hypervigilance (*ibid.*, p. 80).

Many of these rhythmic practices take place in religious services. Van der Kolk writes, “[r]eligious rituals universally involve rhythmic movements, from davening at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to the sung liturgy and gestures of the Catholic Mass to moving meditation in Buddhist ceremonies and the rhythmic prayer rituals performed five times a day by devout Muslims” (*ibid.*, p. 335).

Choosing to participate in communal practices such as rhythm and song can help communally regulate an individual’s sense of safety and possibility in ways that are healing. In so far as Christian liturgy can aid individuals and communities in healing from trauma, it

can also help prevent the passing of trauma down from one generation to the next.

This regulation is complicated and limited in digital church. The most commonly used platforms for online church only allow one source of sound at a time, so we cannot truly sing together. Small time lags are such that we cannot keep time together. We cannot look each other in the eye. We cannot smell each other.

The authors of a 2023 study note that the “live and real expressive human face provides primary cues for natural in-person social interactions”. They compared neural activity in pairs of people looking at one another through a screen, in a “zoom-like” format, and looking at one another through a pane of glass. The study concluded that “the exchange of social cues is greater for the [i]n-person” interactions (Nan Zhao *et al.* 2023).

Another study compared the “brain-to-brain synchrony” of mother and child pairs in live “face-to-face” interactions and “technologically-assisted remote communication”. The digitally-mediated interactions resulted in only one “cross-brain-cross-hemisphere link” between the mother and child, while the face-to-face interactions resulted in nine (Schwartz *et al.* 2022). Such studies indicate that not being in the physical proximity hinders relational and group synchrony (Paul 2021). This inhibits communal regulation.

4. Remember

Our most treasured knowledge is stored in our bodies through communal ritual.

Diana Taylor delineates two ways in which knowledge is generated, stored, and transferred. One is the archive. This includes everything written down, from books in the library to historical landmark signs by the side of the road. Another is the repertoire. This includes all manner of bodily practices, from gestures to complex dances (Taylor 2003, pp. 19–20). Often the archive and the repertoire sit side by side or operate in tandem. Your grandmother might teach you to bake bread at her side, making sure you know what the dough feels like in your hands

when it has been kneaded enough, and she might write down the recipe for you as well. At other times, repertoire is primary. We teach kids to play baseball by first playing catch, then moving on to batting and pitching. I am sure the rules of baseball are written down, but how to play is knowledge in the repertoire, not the archive.

The archive is elevated in the dominant cultures of the modern West. We value the written, which can be easily transferred and can appear universal. Furthermore, it is easier to control who has access to the archive and who is allowed to contribute to it (*ibid.*, p. 17). In the U.S. it was illegal for enslaved Africans and African-Americans to read or write for decades. Now we refer to certain immigrants as “undocumented”⁽⁶⁾. Publication continues to be a form of gate-keeping for dominant cultures. In contrast, the repertoire is very difficult to control.

Paul Connerton analyzes commemorative events as ways that societies retell a historical narrative in such a way as to include the participants in the narrative it is retelling. To participate in a ceremonial event is both to learn the story that is told and to place oneself within its horizon. Connerton argues that societies entrust their most vital memories and knowledge to communal performances (Connerton 1989, p. 102). This communal repertoire will carry a memory through the years or even generations, even if single individuals forget, libraries burn, or worldviews are questioned.

Christians are very attached to our archive, most specifically the Bible. We ought not let that archival focus make us miss the importance of our repertoire in creating, storing, and transferring precisely those communal memories that we find most important. The splashing of baptismal waters, the sharing of the bread and cup — this is the repertoire of memory in which we participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection, become members of the body of Christ.

Evaluating how well such societal remembering can happen in on-line church is speculative, because we do not have studies of this yet. However, there is some reason to suspect that participating in shared ritual from separate locations might jog deep communal memories more easily than it can create them. My immediate family and I have

(6) See also D. Conquergood “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research”, in H. Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader* New York, Routledge, 2007.

memories of taking communion on the couch in the living room. Early on I was picky, making sure we had bread and some sort of juice in the house. As the months wore on, my standards slipped. Why couldn't the body and blood of Christ be present in this muffin and coffee I was already having for breakfast? The variation in space, time, movement, and material from one part of the congregation having communion to another was too great to create a deep repertoire of shared communal memory in which we placed ourselves.

We know from other types of research that eating meals together increases cooperation and group performance measurably. In one study, separate groups of MBA students had to negotiate a complex joint venture agreement. Some groups shared a meal while negotiating; others did not. Those who ate together generated more profitable bargains (Paul 2021, p. 227). In other studies, participants who ate the same food, served from communal dishes, demonstrated higher levels of cooperation than those who ate individually plated meals (*ibid.*). We do not yet know all of the ways that taking the bread and cup together influences us, but we know enough to suspect that being together in the same physical space matters.

5. Resist

Congregations serve as social bodies that can resist oppression.

William Cavanaugh understands the church, in part, as a social body that serves the necessary role of resisting oppressive structures by standing between regimes and individuals (Cavanaugh 1998, pp. 2–4, 9 and 15). Under the Pinochet regime, congregations were prevented from fulfilling this function by the state's practice of torture, which inflicted unspeakable harm on individuals who, if they could even begin to find words, feared that talking about their experiences would place those who heard them in danger. The Pinochet regime used torture to fracture social bodies and reduce resistance. Cavanaugh calls on the church to "realize its true nature as a locus of social practices, the true body of Christ capable of resisting the discipline of the state" (*ibid.*, p. 206).

Cavanaugh focuses on the Eucharist. He writes, "torture creates fearful and isolated bodies, bodies docile to the purposes of the regime:

the Eucharist effects the body of Christ, a body marked by resistance to worldly power...Isolation is overcome in the Eucharist by the building of a communal body which resists the state's attempts to disappear it" (*ibid.*).

My context in the U.S. is quite different from the Pinochet regime in Chile, yet Cavanaugh's analysis is compelling. One way white supremacy is maintained in the U.S. is by focusing on individuals as the site of racial prejudice and refusing to acknowledge racism as a system. This prevents social bodies from resisting the ongoing reality of state-sponsored violence against Black bodies.

On 13 March 2020, a 23-year old Black woman named Breonna Taylor was killed in Louisville, KY. At 12:30 am, at least 7 police officers forced their way into Taylor's apartment in a "no-knock" raid, shooting Taylor six times. Taylor was a medical professional who was not accused of a crime; the police officers were investigating her ex-boyfriend (who was not present) and conspired to mislead a judge to get the search warrant (Oppel, Taylor and Bogel-Burroughs 2023).

After the killing of Breonna Taylor, the residents of the city of Louisville resisted. A small plaza in the city, dubbed "Injustice Square", was occupied by a stream of protestors for over a year. The militarized police responded with tear gas, stun grenades, pepper bullets, and a technique called "kettling". This is when police surround protestors in an area, demand that the protestors disperse, and then arrest them when they try to leave.

Churches resisted. They marched, chanted, held vigils. Most notably, the Unitarian Church downtown became a sanctuary for kettled protestors, holding impromptu services so the police would not come into the church to arrest anyone (Hanna, Kallingal and Almasry 2020). In order to get the protestors safely out of the church and the kettled area, a network of local clergy used encrypted chats to create a shuttle service. Clergy members wore clerical collars and escorted protestors safely away.

This was not the Eucharist effecting the Body of Christ. Most of the Christians involved were Christian before Breonna Taylor was killed, and there were many protestors of different religious traditions and no religious traditions. There were bodies broken and blood poured out

— Breonna Taylor was not the only life lost (Loosemore 2020). It was the presence of bodies on the streets that eventually got no-knock raids banned in Louisville and prompted the Department of Justice to intervene (Oppel, Taylor and Bogel-Burroughs 2023). Yet I am keenly aware of the digitally infused truth of the church in that moment, the ways in which our virtual and physical interactions intertwined, overcoming our multiple forms of isolation to connect and empower the Body of Christ.

6. Rejoice

Worship services are often events of praise and joy.

We go to church services to worship God and rejoice in the gift of grace. Rejoicing is, in and of itself, a good thing. The Westminster Shorter Catechism declares that “the chief end of man [sic]” is “to glorify God and enjoy Him [sic] forever”⁽⁷⁾. The importance of rejoicing, however, might be greater than we know. History provides several natural experiments to study how trauma, hunger, and other adverse experiences can change the genetic expression of generations of people. Scholars study the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, the descendants of Swedes who endured famine, and so forth (Francis 2011, pp. 4, 23 and 89). The chemicals released within the body during such events can influence how genes are expressed in the children and grandchildren of survivors. It is established science that adverse experiences have epigenetic effects for generations.

This raises the possibility that sustained or repeated experiences of positive things might also have epigenetic effects. It is much more difficult to find natural experiments in which large numbers of people experienced sustained or repeated experiences of joy. If it is the case that positive experiences can also have epigenetic effects, then rejoicing in church might not only aid in healing for those traumatized, but might also create epigenetic resilience for coming generations (Craigo-Snell 2020).

(7) *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 1647, <https://www.westminsterconfession.org/resources/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism/>.

Digitally mediated rejoicing is possible, and certainly I was grateful to have that possibility when the pandemic prevented being in the same physical space as the rest of the congregation. At the same time, expressing my joy seemed incomplete without being able to share it physically with others. The social cues we take from other people allow our own emotions to be affirmed and amplified by those that share them with us. Rejoicing is possible, but limited, in digital environments, and we do not yet know the ripple effects that might have.

7. Acting Out and Acting In

Having gone through an eclectic description of six functions of human actions in the church—drawn together only by the unintended then inevitable alliteration of the letter R—let me now draw some broader conclusions. In liturgy, we act out our faith. We sing “Jesus loves me” because we believe it. We also act our faith in. We sing “Jesus loves me” in order to believe it. These are not separated in practice, but a conceptual distinction between acting out and acting in allows us to note some of the strengths and weaknesses of digital and virtual church services.

Online and virtual liturgies are very strong media through which Christians can act out our faith. We can recognize ourselves and one another, as digital media can allow for intimacy and bypass stigmatizing social norms. Sustaining and empowering social bodies capable of resistance is another strength of digital liturgy and technology. These are primarily ways of acting out Christian faith. The means by which Christians act their faith in — rehearsal, regulation, and remembrance — are more difficult in digital and even virtual contexts, as they emphasize bodies in context and proximity. Christianity involves not only the whole person, but a community of people whose bodies respond to one another. Some of the challenges — such as inculcating muscle memory and facilitating synchronized speech and action — might be solvable in a virtual context. Others, such as embedding sacred memories in communal rituals, might not. In regards to still other functions, such as rejoicing, we know enough to appreciate the limits of our knowledge — including what might be gained, lost, or altered by digital mediation.

The six functions I have listed are not exhaustive. Indeed, they serve primarily to illustrate that we do not fully appreciate all the many ways that participating in liturgy affects members of the congregation. Since Augustine, the first rule of theology has been epistemic humility in respect to the mystery of God. Made in the image of God, we, too, are mysterious, not fully comprehensible to ourselves. As we move forward in the digitally infused life of the church, it will be necessary for theologians to consider all that happens in the liturgy, from as many perspectives and disciplines as possible, in order to discern how best to act our faith out and act our faith in.

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