

**Study Committee
On Digital Media and Corporate Worship
To Synod Escondido 2024**

I. Introduction

Synod Niagara 2022 adopted the following recommendations (*Acts of Synod Niagara 2022*, Article 47):

1. That Synod accede to Overture 15: “to establish a Study Committee to provide Pastoral Advice to the churches on the degree to which viewing or hearing worship via broadcast is participation in corporate worship,” with the following grounds:

Grounds:

- a. This is a matter relevant to the modern church.
 - b. This is a matter of continuing pastoral concern in leading those who are unable or unwilling to attend in-person worship.
2. That Synod mandate the study committee to address the following questions in light of Scripture, our Confessions, and the Church Order, giving special attention to Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, Lord’s Days 35 and 38 of the Catechism, and Articles 37, 38, 41, and 46 of the Church Order:
 - a. Can virtual or digital worship be corporate worship?
 - b. Is its validity limited in any way, and what are the key aspects or elements that must be present?
 - c. What constitutes “the living preaching of the Word” (Lord’s Day 35, Question & Answer 98)? Is the Word preached received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly?
 - d. What place do the sacraments have for those participating in virtual or digital worship?
 - e. Is participation using virtual or digital means still beneficial for those who cannot attend, and why?
 3. That Synod appoint the following eight brothers to serve on this committee:
 - a. Rev. Danny Hyde (Southwest US)
 - b. Rev. Brian Lee (Eastern US), Chairman
 - c. Rev. Ryan Swale (Ontario East)
 - d. Rev. Harry Zekveld (Southwestern Ontario)
 - e. Rev. William Pols (Western Canada)
 - f. Rev. Todd De Rooy (Central US)
 - g. Rev. Russell Herman (Pacific Northwest)
 - h. Rev. Talman Wagenmaker (Michigan), Reporter
 4. That Synod instruct the study committee to report to the next Synod.

5. That Synod set the budget for the study committee at \$10,000 USD.

The *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* define “Pastoral Advice” as follows (Appendix D.2):

Pastoral Advice: *Pastoral Advice* is Synod’s application of the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity to particular circumstances in the life of the churches.

2.1 Pastoral Advice expresses the collective wisdom of Synod to guide the churches in their pastoral care.

2.2 Pastoral Advice should be received with respect. It would be unwise to disregard Pastoral Advice in preaching or writing. It may not, however, serve as grounds in matters of discipline.

2.3 Pastoral Advice may be appealed as outlined in Church Order Articles 29 and 31 (Regulations for Synodical Procedure 3.4 and Appendix B).

Our committee presents this report in fulfillment of the mandate Synod Niagara 2022 gave us. To write this report, we met via video conference on the following dates:

- November 9, 2022
- January 11, 2023
- February 22, 2023
- April 5, 2023
- May 17, 2023
- July 12, 2023
- September 13, 2023
- November 8, 2023
- November 21, 2023
- January 10, 2024
- February 7, 2024
- March 13, 2024

In addition, our committee met face-to-face at the campus of Mid-America Reformed Seminary on October 4, 2023. Further committee work was done via email, and we received helpful input from churches as well as individuals.

The report proper is divided into three sections. The first section briefly presents biblical and theological foundations for corporate worship with an aim to draw attention to the major issues related to our mandate. The second section addresses the five mandated questions and issues surrounding them. The third section proposes pastoral advice as an application of the previous two sections and a distillation of those sections into guidance for the churches.

II. Report and Pastoral Advice

A. Biblical and Theological Foundations for Corporate Worship

The Supreme Importance of Worship

God made man in his image so that he might truly know God, love him with all his heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 6). Stated differently, God made man to worship him. The first and second commandments make clear that to have “no other gods” but the Lord our God means we “bow down” and serve him only (Exodus 20:1–5). God calls people of all nations to “ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name” (Psalm 96:7–8), which means all must worship him “in the splendor of holiness” (Psalm 96:9).¹ The great commission (Matthew 28:18–20) is the Father’s way of seeking true worshipers to worship him in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24).² Worship then is the most important thing we do.

From Genesis to Revelation, God gathers a people to worship him. Though the depravity of man quickly manifested itself in the descendants of Cain, Genesis 4:26 tells us concerning Seth’s descendants, “At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.” This language indicates “the exercise of the whole worship of God” and that “they began then to settle and establish the worship of God more openly, more solemnly, and frequently.”³ This is generally accepted as the Bible’s first reference to corporate worship, and the story of God gathering a worshipping people continues through succeeding generations until Christ’s return. The final book of the Bible gives multiple visions of the redeemed from all nations worshipping before God’s throne. Scripture describes the climax of redemptive history in the words, “All nations will come and worship you” (Revelation 15:3–4).⁴ The worship of God’s people is one of the most important themes throughout all Scripture.

Old Testament Worship

When the Bible speaks of worship, it tends to emphasize the *corporate* activity of God’s people. This is not to diminish the importance of individual or family worship, as the “I will” statements of the Psalms repeatedly express the duty, privilege, and delight of personal prayer and praise.⁵ However, the Bible most frequently describes worship as the activity of God’s people *together*.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references throughout are from the English Standard Version.

² “In spirit and truth” should not be understood to mean the worship God is seeking is somehow immaterial or disembodied. While the precise meaning of the phrase is debated, it should not be used to suggest that physically gathering is unnecessary because worship is “in spirit.” The worshipers the Father seeks, and sent his incarnate Son to gather, are not *discarnate*, but embodied.

³ *Dutch Annotations upon the whole Bible* (London: Henry Hills, 1657) [<https://archive.org/details/dutch-annotations/Dutch%20Annotations%20Gen%202%20to%202%20Sam%203/>].

⁴ See also Revelation 7:9–12; 11:16–18; 22:3.

⁵ See Psalm 145:2; 146:2: “I will bless you... I will praise the LORD... I will sing praises to my God...”

We hear this in the “let us” language of the Psalms as they call God’s people to worship corporately, and as they speak so often of the “assembly,” “congregation,” or “throne.”⁶

In the Old Covenant, the place of this corporate gathering was the tabernacle (and later the temple) where sacrifices were brought (Psalm 96:8) as God dwelt between the cherubim, above the mercy seat (Exodus 25:22). This was the dwelling place of God where Israel went for the feasts and solemn assemblies, and where God placed his name (Deuteronomy 12:5). In these assemblies, God blessed his people and put his name upon them in connection with their sacrificial offerings (Numbers 6:23–27; Leviticus 9:22–24). Worship required preparation and activity; the worshipers traveled, often over significant distances and taking considerable time, to a specific place to worship God. The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134) often allude to the practice of going up to worship the Lord, where worshipers looked forward with love and longing to gather with God’s people on Mount Zion.⁷ Corporate worship thus meant gathering with others at the same location where God placed his name and manifested his special presence in grace.

While Scripture speaks of God’s *omni*-presence, it also speaks of God’s *special* presence in his temple and in worship (e.g., the Psalms speak of God both as *everywhere* present [Psalm 139:7–10] and invite God’s people to come *into his presence* [Psalm 95:2; 100:2]). God is everywhere present, but he is also *special* present among his people gathered for worship. He delights in our individual vocations, homes, and gatherings, but he takes a special delight as we leave our homes to come together in family reunion as his redeemed household (Psalm 87:1–3).

New Testament Worship

The theme of God’s presence with his gathered people continues in the New Testament, though no longer in the physical temple (John 4:21). God’s people together *become* his spiritual temple through Christ who is God’s true temple (John 2:21; Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:5–7). Thus, God is now specially present with his people wherever they gather together in his name (Matthew 18:20).⁸ The significance of the “place” where we gather is not the physical location or beauty of the building in which we meet but our gathering together as the people in whom God dwells as his holy temple. In our corporate identity as the organized, worshipping church of the living God, we

⁶ Psalm 22:22; 26:12; 34:3; 35:18; 40:9–10; 42:4; 55:14; 68:26; 95:1–2, 6; 107:32; 109:30; 111:1; 122:1; 132:7; 149:1.

⁷ It is worth pointing out that the gathering together of God’s people in the Old Testament did not exclusively refer to the festal gatherings in the temple but also included the weekly gatherings on the Sabbath, which Leviticus 23:2–3 calls “holy convocations” (and which did *not* occur in the temple). Later, these gatherings took place in the synagogue (Acts 15:21).

⁸ We recognize that Matthew 18:20 is often misused to suggest wherever two people gather informally is a meeting of the church. This is not what we are saying; and we do recognize that the context of Matthew 18:20 is the formal exercise of church discipline. However, this discipline is to be exercised in the context of the gathered church (1 Corinthians 5:4) as an exercise of the keys of the kingdom that are entrusted to Christ’s ordained office-bearers. Thus, by using this verse, we are making the point that Christ promises to be present with his people when they gather together publicly for the exercise of the keys of the kingdom “in his name.” His presence therefore is not dictated by the place in which they gather, but rather by the people who are gathered together, and the ordained officers under whose oversight they are gathered.

become his “household” (1 Timothy 3:15), where God manifests his grace. We no longer gather at the temple in Jerusalem but assemble as a “holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers” “wherever God has established it” (Belgic Confession, Articles 27 and 28). When the congregation assembles to worship God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the power of the Lord Jesus is present (1 Corinthians 5:3–4).

The author of Hebrews thus exhorts God’s people not to neglect meeting together but to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus which he has opened up for us through the curtain (Hebrews 10:19–20, 25). Interestingly, this applies temple language to the corporate gathering of God’s New Testament people, implying that when we meet together for worship, we enter into the holy place Christ has opened through his one sacrifice. Therefore, God’s people are exhorted to “draw near” (v. 22) with hearts “sprinkled clean” and bodies “washed with pure water.” This verse applies the Old Testament imagery of priestly washings to believers in what appears to be a reference to baptism. Our physical bodies, having been washed, draw near to God in his most holy place when they meet together with other believers for public worship. In this we witness both the corporate and physical aspects of New Testament worship. It is not merely a mental or emotional exercise of the mind and heart done individually, but consists in God’s people “drawing near” to “meet together” in physical bodies washed with pure water. Indeed, the worship of God’s New Testament people is corporate and bodily in nature, fulfilling the gathering together of God’s Old Testament saints in the new heavenly Mount Zion that is the church (Hebrews 12:22–24).⁹

Our catechism also affirms the corporate aspect of worship. In Q. & A. 103, every aspect of divine worship occurs in “the assembly of God’s people,” which all are called to “diligently attend.” The worship required of God’s people is corporate and embodied. God is glorified when his people gather together to learn what his Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to him publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor (see URC Church Order, Articles 37, 38, 41, 46). This is our blessed privilege and highest calling, which God’s Word not only calls us to do in faith, but promises to bless us in doing.

The Unique Blessings of Corporate Worship

The great blessing and privilege of corporate worship consists in the enjoyment of God’s special presence. To gather for worship is to “come into his presence” (Psalm 100:2). The promise of God’s presence with us is often thought of as God coming to us and entering our assembly in condescending grace. No doubt the presence of God in his church by his Spirit is glorious, but the Bible gives us another perspective on corporate worship that exceeds this in glory. The wonder of corporate worship is not primarily God coming to us on earth in our assembly, but God admitting us to the assembly around his throne in heaven. Based on Christ’s intercession we enter into the holy of holies and come boldly to the mercy seat and “throne of grace.” Thus, according to Hebrews 12:22–24:

⁹ In the New Testament, synagogue language is used to refer to the church’s gatherings (Hebrews 10:25), in addition to the temple language noted above. Thus, as revelation progresses, it is the case that both the synagogue gatherings *and* the national temple gatherings merge into one and find their fulfillment in the New Testament worship of the church.

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The worship around the throne in heaven, frequently described in Revelation, previews not only the joy of the life to come but describes the glorious invisible world to which we already participate in corporate worship. Even now on earth we may sing:

God Himself is with us; hear the harps resounding!
See the crowds the throne surrounding!
Holy, holy, holy, hear the hymn ascending
Angels, saints, their voices blending.¹⁰

In this light we hear the words of Hebrews 10:25 about “not neglecting to meet together.” Thus, the consistory calls the congregation together for corporate worship to delight in the worship of God (Church Order, Article 37). We ought to take every advantage of such a tremendous calling and privilege of grace.

Saints are sometimes hindered from going to God’s house by illness, infirmity, or other hindrance. Thus, the privilege of going to the house of God is sometimes remembered with tears, as the psalmist says, “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts of praise, a multitude keeping festival” (Psalm 42:4). Being denied access to corporate worship is a trial of faith as well as an opportunity to trust in God’s sufficient grace. The psalmist gives voice to these sentiments in Psalm 84: “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD... Blessed are those who dwell in your house... The LORD bestows favor and honor” (vv. 2, 4, 11).

Thankfully, digital media can help those who are providentially hindered from gathering with God’s people. They may still be built up by the Word, maintain a sense of connection to the church, and practice their love for Christ and his people as living members of the church in their limited circumstances. Shut-ins and others hindered from worship also need the continued prayers, sympathy, and loving attention of the church. Those who cannot come to worship recognize from the hardship of their circumstances that these helps cannot replace the special blessings of corporate worship.

We give particular attention and honor to our brothers and sisters around the world who live under the cross of persecution. For many, leaving home to gather as God’s household involves great risk and requires much thought and creativity to find ways to maintain true, visible community. The Spirit of unity impels them to gather as a church body wherever and however they can. As our forefathers testified in times of intense persecution, “And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God’s Word... to join this assembly wherever God has

¹⁰ “God Himself Is with Us” (Trinity Psalter Hymnal #164).

established it, even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result” (Belgic Confession, Article 28).

With longing and delight, the Psalms often express the special blessings of worshiping in the assembly of saints. In Psalm 63 David recalls the sanctuary as the place where God’s power and glory are seen (v. 2). In Psalm 27 he declares his one desire and quest: to “dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (v. 4). In fact, Psalm 92 (titled “A Song for the Sabbath day”) describes the flourishing of the righteous as those who are “planted in the house of the LORD” (v. 13). This imagery shows the stability and fruitfulness of a life centered around the worship of God and points to the blessedness of the life to come in which we will “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6).

By gathering together, we strengthen and build up the people of God. The Scriptures utilize different imagery to express this sentiment: the church as a building joined together, a family gathered around the same table, and citizens of a heavenly country celebrating our freedom and extolling our glorious King. As we see one another’s faces and hear one another’s voices, we are united more in love (Psalm 122:1–4). Many professing Christians have become comfortable with a life detached from the worship and fellowship of the gathered church. God’s “household” and “flock” are significant aspects of our identity in Christ (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 5:2). When we neglect the face-to-face gathering, we harm our faith and undermine our identity in Christ as his people. We forfeit the blessings only face-to-face fellowship brings (2 John 12; 3 John 13-14). As the Day of the Lord approaches and the battle against the kingdom of darkness intensifies, assembling together for mutual encouragement and affirmation of our identity as God’s chosen people becomes all the more urgent for God’s children (Hebrews 10:25).

The rich blessings of corporate worship are assured by God’s benediction proclaimed to his people and compel Christians to gather with the church at every opportunity. A biblical view of belonging to the church as living members directs us to see attending worship as the most important expression of who we are as members of Christ and his body. Worship is not merely one activity among others. We are a people restored to the worship of God, “planted in the house of the LORD” (Psalm 92:13). Such worship gives the world a powerful witness to the saving grace and mercy of God (Psalm 67) and testifies to a love and unity which demonstrate Christ has come and we are his disciples (John 13:35; 17:21).

B. Addressing Questions About Digital Media and Corporate Worship

Synod mandated this committee “to provide pastoral advice to the churches on the degree to which viewing or hearing worship via broadcast is participation in corporate worship.” Synod also asked the committee to address specific questions related to this topic with special attention to our confessions and church order.¹¹

¹¹ *Acts of Synod Niagara 2022*, Article 47.2:

That Synod mandate the study committee to address the following questions in light of Scripture, our Confessions, and the Church Order, giving special attention to Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, Lord’s Days 35 and 38 of the Catechism, and Articles 37, 38, 41, and 46 of the Church Order:

a. Can virtual or digital worship be corporate worship?

In this section of our report we address each of those questions directly. We note, however, that they touch upon a complex series of interrelated issues involving our theology of worship, sacraments, and the field of media ecology.¹² We believe it helpful to identify each of these issues, treat them in an orderly fashion, and address the questions at the relevant points of that broader discussion. In identifying the following topics, we have taken the marks of the church from Belgic Confession, Article 29 as a guiding principle. The topics we address are as follows:

- The distinctiveness of corporate worship
- The necessity of the believer’s physical presence for participation in corporate worship
- How our theology of the preached Word informs viewing or hearing via remote broadcast
- How our sacramental theology informs viewing or hearing via remote broadcast
- How our understanding of discipline informs viewing or hearing via remote broadcast
- Benefits to viewing or hearing worship via remote broadcast
- The importance of embodied worship

The Distinctiveness of Corporate Worship

Both worship in general and corporate worship in particular are central to the life of the church, as the preceding discussion of biblical and theological foundations demonstrated. The challenge of our current media environment, however, calls the very meaning of “corporate worship” into question. Given this rapidly changing environment, we believe the church must clarify its understanding of worship.

A few words about etymology may help. The word “corporate” comes from *corporatus*, which means “to form into a body;” and *corporatus* is itself rooted in the word *corpus*, which means “body.” Both the Old Testament and New Testament speak of the “assembly” of God’s people and the “congregation,” i.e., those who have congregated. The New Testament further develops our understanding of the worshiping congregation by calling it the “body of Christ,” with our Savior as the head and believers as the many members. In gathering for corporate worship, this metaphor becomes more concrete as we gather our individual bodies to form a corporate body, led in worship by our ascended Savior and head, Jesus Christ.¹³

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- b. Is its validity limited in any way, and what are the key aspects or elements that must be present?
 - c. What constitutes “the living preaching of the Word” (Lord’s Day 35, Question & Answer 98)? Is the Word preached received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly?
 - d. What place do the sacraments have for those participating in virtual or digital worship?
 - e. Is participation using virtual or digital means still beneficial for those who cannot attend and why?

¹² For a helpful brief introduction to the field of media ecology, see T. David Gordon, “Media Ecology for the Family,” *Modern Reformation* (April 30, 2014), <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/essays/media-ecology-for-the-family> and, “The Material Is Not Immaterial,” *Modern Reformation* (July 1, 2023), <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/essays/the-material-is-not-immaterial>.

¹³ Church Order, Articles 37 and 38.

In the preceding discussion, we affirmed that *corporate* worship exists as the biblical paradigm for all worship. Therefore, one ought to carefully define corporate worship and distinguish it from *individual* or *family* worship. As *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* helpfully states,

While believers are to worship in secret as individuals and in private as families, they are also to worship as churches in assemblies of public worship, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected or forsaken. Public worship occurs when God, by his Word and Spirit, through the lawful government of the church, calls his people to assemble to worship him together.¹⁴

Individual or family worship are in one sense derivative from and dependent upon corporate worship.

The distinction between corporate worship and other forms of worship is important when considering media technologies that communicate various elements of a corporate worship service to a remote audience. Technologies such as sermon audio, streaming video of a corporate service, or even interactive video platforms may benefit believers by augmenting or assisting individual or family worship. They are, however, inherently *dis-embodied*. Transmitting the content of a bodily, corporate worship service in space and time changes both how the content is received, and also the content itself.¹⁵

While we understand their origin, the terms “virtual worship” or “digital worship” are problematic because they fundamentally confuse the useful distinction between corporate, individual, and family worship. We believe it is wise to avoid using these terms. Our committee intentionally named itself the “Study Committee on Digital Media and Corporate Worship” to avoid any such confusion. While we recognize the invention of new digital media technologies raises important questions for the life of the church, it does not justify the creation of new categories or forms of worship. Indeed, these impulses ought to be resisted.

The Necessity of the Believer’s Physical Presence for Participation in Corporate Worship

Corporate worship necessarily involves participants being bodily present in the same location and being involved in the same activity. These factors result in this form of worship being referred to as “in-person” worship. There is something significant about the body of Christ coming together in person to worship our Lord and Savior. Paul provides insight into the corporate nature of the church as he details how God composes the body and how the members care for one another, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Corporate gathering of God’s people allows for the body of Christ to worship with and care for each other in a real and tangible way. Bearing one another’s burdens becomes extremely difficult when removed from worship and fellowship with God’s people.

¹⁴ Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Book of Church Order: the Directory for the Public Worship of God*, I.A.1.c, 2020 edition.

¹⁵ Cf. T. David Gordon, “Media Ecology for the Family,” and, “The Material Is Not Immaterial.”

Biblically, participation involves three key elements: endorsing, experiencing, and contributing.¹⁶ All three elements of participation are significantly impaired when observing worship remotely. Depending upon the technology, remote observation of worship may or may not be a public act, and therefore the level of *endorsement* is more ambiguous than for those who attend in person. Further, viewing or hearing worship remotely creates a decidedly different *experience* than in-person attendance. As we recognize the difference between listening to recorded music and attending a live concert, we should also recognize a difference between remotely observing a worship service and being bodily present. One key factor of digital media is “distraction.”¹⁷ Additional distractions exist for the remote viewer in a different location. Being remote allows the ability to pause, mute, or otherwise “opt out” of the content, either temporarily or permanently. He or she can effectively “change the channel” by listening to a different sermon, a different preacher, or with a few clicks, choose a different church entirely. At a minimum, remote viewing radically transfers any *contribution* of the worshiper, if not making it impossible altogether. Many of the active elements of worship entail congregants addressing one another as they sing, confess, or pray to God (cf. Colossians 3:16). Worshiping remotely creates an altogether different experience, and ultimately limits contributing to public worship in any of the activities listed in Article 38 of the Church Order: singing, praise, praying, and the giving of offerings. Remote viewers do not add their physical presence to the public witness of the gathered church in worship. Applying such distinctions, those who view or hear worship via broadcast do not participate in corporate worship but rather utilize the broadcast of corporate worship to aid their worship in secret and/or in private.¹⁸

¹⁶ These three aspects of participating in something are drawn from where Scripture uses synonyms of “participating” (e.g., joining, partaking, partnering, fellowshiping, taking part, being a companion, contributing, and sharing). *Endorsing* can be seen in texts such as: Hosea 4:17; Matthew 23:30; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:21–22; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4, 23; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 5:7; Philippians 1:5; Philemon 17. *Experiencing* can be seen in texts such as: Proverbs 21:9; 25:24; Ecclesiastes 9:4; Romans 11:17; 15:27; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 9:10–12, 23; 10:16–20; 2 Corinthians 1:7; 13:14; Ephesians 3:6; Philippians 1:7; 2:1; 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:22; Hebrews 2:14; 3:1, 14; 6:4; 10:33; 12:8; 13:16; 1 Peter 4:13; 5:1; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 1:3–7; 2 John 11; Revelation 1:9. *Contributing* can be seen in texts such as: Proverbs 28:24; Isaiah 1:23; Malachi 2:14; Luke 5:7, 10; Romans 12:13; 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4, 23; 9:13; Philippians 4:15; 1 Timothy 6:18; Philemon 6; Hebrews 13:16.

¹⁷ Gordon, “Media Ecology for the Family.”

¹⁸ This understanding of corporate worship leads us to answer the first two questions put to this committee.

1. Can virtual or digital worship be corporate worship?

No, viewing or hearing a worship service remotely does not constitute participation in corporate worship. Technology which communicates elements of a corporate worship service to a remote location may assist in individual or family worship, but they do not transform it into corporate worship.

2. Is its validity limited in any way, and what are the key aspects or elements that must be present?

Significant benefits may result from the use of digital media to communicate audio and/or video from a corporate worship service to a remote audience. However, because participation in corporate worship requires local, bodily presence, this remote viewing shouldn't be understood as a valid form of participating in corporate worship. It is rather a means by which individual or family worship may be augmented. If we clearly understand that we are not seeking to emulate corporate worship for those who are not present, churches should feel free to use wisdom to determine which forms of digital media are most helpful for

How Our Theology of the Preached Word Informs Viewing or Hearing via Remote Broadcast

The Scriptures teach that the preaching of the Word is one of the central elements of corporate worship, and our confessions clearly echo this. The Belgic Confession distinguishes between the “body and fellowship of the true church” and false sects by the manifestation of certain marks, noting “the church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel” (Article 29). In expounding the Second Commandment, the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes the importance of the “living preaching of the word” (Q. & A. 98), over and against the use of images. Later, the catechism teaches that the Fourth Commandment requires we “diligently attend the assembly of God’s people, to learn what God’s Word teaches,” among other elements of corporate worship (Q. & A. 103). The Second Helvetic Confession reflects the high view of preaching that characterized the Protestant Reformation when it states, “The preaching of the word of God is the very word of God,” and is therefore “living and active” as it aligns with Scripture (Hebrews 4:12; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The “living preaching of the Word” utilizes language and is delivered in the language of the congregation (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:1–19). Preaching is heard, and to some degree, understood corporately, as there are a multitude of congregants receiving the same message at the same time and place.¹⁹ The preached Word is not received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly, nor does the preacher directly address remote listeners who are absent from the physical gathering. While we acknowledge God uses print or audio media to expand the reach of the preached Word beyond the bounds of corporate worship, we also recognize the use of these media transforms the character of this message. In the gathered body of believers, the congregation not only receives the Word, but participates and responds in a way that incorporates and engages the other worshippers as well as the minister. Indeed, a faithful preacher must engage with his congregation as well as with his text. He must faithfully apply a text in the light of the needs of the congregation and the context in which he is preaching. Scripture records the speaking of an “amen” to prophesying or present-day preaching, and some persons who heard preaching responded with a question (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:16; Acts 2:37). While many of our churches do not include verbal responses within or after the preaching of the Word, every minister knows the reception of the message by the congregation impacts his delivery in real-time.²⁰

In contrast, remote worship is one-way communication. A word preached to a distant audience is merely received, without any immediate interaction or feedback provided to the preacher. While they hear the Word preached, they do not contribute to the event itself. Furthermore, the remote audience is not a “captive audience,” and thus exercises control of the sermon they hear. Remote listeners are free to mute, fast forward, skip, or depart altogether, with little or no consequence.

individuals and families engaging in secret or private worship.

¹⁹ In the case of someone who is hearing impaired, the spoken word may be translated into sign language without diminishing in any way the “living preaching of the word.”

²⁰ These aspects of the living preaching of the Word are missing when a video feed replaces the live ministration of the Word.

All of this affects how the preached Word is “received” since remote observers are entirely receptive in terms of the event and thus are more limited in their involvement than those who are physically present.²¹

How Our Sacramental Theology Informs Viewing or Hearing via Remote Broadcast

Sacraments are visible and tangible signs and seals of an invisible grace. Thus, the sacramental nature of biblical worship constitutes one of the primary reasons why it is impossible to participate in corporate worship remotely. Sacraments convey the same message as gospel preaching. As the Belgic Confession, Article 33 states, “our good God... has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.” The Heidelberg Catechism notes in Q. & A. 66, that the sacraments “were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and seal that promise.” Sealing requires physical contact. The sacraments are heard, seen, touched, smelled, and tasted which necessitate being bodily present where and when the event is occurring.

Sacraments are to be administered in the assembly of the saints. This emphasis on assembling as one body is reflected in our confessions. In baptism we “are received into God’s church and set apart from all other people and alien religions” (Belgic Confession, Article 34), and we submit that “receiving into” requires local presence.²² Regarding the Lord’s Supper, Article 35 of the Belgic Confession states, “We receive the holy sacrament *in the gathering of God’s people*, as we *engage together*, with thanksgiving, in a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, and as we thus confess our faith and Christian religion” (emphasis added).²³ The Westminster Confession of Faith (29.4) echoes this sentiment when it states, “receiving this sacrament...alone...is contrary to the nature of this sacrament and to the institution of Christ.” Reformational churches have always denounced “private” celebrations of the Lord’s Supper (i.e., of the Roman Mass). Any celebration of the Sacraments must not be a private matter but occur in the gathering of God’s people as a ministry of the church.

Sacraments are to be administered by ministers of the Word, not as a private devotional exercise. This is alluded to in Q. & A. 75 of the Heidelberg Catechism which says, “As surely as I receive *from the hand of him who serves*, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ’s body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for

²¹ This informs our answer to the third question posed by Synod:

3. What constitutes “the living preaching of the Word” (Lord’s Day 35, Question & Answer 98)? Is the Word preached received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly?

No, the preached Word is not received in the same way when it is received remotely via digital media.

²² Church Order, Article 42. Our church order clearly stipulates the ordinary practice of the churches in the post-apostolic era. We recognize there are extraordinary cases recorded in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 8).

²³ Church Order, Articles 45–46.

eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood” (emphasis added). Even if the elements are brought to the people by an elder, it is the minister, set apart to represent Christ, whose hand delivers the elements. The corporate nature of the sacraments rules out remote viewers administering the elements to themselves.²⁴

Every individual is to examine himself prior to coming to the Lord’s table (1 Corinthians 11:27–31), but the elders are also responsible to fence (i.e., guard) the table (1 Corinthians 5:11–13) since the Lord’s Supper is a “participation” in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16).²⁵ The elders fence the table by exercising church discipline, which is one of the two keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:15–20; John 20:22–23). Therefore, “the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude” the unbelieving and ungodly from admission to the Lord’s Supper (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 82). Remote viewers of worship cannot properly be admitted to the table by the elders because they are not bodily present.

Baptism as an initiation rite of the covenant is to be administered only once to individuals or households, and therefore the entire congregation does not receive the sacrament together. However, we as members of the church do participate in baptism by being reminded of our own baptism, renewing our covenant vows, and hearing God’s call on our lives. As a church body, we may also participate, promising “to receive this child in love, pray for him/her, help care for his/her instruction in the faith, and encourage and sustain him/her in the fellowship of believers.”²⁶ This vow points to the communal nature of the body of Christ. While remote viewers of the baptismal rite may assent to the vow, they are unable to be held accountable to the corporate act.

While those observing worship remotely see the sacraments, and hear God’s Word and promises, they do not have access to the uniquely tangible and sensory aspects of the sacraments. Those absent are unable to receive the seal of divine grace, which requires physical contact. Furthermore, the communion of the saints we enjoy at the Lord’s Supper cannot be conveyed to a person who is not physically present (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).²⁷

²⁴ “In Matthew 28:19 the administration of baptism along with that of the Word has been entrusted to the apostles. They, along with the ministers, are the distributors of the mysteries of God, proclaimers of the ‘secrets’ that God has revealed in the gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 4:1), stewards of God whose task is to distribute his grace (1 Corinthians 9:17; Titus 1:7–9). With reference to these mysteries, one must undoubtedly first of all think of the word of the gospel. But the sacrament follows the Word and is always connected with it. In Jerusalem the apostles devoted themselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4). At the breaking of bread (20:7, 11), Paul spoke. Voicing the thanksgiving at the Lord’s Supper was a part of the ministry of the Word and therefore assigned to the minister, though like the breaking of bread in 1 Corinthians 10:16, it is represented as an act of the congregation. . . . This unique linkage of the administration of the Lord’s Supper to that of the Word proves that the minister acts in the name of Christ and functions as the steward and distributor of his mysteries. The Lord’s Supper is a meal whose host is Christ.” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 4, page 563).

²⁵ Church Order, Articles 45–46.

²⁶ Citation from the *Baptism of Infants* forms, Forms and Prayers, pages 11, 15. Compare with the forms for the baptism of adults (Forms and Prayers, pages 23, 26).

²⁷ The fourth question posed by Synod is as follows:

4. What place do the sacraments have for those participating in virtual or digital worship?

How Our Understanding of Discipline Informs Viewing or Hearing via Remote Broadcast

The Belgic Confession further teaches us that “the true church can be recognized” by the fact that “... it practices church discipline for correcting faults” (Article 29). While it may not be immediately apparent how practicing church discipline relates to the question of digital media and worship, it is in fact essential to the question. The first and primary obligation of a member is to “diligently attend the assembly of God’s people” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 103). Corporate worship is an important means of discipline, where God’s people are taught from God’s Word, called to repentance by the law, nourished and comforted by the gospel, and instructed in how to live in Christian gratitude.²⁸ The fellowship of the saints before, during, and after corporate worship is a crucial time during which informal discipline is able to take place among the saints as they exercise the general office of believer (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 32). It is also a crucial time during which the special officers exercise their calling by shepherding and caring for God’s people.

Christian discipline is a public ministry that takes place when the congregation is assembled (1 Corinthians 5:4; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 85). God’s people must be joined together as his family to be admonished and humbled as one body, to stir one another up to speak to and pray for their brother or sister, and to sorrow together and comfort one another when a member is admonished, excommunicated, or excluded from the fellowship. When someone who has been excluded from the Christian fellowship is readmitted, this is a public event in which the congregation reaffirms its love for and rejoices together with this reconciled brother or sister (2 Corinthians 2:6–8). For this reason our Church Order envisions that the ministry of official discipline take place publicly, in the gathered congregation with the use of the appropriate liturgical form (Church Order, Articles 55, 58, 60; Forms and Prayers, pages 56–62).

Therefore, those who use digital media to observe corporate worship remotely are failing to receive all the benefits of discipline in the church. Attendance at corporate worship is also one of the clearest markers by which the consistory may observe the vitality of a member’s faith. Attending the assembly of God’s people requires effort, and therefore reflects a commitment to being a part of the body of Christ. All who are in attendance, by definition, are exercising a modicum of participation, even if they may be mentally distracted. However, the attention level of remote viewers is unobserved and unknown. This is why failure to attend worship services is a useful metric for a consistory to determine a greater need for pastoral care. If a member continues to violate the Fourth Commandment by willfully neglecting the assembly of God’s people (Hebrews

The sacramental nature of biblical worship is one of the primary reasons why it is impossible to participate in corporate worship remotely.

²⁸ While we ordinarily use “church discipline” narrowly to refer to the process whereby a consistory seeks the restoration of an unrepentant sinner (outlined in Church Order, Articles 55–60), we are here using “discipline” in a broader sense to refer to the discipling relationship between the under-shepherds and the flock, which incorporates a range of activities that are conducive to the care and nurture of souls. In our view, discipline as a mark of the church necessarily entails both constructive and corrective elements, both the “rod and the staff” of the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23:4).

10:25), this may be grounds for formal discipline and even the extreme remedy of discipline — excommunication.

Benefits to Viewing or Hearing Worship via Remote Broadcast

There are benefits for those who view corporate worship remotely. Objective benefits come about by the Spirit blessing the Word as it goes forth in its various forms; the Word is powerful and living and active (e.g., Isaiah 55:11; Romans 1:16–17; Hebrews 4:12). God promises to bless all of his people through his Word (e.g., Psalm 19:7–11; 119:9–16, 97–112). Those remotely observing a broadcast of public worship may hear the Word, sing and hear the praises of the church, set apart the Lord’s Day, join in the prayers of the church, and observe the administration of the sacraments and professions of faith. In addition, there may be subjective benefits which allow a degree of connection with the body to be felt; these can mitigate somewhat the loneliness members feel at the time of worship when they are unable to attend. Those who are unable to attend public worship are not rendered lesser Christians because of a genuine inability to be gathered together with God’s people.

Nevertheless, only in-person worship is corporate worship. It is the duty of the consistory to extend God’s call to the church to be gathered for public worship each Lord’s Day, and it is therefore the duty of members of the church to attend as they are able (cf. Church Order, Article 37). Viewing corporate worship remotely can serve as a help to preserve connection to the body of Christ during times of forced absence. However, it should not be used longer than necessary or be preferred to physically participating in corporate worship. If someone is unwilling to attend corporate worship or has arranged matters such that he is unable to attend corporate worship, that indicates a problem with someone’s heart that should be addressed and (by God’s grace) rectified. It should be the desire of every believer to attend in-person corporate worship; “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Psalm 122:1; cf. Psalm 42). We should make every effort to attend in-person.²⁹

The Importance of Embodied Worship

We close our report with a note of gratitude for Synod’s mandate asking us to address a few crucial questions regarding the impact of digital media on the church’s worship. In the course of our labor,

²⁹ The final question posed by Synod is as follows:

5. Is participation using virtual or digital means still beneficial for those who cannot attend and why?

We do not believe those who view a service remotely are in any meaningful sense participating in corporate worship.

However, we believe that individual and family worship is both valid and extremely important in the life of the believer, and this importance is only greater when circumstances prevent individuals from attending corporate worship services, such as persecution, health concerns, weather, infirmity due to advanced age, etc. As noted in the report, there are benefits that may result from listening to or watching a corporate service of worship remotely.

the committee has been struck by a renewed appreciation for corporate worship and the practical importance of the body in Christian worship. We have been reminded of the crucial significance of gathered worship to our faith, and how the topic of worship inspires deep theological reflection that stretches across the loci, including theology proper, Christology, anthropology, creation, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

In this spirit, we wish to make it abundantly clear that we do not understand this report or the pastoral advice that follows to be the last word on this topic. Rather, we hope it is something of a first word, a clarion call encouraging our churches to reflect in a new way upon the importance of corporate worship. The cultural assumptions of our digital age present a wide range of challenges to a biblical model of the church as an incarnate people gathered together in a concrete place, an inbreaking of the New Creation and the age to come. We pray that our work may enhance the reflection needed to meet these challenges, and that our churches may thereby be all the more faithful when our Lord returns. Come, Lord, quickly.

C. Pastoral Advice

1. According to Scripture and our Reformed Confessions, corporate worship requires in-person gathering of the congregation under the direct oversight of the consistory.

Leviticus 23:1–3; Psalm 22:22–25; 96; 100; 107:32; 111:1; 122; 133; Matthew 16:19; Luke 4:16; Acts 2:42; Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 10:19–25; 13:17; Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 103; cf. Church Order, Articles 14, 37, 38

2. Consistories should regularly remind their members that the power of the Lord Jesus is uniquely present when the congregation is assembled for worship, and every member should make a sincere effort to gather with the congregation in-person unless prevented by infirmity, illness, or other hindrance.

Psalm 22:22, 25 (cf. Hebrews 2:11–13); 68:26; 87:1–3; 95:1–2, 6–8; 100:2, 4; 133; Matthew 16:18–19; 18:18–20; 1 Corinthians 5:4–5; 14:23–25; 2 Corinthians 13:1–4; Hebrews 10:24–25; 12:22–29; Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 65–67, 83–85; Church Order, Article 37

3. Willfully forsaking the assembly is an act of disobedience. Consistories should therefore admonish members who are content to utilize digital means as a replacement for attending corporate worship. They should urge members to gather in-person with the congregation for the sake of their own spiritual welfare, for the edification of the congregation, and for the glory of Christ, the Head of the Church.

Psalm 35:18; 40:9–10; 122:1–2; 109:30; 111:1; 133:1–3; 149:1–2; Hebrews 10:25; 13:17; Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 85

4. It is the duty of every member to exhort one another not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, and to encourage each other: “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

Psalm 34:1–3; 122:1; 132:6–7; Hebrews 3:12–13; 10:23–25

5. Consistories should be careful that the language used with regard to broadcasting does not undermine the church's theology of embodied worship. Care should be taken to avoid using language such as "Please join us online for corporate worship" or "Welcome to those who are worshipping with us online."

Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 103; Church Order, Article 37

6. Watching/listening to a worship service remotely is not participation in corporate worship, yet many benefits may be received by those unable to attend. Potential benefits include: setting apart the Lord's Day, maintaining a degree of connection with their congregation, being fed by the ministry of the Word, and finding encouragement through the singing and praying of God's people.

Cf. Psalm 42 where the Lord stirs up David's heart remotely to long for God and remember the beauty of the assembly of God's people; Revelation 1:9–11

7. Consistories are encouraged to have a deliberative discussion of the proper use of digital media for their congregation, and how to minister to their members who are unable to attend corporate worship due to illness, infirmity, or other hindrance.

Matthew 25:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15; Hebrews 10:24; 13:3, 17; Belgic Confession, Article 32

8. The preaching of the Word may be published through digital media wherever and to whomever the church is able to proclaim the joyful message of the holy gospel.

Matthew 24:14; Romans 10:17–18; Philippians 1:12–14; 2 Timothy 2:8–9; Canons of Dort, II.5; cf. Canons of Dort, I:3

9. The living preaching of the Word has the central place in corporate worship. Digital media should not be considered a replacement for the living preaching of the Word.

Nehemiah 8:1–8; Acts 20:7; Romans 10:13–16; 1 Corinthians 2:3–5; 2 Corinthians 4:5–15; 1 Timothy 4:11–13; Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 96–98; Church Order, Articles 38, 40

10. When members are unable to join their own congregation in corporate worship on the Lord's Day because they are away from home, they should make every effort to gather in-person with a faithful congregation in another place in order to keep the Sabbath Day holy to the Lord and to build up the church they are visiting.

Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12; Luke 4:16; Acts 17:1–2

11. When members are unable to join in corporate worship and they choose to view or listen to a service remotely, they should give priority to their own congregation if digital means are available in order to maintain the unity of the body in which God has placed them.

Ephesians 4:3, 11–16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

12. The Lord’s Supper and baptism shall be administered in a service of corporate worship. Private communion and baptism are contrary to Scripture. Consistories are encouraged to have a deliberative discussion about livestreaming during the administration of the sacraments.³⁰

Luke 1:58; Acts 2:1, 40–41; 16:13–15; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17–22; Belgic Confession, Article 35; Church Order, Articles 41, 46

13. Since bringing Christian offerings is an act of corporate worship, churches should maintain the practice of receiving offerings on the Lord’s Day.

Deuteronomy 16:16–17; Psalm 96:8; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 103; Church Order, Article 38

14. The churches should be reminded to appreciate and enjoy through the Spirit’s power the many tangible benefits of diligently attending the assembly of God’s people for worship, such as:
 - a. Greeting one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16)
 - b. Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19)
 - c. Hearing the voice of God together (Acts 2:42; Romans 10:14–17; Hebrews 12:25)
 - d. Glorifying our God and Father with one voice and exalting his name together (Romans 15:6; cf. Psalm 34:3)
 - e. Encouraging one another in our identity as God’s household and strengthening our fellowship with the body of Christ (Psalm 133; 1 Peter 2:5)
 - f. Overcoming fear, sadness, or spiritual drift that result from being isolated from God’s people (Psalm 42–43; Hebrews 3:12–13; 10:25)
 - g. Suffering and rejoicing together as members of one body (1 Corinthians 12:25–27)
 - h. Increased joy in meeting brothers and sisters face-to-face (2 John 12; 3 John 13)
 - i. Bringing joy to the spiritual leaders who watch over the souls of God’s people, who must give account for them, and who are grieved by absenteeism which is unprofitable for the members of the body (Galatians 6:6; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27)
 - j. Encouraging one another in faith and good works and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:23–25)
 - k. Testifying of God’s holiness to unbelievers through the congregation’s united, solemn worship (1 Corinthians 14:24–25)
 - l. Exercising regular, meaningful accountability to your leaders and fellow members (Hebrews 10:25; 13:7, 17)

³⁰ Our Church Order uses the wording in Articles 41 and 46 of administering the sacraments “in a service of corporate worship.” We believe it is beyond the scope of this report to speak to the issue of the church’s administration of the Lord’s Supper to shut-ins, and we do not intend our advice here to address that topic.

III. Conclusion

We have attempted to define corporate worship carefully and distinguish it from other forms of worship. In our understanding, corporate worship requires physical presence, so any worship taking place absent from the assembly of God's people would necessarily be classified in another category of worship. Though not itself corporate worship, observing a corporate worship service remotely may still provide many benefits.

Grateful and humbled by the trust placed in us for this work, our committee thanks God for the unity and harmony our committee enjoyed in prayerfully laboring over this matter on behalf of the federation.

IV. Recommendations

We humbly submit the following recommendations:

1. That Synod recommend the report to the churches for further study, without adopting every formulation.

Grounds:

- a. The report provides a biblical, confessional, and theological foundation for the pastoral advice.
- b. There are many issues and situations related to this topic. The report provides a theological foundation that consistories can use to address related issues and situations.
- c. Technology changes, but biblical principles remain timeless. Knowing biblical principles, therefore, will help guide consistories in making future decisions in an ever-changing technological landscape.

2. That Synod adopt the pastoral advice provided and refer it to the churches.

Grounds:

- a. The churches have asked for pastoral advice on this subject.
- b. The pastoral advice applies the Scriptures and the Three Forms of Unity to particular circumstances in the life of the churches.
- c. The pastoral advice will assist the churches in shepherding the flock with regard to digital media and corporate worship.

3. That Synod instruct the federation Webmaster to post the report on the website. For the purpose of this recommendation, the report consists of sections II.A and II.B.

4. That Synod instruct the federation Webmaster to post on the website as a stand-alone document the pastoral advice that Synod approves.

5. That Synod permit the report to be published in booklet form. For the purpose of this recommendation, the report consists of sections II.A and II.B. Our committee has provided a suitable electronic document to the Stated Clerk that can be distributed for this purpose.
6. That Synod thank the study committee and dismiss it.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Dr. Brian Lee, chairman
Rev. Talman Wagenmaker, reporter
Rev. Todd De Rooy
Rev. Russell Herman
Rev. Dr. Danny Hyde
Rev. William Pols
Rev. Ryan Swale
Rev. Harry Zekveld