

A reflection on Anglican Eucharistic practice in and beyond the pandemic

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It was my hope to write a much more academic paper on this matter, but time and perhaps talent have beaten me. Consequently, I can only point to some ideas rather than exploring them in the depth I might have hoped.

Holy Communion is central to the life of the Church. To “do it” is one of the final admonitions of Jesus at the Last Supper. Historically it has been seen as a source of nourishment and belonging. Over the centuries the latter has generally been much less controversial than the former.

In this time of COVID-19 we are dealing with eucharistic theology in a time of change and within an Anglican context. In essence we face a similar question to those faced by our forebears at the time of the English Reformation, what is the nature of Holy Communion within the Church in this emerging new era?

I want to suggest that those who went before us were careful in their determination not to come down too definitively concerning the sacrament. The place where there is definition is in article XXIII of the BCP (710):

Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of the bread and wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by holy writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of scripture, overthroweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.

These words are strong and though the Church may no longer wholly agree with the sentiment of the article it has not been removed from the articles. Article XXXIII notwithstanding the reformers and their immediate heirs were somewhat coy on the nature of the sacrament and its

efficacy. It is to these roots that I suggest we need to return in to begin our exploration of the Eucharist in our present circumstances.

In his 1549 Prayer Book, Thomas Cranmer treads a fine line between Communion as receiving of the “real presence” of Christ through the bread and the wine and the sacrament as an act of remembrance.

This percolates down to later English Reformation theologians and to an extent remains with us today. Cranmer was greatly influenced by the consubstantiation ideas of Martin Luther and Richard Hooker followed a similar line, though some would argue that he was cautious in this. Essentially, he suggested that there is a fundamental change in the state of the “accidents”, not in the sense that their substance changes, but the presence of Christ enters in and is efficacious in the life of the recipient.

Richard Baxter’s view was more memorialist, but not in an arid sense of the congregation being reminded of the sacrifice of Jesus through the actions of a minister at a distance. Rather the words of institution draw the congregation members into recalling Christ’s death and resurrection. It is this reminder that nourishes the believer as s/he receives the elements. Not in the sense that the bread and the wine are changed in any way, but that they are tangible reminders of the nourishing actions of Christ and it is this remembering which is efficacious.

The majority Canadian of Anglicans today would have a view that is nearer to Hooker than Baxter, but it is not exclusively the case. In addition, there are many parts of our Communion where followers of Baxter would be greater in number than Hookerites.

In furthering the conversation, we now turn to the sacrament itself, in particular the words of Institution. There is a helpful definition in John Macquarrie’s *Principles of Modern Theology* (469ff). He suggests there are three aspects to viewing what happens during the prayer of consecration. The first is what is actually happening to the elements, secondly, what the celebrant believes is happening and thirdly, what the recipient believes. If we take each of these in turn it may help us to shed light on how to approach the Eucharist, post-COVID.

Each Celebrant probably has an idea about what we think is happening to the bread and the wine when we say the words of Institution at the Eucharist. The bald truth is that we really do not know. Over the centuries several possibilities have been put forward as to what might be happening at the metaphysical level, but materially nothing changes.

Those of us who preside at the Eucharist know what we believe is happening to the elements and that varies according to our formation, it may also change over the course of our ministry. I am sure that each

of us would argue that the sacrament is efficacious in some way no matter what happens to the substance.

Many of us would go on to say that it is irrelevant as to what the individual priest believes is happening to the elements, the effect is the same no matter the celebrant, because of the orders we share. Macquarrie's third point deals with what the recipient of the sacrament believes they are receiving. This can vary from the notion that they are getting a reminder of the death and resurrection of Jesus, through to the belief that the elements have become the body and blood of Christ. Additionally, they may believe that the effect of the reminder is to draw them closer in thanks and praise to God enabling their growth in faith, through to the bread and wine mystically playing a part in their growth and uniting them with Christ.

It seems that in the current circumstances and moving ahead into a future where it is unlikely that former practices will be deemed safe by many church members and society in general, we have to pastorally place the greatest emphasis on the third of Macquarrie's points, what does the recipient believe about the sacrament and its efficacy? This leads us to other issues.

These include, what is the nature of Communion both within and separate from community? What constitutes consecration of the elements? What actions are necessary or are words enough? How is the consecrated bread and or bread and wine to be administered? Can the Eucharist be celebrated virtually? Finally, perhaps the most delicate matter within our Anglican context, who can celebrate the Eucharist? Communion implies community at different levels. It is Communion with Christ and through him with the Trinity. It is an expression of unity between members of the local worshipping community and a gathering with the Church, both militant and triumphant. Consequently, to see it as a private matter would be to deny its essence and move further towards the privatization of faith. That being said there are times when personal Communion is necessary, for those confined to their homes or hospital and for the dying. It may be that in a period of pandemic this should be extended to those who need it separately from the body of Christ for whatever reason, but to make it universal atomizes the Eucharist.

As far as how the elements are consecrated for home communion or similar, it seems there have been two traditions. Communion by extension and reserve where the bread and wine are brought from the table used in Sunday worship to the home of the recipient, either directly or later in the week. The other method has been to consecrate the elements in the home and then administer them. One question which arises here is in a post COVID-19 world will there be enough clergy to keep this system going?

This issue moves us on to what constitutes the consecration of the elements? Obviously, the words of Institution spoken over the bread and wine are significant. Since at least the days of St. Augustine of Hippo it has been recognized that the priest who speaks them does not need to be in a state of grace for them to be effective. The question is where does s/he physically have to be in relation to the elements for them to be consecrated? Can the Eucharist be celebrated virtually, for example?

For many of us the tradition is to: take, bless, break, and give, clearly this cannot be done at a distance. The Book of Common Prayer is more specific telling the celebrant when and how to hold the vessels and the elements. All of this implies that to celebrate the Eucharist at a distance is inconsistent with tradition.

Is tradition static or can it be altered? It is not unknown for the Church to overturn tradition. Within living memory, we have allowed the ordination of women to priestly ministry and the re-marriage of divorced people in church. In many parts of the country there has been a shift from Sunday worship being primarily through the Offices to its being largely Eucharistic.

There is no consensus in the Anglican Communion about the former two matters and the prevalence of Office over Eucharist is often dictated by the availability of priests. This leads to the question can the Anglican Church of Canada move towards virtual consecration in a post COVID-19 world? It could be a point of discussion, but it is far from clear as to whether this is desirable or possible.

A further step could be lay presidency at the Eucharist. The following motion was passed in Sydney Australia:

Resolution 27.08 passed by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney on 20 October 2008, in affirming “that the Lord’s Supper in this Diocese may be administered by persons other than presbyters”, is consistent and in accordance with the Constitution of The Anglican Church of Australia and the canons made there under.

This was ruled as unconstitutional by the Appellate Tribunal of the Anglican Church of Australia in 2010 and no further actions has been taken by Sydney Diocese to enact the resolution.

Sydney is probably the most radical diocese in the Communion with regard to this subject. Given that it has been thought unwise to proceed there it seems unlikely that there would be a general, agreement on the issue across the world, even if that were thought to be desirable.

As a side note the National Convention of our partner church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) passed a motion in July 2015 to allow lay ministers to preside at Communion under tightly restricted circumstances in its churches. This has implications for Anglicans who might be worshipping in such a Lutheran congregation, but it also raises the question of the nature of Apostolic Succession. Can a person who has not received an episcopal laying on of hands preside at the Eucharist and that Eucharist be valid?

This brings us to a significant question do we need to have a major re-think of our Eucharistic practice? Is it necessary to receive Holy Communion every week? Is it even practical to do so?

In many parts of the Anglican Communion today a weekly service of Holy Eucharist is a distant dream. Within living memory in Canada even in parishes with full-time clergy the tradition was an 8am Communion with Morning and Evening Prayer later in the day. There might have been a Eucharist added to these services once a month, beginning with the sentence “Ye who do truly and earnestly repent...”, in the Book of Common Prayer.

Across Canada for many years, and some cases this still pertains, priests would travel long distances to bring the sacrament to disparate communities across a region, once again these events would not occur on a weekly basis. It seems likely that we may have to go back to the future in many of our areas.

This possibility raises the issue of what is efficacious in the life of the disciple? It takes us to another discussion which has been happening in the Church over recent years how is deeper discipleship encouraged amongst Christians? If the inability to receive Holy Communion is inimical to the development of the disciple, then there is a need to run back through the discussion we have just had and perhaps reach different conclusions.

If receiving the sacrament is part of growth, but not the whole story, then apart from asking how often it may be necessary to receive Holy Communion, the matter might move on to how do we grow in faith if we are unable to receive the sacrament on a weekly basis?

The current period of pandemic has merely accelerated the need for a necessary conversation around practice in our churches. This is something which requires input from the wider Communion and detailed study about the theology which lies behind our eucharistic practice. The fundamental question does not seem to be about the nature and doctrine of the Eucharist, but its necessity and frequency.

To change our understanding of the nature of presidency and to try to define what constitutes efficacious consecration will take us down many rabbit trails for which we do not have time. As at least an interim measure the most obvious way to move forward is to go backwards. The re-invigoration of non-eucharistic worship should take place. This will allow greater flexibility in the conduct of acts of worship and in who can lead them. This is not a plea for the removal of the Eucharist from our worship, rather a recognition of the need for a measured response, reflecting the maintenance of tradition in a changing landscape exacerbated by COVID-19.