

To make bread, first grow the wheat

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I did not expect, as 2020 began, that I would spend much of the year participating in a crash course in ecclesiology, but that is how it turned out. My parish and diocese, the Anglican Church of Canada, and many other groups of Christians around the world, confronted a series of questions about our self-understanding, triggered by the disruptions to public life. What is church? What is it for? How do we do church? What counts as doing church well or badly, or right or wrong? And who gets to say?

The questions arose as the central identifying act of the church – Sunday gathering for worship – was dislodged from its place, with immediate and near-universal effect. As a result, questions about the church’s meaning and identity took on three qualities they have not typically had before: the questions were *urgent*, they were being asked *at the front line*, and they could only be answered *experimentally*.

It is the second of those qualities that I want to make the focus of this reflection, though the others will drift back in from time to time. I have been struck by the way the pandemic engineered almost a polarity reversal in the organization of our church. Where we relied so often, in the past, on structures and hierarchies for our identity, collecting ourselves into diocesan, provincial and national families, the question of how to be a worshipping church during a pandemic has demanded a much more decentralized, local, and context-specific response.

When we ask all the identity questions at the front line, the first thing we notice is that different and unexpected people are doing the asking. Reinventing ourselves, without access to Sunday worship gatherings, is not a specialist or academic question, nor is it a question which can be answered by bishops or clergy acting alone. Every Anglican, indeed every Christian, has had to ask themselves, “How am I going to participate in my

community of faith, my church, in these very different circumstances?” As the church emerges from the pandemic shutdown, its new contours are described by the sum of the answers to that question, which each member has contributed through their reflections, choices, and actions.

It has been fascinating to watch the range of response from members of the church. Individuals made choices about attending worship virtually, in person (once a limited return was possible), or not at all. We did so as technology multiplied the possibilities rapidly, creating new questions: do I attend my parish’s Zoom worship, or watch the bishop’s livestream, or tune into a YouTube recording of a service in a completely different part of the world? Church members also took responsibility for shared decision-making about keeping local churches closed, finding alternatives which fit their congregational culture, determining when reopening is safe, ensuring appropriate protective measures are in place, and maintaining a sense of community with people whose access to digital or in-person services is limited.

Clergy participate in these local processes of decision-making in their own ways: for example, by contributing information about diocesan or civic guidelines and restrictions, or by encouraging theological and missional reflection on the choices local communities are facing. As clergy do that work, though, we are also turning to one another. I have witnessed a substantial uptick in clergy interaction, through one-to-one contact, formal and informal diocesan networks, pre-existing online communities, and brand new conversations initiated across diocesan, national and denominational boundaries. This kind of networking hints at a new way of reconstituting the ‘hierarchy’ of the church, from the ground up.

Bishops, and others with ministries of oversight, exercise their role in this process too, though I wonder if they have not been caught between two stools. One impulse was to support and facilitate the creativity and innovation manifesting at the local level, to lead by example, and to identify parishes and congregations that need extra help or encouragement. But the practice of episcopacy also contains a disciplinary thread: the responsibility to say what is *not* supposed to happen, and to ensure that boundaries are observed.

This responsibility sits uneasily with the urgency and experimentality evoked by the pandemic, and with the unpredictability of the events it set in motion. Leaders properly attempt to anticipate the longer-term consequences of their decisions, whether those decisions are to forbid or to encourage specific actions. In reaction to COVID-19, though, anticipation was especially difficult, as so many of the calculations involved had to be made without modern precedent, with incomplete

information, or with assumptions about how other actors (such as civil authorities) would behave.

More importantly, though, the exercise of oversight during the pandemic simply emphasizes how the centre of attention in church life shifted towards the local. Church leaders, acting in a particular diocese or in concert with others, were primarily concerned to regulate acts of worship, to encourage parishes to be attentive to their unique context, and to promote communication between faith communities about how they were coping and/or innovating.

This decentralized picture of the church, in its response to the crisis, is shaped in significant ways by Canadian geography and governance. Other countries, such as England or New Zealand, with more unitary national and church structures, had more of a single shared experience. In Canada, however, we face the reality of different public health regulations across the provinces and territories, as well as risks of contagion which vary dramatically, based on population density, isolation, age demographics, prevalence of poverty, and other factors.

These differences appear not just between jurisdictions, but right down to the most granular level. Management of a public health crisis relies on the cooperation of citizens as much as on law-making, so it has to take into account the distinctiveness of local communities as well as their connectedness with one another. Perhaps there is another hint here of a bottom-up ecclesiology: a model of the church which asks first what is happening in a local context, and then how it relates to the bigger picture.

This approach has indeed played out in our church, where the key questions for navigating the crisis have been the questions asked and addressed in specific local settings. For example, the capacity of church members to stay in touch with each other, during a social shutdown, could only be determined locally, with reference to people's pastoral needs, access to telecommunications, and so forth. Even where it seemed like centralized action might make sense, such as in the production of web-based worship resources, there was an unexpected bias towards the local. Many parishes discovered they were more capable than they realized, when it came to Zoom or Facebook services and Bible studies; and there has been a widely observed phenomenon of people searching out familiar faces and places for online worship, even when global options are available.

What can be said about worship or pastoral care also applies to mission and outreach. Social disruption both focuses and narrows the work of discerning what the church is in the world for, and the initial restrictions on travel and activity meant that most churches gave their

attention primarily to their immediate environment. That could mean contacting the lonely and isolated, offering emergency supplies, supporting people integrating work with childcare at home, or simply celebrating the newfound (if forced) sense of identity and camaraderie within neighbourhoods.

In all these ways, the life of the church, in worship and mission, carried on in communities and settings across Canada, but with one notable exception: eucharistic worship was severely curtailed, and in many regions of the church largely eliminated for a period of months. The suspension or restriction of the celebration of Holy Communion was a rapid episcopal response to the initial declaration of the pandemic in March. This need not be seen as the imposition of a regime “from on high”, as church members were already voting with their feet, not risking their health to attend worship, or declining to receive the wine and eventually the bread as well. The closure of the churches ratified and completed a process that was already going on, and gave a public signal of solidarity with the shutdown in wider public life.

What made sense as an immediate response to a public health emergency, though, requires further scrutiny as more and more time elapses. That isn’t just because it’s harder to go without Communion for six months than it is for a few weeks. Rather, those very questions about what makes us church, which are being asked in new ways as the result of the pandemic, have something to say about the place of the Eucharist. The meaning of the sacrament is sometimes described in very abstract or conceptual terms, but as a practice, it highlights the local, the specific, the contextual nature of what it is to be the church. Communion is an event which happens in a particular place and time, with particular people, and in some kind of relationship to all the other events going on around it.

That is not to say that there is nothing bigger involved when a group of Christians celebrates the Eucharist. We can give various theological accounts of what that something bigger might be: we are participating in the universal action of the Church, or in the heavenly banquet, or in Christ’s “one oblation of himself once offered”. Still, there is only one way to put flesh on to any of those accounts, and that is for a group of Christians to take bread and wine, give thanks, and share. Because that practice is something we hold in common with the church through time and space, we are accountable for what we do and for how we do it, but it is ours to do.

There are examples, not very far away from us, of faith communities who have gone without Communion for a time. In northern and western Canada, rural and remote communities, both indigenous and settler, remember periods of history when Communion was infrequently

celebrated. The church was still there, in the people who prayed, cared, lived the gospel, and passed it on. I have not found that people who lived through that history cared less about the sacrament. Instead, they were fully occupied with being the church that the Eucharist is the sacrament *of*.

Over time, many of these local churches adopted more regular Eucharistic celebration. But this is not simply a matter of “raising up clergy” in order to satisfy the church’s order. That is just one element of figuring out how to make sense of the sacrament in a specific context, which is a task clergy and laity need to work on together and in partnership. The question of “how we do communion” is not, in the end, any different from the question of “how we do church”, as our worship reflects who we are, how we live our faith, and where we encounter the risen Jesus, at all other times of the week as well.

I wonder if this pattern has something to offer the church as a whole, as we work through the implications of this pandemic for our sacramental life. The necessary suspension of public worship has already compelled us to think much more clearly, in all our many settings, about what it means to be the church. But our longing to reunite, around the offering of bread and wine, has to be more than just an ill-defined yearning. It can be a desire to discover afresh what it means to be a sacramental people in *this* context, and in *that* one.

Urgency and experiment are inherent qualities of that process of discovery, but the process also needs to be accountable to and in conversation with the vast range of local communities that make up our church. Bishops and other leaders will have a role in enabling that kind of conversation to happen. At its heart, though, our responsibility to one another is to relearn how to be eucharistic people, in all our particular places and spaces.