

Reflection on the Eucharist in Pandemic Times

Murray Still

After nearly a year, our two urban churches have adjusted to the reality of existence beyond the building. After a long period of experimentation we learned how to navigate a Livestream Sunday service. Each week, challenges arise as to getting on air, or choosing music off You Tube that will be allowed for airing. We have purchased better microphones and camera systems and found ways to patch it all together to create a pleasing product.

Once our product is complete, viewers send comments that are helpful in our continued production. At one point, one of our churches, St. Stephen and St. Bede offered after church fellowship via Zoom with a good turnout.

In the early phases of the pandemic Manitoba was placed under a lockdown that lulled people into a false sense of confidence. At that point, the province was placed in an “orange” mode. By this time, any parish that wanted to continue to meet Sundays had to have a strict protocol that was approved by the bishop. After some 50 hours our two churches developed such a protocol. Each time the government tweaked the codes, the bishop sent out guidelines which parishes adhered to.

Under Code Orange, one of our two churches, St. Stephen and St. Bede returned to in person worship and participation in Communion in one kind: bread. Though code orange, our numbers remained strong. At one point, St Stephen and St Bede welcomed both bishops to commemorate the 50 years since St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church left their building and walked over to St. Bede Anglican, where they were warmly welcomed. That friendship led to a joint worshipping community and pioneered the Waterloo Declaration.

This pandemic has taught our churches that the buildings while important, are not the totality of who we are as Christians. We learned technology that brought our Church into each other’s homes. Each week, our Zoom Bible study brought growth to people’s faith. We came to understand ourselves as the Body of Christ in new ways.

As for Communion in one kind, we offered weekly services that reached our elderly and shut-ins. This is a good thing, but it also trained our thoughts on what it meant to be the gathered community. As our faith teaches us, when two or three are gathered, Jesus is present in the midst of them. Where two or three gather, you have Church,

It is in the context of the gathered that we understand Communion. Jesus broke bread, blessed it and shared it. The command to continue is evident at the Last Supper, recorded in Matthew 26:26, where it says, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, spoke a blessing and broke it, and gave it to the disciples saying, “Take and eat, this is my body.” He does the same with the cup.

When I served as a deacon in charge in the Indigenous community of Grand Rapids in the Diocese of Brandon, community leaders gathered to create a plan to deal with crime and drug and alcohol addiction. A small group of 12, the “Core” group met to plan healing conferences.

At the end of a major healing conference, a large gathering of Anglicans and Roman Catholics met in the newly built Roman Catholic Church. The keynote speaker was Anglican Bishop John Conlin. At the end of our conference the community held a feast. At that feast Bishop Conlin took a large flat piece of bannock and broke it in half. He tore off a strip and gave it to the Roman Catholic Bishop with these words...”God loves you and so do I. Please share my bread.” At that moment, the Roman Catholic Bishop did the same and others gathered around the table were given the bannock and repeated the ritual, ripping off a piece of bannock and saying the same words Bishop Conlin had used.

It was a powerful moment for everyone gathered, as the Communion was evoked not in a liturgical way at the altar, but as a part of a meal, just as Jesus did at the Last Supper.

I recall that moment often but in these covid times, wondered about our folk at home watching the livestream Communion. The question is simple. Is Jesus present for those folks at home? Are the folks at home as engaged in that worship as we were live? Can a virtual Communion occur where two or three gather? Is it possible for home dwellers to have bread and/or wine in front of them and share at the same moment as Communion is distributed via livestream?

If we believe Jesus is present with us by virtue of our baptism and that Church exists where two or three gather and the priest or bishop extends hands toward the bread, can that extend beyond to those at home? These are the important questions to ponder in an age where technology can bring us even closer to each other. If we are to say, “Yes,” what does that mean for the gathered? Can the unused sacrament from the home be given to the sick that day?

As we continue in an environment where many have not had their Communion for some time, especially our aged, is this a way we might reach them and strengthen their faith?

The concept of two or three gathered forms the core of our indigenous understanding and finds its way into “Our Way of Life,” or constitution for a Fifth Province. How might two or three in a small community with no building celebrate as Church? The concept of the “gathered” is important in indigenous communities as we celebrate the sacraments. In the time of covid, can this community be enlarged virtually?

Now that we are in a red zone in our Province of Manitoba, livestream is all we can do. We are connecting with community by Zoom technology and we wait the day we can gather again in our buildings, as Church, as diocese. Until that time, we know the Church continues to exist, continues to offer pastoral care via email and social media and prayer. Will we make decisions as to the place of virtual Communion? In our tradition, the bishops give us direction and we take oaths as clergy to obey our bishop and to follow the doctrine and discipline of the Anglican Church of Canada. Until decisions are made, the Communion will occur when the gathered are together at the table of our Lord.