

Rev. Faan Myburgh

An approach to Holy Communion during social distancing

Introduction

For the foreseeable future we will not be able to meet (as societies in the usual way) for the purpose of regularly and frequently partaking “of this sacrament (Holy Communion),” and by which we are “built up and strengthened in (our) faith and spiritual life.” With regards to the administration of Holy Communion there is “... no theological or pragmatic reason why contemporary Methodism should deviate from (the) tradition ...that the celebration of the sacraments is an exclusive function of the office to which a Minister is duly ordained.” It is thus appropriate that we ask about partaking of Holy Communion within the context of social distancing where the physical presence of the Minister, whose “call from God has been recognised by the church as a whole and who has been set apart by ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament,” is not always and in general possible.

A new context

The current context in which this discussion is taking place in is new, certainly for our life – time. The world – wide trend suggests we are talking about a three to six month period, certainly not less than two months, during which congregants will not be able to meet as ‘usual,’ to partake of Holy Communion. On the one hand to not have Holy Communion during this time may seem like nothing more than an inconvenience. On the other hand it is also the case that for many, certainly those who are committed to a Methodist ethos, their essential spirituality is informed by regular and frequent partaking of Holy Communion amongst other related issues (see the means of grace in the context of the order of salvation). To partake in Holy Communion is of ultimate concern and grounded, all at the same time, in the theological, spiritual and pastoral needs of God’s people. It is thus important that we do what we can to make available to God’s people opportunities to partake in Holy Communion within a context of social distancing even though it may only be needed for a while.

The exclusive function of the office of the minister

To make the point it is only necessary to refer to The Methodist Book Of Order, Twelfth Edition: Revised 2016, pages 15 to 19 to understand that where the minister is not physically present to be the celebrant, it would be very difficult to partake of or have Holy Communion. The basic understanding we find in 1.26; “Because the Holy Communion is an act of the whole Church, the celebrant is a Minister whose call from God has been recognised by the church as a whole and who has been set apart by ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.” Being the celebrant is thus an exclusive function of the office of the Minister (The ‘office’ with all its privileges and consequences and what it represents is included here) duly ordained thereto. It is however possible for lay people to be appointed by the Minister, after the office of celebrant having been adhered to, to distribute the elements even when the celebrant (Minister) is not physically present. The requirement is that they do not repeat the words of institution which is exclusive to the office of the celebrant or Minister.

From exclusivity to inclusivity

It is the contention of this paper that this sense of exclusivity must be balanced with the following regarding the Church's doctrine: "...For the sake of Church Order, and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office, the Ministers of the Church are set apart by ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments." (Book of Order page 13, 1.10.7) In the section, 1.15 to 1.35, which deals with Holy Communion apart from the two references to the exclusivity of the Minister as celebrant most of the section deals with what is applicable to all God's people. In other words Holy Communion is an 'open table' to which all of God's people are invited to and fully partake in as equal to the celebrant. There is no distinction or separation between celebrant and others except in the use of the words of institution by the celebrant and the meaning we give to the office of the celebrant. A further note can be used to support the above contention, namely, "the reaffirmation and consistent exercise of the New Testament truth of the universal priesthood of all believers. The Methodist Church, therefore, holds that while certain of its members are called of God and are ordained and separated to the holy office of the Ministry within the church, these hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to the Lord's people, and have no exclusive title to the preaching of the Gospel or to the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others, men and women. "It is one and the same Spirit who does all this; as the Spirit wishes different gifts are given to each person.""

Balancing the difference

Taking seriously the exclusivity of the office (and all it represents) of the Minister with regards to Holy Communion as well as the notion that it is for the sake of church order, and not because of any inherent priestly virtue, that some are ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament as well as the current context is it not possible for ministers to guide their people through a Holy Communion liturgy via social media? For the sake of Church Order this would mean some input or instruction from Ministers beforehand to help God's people prepare for the event and for Ministers to guide people. This preparation and guidance cannot be replaced by someone else. However, as God's people are led through the liturgy by the Minister, the words of institution, following the words of institution offered by the Minister, as the primary celebrant, are offered by one person per gathering as families gather in their homes. The Spirit of God always reaches out to what is beyond our own understanding and also within the MCSA as a church who confesses to be inclusive rather than exclusive in its praxis and thus the functions pertaining to its various offices.

Conclusion

The current context, I think, asks of us to allow the Spirit to lead us to where we have not been before. Remembering (anamnesis) is not, in an absolute sense, dependent on the physical presence of the Minister to exercise the office of the Minister or being the celebrant. The current context asks of us to exercise the office of the Minister in new or different ways for the sake of our unity in Christ in the context of social/physical distancing. We are in fact already discovering new ways of being together (an essential part of what constitutes the minister's office representing the unity of all God's people in any given place and time) within the context of social distancing: Preaching and other work via

social media. A more inclusive approach – that is, allowing others to also act as celebrant under the guidance of the office of Minister – is perhaps a more pragmatic and helpful approach for the time in which we find ourselves in so that we may no longer exclude others from partaking in Holy Communion.

If what is suggested here is not possible due to theological and other constraints it would be prudent for the MCSA to ‘rediscover’ and promote what is known as the ‘love feast.’ This can be done via social media. It does not replace Holy Communion in any way but is a separate liturgy to promote unity and spiritual and other care of the people.

I have quoted from the The Methodist Book of Order, The Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa Twelfth Edition: Revised 2016. It may be that some changes have been made since then which I am not aware of. I have also not made use of Scripture references because it is my understanding that what we read in the Laws and Discipline are already deeply rooted in scripture as well as the limitations with regards to the length of this paper.

God bless and take care

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