

The MCSA and the Eucharist during Covid-19 and beyond

By: Rev Thembani Ngcayisa

1. Introduction

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa as part of the Universal Church is affected by the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic like all church bodies and secular institutions. The reality and seriousness of the pandemic ultimately led to the President of the Republic of South Africa proclaiming a State of Disaster which was shortly trailed by the sister countries of the Connexion following suite. These declarations where rapidly followed by the lockdown in the six countries of the Southern African Connexion.

These set lockdowns come with certain protocols that carry varying restrictions as provided for by the National Departments of Health in the various countries. Most of these restrictions have a bearing on how the Church can and should conduct some of its holy rituals during the Covid-19 lockdowns and beyond. Apart from the various governments pronouncing the ban of public gatherings, which include Church meetings and worship services, the MCSA has requested that its Ministers should continue ministering to its members by finding creative means to do so whilst fully observing the health and hygiene protocols as directed by the different governments of member countries of the Connexion.

This proposal thus seeks to provide some insight into the understanding of the Eucharist and other holy rituals and further propose certain practical means to enable Ministers and other agents of the MCSA to administer its Sacraments during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic era; without being an academic compass due to the unavailability of materials as a result of the lockdown. Finally, it is important to note that this short paper seeks to ultimately inspire and trigger conversation and pave a way forward and does not claim to be an exhaustive response to the praxis of Sacraments within the MCSA moving forward.

2. The Eucharist and its Three Major Components

The Wesleyan Methodist understanding of the Eucharist, otherwise referred to as Holy Communion, is founded on the Protestant tradition of “consubstantiation” as opposed to the Catholic tradition of “transubstantiation”. With this in mind, Methodists therefore understand that the Elements of the Eucharist, bread and wine (fruit of the grape) are visual and physical signs which fully represent the body

and the blood of Jesus Christ as compared to being the actual presence of Christ in the Elements as held by the Catholic tradition.

This notion thus opens the argument that these Signs or Elements of Holy Communion need to be consecrated by a Presbyter who has been ordained (duly authorized) by the Church in order for them to be accepted and validated as Elements of the Eucharist. The issue thus is the observation of health and hygiene protocols set out by the governments without either, negating the physical presence and aspect of consecration or contradicting the regulations around physical contact of “food/ edibles”.

Furthermore, the Wesleyan tradition on the Holy Communion, *ceteras perebus*, is centered on the presence of three components of the Eucharist being present at the same time. These being the Sacramental Elements (bread and wine), the Celebrant (duly authorized Presbyter) and Participants (recipients of the elements). So far as our Church regulations allow, these elements must be present at the same time except in cases where there is reasonable justification for contradicting such. Such contradictions would be allowed in instances where the Elements of the Eucharist would need to be transported to an elderly person outside the Holy Communion Service, for example. Even then, the issues of health and hygiene protocols of the Covid-19 would need to be fully observed.

This is the dilemma that the ‘new church’ must embrace and work with going forward and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic era.

3. Practical Implications

There are specific regulations that would impact the praxis of the Eucharist developed and authorized by the governments to ensure the curbing of the Covid-19. These include social distancing, health and hygiene protocols and restrictions on moving from one house to the other. This section thus seeks to provide possible practical means of addressing this whilst also respecting the holiness of the sacrament, its theological and traditional validity.

During the lockdown phases, as prescribed in the government Gazettes of the member countries of the Connexion, there are restrictions on movement between jurisdictions such as provinces, towns, cities and households where Ministers may need to serve Holy Communion. There are also regulations on how food and edibles should be prepared for communal consumption by individuals who should also observe certain hygiene protocols.

The Celebrant

The Methodist understanding is that God is omnipresent and thus transcends time and space. This reality of our faith does not however exempt the Celebrant to transcendence and thus in order for the validity of the Sacrament to be intact, the Celebrant MUST be physically present at the consecration of the Elements. It is the view of the author that our tradition does not allow for virtual consecration of the Elements as the Celebrant is not transcendent. The Celebrant, as a Methodist Minister or duly authorized person, MUST at all times ensure that whilst physically preparing the Table and during consecration and distribution of the Elements; they MUST wear an appropriate face mask and hand gloves. The Celebrant may not touch the Elements with bare hands or with gloves but may hover their (right) hand over the Elements during consecration whilst using the relevant liturgy for such a purpose.

- **Preparation of the Table**

The Minister MUST use the prescribed type of sanitizer to clean the contents that are to be used at the Table. As Methodists we understand that the use of alcohol in the Holy Communion is prohibited however it needs to be understood that this alcohol content on the sanitizers is not for consumption but for hygiene purposes in order to comply with government regulations.

- **Consecration of Elements**

Once all the contents such as the Table, Cloths, Chalice, Wafer Holder, Wine Glasses etc. have been sanitized the Celebrant may use the relevant liturgy to consecrate the elements with the hovering of the (right) hand over the Elements. Once consecrated the Elements may be distributed to the Participants whilst observing social distancing and other regulated protocols.

- **Distribution of Elements**

All countries of the Connexion insist on observing social distancing as part of the strategy to curb the spread of the Covid-19. This is to be respected and undertaken with the seriousness it requires. There are also regulations on the number of people that can be seated in a single venue once the lockdowns have been lifted. NO Holy Communion by Intinction should be allowed during Lockdown and only the Celebrant may drink from the Chalice whilst other participants may drink from small Holy Communion glasses (disposable if ever possible/ available)

- **During Lockdown Phases**

The Minister will sanitize the Table (or the holder where the Elements will be placed). After which, the Minister, after sanitizing their hand gloves and whilst wearing a mask, will then uncover the Elements

and after a prayer will allow the Participant to reverently take the elements and feast on them whilst observing social distancing. In extreme cases where the Participant cannot reach and feed on the Elements on their own, or that the Participant has to be visited in their home, the Minister need to ensure that they have a valid permit to visit the Participant and will ensure that the Elements are served properly and swiftly using sanitized clippers and glass holder to observe social distancing. The above process will also be encouraged for Ministers who may need to travel and deliver the Eucharist during lockdown. The Minister will need to sanitize their hands each time they leave the home of the Participants.

- **After Lockdown Phases have been Lifted**

Once those numbers have been reviewed and issued, no Minister at any single moment of officiating during the Sacramental Service will allow the number of people in attendance to exceed those directed in the regulations. The Minister will ensure that during such services the seating arrangements will conform to the set regulations observing social distancing. If for any reason a Minister will need to deliver the sacraments to a home of an elderly or sick member outside of lockdown, the Elements will be distributed as per the process of Lockdown above.

The Elements

- **During Lockdown**

The Elements need to be consecrated by the Celebrant prior to being transported to the home of the Participants. This will ensure that the visit is short enough to avoid unnecessary long visits and contamination. The Minister/ duly authorized person with a valid permit to make visitations, will only take with enough Elements to serve Holy Communion in a household while leaving the rest of the consecrated Elements in a covered container in the vehicle they are travelling in. Elements that left over during the visit need to be reverently disposed of in the home of the Participant before returning the containers to the vehicle. On return of any used containers, the Minister/ duly authorized person will need to sanitize the containers before storing them in the vehicle

- **After Lockdown**

The same protocols as above need to be observed with the exception of the traveling permit, face mask and hand gloves.

The Participants

- **During Lockdown**

The Participants in the Holy Communion will be contacted by the Minister/ duly authorized persons with a valid permit in order to assist in the delivery of the Eucharist. The Participant will need to wear an appropriate face mask and sanitized hand gloves in order to receive the Elements of the Sacrament. The hygiene protocols and social distancing during the distribution of the Elements as outlined above would need to be adhered to.

- **After Lockdown**

All the above may remain with the exception of a valid permit, mask and hand gloves. Holy Communion may be received by Intinction with one participant using their own glass for dipping the wafer or bread

Conclusion

The above are mere insights to be considered during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond they are not exhaustive in any form but call further reflection and engagement within open discussions whilst discerning the holiness and validity of the Eucharist as led by the Holy Spirit. Once agreed upon, these procedures may be forwarded to the relevant structures who may resolve to utilize some or all as part of our practice in celebrating Holy Communion going forward.

Finally, the same protocols, restrictions and practical procedures can be adopted and modified during other key sacramental and holy rituals celebrations such as Baptism and at Ordination. We can no longer dismiss the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic which is calling for the Church of Christ to rethink its future and the manner of doing church whilst keeping our doctrine and tradition in the face of evolving theology.