
Communion and Uber Eats – Managing the Methodist Grace Supply Chain during the Covid19 Lockdown

I offer these thoughts as a Methodist lay-person with a particular academic interest in evangelism and John Wesley's *Journals*¹.

In these Corona Virus Days we are told that we Methodists are not allowed to receive communion by supplying the elements ourselves and letting a minister guide us through the sacrament over Social Media. Effectively this means that the Sacrament, like alcohol and tobacco, is not available to Methodists under Lockdown conditions. The bread and juice that are delivered to our homes by Uber Eats – or bought from the spaza shop – are not considered part of the sacred food chain.

On the other hand, some products and services are considered essential during a general lockdown, and maintaining their supply chain is a high priority. If the Lord's Supper is similarly essential to the spiritual health of the individual Methodist, then we perhaps ought to find a way to celebrate, and re-think the "supply-chain" of communion; Covid 19 has coerced a new way of being the church in the world, and we have to consider whether we can or cannot (or may/may not) establish new modalities for the sacrament within this new context.

There are several possibilities for what we might do about communion during lockdown: just get on without communion for a few (or many) months (Ngcayisa, 2020); have family love-feasts that do not include formally blessed elements (Atwell, 2020; Myburgh, 2020); have a representational celebration of the mass (with the rest of us looking on virtually); Virtually celebrate with completely virtual elements ("Now click on the bread icon"); virtually celebrate with a motorbike delivery of blessed elements; let everybody just do their own communion; appoint "zone communion stewards" to minister the sacrament to Methodists in their area (Frowe, 2020); let ministers phone members and have communion over speaker-phone, using elements prepared in that home; or set up group virtual celebration with home-prepared elements (Myburgh, 2020). I currently favour the last two options.

1.1 The Locus of Liturgy Under Lockdown

Firstly, we are not allowed to meet face to face, so we have synchronous, online services, where we can post comments as the minister sings and prays and preaches, and send heart or thumbs-up or frowny-face emojis. Is this "real" liturgy/worship or not?

The classic radical protestant understanding, embraced by Wesley, is that the presence of Jesus constitutes the church – "Where two or more are gathered in my name" (Matthew 18:20) (Wesley, 1827-1, p. 477; Wesley, 1986, pp. 46-57; Volf, 1998, p. 136). If Jesus moved out of the consecrated building, then the church moved too. Wesley strongly advocated the value of such of off-site liturgy (Mostert, 2018). In our tradition, ministers already do off-site celebration of communion with house/hospital-bound members, without the actual presence of the rest of the community. And already they have moved off-site via

¹ My PhD research was on "evangelism in the Methodist Church in Cape Town" (Mostert, 2018).

electronic platforms – a functional equivalent of Wesley’s off-site liturgy.² (Mostert, 2020).

The inference is that the church, gathered under extraordinary circumstances – be it a tete-a-tete at a bedside, over a phone, or on group social media - is indeed the real church; Jesus himself constitutes the church by his presence (Matthew 18:20), as we are intentionally present to one another as best we can under the circumstances. Wesley opened the windows of the church building so that those outside at a distance could also be part of the liturgical community (Wesley, 1827-1, p. 315; 1827-2, pp. 193, etc.). In view of the cosmic nature of God, I consider that basic cell-phones and social media platforms open contemporary windows to those newly crowded out by circumstances.

1.2 The Converting Power of the Sacrament Under Lockdown

Next, how does grace reach people through the sacrament? The spiritual “commodity” flowing down the supply-chain is the “preventing, justifying and sanctifying” grace of the really present Jesus (Wesley, 1984, p. 381). As such, Wesley saw the sacrament as a means of grace, one aspect of which was that it was a *converting* agent³ (1827-1, pp. 247, 279, etc.). He assumed that many church-goers were as yet unconverted (1984, p. 383), and so celebration was urgent: “we must neglect no opportunity of receiving the Lord’s Supper”, he said (1986, p. 429). As Oduyoye puts it, “the Eucharist should mean that the world is the church’s business” (1986, p. 143). Consequently, and if we also have a sworn commitment to “maintain the common life of worship and service” (MCSA, 1975, p. A9), then we *must* try to keep the Lord’s Supper available, because we are public people, not private liturgical consumers (Barth, 1958, p. 565). But under current lockdown regulations only a minister has access to communion: the poor might be cut off from hi-tech platforms, but *all* non-clergy are currently cut off from communion.

It is important to note here that there have already been changes in the modalities of communion over time. Protestants protested (MacCulloch, 2003, pp. 147-8). Even the hyper-conservative Catholic Church holds that “...the liturgy is made up of unchangeable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These latter not only may be changed, but ought to be changed with the passage of time, if they ... have become less suitable” (Vatican Council, 1996, p. 126). And over the years the Methodist church has introduced such changes as the diced sandwich loaf for the host, and grape juice for wine (Miller, 1990). These were not random changes: they were “may and ought” changes, made as circumstances changed. Red cooldrink and sliced bread from the spaza shop might be the next appropriate new response to the new contingencies of corona virus lockdown.

If virtual connection - by basic cell phone or hi-tech platforms - is a new normal along with enforced separation, then “may and ought” we take another contextually relevant step, using these newly available platforms as loci of communion?

1.3 The Priesthood of all Believers Under Lockdown

Thirdly, who may handle the elements, and in what way do they need to be handled?

² I have argued this in my previous contribution to this forum (Mostert, 2020)

³ Wesley would have celebrated the Lord’s Supper daily if he could (1986, p. 430; 1827-4, p. 96)

Methodists hold a “democratised” view – the bread and wine are handled freely by non-clergy, who buy, set out and pack away the elements, and are even deputised to distribute bread and grape juice at communion services (along with the minister): “The grace through every vessel flows/in purest streams of love” (MCSA, 1983, p. 753). We do not house the consecrated host in a tabernacle; the minister does not have to polish off all the wine.

So...when and how do very ordinary bread and grape juice become effective nodes in the supply chain of grace? If the bread and wine are “visual and physical signs which fully *represent* the body and blood of Jesus” (Ngcayisa, 2020, pp. 1,2), then grace touches the recipient of the elements as and when they perceive – through the *representing* sign - the presence of Jesus during communion (Hughes, 2003, p. 146). I currently favour the idea that grace always remains in the gift of Jesus (“All power is given to me...I am with you always” he said – Matthew 28:18-20), not in the gift of the church. In our current practice we tacitly acknowledge this by accepting that the minister does not have to actually touch the elements for the grace of God to flow through them⁴.

My tentative conclusion is that the orderly worship of the church under lockdown conditions would be enhanced by a pastoral phone-call during which isolated Methodists could consume ordinary elements (hygienically supplied by themselves) that are consecrated in conversation with their minister⁵; a pastoral conversation which could helpfully be extended to a multiple-participant, synchronous online Eucharist.

1.4 Cost/Benefit Analysis

Conference needs to decide what the best way is for the church to maintain and execute its mission in the light of Scripture and the particular emphases we inherit from John Wesley. However, my cynical expectation as a layman is that our leaders will simply keep on talking about what we might do until “normal” church resumes, leaving the status quo as it is: no communion during lockdown. The “new normal” will become the “old normal”. That might, of course, be the most irenic thing for such a culturally varied and change-resistant institution. But we ought at least to consider a cost/benefit analysis of our action or inaction.

Risks: Losing control – because sacraments are the one thing you can’t get unless you come to church? Lay people getting above themselves? The danger that one event can be endlessly repeated, rather than being re-created repeatedly? Exclusion of the lo-tech poor and elderly? Losing members to churches with a stronger on-line presence? Losing plate money for maintenance of buildings? Having to learn new modes? Exposure to comparison in a competitive world? Opening oneself as a minister to criticism and critique by both insiders and outsiders?

Benefits: maintaining the rhythm of church; extending a viable channel for people to be included in future (don’t have to lose people who go on holiday)? Pastoral integrity and good will maintained? Focus on people rather than buildings? Using new modalities will resonate with the very people we are concerned that we are losing? Potential to be something plain,

⁴ In fact, I note that it is a common practice to have a *separate* cup and bread-portion for the celebrant to handle, which I do not understand in terms of the imagery of “one loaf”. But that is a discussion for another day.

⁵ A minister might need to make a *lot* of personal calls to members who could not afford hi-tech virtual platforms – but that might be an excellent pastoral connection.

homespun and wholesome on line? Open to both insiders and outsiders? Establishing real links with the elderly and immobile? Acknowledgement of the spiritual agency of the laity?

Wesley was a risk-taker in terms of sacrament and Church order: he appointed irregular preachers because of new contextual demands (Wesley, 1827-1, p. 542); he approved of irregular ordinations in America, for the same reason (1827-4, p. 296); he approved of irregular women preachers (1827-4, p. 223). He took risks because he was convinced the Spirit of God was able to move in old power in new situations – what Mokgothu refers to as the “Original Normal” (2020, p. 4). The issue of distance-communion through distance-community perhaps tests our resolve to walk in the ways of the Spirit in our time.

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