

Communion during lockdown: **Some pastoral and theological reflections**

by Rev Dr Roger Scholtz

1. Introduction

I am one of those Methodist ministers who has used a digital platform to administer communion to my local Society during the Coronavirus lockdown. I have done so, thus far, on three separate occasions as part of particular services of worship in which our community was gathered together, albeit remotely – on Maundy Thursday, on Easter Sunday, and on the first Sunday of the month of May. I must hasten to add that at the time of each of these services, I was honestly unaware of the directive issued by the Presiding Bishop that ministers should refrain from conducting online communion services, and was acting with a clear conscience and in good faith.

Having already ventured a little way down this particular path, I'd like to offer some pastoral and theological reflections on how these services were conducted and what they have meant to me as an ordained minister; and to my church community, as far as I'm able to discern, in this difficult and demanding time of lockdown.

2. Reflections on how these communion services were conducted

I have been very careful to ensure that a number of core principles be observed in the manner in which these communion services have been conducted:

2.1. Each of these communion services have clearly and unambiguously been part of a particular worship service, on a particular day (and even time) when the local church community as a whole was invited to gather, each in our own homes, with the express intention of worshiping together. (Some of the ways in which this sense of communal participatory worship has been fostered include – a text message to every member of the church prior to the service inviting them to participate; worship guidelines for each service that include responsive prayers, readings and song suggestions, all encouraging people's *active* participation; written prayers by different members of the community; an audio sermon from myself; shared intercessory prayer needs arising out of the pastoral concerns within our community and country; an invitation for people to contribute financially to the ongoing work of the church; an online Zoom "coffee chat" after the worship service when people can share directly with one another their thoughts and reflections on the service itself.) It has been explicitly stressed that while we all partake of the elements of bread and wine in our own homes, we are in fact all sharing in one common communion service. I have no doubt that these communion services themselves have contributed in a significant way to the sense of corporate worship and connectedness as a community of faith that we have been fortunate to experience during this lockdown.

2.2 As an ordained minister and the person set aside within our community to exercise sacramental ministry, I have clearly and unambiguously been the celebrant at each of these communion services, leading the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving ("Lift up your hearts..."), the Words of Institution ("...on the night in which he was betrayed...") and the Invocation of the Spirit ("...by the power of the Holy Spirit [may] we who receive your gifts of bread and wine...share in the body and blood of Christ.") I do not regard this role as a form of "job reservation for the clergy", but rather hold to the view that ordained ministers are representatives of the entire Church of Christ, whose agency as celebrants in Holy Communion establishes a tangible and visible connection between the local community sharing the sacrament here and now, and the worldwide people of God across all time and space. This is an important dimension of a communion service that should be safeguarded, especially in this time when the sense of connectedness as the people of God is under threat.

2.3 The way in which the various components of the communion service referenced above have been shared with the congregation has simply been through an **audio** recording of the minister leading the liturgy that is distributed via WhatsApp. There are pragmatic and theological motivations for this particular choice. On the pragmatic side, an audio recording on WhatsApp is an accessible, user-friendly delivery channel for a majority of our congregation, including the aged and the poor. (The data requirements for an audio recording of the entire communion liturgy are not excessive – approximately 4MB for a high quality recording of about 4 minutes, and 1MB for a good quality recording.) A theological motivation is that by using an audio recording of the liturgy (as opposed to video), the visual focus on the particular piece of bread and chalice of wine in the minister's home is removed, allowing the Words of Institution and the Invocation of the Spirit to be focused more sharply upon the bread and wine in each communicant's home.

2.4 While various communion liturgies have been authorised or approved within the MCSA, the most commonly used liturgies, such as those found in the 1975 Methodist Service Book and the various vernacular hymnals, are clearly preferable in these circumstances as they provide a recognisable connection with familiar forms of worship within our Methodist tradition. It must be noted however that the more commonly used words in the Breaking of the Bread (the Fraction), as found in the 1975 Service Book – “The bread we break is a sharing in the body of Christ. **Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in the one loaf**” – cannot easily be accommodated in these circumstances. The alternative words offered in that section of the service would be preferable – “The things of God for God's holy people. **Jesus Christ is holy, Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**”

3. Reflections on what these communion services have meant to me as a pastor, and to my local church community

The point has been made by some that because we are unable to gather together in the same physical space during lockdown, we therefore cannot celebrate communion. I, however, would argue the exact inverse of this – that it is precisely because we are unable to gather together in the same physical space during lockdown that we **MUST** celebrate communion. For this is the participatory feast of grace that binds us together in Christ and opens us to a direct experience of his living and enlivening presence, which is surely what is most needed in this particular moment of struggle and uncertainty that is ours. Let me share what this has meant for me quite specifically as a pastor, and what I sense it has meant for the local community of which I am a part.

3.1 Under ‘Duties of Ministers’, our Book of Order states the following: “Ministers are to be servants of all Christ's people by being pastors to them *in their homes and in every other situation.*” (*The Methodist Book of Order*, 12th ed., para.4.73., p.41. My emphasis.) The current extraordinary situation of a global Covid-19 pandemic with all its attendant health, economic and social consequences is placing a significant demand upon the pastoral care that ministers are being called to exercise. This is both the burden and privilege of our calling as shepherds of the flock of Christ. The bottom line is that people's lives are being impacted in direct and devastating ways. Offering words of hope and life, and extending to people the means of God's grace, have never felt more crucial in the almost 30 years of my ministry. And knowing how central communion is to the faith and spirituality of so many people, being able to facilitate communion for my community during this time as one key expression of the pastoral care I'm charged to exercise has been a source of immense meaning, gratitude and joy.

3.2 On an even more personal note, the disruption that our national lockdown has brought to the usual way of doing church has been immense. I have found myself feeling quite overwhelmed at times as I've scrambled to put structures and systems in place that will enable effective ministry to continue. The pressure of ensuring that nobody feel isolated or abandoned has been enormous, and there have been moments when I've questioned whether this is, in fact, possible. But then there have been other moments of sheer grace, when we've been gathered by Christ at his table to receive again the gifts and benefits of his saving work on the cross. And in those

sacramental moments I've been reminded in a profound way that it really is Christ who gathers and holds his body together as one. This has given me the perspective and strength to continue the work that is mine to do. This is what the sacrament of communion can do – it really is a saving grace for the likes of ministers like me.

3.3 For the community I serve, I can confidently say that these services of communion have been a means of grace that have been deeply appreciated. Many have commented on how special it has been to give and receive communion in the intimacy of their own homes, as they have shared Christ's body and blood with those closest to them. Given the enormity of the strain that homes and families are currently facing, not least of which is the heightened threat of domestic violence, sacramental ministry of this nature that reaches into the very heart of the home is no small thing. Whatever theological arguments may be offered as to exactly how and when the presence of Christ is mediated in communion, the lived experience of my community is that Christ's presence in these services of communion has been real and a source of great hope and strength.

3.4 A further benefit is the growing potential of these sacramental moments to forge a radical new unity amongst the diverse (and often separated) congregations that make up our local Society. Prior to lockdown we had a traditional English service, a contemporary English service, and an isiZulu service – but all of these congregations are now invited and included in one united feast of grace. Should this means of grace be suspended, I know that it would be a source of deep disappointment, puzzlement and even grief within this Society.

4. Some concluding comments and suggestions

4.1 Within the covenantal relationship between a Minister and the Church, "the church provides ministers with the opportunity to practice their calling" (*The Methodist Book of Order*, 12th ed., para.4.3., p.30.). Administering the sacraments is a significant dimension of any calling to the ministry of word and sacrament, and so the church should trust her ministers, as covenantal partners, to do so with integrity and good pastoral sense.

4.2 Where guidelines are needed to ensure that the administering of communion during lockdown is consistent with the best emphases of our particular ecclesiastical and theological traditions, the following core principles should be foregrounded:

- 4.2.1 Communion services are communal and inclusive in nature, never private or exclusive. Great care needs to be taken to find ways to encourage this sense of the gathering of the community if communion is to be celebrated during lockdown. Thankfully, the technology that is now available can assist greatly in achieving this.
- 4.2.2 Accordingly, communion services should be located and grounded within particular and intentional corporate worship experiences. It is quite possible that such intentional worship services where communion is to be celebrated can extend beyond local Societies to include Circuits, Synods and even the Connexion. Imagine the power of the Presiding Bishop calling the entire Connexion to join in worship at a particular hour one Sunday morning, where she leads us in a communion liturgy and we all receive the body and blood of Christ together.
- 4.2.3 While Christ is the host at communion, ordained clergy should be the celebrants. The current situation does not require a deviation from this aspect of our current communion practice. Laity are obviously required to play the further role of distributing the consecrated elements within their own homes.
- 4.2.4 The use of familiar communion liturgies, like those in the Methodist Service Book and our vernacular hymnals, should be encouraged.
- 4.2.5 Great care should be taken to keep the data and technical requirements for digital participation to an absolute minimum, so as to limit as far as possible those who might be excluded due to financial costs or digital competency. The provision of data for poorer members could be a particular focus within local

churches. Indeed, the need for affordable data access for all should become a justice and advocacy issue within the church's public discourse.

4.3 It is recognised that there will, inevitably, be those who are unable to participate in communion that uses a digital platform, for various reasons. This would then require a special focus and response from the ministers of such members to find ways of reaching these. At the very least, they should be included in the prayers and awareness of the rest of the local community who are able to participate. Thankfully, the shifting digital landscape of our time means that a significant number of our people can be reached via these means.

4.4 We should stop using the language of "virtual communion" to refer to communion that uses digital platforms to gather and connect the worshipping community, as it implies that the communion they share is not "real" communion. **The resurrection bears witness to the truth that the presence of the living Christ transcends all barriers of space and time.** This is the fundamental theological basis that enables the church to explore new modes of sacramental practice in this particular moment of crisis and need when we are unable to gather physically together. For the hope and promise of Christ is that he is with us always, even to the end of the age (Mt 28:20).