

# Does celebrating Holy Communion ‘virtually’ represent the envisaged community of believers?

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<sup>20</sup> Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper. <sup>21</sup> For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of *others*; and one is hungry and another is drunk. <sup>22</sup> What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise *you*.

*1 Corinthians 11: 20-22*

## Introduction

I am grateful for the invite to share a few thoughts on the urgent matter of our practice of Holy Communion. A disclaimer; in the time I have had to put this reflection together, this is in no way an academic paper, so it comes with very little source referencing to support my assertions – it is purely the reflections of my exposure from over the years as a minister.

In pursuit of the best solution it is always commendable to tread carefully and avoid being forced by circumstances to make a rash, yet lasting decisions based on temporal conditions. The Sacraments are a practice that is biblically, theologically and ecclesiologicaly grounded over years of deliberations and practices. Another concern that has led to this paper is how often we have allowed pragmatism, instead of theological principles, to dictate our Holy Communion practices.

One of my other struggles with modern Christianity is the propensity for dishonest propaganda that it relies on in peddling whatever message it seeks to propagate. In the contextualising of Christianity, one hardly ever hears how it dealt with inculturation into Europe and how rituals and ceremonies within the church were constantly being removed or added, the major changes happened even around 1500 Elizabethan Anglican church. Somehow, when it gets to Africa – Africa must just accept all the rituals of Europe as being Christ’s ordinances and anything African seen as demonic and evil.

In this paper, I will give a brief outline of the Christian understanding of Holy Communion, a Wesleyan interpretation. In dealing with Methodism I will also look at how the Church Unity Commission as a body made up of the following member churches; Anglican Church of Southern Africa, Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, The Methodist Church of Southern Africa, The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa formulated agreements on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

I will invoke some African understanding of rituals and their place in forming community. Christianity is a narrative formed community and ritual is a central part of such a community. Therefore, beyond just the correct belief and correct practice, we seek correct living out our Christianity.

## A Methodist Theological reflection on Holy Communion

Holy Communion, the Eucharist, is considered a Sacrament in the Christian tradition, not only just a sacrament but an ordinance of Christ. A Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, especially a solemn Christian ritual instituted by Jesus Christ. The Methodist Church recognizes two such rituals, Baptism and Holy Communion.

In terms of what Holy Communion stands for, our understanding of bread and wine once consecrated, as is often the case, for us Methodists it is seldom an either/or but a both/and approach. On the one hand are

the Roman Catholics and their transubstantiation where bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. On the other end are the Baptists; who view the sacraments as symbolic and memorial in nature. I chuckle when people speak of “virtual” communion because ‘virtualism’ in church history refers to the practice close to what Roman Catholics understand as partaking of the sacrament gives real *spiritual power* in being the body and blood of Christ. Let us therefore, be careful not to embarrass ourselves in the ecclesiastical circles. So as Methodists we believe in the presence of Christ not so much in the actual elements but in the celebrating community, the Upper Room and Emmaus experience speak directly to this presence – Bread, Wine and Christ in the same venue. In this celebration, there is a threefold structure: *eucharistia* (act of thanksgiving), *anamnesis* (act of remembering), *epiklesis* (act of invoking the Holy Spirit to work among us). The consecration of elements has long been accepted by the Methodist church to not only be based at a particular time but in the process of all the 3 elements of the service. The *epiklesis* is therefore not the only moment of consecration but the combination of all these. The commentary on the Lima Document puts it this way:

In the early liturgies the whole “prayer action” was thought of as bringing about the reality promised by Christ. The invocation of the Spirit was made both on the community and on the elements of bread and wine. Recovery of such an understanding may help us over-come our difficulties concerning a special moment of consecration. (Lima Document, 1982, 11)

### **John Wesley and Holy Communion**

John Wesley preached that Holy Communion is more than a saving sacrament but a converting one. A conversion not from being a non-believer but a believer moving deeper still in the love of God and Christ-likeness; Charles Wesley put it as “changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place.” So, what exactly did Mr Wesley believe and teach on Holy Communion? There exists a document that seems to have fallen through the cracks of the MCSA, Wesley’s Articles of Religion. I will summarise numbers 16 – ‘on the sacraments’, 18 – ‘Of the Lord’s Supper’ and 19 – ‘Of both kinds.’ 16 and 18 define the understanding already defined in the above section and uses the Pauline warning on unworthy celebrations. 18 goes on to emphasise that the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshiped. This is an emphasis that the sacrament in and of itself carries no particular significance and the blessing thereof doesn't elevate it to any other level either. Article 19 simply emphasises that the participation is to be of both the bread and wine, not just one.

In the Methodist church, the ritual of Holy Communion is celebrated by an Ordained Minister. One who comes from among the laity, recognise a call from God in their life and is set aside by the church through the laying of hands for ministry, not just of Word and Sacrament but also often overlooked is that a minister shall observe and implement the provisions of Laws and Discipline and all other policies, decisions, practices and usages of the Church. (BoO 4.76) Two matters are of interest to us here; firstly, the authority given the minister and secondly the guided role of the minister in the sacraments. Priesthood from medieval times was understood as standing *in Persona Christi*. This is partly why when we preside at the table, we assume the position behind the table rather than with our backs to the congregation. However, we have shifted from this medieval expression of *In Persona Christi* as a full stance, but we hold to that value of as churches.

The Lima Document states:

It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. He is the shepherd who leads the people of God, the prophet who announces the Word of God, the priest who celebrates the mystery of God. In most churches, this presidency is signified by an ordained minister. The one

who presides at the eucharistic celebration in the name of Christ makes clear that the rite is not the assemblies' own creation or possession; (Lima Document; 1982, 14-15)

Also:

14. It is especially in the eucharistic celebration that the ordained ministry is the visible focus of the deep and all-embracing communion between Christ and the members of his body. In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. In most churches this presidency is signified and represented by an ordained minister. (19)

### **A matter of Authority in Holy Communion**

Wesley's Article 22, of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches:

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant to the Word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, Every particular church may ordain, change, or abolish rites and ceremonies, so that all things may be done to edification.

In this article Mr Wesley articulated the freedom of what we could now say are the various Connexions and the necessity of an inculturation that should not be in contrast to the Bible. Wesley even allows space for creativity of practice so in principle this could be said to allow for an entertainment of this virtual communion. However, the same Article of Religion prevents an altering of Conference agreed doctrine without the agreement of the decision-making body.

The minister does not have free reign to conduct the Sacraments as he/she chooses. Ministers are guided by the church's sources of theology amongst which are our liturgies. No minister is allowed to create their own form of liturgy and should they do that, they require the permission of the Bishop. Conference authorises the forms of liturgy to be used by the church and sadly in the vernacular languages of the church the last authorisation was around the 1950s and in the English language, the early 2000 with the acceptance of the British red book. In the event that Conference is not sitting, the Presiding Bishop is as commonly called, Conference between Conference therefore when a matter of a disaster that affects the connexion, the only person who can make a decision regarding the rituals of the church is its leader – the Presiding Bishop. The PB made a call and therefore we shouldn't be here, so why are we here?  
PRIVILEGE

### **The exclusivism of Privilege**

There are people who believe their comforts are more important than the bureaucratic processes of the church and they can function with impunity. They perform as though the church is a congregational movement with some local council being the final body on matters of doctrine. The church is a divided body and the dividing line is a blur between race and class but sadly also a ritual blur on matters that even Mr Wesley himself had instructed; "I also advise the elders to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord's Day." Generally, the white churches and the more affluent churches celebrate communion at least once a month whilst the majority of the black and poor churches must wait for at least 3 months when a minister can get to their society. I posit that this discussion is therefore not a theological one but nursing the delicate issues of privilege and purse. This is where I believe the Methodist church needs to hear

carefully the Pauline admonishing – let us be careful not to over indulge whilst our brothers and sisters haven't arrived at the table or that by the time they arrive, we have over-indulged and consumed everything.

### **The essence of Community**

The church by nature is a community hence the Eucharist is referred to as the Holy Communion, it is the gathered community that celebrates in the ritual. What is community? A group of people united by a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society or having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests. I am not persuaded by the pursuit to redefine community in post-modern terms to include social media as an authentic community platform. To put it differently; is a means of communication, a formation of community? Emphatically NO! Church attendance should have stopped with the invention of Radio and TV because we all should congregate around those electronic gadgets and be in community. Virtual platforms are not community but a means of communication. FB friends are not friends but perhaps a better word would be followers because even those who dislike you follow you just to keep tabs on you.

As a Church in Africa, two other communal liturgical elements that we would be missing on are the acts of washing of hands and of passing the peace. We have neglected in our practice the act of hand-washing which this Corona pandemic has launched us right back into it, before any meal we assist each other in wash our hands – in the church context – particularly for those who are to serve the meal. The other part which is critical, is the passing of the peace. You cannot engage in a meal with people you have unsettled issues with, such food may cause you to be ill. This is both as African as it is biblical. Virtual communion enables us to dodge both these processes and therefore whatever type of community we may think we are endangering, would be in error.

Another African lesson we can learn is the gift of waiting. When calamity strikes, the community pauses from 'life as normal' and observes the disruption but this is Christian as well. The church needs to teach our people the gift of waiting – on the Lord. We are faced with a world pandemic and as a people of hope – which is what the Eucharist is all about, surely, we can wait on the Lord to deliver us from this crisis and then we can re-convene to celebrate again. I may not know what happened with the Spanish Flu but I know with the World War 2, the church paused from meeting and great thanksgiving celebrations were had after the war. The urgency of finding a quick fix speaks to a community that cannot wait on the Lord when the very meal we speak of is a meal for those waiting to celebrate its fullness in the presence of God.

It would also be a mistake if the Methodist Church in this period sought to redefine its understanding and Eucharistic practice because as co-signatory of the LIMA Document we have covenanted to a shared table:

19. The eucharistic communion with Christ who nourishes the life of the Church is at the same time communion within the body of Christ which is the Church. The sharing in one bread and the common cup in a given place demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with their fellow sharers in all times and places. It is in the eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested. Eucharistic celebrations always have to do with the whole Church, and the whole Church is involved in each local eucharistic celebration. In so far as a church claims to be a manifestation of the whole Church, it will take care to order its own life in ways which take seriously the interests and concerns of other churches. (Lima Document, 1982, 12)

### **The Love Feast as an alternative**

Historically the Wesleys' offered the Love Feast as a substitute for the sacrament where there were no clergy present as a way of experiencing the grace of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of community by sharing together. Creative ways can be sought on how this can be celebrated. The struggle for me though still remains; surely every meal that a family celebrates should be a love feast, are we not the ones who sing a blessing over our food: "Be present at our table, Lord; be here and everywhere adored; thy creatures bless and grant that we may feast in fellowship with thee" What difference would this Love feast setting offer that is different from any meal we celebrate?

### **Conclusion**

I will not sum-up the points I have made above but attempt to refocus us on what unites us most.

The church is not at a stage where it can allow the practice of virtual communion to continue because doing so without others would jeopardise our communal values and witness.

The community we are called to model seeks to be Christ-like, inclusive of all people particularly the vulnerable and values its traditions.

A community that prays "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is an eschatologically hopeful one – here now but journeying to a place where we shall be joined with Christ in God's full presence and glory. We therefore dare not celebrate in a community where race and class are dividing factors laid bare by the Corona Virus. Our response cannot be like that of the world where the haves continue in their comforts.

The community we seek to shape is one where whilst we are made to be Christ-like we continue to be poured out like Christ – into a world filled fear, uncertainty and in desperate need of hope. As we are being emptied, we are also being filled by Christ.

We are a Christ healed Africa for the healing of Nations.