

FROM THE EDITOR

Communion and Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues at the time of writing. Although western countries who are the prime subjects of their own media interest have mostly ‘flattened their curves’ and are easing restrictions, the impact of the coronavirus will continue for a long time, and in different respects. The African countries which are now the demographic center of the Anglican Communion have yet to encounter, or at least to report, the effects of COVID-19 in comparable numbers to those experienced in the USA and Europe. Nigeria eased its lockdown on May 5th with little sign of serious testing or gathering of statistics. With the African and Indian realities still to be assessed, and cases in Brazil still accelerating, even the impact of the first wave cannot really be counted yet.

In the absence of vaccines or effective treatments, the likelihood of second and further waves is more than just high; and in some sense, even epidemiologically, COVID-19 may always be with us. The Churches will never be the same either. The changing circumstances of the pandemic have forced adaptation and innovation in various ways; and in the process a number of uneasy theological tensions have come into clearer focus. Things some of us may already have believed or stopped believing long ago about the Church and the Eucharist became obvious to others, where relative prosperity and ease in the West had allowed significant differences to be ignored. The material economy of the Church is compromised as much as that of households and nations; some great institutions reliant on visitors and programs are now hobbled, and local communities, dependent on voluntary gifts, are directly exposed to the vulnerabilities of parishioners even as they seek to minister to them. Yet the Church has sought to respond faithfully and effectively to the needs of its members in particular, and often to the wider community as well.

Essential Services

While history is full of stories in which ministry to the sick involves the courageous witness of Christians, advances in science mean that the Church has had to learn a more passive role in caring for the suffering under plague conditions. Pastors and others are used to aligning themselves with and working alongside physicians and nurses, but with COVID-19 it has been the epidemiologists who have become partners in adjusting and responding to the needs of the community. Past heroes of faith demonstrated virtue by sharing the risks associated with the sick, but the realities of

transmission now mean that old forms of good deed have potentially become means of harm. Often the key question for Church leaders, as for other members of the community, has been what *not* to do.

Restraint and suspension of normality has become characteristic of how Church communities have responded to the pandemic, not without controversy. The Church of England in particular has struggled with the question of how both to share in and support the needs of the community.

While suspending public worship took place there as elsewhere, the Archbishops specified that clergy were not to enter church buildings, even for private prayer or for the new core pastoral task of starting a live-streamed service. The original notice, following British PM Boris Johnson's March 23 announcement, also suggested that while regular services, funerals, weddings, and baptisms could not take place in Church buildings (and baptisms only as emergencies), food banks were exempted.¹ This of course raised the question of what was essential, and why.

The problems were immediate and obvious, except perhaps to the Archbishops and their immediate staff. Many worshippers, not just clergy, wanted to be connected with the spaces and places that meant so much to them. Members of the Church were now being offered alternative forms of prayer and worship, via technologies not always familiar or welcome, centered on clergy whose faces which had become personal avatars of worship. Without the context of stone and wood that spoke of a larger reality than personality or family, and reminded them of a past and future beyond the challenging present, this personalized corporate worship as never before. The force of this interdict was all the greater because Holy Week and Easter were imminent. Some clergy, and not just those who might have been expected to pick a public fight, immediately put pressure on the Archbishops and their offices in some quiet, and eventually less quiet, ways. Other very senior clergy seem not to have been persuaded, even though they held the line publicly for the ecclesial greater good as they saw it.

The lack of clear rationale for the specific directions was part of the problem from the outset; as more of the implicit reflection emerged, the basic commitment the Archbishops wished to share was one of participation and solidarity with the wider community, to put it the best way possible, rather than claiming some sort of exceptionalist privilege. In a clarifying letter on March 27 purporting to be from all the bishops, the Archbishops said:

The numbers of those becoming seriously ill and dying is increasing. It therefore remains very important that our churches remain closed for public worship and private prayer. The Church of England is called to model the very best practice. We must lead by example. Staying at home and demonstrating solidarity with the rest of the country at this testing time, is, we believe, the right way of helping and ministering to our nation.²

¹The March 24th announcement: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/church-england-close-all-church-buildings-help-prevent-spread-coronavirus> Accessed May 3, 2020.

²Letter from Archbishops and Diocesan Bishops of the Church of England to all clergy in the Church of England, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/20200327%20Letter%20from%20Archbishops%20and%20bishops_1.pdf Accessed May 4, 2020.

That was the same day that the most striking liturgical moment of the *Triduum* of 2020 took place, Pope Francis' *Urbi et Orbi* given in an empty St Peter's Square in front of the ancient crucifix of S. Marcello al Corso and the icon of Mary known as *Salus Populi Romani*, before entering the Basilica for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The value of symbol and place could not have been more apparent.

Even after some sidetracking and qualification, the brief statement of the situation offered by the Church of England early in May was still: 'Our church buildings are therefore now closed for public worship, private prayer and all other meetings and activities except for vital community services until further notice.'³

The question being begged through all this of course was that of 'vital community services'; and the fact that the Church has traditionally used 'service' to refer to its liturgy added force to the irony involved. The Archbishops obviously value prayer and worship, but they conceive it to be something that lies outside the realm of what actually is vital for the wider community, and the dangers of the clergy stepping out—symbolically or literally—seemed greater than the virtues inherent in staying in step.

London cleric Marcus Walker was one who offered loyal opposition:

I have received scores of letters and emails, calling on services to be restored here in their church: the church they have upheld and kept up, where they were married, where they buried a partner, saw a child christened, found God, were confirmed. This is their church and I am their pastor; I owe them my solidarity. As one said in her letter: 'We don't need you in solidarity at home, we need you in solidarity at the altar of our church.'⁴

Just as striking however was that the Government clearly did not intend any such restriction to apply, and probably expected more of clergy than starting Zoom services. Those prepared to click further into the information that the Church itself had to reproduce would learn that those understood to be 'key workers,' whose children could attend to cut-down educational offerings still being offered in schools, 'includes "religious staff" – such as parish clergy and chaplains whose work is critical to the coronavirus response.' There were also indications that National Health Service facilities were underserved in the more familiar and traditional roles of chaplains, but calls for volunteers came from the constitutive health trusts, not from the Church.⁵ Food banks and schools joined hospitals as essentials services, but Churches did not. The Archbishops had called on clergy to go an extra mile, as they put it, but left people behind in doing so.

All this may have brought to the surface assumptions discernable elsewhere in the function of the central leadership of the Church of England, where theoretical cues on leadership seem to be taken from a generic set of assumptions about the

³Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance for churches,' <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches> Accessed May 3, 2020

⁴Marcus Walker, Sermon for First Sunday after Easter,' <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=538365010179833> ; transcript at <https://archbishopcranmer.com/revd-marcus-walker-returns-pulpit-here-i-stand/> Both accessed May 3, 2020.

⁵Hattie Williams,' Volunteers' help for stretched hospital chaplains to be tightly restricted,' <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/news/uk/volunteers-help-for-stretched-hospital-chaplains-to-be-tightly-restricted> Accessed May 3, 2020

public good, but are wedded to an interiorized sense of the Gospel, missing the wisdom of Christianity's historically-formed identity. Retired bishop Peter Selby reflected in *The Tablet*: 'That removal of Holy Week and Easter to the domestic realm reflects, without any element of challenge, faith becoming a private matter and our public life belonging to be the realm of practical secularity.'⁶ The disjuncture between the leadership and the experience of the clergy was manifest in a recent letter to *The Times* signed by many hundreds.⁷

To give them their due, the Archbishops and their charges shared and wanted to act on a recognition of the importance of civil society, even if the specifics of their rulings overreached. Elsewhere, it was not so much misstep as calamity being paraded under Christian banners. Some conservative Roman Catholic and evangelical voices in the USA joined in the curious rejection of social solidarity that seems characteristic of the current American political moment, pleading on behalf of the economy as an abstraction even at the expense of human suffering and death.⁸ Like the problematic leader of that nation, these religious leaders played a double game, defending economic privilege under a banner of political disruption. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of specific Anglican responses, there seems to have been something about the Anglican tradition of social thought that guards against such open pandering to capitalism's worst excesses at the expense of civil society on which it depends.

Virtual Communion

Not everything about the Church being forced from the more public into the domestic realm has been lamented. Despite an increase in vacuous quips about the Church not being buildings, many clergy and lay people have been able to deepen a sense of the sacred in daily life, finding different understandings of space and place outside of Churches. In other parts of the Anglican Communion, the domestic setting was still able to be connected with Church buildings visually or virtually, allowing the sort of limited connection with the familiar symbols which the Roman Catholic and other traditions had treated as essential. Interiority itself may often have found new attention, harder as that is to measure.⁹

Clergy have now been working to add competence in video-conferencing programs to the list of desirable pastoral skills to practice and visibly succeed or fail at, and many communities have maintained their close existing connections by streaming worship live. There have been unforeseen positives, given the wider availability of these resources to people not otherwise inclined to attend Churches or far from those to whose liturgies and lives they might otherwise be drawn. Others have identified spiritual needs not previous known or acknowledged, and have been able

⁶Peter Selby, 'Is Anglicanism Going Private?', <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/account/register?redirect=/features/2/17973/is-anglicanism-going-private> Accessed May 3, 2020.

⁷Michael Sadgrove, 'Clergy and Locked Churches: The Bells Not Tolled,' <https://northernwoolgatherer.blogspot.com/2020/05/clergy-and-locked-churches-bells-not.html> Accessed May 3, 2020.

⁸R. R. Reno, 'Coronavirus Reality Check,' <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/04/coronavirus-reality-check> Accessed May 4, 2020

⁹Sylvia Gosnell, 'Inside!' <https://ism.yale.edu/news/inside>

to access forms of prayer not otherwise available; in some cases, more users have appeared online than expected.¹⁰

Yet there have also been drawbacks and difficulties. Little attention has been given to those without internet access, whether excluded by familiarity with technology or by lack of economic power, although in the UK the Archbishop of Canterbury went to the phone lines as well as the internet.¹¹ The inability to celebrate the eucharist together has been widespread, although felt deeply more in parts of the Communion (and the wider reality of Christianity) where eucharistic worship is central. Most Anglicans have accepted the inaccessibility of sacramental worship as a given under the circumstances; in some places it has been possible for a few to gather representatively, and others then to participate vicariously by visual connection.

Yet at different ends of the theological spectrum, different possibilities have been mooted or performed. Private masses and celebrations with no communion except by the congregation, participating only visually and prayerfully, were once common at the Anglo-Catholic end of the spectrum; these have now returned in some places, the pastoral emergency helping some get past the traditional objections to Eucharist without congregation.¹² A rather different question was raised quickly, apparently with more vigor at the liberal end of The Episcopal Church (in the USA etc.) than elsewhere: why not, some have said, regard a community created by virtual means as able concretely to celebrate the Eucharist together? This was perhaps what the others merely viewing eucharistic celebrations were also affirming, but to somewhat different effect when it came to the physical expression of communion. Those arguing for a so-called 'virtual' eucharist have sometimes wanted the physical signs of bread and wine themselves *not* to be virtual; that is, to be provided and consumed by the different participants where they are, local consumption trumping other actions of sharing that are necessarily physical absent.

Here again the authority of primacy has been needed to provide guidance. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry of TEC noted at the end of March, not only that the 'virtual Eucharist' was not now a possibility, but that it was in deep tension with Christian beliefs about sacramentality.

Sacraments are communal actions that depend on 'stuff': bread and wine, water and oil. They depend on gathering and giving thanks, on proclaiming and receiving the stories of salvation, on bathing in water, on eating and drinking together. These are physical and social realities that are not duplicatable in the virtual world. Gazing at a celebration of the Eucharist is one

¹⁰Harriet Sherwood, 'British public turn to prayer as one in four tune in to religious services,' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/british-public-turn-to-prayer-as-one-in-four-tune-in-to-religious-services?CMP=share_btn_tw Accessed May 4, 2020.

¹¹Archbishop of Canterbury launches free dial-in worship phone line during coronavirus lockdown,' <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/archbishop-canterbury-launches-free-dial-worship-phone-line-during> Accessed May 4, 2020.

¹²<https://www.allsaintsmargaretstreet.org.uk/> Accessed May 3, 2020.

thing; participating in a physical gathering and sharing the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist is another. And, God, of course, can be present in both experiences.¹³

This of course did not end the conversation. One diocesan in TEC seemed not to get the memo, and later had to be reminded of the Presiding Bishop's teaching.¹⁴ At least one priest in the Church of England went ahead at their own initiative (which perhaps caused less of a stir there, because the attention was on other issues already mentioned), invoking clericalism in objecting to the forms of purely visual communion being offered by others.¹⁵ In still other places, clergy and worshippers saw the possibilities in using the signs of bread and wine in different ways, retrieving the rather ill-defined (and hence flexible) notion of the 'Agape' meal, while distancing themselves from the notion the Eucharist in the stricter sense could be celebrated under these circumstances.¹⁶ Further arguments for the virtual eucharist have been offered since, commenters claiming to discern the Holy Spirit moving amid the downloads,¹⁷ or again underlining the roles of clergy and laity signaled in the apparent accessibility of eucharistic celebration to some.¹⁸ Less attention seems to be given to the fact that internet access is not, globally or even locally, a universal resource, or to deeper questions of what is constitutive of eucharistic celebration itself.

These issues will not go away soon, even though most of those involved might share the hope that the challenges which made it more topical might do so. Yet the question is not brand new. Some protestant groups had been using televised communion services (bread and wine on the TV set) long ago, and even Roman Catholics and others have televised eucharistic celebrations for decades without the expectation of taking communion. The more evangelical end of the non-denominational spectrum had adapted this concept to the internet already too. Prior to COVID-19, Anglicans were generally clear why these were not appealing or justifiable.

However virtual reality, and its dependence here on other notions of presence and community, is not even this recent. The prior technological revolution that

¹³Michael Curry, 'A Word to the Church regarding the theology of worship during the COVID-19 pandemic from the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church,' <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-word-church-our-theology-worship> Accessed May 3, 2020.

¹⁴Jacob W. Owensby, 'Home Based Worship and Resources: Keeping Connected Amid Physical Distancing,' https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Home-Based-Worship-and-Community-Resources.html?oid=1111514195724&aid=nlM3_CQpxbM; Accessed May 3, 2020.

¹⁵Dana Delap, 'How we shared the bread and wine on Zoom,' <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/comment/opinion/how-we-shared-the-bread-and-wine-on-zoom> Accessed May 3, 2020.

¹⁶Egan Millard and David Paulsen, 'Drive-thru Communion? Remote consecration? COVID-19 sparks Eucharistic experimentation – and theological debate,' <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/04/08/drive-thru-communion-remote-consecration-covid-19-sparks-new-eucharistic-concepts-and-theological-questions/> Accessed May 4, 2020.

¹⁷Joshua Case, 'Towards a Digital Sacrament: A Moment 40+ Years in the Praying,' <https://medium.com/@nieuprovoker/towards-a-digital-sacrament-a-moment-40-years-in-the-praying-87cacc9c1daa> Accessed May 3, 2020.

¹⁸Diana Butler Bass, 'On Hoarding Eucharist in a Hungry World,' <https://churchanew.org/blog/2020/05/01/butlerbass1> Accessed May 4, 2020.

changed Christian worship irrevocably was the accessibility and then centrality of the book. The availability of the Bible in the vernacular, and the use of the book as the medium of 'Common Prayer' in England, involved a technological as well as a theological shift. The imposition of a common liturgy was intended to create a 'virtual' unity among English Christians independent of their physical locations and exact times, and in some important ways it did just that. Anglicans have long spoken of the value of knowing a shared liturgical heritage is always being performed in prayer around the world, even while not seeing it or touching its elements. Yet this revolution did not displace common physical presence, which could have yielded to a much more privatized sense of faith and worship at that point. The private or domestic could then have become the primary locus for worship, given the emergence of new emphases on personal piety, but did not. Rather the new possibilities brought by the technology of the book were subsumed in the fundamental commitment to the physical gathering, whose participation in *koinonia* was at least in some ways enhanced.

While they are taking place, it is common for experiences of disruption to be experienced as threatening or promising more change than they really bring or leave. The prayer book and the Bible disrupted liturgy, but in doing so deepened what they could have undermined. The disruption afforded by COVID-19 and that afforded by the internet are not the same thing but have coincided, and catalyzed each other. Anglicans are now sharing in prayer with others (not just other Anglicans) all over the world now, seeing things they had not before, hearing familiar words in unfamiliar cadences and new words spoken in unfamiliar holy places. Some of this takes place because it is possible, and other parts because it is necessary. Worship may indeed be changed; it may increasingly be streamed even when available in the flesh, and perhaps even hybridized by including streamed elements, but it will not cease to be primarily a physical and communal activity if it remains characteristically Christian.

If we learn anything from these experiences, it must be more than the defense or deepening via technology of existing privileges characteristic of our localized identities, or facilitate the triumph of the private over the public and communal that Anglicans have so far resisted. Not only does the public character of worship need to be affirmed, the needs of people and provinces further away from the prosperous communities now being 'virtualized' must also be given the attention that a 'global world,' or a global Communion, should be able to muster, whether because of the viral crisis or the technological opportunity. These concrete challenges for health and for holiness will not go away soon. Anglicans should hope to emerge into a world where not only a virus but a prayer or hymn may both travel and transform.