

Holy Communion and the distribution of the elements

Liturgical Considerations

- 1 Holy Communion is a shared sacramental meal at which the risen Christ presides. In relation to the elements of bread and wine, *Common Worship* states that ‘In Holy Communion the Church, following the example of the Lord, takes, gives thanks, breaks and gives’.¹ The way in which these actions are carried out has symbolic significance, not least in relation to how they express the gathered community’s celebration of a shared meal and, through it, their participation in the one Christ. It is often suggested that this is best achieved through the sharing of one bread and one cup, reflecting the teaching of St Paul: ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’. (1 Corinthians 10.16). The sharing in one loaf and one cup is also present in the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper (Matthew 26.26-27; Mark 14.22-23; Luke 22.17, 19-20).
- 2 Practical considerations, such as the number of communicants and, in the current situation, risk of contagion, will sometimes require the ideal of ‘one bread, one cup’ to be adapted according to circumstance. Such adaptations need to take account of the primary symbols associated with each element.
- 3 In relation to the bread, whether a loaf of bread or wafer bread is used, the piece of consecrated bread that the communicant receives should, wherever possible, have been broken. Although the Church of England’s current Advice on the Administration of Holy Communion (1 July 2020) states that ‘For the time being we encourage the use of individual communion wafers or bread that has already been divided rather than large wafers or loaves of bread that are broken and shared’, it also makes provision for consecrated bread, other than that that the president will receive, to be broken before it is administered ‘in silence or while the Agnus Dei is said by the congregation and after the priest has sanitized their hands’. The administration of a piece of broken bread is therefore permitted.
- 4 In relation to the wine, the primary symbolic association is different in that it relates not only to the wine itself but to the manner in which it is received, drinking from a common cup. Even when, because of the number of communicants, several chalices are used to administer communion, they are shared vessels rather than individual cups. Drinking from a common cup is a strong symbol of unity, and of a Christian’s belonging to, and responsibility towards, others and, not least, Christ. Before the crucifixion, Christ prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’ (Matthew 26.39b). The cup from which the communicant drinks is not their own, but Christ’s cup of self-sacrificial love. In the current situation, there appears to be no obvious adaptation of the way in which the consecrated wine is administered that permits this key symbolic association to be expressed. The use

¹ Note 17 to Holy Communion, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (main volume), p.333.

of individual cups is not customary in the Church of England and carries significant public health risks (see below paras 13-17). Furthermore, there are practical problems with their liturgical use in the Church of England. This relates to any consecrated wine that may remain in individual cups after the communicant has received. *Common Worship* states that ‘Any consecrated bread and wine which is not required for the purposes of communion is consumed at the end of the distribution or after the service’.² In the current situation, it would not be possible for any consecrated wine that remains in individual glasses to be consumed safely by anyone other than the communicant.

- 5 The Church of England normally administers Holy Communion in both kinds (consecrated bread and wine). Article 30, ‘Of both kinds’, remarks that ‘The Cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the Lay-people: for both the parts of the Lord’s Sacrament, by Christ’s ordinance and commandment, ought to be ministered to all Christian men alike.’ In the Church of England, the consecrated wine has always been administered with a common cup or chalice.³
- 6 However, there are some situations in which communicants lawfully receive bread alone, or wine alone. The Notes to the Celebration of Holy Communion at Home or in Hospital, and for the Distribution of Holy Communion at Home or in Hospital indicate that ‘where necessary [Holy Communion] may be received in one kind, whether of bread or, where the communicant cannot receive solid food, wine.’⁴ This Note refers in particular to the administration of Holy Communion to the sick and housebound, but others might also do so habitually, for instance, those who are alcoholics or who have coeliac disease.⁵
- 7 Whilst it is normal practice to administer Holy Communion in both kinds to children, the Guidance on Celebrating the Eucharist with Children (published with the Additional Eucharistic Prayers) observes that ‘if a parent declines to allow their own child to receive consecrated wine, then communion should be administered in one kind only to that child.’⁶
- 8 In these specific circumstances, receiving Holy Communion in one kind alone is not controversial.

Legal Considerations

- 9 At the time of the Reformation, even before the publication of Article 30, statute law was enacted stating that Holy Communion should be distributed in both kinds.

² *Common Worship* (main volume), p.182.

³ Developments in the germ theory of disease toward the end of the nineteenth century caused various Free Churches to experiment with individual cups: US Patent 516,065 (granted to John G. Thomas of Ohio in March 1894 for ‘certain new and useful Improvements in Communion-Service’) describes one of the earliest known uses of individual cups. <https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/82/57/78/f4123e8c6c4a41/US516065.pdf>. It would appear that the use of small cups was precipitated by a preoccupation with hygiene, not (for instance) a desire to mirror Passover usage or to communicate a theological point. See A.K. Robertson, ‘The individual cup: its use at Holy Communion’ *Liturgical Review* 8 (1978), 2-12 (p.2) which also suggests the emergence of individual cups in the 1890s.

⁴ *Common Worship: Pastoral Services*, pp. 73, 79.

⁵ Legal Advisory Commission, *The Use of Non-Alcoholic Wine and Gluten-Free Bread*, ss.12-13.

⁶ Liturgical Commission, *Guidance on Celebrating the Eucharist with Children*, ‘The use of fermented wine’.

However, the legislation also made provision for a generic situation in which that practice should not be followed. The Reformers took account of the fact that there could well be occasions when it was necessary for the cup not to be administered to the people, i.e. when there was a risk of contagion. Where that was the case, they provided for communion to be administered in one kind only. Thus the Sacrament Act 1547, s.8, notes that ‘the... blessed sacrament [shall] be hereafter commonly delivered and ministered unto the people... under both kinds, that is to say of bread and wine, except necessity otherwise require.’⁷ In other words, it recognises that

there may be circumstances when the requirement for delivery of both bread and wine need not be complied with. Delivery in one or other kind alone is lawful provided that a true necessity can in law be demonstrated. In the first instance, the responsibility for deciding whether such a ‘necessity’ exists rests within the discretion of the president but s/he should not deviate from the general law except in a case of genuine necessity.⁸

- 10 The examples given in the Legal Advisory Commission’s opinion, *Holy Communion: Administration of the Sacrament* (September 2011) are those in s.6 above, namely those individuals who for some reason cannot receive either bread or wine. But the opinion also observes that ‘necessity’ can also cover large numbers of communicants ‘if there is a reasonable fear of contagion from use of a common cup or chalice.’ The health risks potentially posed by a common cup during the present pandemic suggest that it should not be used. In such a case, the minister should consider such advice as may be forthcoming from the diocesan bishop in the exercise of his or her responsibilities (Canon C 18).
- 11 Accordingly, the Church of England guidance on Holy Communion issued on 1 July 2020 for the resumption of public worship, following the easing of Government restrictions, indicates that the president should receive communion in both kinds and that the congregation should communicate under the form of the consecrated bread alone. It is not permissible for the bread alone to be consecrated, or for the president to receive in one kind alone (either practice would be a ‘variation... of substantial importance’ in the form of service in the language of Canon B 5).
- 12 The LAC’s opinion, adopted by the House of Bishops in the answer to a Question at the informal meeting of General Synod (11 July 2020), is that ‘the Sacrament Act 1547 makes provision for cases where a necessity not to deliver a common cup arises: in such a case the normal requirement that the sacrament be delivered in both kinds is disapplied by statute.’⁹ It is because ecclesiastical law provides for what is to happen where there is a necessity not to deliver a common cup (i.e. the usual requirement for communion in both kinds is dispensed with) that there is no legal basis for individual clergy to make alternative arrangements such as the adoption of individual cups.

⁷ Emphasis added; text modernised. Original at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Edw6/1/1/section/VIII>. The 1547 Act was repealed under Mary I but revived under Elizabeth I by the Act of Supremacy 1558.

⁸ Legal Advisory Commission, *Holy Communion: Administration of the Sacrament*, s.6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, s. 8.

Public Health Considerations

- 13 The current Government guidance on ‘food and drink’ in worship points to the need for a system preventing individuals coming into contact with ‘consumables and any dishes and/or cutlery other than their own (for example the use of shared bowls)’. In this light, it is inadvisable to use a common cup to distribute the consecrated wine at Holy Communion.
- 14 It has been suggested that, as in some Free Churches, individual cups could be used for this purpose and guidance written to govern their safe use. The ordinary practice in such churches is to use small glasses which are placed close together in purpose-built trays (which might fall under the category of ‘communal vessels’ referred to in the Government guidance).
- 15 The practicalities of distributing consecrated wine in individual cups would certainly need very careful consideration. Whatever the mechanisms for filling and distributing such cups, there would be many opportunities for spillage, fingers touching other cups or communicants’ fingers, and individuals breathing over multiple cups. The cups would need to be securely covered prior to use.
- 16 As yet another alternative, it has been suggested that wine could be consecrated in flagons at the holy table and poured into a cup brought from home by the communicant. The same issues would apply in relation to accidental touching and close contact for an unnecessarily long period during the distribution. In addition, personal cups would need to be covered in order to prevent possible contamination before their use.
- 17 For all these reasons, specific guidance from Public Health England would need to be sought for any of the above before sanctioning such a practice. It is doubtful that PHE would approve such usage without very detailed guidance being given, if at all. As things stand, the current guidance of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) against the use of ‘common vessels’ probably extends to the sort of communion trays that are customarily used in some Free Churches.

Conclusion

- 18 If it is necessary on public health grounds to suspend the common cup there is no basis for making alternative arrangements such as the provision of individual cups. The requirement for Holy Communion to be administered in both kinds is suspended.
- 19 The use of individual cups could be made lawful in the present circumstances only if they were lawful at all other times. Such a change can only be sanctioned by the House of Bishops or by the General Synod. In view of the above, such a change is likely to be highly contentious, and would generate significant controversy without the prospect of agreement being reached.

+ Robert Exon, *Chair of the Liturgical Commission*

Dr Matthew Salisbury, *National Liturgy and Worship Adviser*

Alexander McGregor, *Chief Legal Adviser to the Archbishops' Council & the General Synod*

Dr Brendan McCarthy, *Medical Ethics, Health and Social Policy Adviser*