



The Doctrine Commission Of the Anglican Church of Australia

Report from the Doctrine Commission concerning

Eucharistic Ministry and Ministry in the Absence of a Priest

This is a paper prepared by Andrew McGowan and Peter Adam, for and on behalf of the Doctrine Commission, in response to the issues referred by Standing Committee (SC 2005/2/008) and General Synod (Resolution 75/04). An earlier version of this paper has been discussed at length by the members of the Doctrine Commission, who commend this paper for conversation and reflection, though not all members would agree with all parts of the document.

Introduction

1. A number of questions about Eucharistic ministry, and specifically the reservation of the sacrament and extended communion, were raised by the General Synod in 2004 in the aftermath of a debate about lay presidency. In subsequent conversation at the request of the Standing Committee, the Doctrine Commission gave particular attention to situations where stipendiary priestly ministry may not be available, and hence focussed its discussion in these more specific terms, among the wider “theological, ecclesial, doctrinal and missional implications”. The issues in this paper have been discussed by the Commission and are commended for consideration by the members of General Synod; its contents should not be taken to have the support of all members of the Commission.
2. Various options may be considered by bishops and communities addressing the need for Eucharistic and other ministries, where distance and other factors make local stipendiary ministry difficult. This paper seeks first to reflect on key issues about the nature of the Holy Communion that might inform those who are reflecting on the merits and dangers of particular pastoral solutions to these challenges, and then briefly to address some specific proposals and practices.
3. Not all Anglicans will reflect theologically the same way on what is appropriate practice concerning the Holy Communion, but there are common sources to which any proposal or practice needs to be accountable. The New Testament writings give certain basic prescriptions about Eucharistic theology and practice, and certain other indications about norms.
4. Australian Anglican reflection must also take account of Constitutional commitments to the sacrament of Holy Communion, as well as to Baptism and to the three-fold order of ministry (Fundamental Declarations), and of the “doctrine and principles of the Church of England embodied in the Book of Common Prayer...and in the Articles of Religion” (Ruling Principles).
5. Faithfulness to scripture regarding the Holy Communion is understood by Anglicans to mean its being “ministered with un failing use of Christ’s words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him” (Lambeth 1888). The New Testament is not prescriptive on who may preside, but there are other characteristics of the Holy Communion which may be inferred from texts such as 1 Cor 10-11.
6. The NT gives particular emphasis to the integrity of the meal and the reception of the elements within the meal. The danger of inappropriate practice is not primarily that the meal elements lose their character, which does not depend on its participants (1 Cor 11:27), but

that the meal will cease to fulfil its proper purpose (11:20) and that it will therefore become destructive.

7. Dom Gregory Dix has pointed to the significance of the four -fold action of the Holy Communion, taking, breaking, blessing, and sharing. In this the focus is not just on the elements, but also on the actions, and on the words that accompany them. To separate the offering of the Eucharist from the receiving of the elements may be seen to undermine the significance of the Eucharistic action.
8. The character of the elements as body and blood of Christ is strongly analogous to the (eschatological) character of the community that shares the meal. In the words of E. L. Mascall, 'in the Eucharist the Whole Christ offers the Whole Christ.' The Christian community, locally and otherwise, is challenged to accept its own distinct identity that stems from sharing the meal. Modern liturgies have emphasized the epiclesis, the prayer for the Holy Spirit. Gerard Austin points out that this is also a prayer for the work of the Spirit in the congregation: 'eucharistic reality is about a conversion: not only of the elements of bread and wine but of the gathered assembly of the baptized.'
9. The Articles of Religion state that "the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped" (28). Insofar as such forms of Eucharistic devotion were perceived as substitutes for actual reception, these objections will have limited bearing on the immediate issues addressed here.
10. The 1662 Ordinal indicates that 'from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests and Deacons.' The commitment to these orders in the Fundamental Declarations of the Anglican Church of Australia implies that there are ministries proper to them.

Extended Communion

11. By Extended Communion we refer to instances where the sacrament is taken directly from a particular celebration for public or private reception by other individuals or a group.
12. We have noted that any separation of reception from the celebration involves a risk of undermining the significance of the Holy Communion. The value of any normal practice of Extended Communion should involve consideration not only of the possibility of reception afforded, but wider issues of the integrity of the sacramental action.
13. The immediate taking of the sacrament, duly consecrated in the course of public liturgy, to someone physically unable to be present with the gathered community need not mitigate the fact of the community meal or other aspects of sharing, unless this practice becomes normal rather than exceptional.
14. The mere possibility of Extended Communion need not mean that it is a more appropriate practice for reception by a sick or housebound person than the intimate celebration, with a priest, envisaged in the Communion Office for the Sick.
15. Regularly taking the sacrament to another worshipping community for an act of public worship is more problematic. There may be other options more adequate to the character of the gathered Church community and to the nature of the sacrament.

Reservation

16. By Reservation of the Sacrament we refer to instances where the sacrament is kept aside from a particular celebration, for later public or private reception by other individuals or a group.
17. Reservation involves inherent difficulties because of the separation of reception from the rest of the Eucharistic action. The pastoral value of reserving the sacrament for later reception must be assessed against the impact on such practice on the proper understanding and practice of the symbolic action normally involved in celebration of the Holy Communion.

Diaconal Presidency or ‘Administration’

18. Generally the role of deacons in the celebration of the Holy Communion is to assist the priest or bishop and to distribute the consecrated elements. This is the most appropriate form of “administration”, and might well include Extended Communion where authorized. Where it is desired that a person in deacon’s orders regularly preside at the Holy Communion, it would be preferable that they be appropriately trained and ordained priest.
19. **Lay Presidency or ‘Administration’**. Lay presidency has its proponents, and there are arguments in favour of it, either as an exceptional or as an authorized practice. It does not, however, appear to be a “solution” for ongoing ministry within the recognizable limits of Anglican tradition in particular or Catholic order generally. It would require the lay persons concerned to be trained and formed to an adequate standard for wider aspects of ministry as well [See 25 below].

Ecumenical collaborative administration

20. There are numerous reasons to welcome ecumenical collaboration, not least where isolated communities are able or need to transcend denominational limitations. Communion does imply such a degree of recognition of faith and of ministry that the “sharing” undertaken has integrity.
21. Anglicans should welcome those who are baptised believers communicant in their own traditions. They should take part the celebrations of those who recognize and can accept Anglicans similarly. Questions of recognition of ministry cannot be overlooked.

Reduced Eucharistic Frequency

22. Circumstances may affect the frequency with which Anglicans or others can expect to receive Holy Communion. Isolation such as to make weekly communion difficult or impossible should not be used as a basis for introducing practices otherwise deemed unacceptable.

Local Priests

23. All ordained ministry is a provision of Word and sacraments for the Church, and all the ordained are in a sense “local”. The regulations and standards whereby the Church orders the ministries of deacon, priest and bishop are and have always been enormously varied, according to the necessity of providing these ministries. Ordination makes explicit the permanent relational expectations of pastoral and ministerial leadership.
24. The creation of ‘local priests’ should not be undertaken purely as a means to provide sacramental ministry, but as a means to provide the full and varied various dimensions of ordained ministry, specifically preaching and teaching, and pastoral care and oversight, as well as liturgical leadership.
25. If we are to adopt Local Priests, then the Bishop needs to preserve the power to deal with the situation of pastoral breakdown, which may require the Priest to be moved, or the Licence to be withdrawn. This possibility would raise many pastoral problems.
26. ‘Local priests’ as well as other ministers, lay and ordained, stipendiary and non-stipendiary, should be trained according to the standards expected of all such lay or ordained persons. The education of the laity as a whole is also interdependent with such adequate formation and education for the ordained. The recognition of this need and the provision of resources to address it is at least as urgent as the needs for sacramental ministry already acknowledged.