

Witney Deanery, Motion on Holy Communion. 19.11.2020

This Synod (Witney Deanery):

- i) acknowledges the health advice behind receiving communion in one kind during the global pandemic of Covid-19 and the theological advice that communion in one kind is nevertheless 'complete communion'*
- ii) notes that in practice this has caused hurt to some who have been unable to receive bread and wine together*
- iii) recognises that within the Deanery of Witney there is a diversity of theological opinion on this matter*
- iv) calls on Diocesan Synod to ask the House of Bishops to offer assistance, advice and teaching on this matter (in particular to address online communion, remote consecration of communion and individual communion cups.)*

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Briefing Paper for Diocesan Synod:

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020), the bishops promulgated guidance on Communion from the National Church Gold Group and subsequently the Recovery Group for the information of ministers. The Diocese of Oxford sent out Covid Guidance on 13.3.2020 to 'Offer Communion in one kind only.' Thus, the common cup would be withheld during the service of Holy Communion and priests would receive the consecrated wine on behalf of the people.

On March 23rd Churches were closed and services moved online.

Witney Deanery covers 38 churches. Buildings opened again for services from July 4th 2020 and Chapter reported a profound spiritual hunger to return to services in person and to receive the sacrament of communion. It was in late July that two churches within the Deanery began to ask questions about the guidance on receiving wine. In both cases, churchwardens raised the possibility of using 'individual cups' as a way forward.

The question of communion was discussed in the weekly zoom Chapter meeting with incumbents. As we tried to look ahead to the future, one of our members said that he could not imagine many people wanting to return to the common cup after the pandemic, as there was a heightened awareness of hygiene. The incumbent of another church raised the question of individual cups and suggested that it was an important topic which should be taken to Deanery Synod and debated there. Meetings followed, between the Area Dean and churchwardens to hear about their concerns. It was clear that they held holy communion in very high regard but their beliefs in a 'priesthood of all believers' meant that they were uncomfortable about the priest receiving the wine 'on their behalf'. They also disagreed with the description by the Faith and Order Commission of communion in one kind as 'complete' and wanted the opportunity to receive the wine 'in a safe and risk-free manner.' As we spoke further, we discussed such matters as why we could not change the words of the eucharistic

prayer and consecrate only the bread, and it became clear that there was a keen interest in knowing more the theology of the eucharist and why we do what we do at the altar.

When this came back to Chapter, the point was made that only two churches in the Deanery had raised this directly. However, the strength of feeling was such that it felt right to raise this at Deanery Synod for debate. Chapter agreed at this time that there was more we could all learn about eucharistic theology. So, for example, one incumbent's response to the pandemic guidance was consecrating wine, but not receiving it during the service 'in order to maintain the unity of our Fellowship.' He consumed the wine after the service. Others were trying to get their heads around requests from the congregation to take bread and wine in their own homes and share it at the same time as the priest on Zoom.

Based on the discussions in Chapter and the consultations held with churchwardens, a motion was drafted for Standing Committee and then shared for discussion with Chapter. After agreement, it was then put onto the agenda at the November Deanery Synod (19.11.2020) for discussion and vote. This took place on Zoom. The figures recorded in the minutes were: FOR, 93.8%. AGAINST, 3.1%. ABSTENTIONS, 3.1%.

The motion passed by Witney deanery acknowledges the pain that some people were feeling, whilst also noting that not everyone felt this way. It also acknowledged that our churches come from a wide variety of theological backgrounds, all of whom hold holy communion in high regard. The debate in deanery synod demonstrated that what was common to everyone was the recognition that this was a time to refresh our understanding of the rules around holy communion, and that clergy and laity were looking to their bishops for catechesis on this matter: both to renew people's understanding of Church of England's teaching and also for advice specific to the pandemic (hygiene and online communion).

The House of Bishops was discussing the question of holy communion in November and on 1st December 2020, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York commended simultaneous administration in a letter which bishops were invited to bring to the attention of the clergy. The Diocese of Oxford gave guidance on simultaneous administration on 11.12.2020.

Revd Dr Tess Kuin Lawton, Area Dean (Witney)
Kirsty Morgan, Lay Chair (Witney)
May 2021

Response to the Witney Deanery Synod Motion on Holy Communion

At Bishop Steven's request, Dr Matthew Salisbury (national liturgical adviser) has provided the following position paper setting out work being carried out by the House of Bishops via its Holy Communion Working Group, to assist members of Diocesan Synod in deciding whether Synod should make the request of the House of Bishops set out in the motion. Those who consider that Diocesan Synod should make this request to the House of Bishops would vote in favour of the motion; those who do not favour that would vote against (abstaining is of course also an option). If the motion fails Bishop Steven would nonetheless propose to notify the Working Group as Dr Salisbury recommends.

Mark Humphriss
Diocesan Secretary

Background

1. On 19 November 2020, Witney Deanery Synod passed a motion calling on the Oxford Diocesan Synod to ask the House of Bishops '*to offer assistance, advice and teaching on [Holy Communion] (in particular to address online communion, remote consecration of communion and individual communion cups.)*'
2. As the background paper from the Deanery indicates, this motion responds to the fact that almost all to whom the Sacrament is administered are currently receiving Holy Communion in an unfamiliar way which, for some, has been uncomfortable. Since the early days of the pandemic, guidance about public worship has been shared by the Diocese of Oxford, and other dioceses, acting on advice from various bodies within the National Church Institutions and latterly the House of Bishops Recovery Group. This guidance has recommended consistently that the Sacrament should be administered to congregations under the form of bread alone, or with the consecrated bread and wine administered simultaneously by the president according to a procedure commended by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in December 2020.
3. Among other points, the Deanery Synod paper notes that:
 - two churches within the Deanery had raised the possibility of the use of individual cups for the administration of Holy Communion;
 - there would be a 'heightened awareness of hygiene' for some time to come, and that sharing in a common cup might be seen by some as risky even after the pandemic had ended;
 - some viewed the president receiving the consecrated wine 'on their behalf' to be inconsistent with a theology of priesthood of all believers;
 - some did not understand communion in one kind to be 'complete' and wished to receive the wine 'in a safe and risk-free manner';

- anecdotally, some clergy and lay people would have preferred to alter the form of service in a substantive way than follow the advice of the Recovery Group;
- the clergy of the Deanery agreed that more study of Eucharistic theology, and more catechesis about Holy Communion, would be beneficial for everyone.

The key issues at the heart of these observations will be explored below.

Receiving the fullness of the sacrament

4. Many Anglicans, but not all, hold the position that Holy Communion received in one kind conveys the benefits of receiving in both kinds. Some Anglicans would point to the doctrine of concomitance, which avoids a narrow association between body and bread or blood and wine. Those who accept this doctrine observe that nothing in authorized liturgy or formularies contradicts a doctrine of concomitance inherited from the pre-Reformation church. Others remark that this doctrine has never been expressed explicitly in such authorized sources or historic formularies. It is a serious point that Jesus told his disciples both to eat and to drink at the Last Supper. Yet while Article 30 ('both parts of the Lord's Sacrament... ought to be ministered') captures the position that all should receive in both kinds, there is never any suggestion that Christ is not truly given through both bread and wine equally: the risen Christ is indivisible. By each we feed on Christ 'by faith with thanksgiving'.
5. It is important to remember that even in ordinary circumstances many people do receive Holy Communion in one kind, in circumstances that require it, and they legitimately and appropriately consume the species which is available to them, whether bread or wine. The *Notes to the Celebration of Holy Communion at Home or in Hospital* indicate that 'Communion should normally be received in both kinds separately, but where necessary may be received in one kind whether of bread or, where the communicant cannot receive solid food, wine.'¹ Some who are ill for a time may not be able to consume solids. Others, conversely, may be unable to use a cup. Many more, on a more permanent basis, may be unable to consume gluten or alcohol. Additionally, 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.' It would be hard to argue that all of these people, properly prepared for the sacrament, do not receive Holy Communion in its fullness. This understanding is not dependent on one's understanding of what happens to the elements of bread and wine when they are consecrated, or what benefits are understood to result from consuming

¹ *Common Worship: Pastoral Services*.

them. Most of us are, like these people, currently in a position where widespread health considerations mean that we should receive Holy Communion in this way.

6. Indeed, in circumstances of necessity both the *Book of Common Prayer* and *Common Worship* reassure us that the benefits of Holy Communion can be obtained even if no physical elements are consumed:

Book of Common Prayer: if a man... by any ... just impediment do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, the Curate shall instruct him, that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him; and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefore, he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his Soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.

Common Worship: Pastoral Services: Believers who cannot physically receive the sacrament are to be assured that they are partakers by faith of the body and blood of Christ and of the benefits he conveys to us by them.

The president receiving 'on behalf of the people'

7. It would therefore be helpful to avoid the suggestion that only part of what the Lord offers us is received in a single Eucharistic species, and to avoid notions that the president receives the consecrated wine 'on behalf of' those who are gathered, or that they receive something spiritually greater or different than that which all communicants receive. The president receives Holy Communion in both kinds because both the consecration and reception of both bread and wine are essential parts of the rite, and because it is safe for them to receive both elements from their own hands. They nonetheless receive spiritually no more and no less than those who receive in one kind alone.

Modification of forms of service

8. Ministers in the Church of England undertake to use only those 'forms of service which are authorized or allowed by canon.' Canon B 5 allows the minister to 'make and use variations which are not of substantial importance' in such forms of service. Such variations must not be 'contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter.' Changing the form of service for Holy Communion to omit the consecration of wine, or for the consecrated wine not to be consumed at the time of Holy Communion, would arguably represent a variation of

substantial importance. In any case, ‘if any question is raised concerning the observance of the provisions of this Canon it may be referred to the bishop in order that he may give such pastoral guidance, advice or directions as he may think fit’. The bishops have already given a clear steer with respect to appropriate accommodations for Holy Communion during the pandemic.

The introduction of individual cups

9. It is the current position of the Legal Advisory Commission of the General Synod that individual communion cups are not lawful in the Church of England.² The House of Bishops is also aware of another legal opinion, commissioned by a member of the House of Laity of the General Synod, which asserts their legality. There is no mechanism for individual diocesan bishops (or indeed the House of Bishops) to authorize unilaterally the use of individual cups, whether permanently or for a fixed period. In any case, the House is of the view that such matters need to be explored theologically rather than settled solely by legal means. It would be possible to introduce legislative and liturgical business to the General Synod authorizing their use, were it deemed appropriate to do so.

Action to date by the House of Bishops

10. The House and College of Bishops have both been studying emergent questions about the theology and practice of Holy Communion since October 2020, first in a Study Day for all serving bishops and later through a morning of discussions at the House. In April 2021 (several months after the Witney motion was passed) the House of Bishops approved Terms of Reference for a Holy Communion Working Group chaired by the Bishop of Lichfield. The express purpose of this group is to study the theological and practical issues which have been brought into particular focus by the pandemic, in particular: spiritual communion; the theological arguments for and against receiving Holy Communion in one kind as necessity may require; the significance of the common cup, and how that significance could be expressed through different methods of administration; and theologies of the Eucharist which might underpin ‘blended’ celebrations of Holy Communion at which some participants are not physically present with the president, or at which only the president is physically present. The Working Group is also looking forward to the publication this year of several scholarly monographs on the subject of ‘online communion’ which will aid its work. Several members of the Group with academic interests in the Eucharist are working on related projects.

² This position was first expressed in the 2011 opinion *Holy Communion: Administration of the Sacrament*. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/reception%20of%20communion.pdf>. Individual communion cups differ from multiple cups or chalices used in some churches and cathedrals in that such cups or chalices are always used by more than one person.

11. This Working Group, therefore, has been tasked with reflecting on the three issues that the Deanery Synod motion mentions: 'online communion' (meaning broadcast services of Holy Communion in which the faithful participate synchronously or asynchronously, including the 'remote consecration of communion'), and 'individual communion cups'. It is the intention of the Working Group to report to the House of Bishops, with a full report due by the end of 2022. The House of Bishops agreed in January 2021 that it would be premature to make substantive decisions about these issues without further research and reflection on the theological and liturgical questions, which it has now entrusted to the Working Group.
12. The Working Group recognises that potential ongoing concerns about hygiene may outlive the pandemic, and its work will seek to engage with such a possible future.
13. The Working Group is also intending to produce or promote resources that will encourage teaching and learning about Holy Communion. In this diocese, Bishop Steven has already recorded several episodes of a very useful podcast, 'Come and Eat', reflecting on many matters relating to Holy Communion. The Diocese of Lichfield is also engaged in such a teaching and learning programme, and it is hoped that other bishops will do likewise.

Recommendation

14. Rather than making an appeal to the House of Bishops for guidance it is not currently able to offer, the Diocesan Synod is invited to forward the Witney Deanery Motion to the Holy Communion Working Group, together with any further reflections from the Diocesan Synod which may help that Group in its deliberations and inform guidance to the House of Bishops.

20 May 2021

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