Changes at the Heart: Adapting Eucharist in the Time of Pandemic

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Changes at the Heart:
Adapting Eucharist in the Time of Pandemic

Marjorie M. Snipes

During the initial COVID-19 pandemic period of 2020-2021, social institutions worldwide faced stress in adapting to immediate needs, among them places of worship which faced challenges from the disruption of social gatherings, religious services, tithing, and the celebration of key rituals. While many churches suspended or postponed rituals such as weddings, funerals, and baptisms, the practice of Eucharist presented a unique challenge. This ethnographic research focuses on mainline Christian churches in a semi-urban town in the state of Georgia (U.S.). It examines the ways that the experience of shutdown and social isolation affected the practice of Eucharist in Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian, and non-denominational churches. Those religious institutions able to reinstate Eucharist more quickly and in a format that remained familiar to its members, faced fewer kinds of identity crisis.

Keywords: Eucharist, ritual, Christianity, COVID-19

Invocation

While not celebrated as a sacrament\(^1\) in every church or denomination, Eucharist is considered a central rite of almost all Christian congregations. More than any other ritual, it is a defining moment for individuals and groups in which they perform an act of anamnesis, remembering and memorializing an earlier event, in
this case the Last Supper in which apostles ate a last meal with their teacher, Jesus Christ. During the meal they received instructions on how to remember the lessons he had taught. The word comes from the Greek εὐχάριστος, *eucharistia*, meaning “thanksgiving,” and it is meant to be a public act of faith by members of a Christian community:

 [...] Eucharist is at the heart of Christian worship. It is celebrated by Christians around the world as a memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in response to his words at the final meal he shared with his disciples, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Church of England, para 1).²

Eucharist may be referred to in various ways, depending on the community—Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord’s Supper, the Divine Liturgy. Ideally, this reconstituted Last Supper includes elements that are conduits for the Body (bread) and Blood (wine or juice) of Christ as well as prayer or communion with God. Anthropologists commonly classify this ritual as a symbolic form of cannibalism, as members of the religious group consume (either literally or symbolically) the corporeal presence of another being. It is symbolically dense and multivocal in that the deity Christ/God is seen as: the Host of the “banquet” (the deity invites participation); a Guest participating at the “banquet” along with the religious participants; and the Substance served at the “banquet,” as the elements are considered literally or symbolically parts of the deity’s body (Fox 2000,124).
Call to Worship – The Problem

Ritual, whether sacred or secular, is a social act with formalized steps and sequences, performed in a specific setting (time and place), and intended to have an effect on an individual or a group of people (Turner 2017). Toure speaks of ritual as a moment of “restorying,” a time in which we “remember our own story in relationship to the transcendent,” personally and collectively (2023). From this shared ritual experience, a group maintains and passes on its traditions, designates membership, and confers identity on the individual and the group.

In his research among the Ndembu of Zambia, anthropologist Victor Turner proposed that effective or successful ritual results in an experience of normative communitas, a sense of oneness and unity that holds a group of individuals together with a common vision or goal. Defined as “a force that transgresses or dissolves the norms” (Turner 1969, 128), normative communitas establishes (or re-establishes and strengthens) a group’s purpose and sense of collective unity. This is found in secular and sacred contexts, but in all groups the experience of unity and collective outlook are vital to group cohesion, relevance, and continuity.

During the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, an extended period from 2020-2021, all social institutions faced challenges to ritual behaviors and norms—including schools, storefront businesses of all types, courthouses and municipal services—and all required adaptations to ensure public safety and to comply with local, state, and federal health regulations. Specific, prolonged crises, however, were associated with some services that could not be effectively carried out “at-a-distance,” such as those found in
restaurants, medical practices, and many churches whose face-to-face rituals and social interactions defined their primary purpose. Some of these businesses and services either closed for an extended period of time, sometimes resulting in an eventual permanent closure, or they attempted to continue their work in an amended or diminished capacity. In the case of religious institutions, how well they adapted depended on many factors, such as prior experience with online outreach, age of the congregation, and each group’s specific social norms, rituals, and theology. Some chose to ignore unenforced regulations, while others scrambled to make the necessary changes. How well the church adapted varied greatly from one to another congregation.

The purpose of this research is to better understand what happens to religious groups when their rituals undergo rapid culture change. Are there conditions under which change is more or less disruptive? Are certain rituals more or less amenable to adaptation? And how does ritual change in an institution affect the social identity of a group?

Profession and Dedication – The Methodology

During summer and fall of 2021, I conducted ethnographic interviews with seven Christian priests and pastors in a semi-urban county in western Georgia, all leaders of mainline traditional churches (see Table 1). The interviews covered not only questions of church identity and ecumenical practices across congregations, but inevitably focused on the remarkable and dramatic instances of culture change prompted by COVID-19. Most interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and in each of them the priest, or pastor,
lingered in describing the challenges they and their congregations had faced over the preceding months. Five of the interviews took place face-to-face in the priest’s or pastor’s office, one was by phone, and the other was a written interview.

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<td>Episcopalian</td>
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<td>Methodist</td>
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<td>Nondenominational (megachurch)</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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Table 1. Distribution of Pastors and Priests in the Study

A range of churches and denominations were included, but it was not as diverse a group as I had initially intended. Ultimately, only what would be called “mainline traditional” Christian churches participated. These included Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical churches that were located in or near the downtown area of the county seat and, unfortunately, did not include any Pentecostal church, several of which were reported in the county to have continued services unchanged during the period of COVID-19. For this research I contacted 17 churches. Many leaders simply did not respond to my request for an interview, and a few politely declined. In one case the church was without a leader and the congregants who responded to me did not know when they might reconvene as a congregation. I suspect some of the reluctance to be interviewed at that time (late 2021) was related to internal and
external social pressures that many congregations were facing: whether they were holding face-to-face services, masking and social distancing or ignoring health advice, and how well adapted the congregations were after some 14 months of COVID-19 concerns. Also, neither congregants nor church leaders had had adequate time in late 2021 to reflect upon what they had faced during the prior months. In addition, most ecumenical interactions between congregations had been suspended and churches were functioning at this point as more isolated and self-regulating units. Even among the larger and more public churches there appeared to be a distinct reluctance to talk to an outside individual (anthropologist). Of the 17 churches contacted, seven leaders responded to the invitation for an interview.

During the period 2020-2021, religious institutions faced stress within a variety of areas from the disruption of services, loss of social contact/fellowship and the suspension or rapid adaptation and change of liturgical rituals and life rites (such as marriages, baptisms, and deaths). In turn, for many, the loss of community and inadequate care for congregational needs led to fewer financial contributions (tithing) and a critical financial loss resulting in institutional destabilization. Far fewer churches and congregations were accustomed to “online giving” prior to COVID-19 than afterward, and many congregants were older adults less likely to have access to adapted technologies. Yet the ways the churches had managed prior to COVID-19 were not sustainable during this period and they were forced into re-imagining how to practice their faith.

In the past, churches, like all social institutions, had had to adapt to ongoing change, such as that associated with generational
shifts, socio-economic fluctuations, and the introduction of new cultural practices. The swift and abrupt disruption caused by COVID-19, however, was very different. It required rapid alterations and, in some cases, the cessation of long-practiced rituals. For traditional face-to-face churches adhering to the quarantine and some level of social distancing during the period 2020-2021, there were various obstacles: How would they function as a community and could they support each other’s needs? How would they recognize major life events such as baptism, birth, death, and marriage? And, without these practices, what constitutes a church?

In short, the challenges, which were huge, were primarily those of translation. How would they transfer and adapt long-held and cherished religious practices into a new technology and a new social arena? How would the performance of these newly-adapted rituals affect or alter their sacred (emotional) qualities? The urgency was two-fold in many ways: not only was the functionality of ritual important in and of itself, but if these religious institutions were to survive, they had to reach their congregations and sustain the social fabric of their communities in a meaningful way.

Technology and the format of an online service affected each one of these churches. While all of the churches involved in the study previously had some kind of online foothold, most commonly a website and archive of recorded services, it was not sufficient to translate literally all of their activities and needs in the early period of quarantine. All of the churches lacked some forms of technology for the tasks that faced them, but even with a manageable technology, they faced a huge demographic challenge. An urgent need for translation was occurring on top of a growing trend within
churches of aging memberships, a generation less likely to have access and knowledge of new technologies. In addition, the online format affected many areas of worship at once:

We had a relatively small period that people were away from the church and lost access to Mass, Confession, and other sacraments. There was a tremendous loss in the sense of the importance of gathering in person…. These were all affected by not meeting face-to-face (Catholic priest).

The lack of face-to-face meeting and the impersonal nature of this [livestream] hurt us. There was also the idolatry of the social media. It’s a godsend to connect with each other and learn about true intimacy…. I’ll have a different congregation now from Sunday to Sunday. COVID has moved us into a post-Christendom time, Gideon culling the herd? (Baptist pastor)

At first we had no cameras and no technology to transition; for three to four months we used iPhones and iPads…. We shut down a lot longer than a lot of other local churches. (Episcopal rector)

We’ve moved a decade in a year. Worship is now an on-demand experience for many. I watch TV when I want to. Now we address a group that is watching and not necessarily worshiping together. (Baptist pastor)

In the ethnographic interviews I conducted, every church leader was thoughtful, welcoming, and grateful for the chance to share their stories of this tumultuous time. One leader said: “I am grateful for this conversation. We were handed a major change in the
Christian tradition, primarily needing to solve the problem ourselves,” and another, “I appreciate the chance to think about this period and reflect on what we did. I had been thinking so much about how we failed during the early days of COVID, but it’s heartening to see how much we were doing, trying to make it work.”

A third leader even contacted the pastor of a church that had not initially responded to my email and encouraged the other pastor to speak with me because “it will make you feel better.” That said, in general there was a substantial reduction in ecumenical interactions between the church leaders themselves. Prior to COVID-19 there was an active Ministerial Alliance of faith-based leaders collaborating on issues of social need and social justice in the county. During this period of 2020-2021, Ministerial Alliance meetings were suspended and the former President of the Alliance retired from his church. In six of the seven interviews the religious leader commented on the suspension of the Alliance as something that caused further isolation between the churches.

In the end, regardless of the church or denomination and whether they were part of a larger religious structure or independent, COVID-19 created an immediate local challenge—how could the single local church keep its congregation and mission intact and survive the rapid change occurring all around them? And one particular ritual concerned the seven religious leaders more than any other.

**Holy Communion – The Study**

Across all interviews, every church leader singled out Eucharist as the primary ritual concern during quarantine and the
early months of COVID-19. Because it is a primary ritual celebrated with regular frequency and involving full membership of the congregation, being able to re-establish Eucharist was a critical concern. As priests and pastors shared their experiences of COVID-19, it became evident that this one ritual, interpreted differently by different churches, was a key *summarizing symbol*, meaning it was “intuitive” and “mysterious” and represented “in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way what the system [e.g., church] means to them” (Ortner 1973, 1339). Eucharist as an idea and a practice expresses the core values of each congregation and reflects the essence of their identity. And yet the *ritual* of Eucharist, depending on the theological foundations of the church, turned out to be sometimes supple (adapting easily) and sometimes brittle (difficult to adapt).

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*Table 2. Adaptability of Eucharistic Ritual*

In this paper, I highlight the adaptation of Eucharist in four theological and practical traditions involving the experiences of five different churches: one Catholic, one Episcopalian, two independent Baptist churches, and one non-denominational.
Together, they exhibit a wide scope of ritual adaptation and, interestingly, suggest that the suppleness or brittleness of the ritual is not necessarily the only important factor during moments of rapid culture change (see Table 2).

Catholic Church

Located seven miles from the town center in a rural area, the Catholic church consists of a sanctuary and connected buildings with a parish cemetery on one side. The church was first established in 1952 when a group of local parishioners, who had been traveling to a neighboring county for services, purchased a small wooden chapel previously used by a growing Episcopalian congregation. The current location is a newer building, constructed in 1965. Today, there are approximately 1,000-1,100 “family units” in the parish and the priest who was interviewed had served the parish since July 2020. During an average weekend at the time of the interview, “there are an estimated 850 family units in attendance” (Fall 2021).

In the Catholic Church, Sunday Mass is both a sacrament and a weekly obligation, meaning it is a commandment of the Church and considered a “moral demand and necessity” for members. The history of the obligation varies depending on its intent: some theologians trace it to Moses and the Ten Commandments (“Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy”) or the reign of Emperor Constantine (272-337 AD), when Sunday attendance became a norm mandated and practiced in regional church councils. By 1917, however, the obligation was formally incorporated into Catholic Canon law. Updated by Pope John Paul II in 1983, it is now Canon 1247: “On Sundays and other holy days
of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass” (Vatican Archives, Ch. 1, para 3). As Catholic theologian Fr. Manuel Garrido explains:

The spirit of assembly appears from the beginning to be fundamental in the Sunday obligation. We cannot keep Sunday holy individually even through pious practices. There is no heaven for individualism even though it is the individual that is saved by cooperating with divine grace in this great enterprise (1982, para 16).

This spirit of assembly is accompanied by the “mystical presence of Christ” in the Catholic Mass which gives it “a festive note of joy that cannot be found in any other gathering” (para 17).

Local church regulations and decision-making proceed from within the greater Catholic institution and do not reside at the local level. The local Catholic church is part of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, organizationally classified as an ecclesiastical province because of its size and sphere of influence. The Archdiocese of Atlanta, a member within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, answers directly to Pope Francis and the Holy See (Vatican).

As COVID-19 rapidly spread worldwide, decisions on how to manage the Catholic Mass became urgent. With approval from the Pope, the first closures (lifting the obligation to attend Mass) were issued through the dioceses of northern Italy (Milan and Venice, among others) where public Mass and funerals were cancelled as early as February 2020 (Brockhaus 2020). By March 8, 2020, this included the Diocese of Rome and all of Italy (Mares 2020).
Instead, parishioners were encouraged to observe days of fasting and prayer.

A week later, the urgency had spread to the U.S. and on March 15, 2020, the Archbishop of Atlanta\textsuperscript{6} followed suit and the obligation to attend Sunday Mass was lifted from March 15–May 31, 2020 in the parishes under their jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{7} During this early period of COVID-19, there was no Eucharistic service for the congregations, something unprecedented in Catholic history.

Described by the priest as a “loosening and flexibility of discipline required by the tragedy of the times” this period created a sense of rootlessness within the congregation. Compounding instability, the local Catholic church was facing a change in leadership right before COVID-19, and the soon-to-be-named-next parish priest was already involved online with the congregation and local church leadership, although he had not yet assumed duties in the local parish. In observing this somewhat as an outsider at the beginning of COVID-19, he described the parishioners as unsure,
“anxious and afraid.” Without the ability to attend Mass in-person, the parishioners would have no access to the Eucharistic elements. Many reacted with alarm.

In the Catholic tradition, the Eucharistic elements are believed to *transubstantiate*, meaning that once the priest blesses them, the wafers and the wine become fully the “Real Presence of Christ.” For some, this is an association with Christ’s actual body and blood, and for others, theologically, the “Real Presence” is an essence of Christ’s Spirit within the elements. Catholic theologian and philosopher John Goyette notes:

> When we eat Christ, we do not physically tear his body with our teeth, and digest him in some kind of cannibalistic ritual. It is rather we who are changed by what we receive: It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. To be clear: St. Thomas [Aquinas] is not calling into question the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but explaining what being fed by His true body and Blood means. Spiritual eating is nothing other than being united to Christ by faith and charity (2017, para 6).

Regardless, though, of how the theologian, priest, or parishioner interprets transubstantiation, the presence of a priest, as a consecrated representative of the Church, is essential. Once the Mass was cancelled, with no priest available to bless the elements, Eucharist was no longer available to church parishioners. Instead, Mass could only be celebrated inside the rectory (where the priest lived) along with “two to three of the faithful” who were asked to read and sing while it was livestreamed to the remainder of the parish. One Mass was celebrated in Spanish and one in English, but
only those few individuals celebrating with the priest had access to the Real Presence of Christ.

The current priest, watching the services from Atlanta, described the online chatter from parishioners expressing heightened emotions, such as anger and frustration. Some of the comments posted were: “Father, we are hungry.” “We are being starved of our emotional food!” “How is it OK not to offer Eucharist?”

For the parishioners this alienation from the Eucharist translated into an alienation from their parish and, ultimately, from each other. By closing the Mass, a number of parishioners experienced sadness and resentment at being excluded from access to their faith and church. The priest, fully aware of this ritual impasse and sympathetic, said:

Our faith is incarnational—our coming together as a family is important. We cannot subsist on livestream. The Rosary, preaching, teaching, life chat—\textit{this is extraordinary stuff}. This [livestream] is not how we celebrate and worship. We are a tactile and earthy church. We have mediated encounters. (priest’s emphasis)

As a result of this difficulty in translation, very quickly and long before there was any improvement in the status of COVID-19 in the community,\textsuperscript{8} the Archdiocese of Atlanta reinstated Eucharist on May 31, 2020, following direction from the Vatican.

There were some adjustments, however, in the way the Mass was directed. Families were to sit together on rows within the church sanctuary and every other row was blocked off to provide more
distance between parishioners attending Mass. The priest offered multiple Masses to reduce the number of parishioners attending any given one. This included two Masses on Saturday and three on Sunday. And an “overflow room” was set up where parishioners could go if the sanctuary was full at a particular Mass.

In addition, the only element offered was the Host [wafer], not the Cup. When I interviewed the priest in Fall 2021, this was still the only element being used in Eucharist: “the Precious Blood remains suspended. No place in the Archdiocese is using Precious Blood. It is not theologically significant. The Host, when consecrated, is fully the Real Presence” (author’s emphasis).

Baptist Churches

The Baptist churches in the study are located in different areas of the county. One church is a “downtown” church located in the town center and first established in 1875. Its brick façade with Roman arches faces a busy city street and there is a small parking lot and a parking garage nearby. At the time of the interview, this Baptist church had an interim pastor who had been serving about six months and a congregation of “approximately 500 participants, including children,” with “about 120 in worship each Sunday online and in person combined” (Fall 2021). The other Baptist church is located on a beltway near the city limits and is a significantly larger series of buildings. It was first formed in 1899 by a breakaway group from the downtown Baptist church. It has been located in several places during its history and its current location dates from 1989. They had a pre-COVID membership of
550 and a post-COVID membership of 350 (Fall 2021), and their pastor had been in his position since 2016.

Unlike Catholic churches, Baptist churches vary in terms of rituals, beliefs, and practices. Although some Baptist churches are gathered into larger organizations, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which is itself considered a Baptist denomination with more than 50,000 church memberships, the two mainline (independent) Baptist churches involved in this ethnographic study are both members of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). The CBF is a looser network of independent Baptist churches who tend to be more progressive, more inclusive, and more diverse. In general, they eschew literal fundamentalist principles, although they house a range of beliefs and interpretations among congregations.

In the wider Baptist tradition, Eucharist is most commonly referred to as the Lord’s Supper or Communion and it is celebrated variably. Some congregations practice the Lord’s Supper weekly, some monthly, and others quarterly. It does not involve the transformation of the elements and so does not require ecclesiastical mediation with any particular individuals or elements in order to be valid. Theologically, it is sometimes referred to as memorialism, where there is no real presence within the elements; instead, they are to be symbolic conveyances that remind believers of Christ’s instructions to his apostles and his sacrifice. The purpose of the Lord’s Supper is to prompt believers to contemplate and ponder the work of Christ in their lives.

It is also critical to note that while the Lord’s Supper is most commonly designated as an ordinance in the Baptist tradition, not a
sacrament, this does not mean that it is devoid of a sacred act or feeling. An ordinance is a symbolic re-creation of a religious ritual believed to have been instituted biblically, and for Baptists, the moment of taking the Lord’s Supper can be as holy as that of a Catholic taking the Real Presence. In the two interviews with pastors of independent Baptist churches, one church celebrated the Lord’s Supper monthly and the other quarterly, but otherwise, they shared similar experiences with practicing this ritual.

In the early period of COVID-19, both churches ended face-to-face, live services abruptly, following recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Initially, they recorded services to upload on Sundays (one church was doing its recording every Thursday for transmission on Sunday), sometimes from the pastors’ offices and sometimes from inside the largely empty sanctuaries. Within just a few weeks, though, both churches were doing a livestream Sunday service involving a small number of active participants, including the pastor. In these services, they continued with the rituals of prayer, sermon, and congregational announcements, trying to maintain a sense of community even while divided into separate homes and unable to react to each other’s presence. Congregational members also reached out to help others, often older members, to operate equipment so that they could also participate as “audience” members.

When the shelter-in-place order was lifted state-wide (end of April 2020), neither church chose to return to face-to-face services, so eventually they both faced the need to adapt the Lord’s Supper to the new technological format. Unlike the Catholic Church, however, they did not face the same kinds of challenge. Since the elements used for the Lord’s Supper were intended as symbolic
reminders only of Christ’s Body and Blood, and they did not need to be consecrated, there was a wide range of options for the congregants and the ritual itself was significantly more adaptable.

In preparation for the Lord’s Supper, both churches offered congregants the option of coming by the church to pick up disposable “elements-to-go” or to use their own substitutionary elements at home (bread, juice, wine, etc.). Originally, the Lord’s Supper “travel packs,” small plastic cups sealed with a tiny wafer on top of the cup, had been used for homebound members or members in hospitals or nursing homes. Repurposed, these allowed those who preferred, to get elements specifically designed for the Lord’s Supper. Most church members, however, opted to use their own elements from home.

After this early period, the two congregations began returning to the sanctuary in August 2020 while encouraging masking and social distancing between pews. Since a large number of members remained at home watching livestream, they would have some congregants present in the sanctuary and others watching via livestream, and there was no issue with needing overflow areas. While both churches adapted rather well, albeit with some loss of membership, the livestream concerned both pastors at this time. The interim pastor said, “It’s like Disneyworld—we’re in the theater with a collective experience versus being in a church actively worshipping.” The other pastor said of this period, “the gift of presence and opportunity to connect with people was removed.”

One practice that continued after many in the congregation reconvened in person, however, was the use of disposable “self-serve Communion cups with wafers.” In Fall 2021, when the pastors
were interviewed, they were still using these elements in the face-to-face services. Both pastors lamented this practice, even though it was the safest way to dispense the elements, as congregants picked up their own self-serve cup and carried it with them to their pew seat, cutting down on direct contact between individuals:

...it has been hard. Baptists are sacramental about the Lord’s Supper. People feel something different now because of how we are doing it. We are using the self-serve disposable cups, juice, and wafers, and the noise of removing the plastic tops, in addition to the act of serving yourself [and not one another], has made this whole ritual different. Everyone is isolated in the church or at home on Zoom. (interim Baptist pastor)

The Lord’s Supper is symbolic, but important. No grace is confirmed, but it is a holy act. We used disposable elements during the time we were entirely on Zoom [during shutdown] and also after some of us began returning... Physical touch matters, so this was a challenge. (Baptist pastor)

Clearly while key rituals such as the Lord’s Supper had been translated into the new format and resumed functioning within the congregation, it was accompanied by difficulties. The ritual could be reinstated, but the ritual context remained damaged. In the Baptist tradition, it is common for the “Communion plate” to be passed from one member to another, going down the pew and back to an usher or deacon. Participating members pass the plate to each other as a form of serving each other Communion. Once the elements for the Lord’s Supper were no longer being served (either congregants obtained their own elements at home or used the
sanitized and sealed, self-serve communion cups), the connections between members of the congregation were suspended or severed. Both pastors indicated the new way of “doing” the Lord’s Supper was imperfect.

While the interim Baptist pastor showed more frustration with the changes occurring within his church, the other Baptist pastor, to a great extent, had the same concerns. Both commented that there had been very few baptisms during the period 2020-2021. The interim pastor noted that because of the reduced face-to-face interactions with each other, “nurturing, contact, discipleship are not happening so that people normally awakened are not being so.” He also lamented in a nostalgic way, “The challenge now is recovering from the COVID losses. The churches that never broke their stride and didn’t social distance have boomed—Pentecostals have boomed in size. Sheep stealers.” While this comment sounds sharp, his demeanor seemed very defeated and sad.

Non-denominational Church/Megachurch

The non-denominational church has more than one pastor. The lead pastor at the time of the interview had served for nine years, including the opening of this new “campus,” as he referred to it, around 2016. This church, located near a large regional university, has a modern architecture that is similar to an urban housing unit. The pastor shared that their pre-COVID numbers were 1800 (Winter 2020), 400 (Spring 2020–Spring 2021), and 1100 (Fall 2021).
The nondenominational megachurch follows a dogma very much aligned with the Baptist churches in this study; in fact, several of the congregants in this larger church began as members of a Baptist church. During the period of challenge and adaptation provoked by COVID-19, changes within the nondenominational church were quite similar to those of the Baptist churches, although, interestingly, this need to change and adapt was experienced more positively and eagerly by the megachurch. Most likely this was because they are less rooted in social traditions than the other churches. Much of their model of Christianity is based on adapting to changing social needs and less on traditions and institutionalism.

The nondenominational church defines itself as a “community center” and it has an active social outreach network including a community gymnasium and fitness center, a café that operates daily for lunch, a counseling center, and even student housing for the local university. It is virtually a one-stop-shop-church, and in my interview with the pastor, we were interrupted by people greeting him as they went to the various activities occurring during the middle of the week.

This church, unlike the others, had far less difficulties getting “up and running” on livestream. The pastor started livestreaming Communion with his family and “just a few others in the gymnasium” immediately when the quarantine was instituted. They had the technology they needed to transition into a digital format and their larger (and younger) congregation was also more quickly adaptable. Since they practice Communion weekly, they soon adapted to the online practice of choosing home elements for the Body and Blood and sharing their family practices with the online
congregation. Enthusiastic, the church pastor said, “This was cool. I liked this [Communion] because we were each doing it with our own families the way Jesus would have done it.” Intimate, and yet shared online, the pastor said he encouraged people to choose their own unique elements. One family, he said, used M&Ms and coffee for their elements. He said their sharing and doing things differently made the Communion into a celebration of their Christianity.

After the state of Georgia lifted its mandatory shutdown (on April 30, 2020), this church immediately re-opened its doors using safety protocols, such as “highly encouraged” masking and social distancing for services in the large gymnasium. They also continued livestreaming for those who preferred to be more cautious. Regarding the face-to-face service, the pastor said:

When we did Communion in person, we used to pass the trays and everyone put their hands in. Now I think, ‘this is so gross!’ Now we’ve shifted to plastic crackling, disposable Communion ‘snack packs’ they pick up as they enter the gymnasium and inside is a little cup and wafer. It’s much better.

Figure 2. A Communion “Snack Pack” with Juice and Wafer on Top (Photo courtesy of M. Daniel, University of West Georgia)
He said that, overall, the congregation seemed to be enjoying Communion more than before and he wondered if perhaps they realized the value of the ritual more than before because they had to adapt and make it more personal, a kind of do-it-yourself experience. He said at first the plastic crackling as people opened the disposable Communion “snack packs,” as he called them, disturbed the sanctity of the moment, but that was the only negative aspect and “we are getting used to this now.”

This pastor, more than any other, had a more positive outlook on the effects of COVID-19, even though he, too, acknowledged that attendance at services had declined. He also noted that financial giving had declined by as much as $3,000/week during the period when the “plate was not passed.” On the other hand, this church had begun practicing baptism in people’s homes, “disciples making disciples.” He noted that there were husbands baptizing wives, one in a hot tub, and that they began baptizing also at the church livestreaming it. Clearly this church was more at ease than the others in finding solutions and creating new traditions (adapting). This speaks to its success in membership during and immediately after this period. As he had stated at the beginning of the interview, “we are a church that wants to be the church 7 days/week and 24/7. We believe firmly in making disciples that make disciples. This is the Great Commission. We want to be the church in each other’s life.”

When asked about the significant challenges that the Christian church was facing in the U.S. South today, he responded quickly, “first and foremost convincing people that the church is necessary.” As we continued talking, though, he added, “Of course COVID has been a challenge, but I also think ... [and here he hesitated a bit] ...
that many pastors were just lazy; they didn’t want to do the work required to adapt to the changes of COVID.” Like the comment quoted above from one of the Baptist pastors, this one sounds sharp and critical, but it was delivered in a much more thoughtful (and hesitant) manner. The nondenominational church was significantly bigger than any of the other churches, with various tasks and services headed by different individuals. They also had a growth model that was based on responding to social need and being part of their congregants’ lives in all ways possible.

Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church is located downtown near the town center and not more than two blocks from one of the Baptist churches. It was first established as a congregation in 1892 and then outgrew the first building. The current church building, which has a white wooden exterior resembling a small chapel, was built in 1953. The Episcopal rector I interviewed had been in the parish for four years at the time of the interview. Their pre-COVID attendance was “about 150 across two services,” but during the interview he noted, “last month [September 2021] we had about half of that.”

For Episcopalian, Holy Eucharist is a more ambiguous and less precise ritual. Within their theology it is most frequently referred to as Real Presence, which means Christ co-exists with the Eucharistic elements “in every way except physically,” so the elements themselves, after being consecrated by the priest, have a sense of being sacred and irreplaceable. However, Episcopalians subscribe neither to Catholic transubstantiation nor to consubstantiation, a
belief that the “substance” or essence of Christ exists *alongside* the elements during Eucharist (associated most commonly with Lutherans).

How is Real Presence, then, distinct from the other theological positions? Depending upon the interpreter, Real Presence can be explained in various ways, some overlapping with transubstantiation and consubstantiation:

- “Christ's body and blood are really present in the sacrament of the eucharist [sic] and received by faith.” Statement on the website of the U.S. Episcopal Church (Episcopal Church, para 1).
- “In Episcopal doctrine we teach the 'real presence' of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The bread wafer and wine do not literally become Christ, but through faith, we receive His presence through the Act of Consecration by the priest” (emphasis in original). Statement on the website of Grace Episcopal Church (Grace Episcopal Church, para 3).
- “The presence of the risen Christ in the Eucharist is ultimately an inexhaustible mystery that the Church can never fully explain in words or philosophical ideologies.” Statement on the website of St. James Episcopal Church (St. James Church, para 10).

“Real Presence” designates a *spiritual* presence which is neither wholly physical/corporeal (Catholic) nor symbolic (Baptist). In considering the Episcopal experience of Holy Eucharist during the time of COVID-19, the ambiguity and (in)translatability of this concept becomes important. Given the range of explanations and
the mystical quality of the elements after consecration, parishioners have a somewhat open field to interpret the meaning. While, in general, Episcopalians do not see their belief as being as literal as Catholics or as symbolic as Baptists do, they also do not have the conformity of outlook that accompanies the other churches’ interpretations of Eucharist. The only sure thing is that the Episcopal Eucharistic elements require consecration, and that consecration is something that an Episcopal priest does.

An immediate question emerged as part of the Episcopal adaptation of Eucharist during the time of COVID-19. In “extraordinary times,” can the Episcopal priest consecrate the elements online or from a distance? This has now become an ongoing theological debate, as the Book of Common Prayer calls for the elements to be physically touched during consecration (Parish 2020). Exploring the latitude in this principle of the sacrament—what constitutes physical touch and can touch be symbolic—is at the heart of the ongoing debate. Anglican Archbishop Glenn Davies of Sydney, Australia writes on behalf of online consecration:

We must not fall into the erroneous mindset of thinking that consecration of the elements is only valid for us if we are physically present to consume them, as if there were magic in the hands of the minister. (Mattingly 2020, para 10)

Because the Episcopal position is somewhat betwixt and between the rather more extreme and clarified positions of the Catholic and Baptist churches, some Episcopal parishioners found themselves in an unclear place in regards to Eucharist during the early months of COVID-19. How would they translate Eucharist?
The local Episcopal church is a member of the Diocese of Atlanta, under the regional authority of the Bishop. The diocese, in turn, forms part of a province within the larger General Conference of the Episcopal Church under the direction of the Presiding Bishop. All rules and protocols come from outside the individual congregational church, similar to the Catholic parish, although the bishops are not seen as infallible and hallowed as a pope.11

The Episcopal rector (priest12), like the other church leaders I interviewed, was very forthcoming in our conversation. He expressed frustration with what he called the “Atlanta Rule,” meaning the mandatory regulations and protocol dispensed from the Diocese for local parishes to follow during the COVID-19 period:

As a result of the Atlanta directives we shut down longer than a lot of other local churches. Our last regular service was March 8 [2020]; by the 15th, a lot of people were just not showing up. By March 22, [2020] we were mandated to be completely online—everything. Our first in-person resumption of services was Palm Sunday, 2021 [March 28, 2021].

The rules and protocol affected all areas of pastoral care, “While we were completely online, I could not make pastoral calls [meaning face-to-face] and we could not open and use the sanctuary for any reason.” All decision-making came from outside the parish and during the interview it was clear that the rector was processing and re-processing so much that had happened over the last months. At one point, he added, “I had been feeling bad about so much, but
just saying out loud all that we had to do and did to get through this really is a powerful reminder that we did a lot and tried almost everything!"

Even still, it was Eucharist which created the most upheaval.

The first week of livestream in March [2020], we did not celebrate Eucharist. It was given to no one. It felt awful, and I broke down and cried. At this point no one was taking it at home—in fact, people did not even have their own elements. This is not in our theology.

After that first week of shutdown, the rector began carrying out Eucharist at the end of the service as it would normally occur, but it was done online, with just his family participating while members watched and participated any way they felt they could. Because the sanctuary was closed by the Diocese of Atlanta, the rector was not even able to perform the service with his family via livestream from within their sanctuary. Parishioners were surrounded by the unfamiliarity of so much related to Eucharist.

While some members might have used their own elements, this is not custom and is not a common practice among Episcopalians. Reduced, instead, to spectating, not all congregants even participated by watching. The rector said they began noticing that more and more people would turn off the livestream transmission when he began doing Eucharist. They would watch the service up until that point and then shut it off. Parishioners shared that “watching you [the rector] do Eucharist with your family is very painful.” He said some parishioners felt “angry” and several left the church at that point because they could not access Eucharist. Some went to non-Episcopal churches that were convening without
regard to the shutdown or they left the Christian church entirely. This was reflected in their fluctuating attendance, although all of the churches used open, public livestreaming and so were not able to determine precisely which attendees were members and which were visitors.

The safety protocols and length of shutdown for a large urban area such as Atlanta was not comparable to the needs of the small town parish that the Episcopal rector was leading, but because of the nature of the bishopric institutional structure in the Episcopal Church, he had to follow the protocol dictated by Atlanta. Their first face-to-face service was outside, on Christmas Eve, 2020, and they continued through January-March 2021 as long as the weather was bearable. Then, in March 2021, they were finally allowed to re-enter the worship space and they re-convened as a congregation in their sanctuary on Palm Sunday (March 28, 2021).

At the end of summer [August 2021] we finally resumed with both services indoors. Now we have resumed Eucharist, but it is in one kind only—the bread. Just recently we’ve started using intinction [dipping the bread].

The protocols for this first service inside their church included a formal sign-up for who would attend and how many in each family. They were then assigned seats with social distancing.

In retrospect, though, the rector acknowledged that there had also been positive change as a result of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic he began “…praying the Office\textsuperscript{13} four times a day. It was meaningful to me, and so I started inviting others to join me [on Zoom].” During the first year this also became a very meaningful practice for several members of the congregation during morning,
mid-day, evening, and compline (night). “Then, as attendance declined, we went to morning prayer and compline.” Later, “we let it go,” he said. He also pointed out that the leader of their Adult Bible Study, a group primarily composed of older members, had “really gotten” the technology and began to reach out to former members who had moved away from the area. As a result, that particular group had actually grown in size. While attendance had declined during the first year, by the end of 2021 they were seeing growth again.

In many ways, the Episcopal experience during the early period of COVID-19 is somewhat equidistant between the Catholic and nondenominational churches. The rector, in fact, explained: “we are the Middle Way between Protestants and Catholics—formal, liturgical, traditional; the theology is clearly Protestant and we tend to be more progressive.” Yet the experience of Eucharist remained most difficult for this church. From the Catholic church, which did not adapt so much and, instead, reinstated Mass immediately after the obligation was reinstated, to the nondenominational church, which seemed to relish the opportunity to redefine the ritual of the Lord’s Supper, the Episcopal church fell somewhere in between, struggling to function within the ecclesiastical structure imposed on them and struggling to adapt to the conditions created by the pandemic.

**Benediction – The Conclusion**

What do these different experiences of Eucharist reveal about the role of ritual and, specifically, how rituals function in a time of rapid culture change? In examining the four cases of
Eucharistic practice in different contexts, various characteristics and qualities of ritual emerge. First and foremost, rituals are part and parcel of larger systems of meaning that determine their efficacy and integrity. No ritual exists apart from its meaningful context. The particular local tradition of Eucharist in each separate religious tradition had a great effect on the amount of difficulty each church faced during the early days of COVID-19.

All churches experienced congregational decline and discomfort during the early months of COVID-19, even the nondenominational megachurch. This presented a challenge for religious leaders, the faith community as a whole, and individual members. Noticeably, there developed a group of transient church members who were in movement, trying out different communities, and, in general, struggling to re-define themselves as Christians as their church struggled with translation. Both the Catholic priest and the Episcopal rector indicated that there was a group of people of unknown size moving from the Episcopal church to the Catholic church, where Eucharist was being celebrated in person.

Although some may argue that these four practices of Eucharist are not the same ritual technically, across churches and faith traditions it is recognized as symbolic of the same biblical event. And this same anamnesis in its particular faith tradition and local setting can be more supple and adaptable (the case of the Baptists and the nondenominational church) or more brittle and difficult to translate (the Catholic and Episcopal cases).

Of course despite whether it was easier or more difficult, we note in the interviews that all church leaders were “burdened” and many
could be described as “saddened” by what they had faced and were continuing to face in Fall 2021 when the interviews were conducted. Whether translation of the ritual was more or less difficult, all churches faced unwanted and urgent change.

These cases speak to the complexity and specificity of ritual as it is practiced on the ground. It should remind us as we study in both religious and secular contexts that there are subtle elements within ritual practices that can have profoundly different meanings during times of rapid social change. Most importantly, this study points to the significant role that ritual plays in meaning-making and identity, especially within the faith tradition. When normative rituals are disrupted, as they were during the early months of COVID-19, the nature and notion of community/communitas is disrupted as well. Those religious institutions able to reinstate Eucharist more quickly and in a format that remained familiar to its members, faced fewer kinds of identity crisis. As ritual goes, so also go the bonds of belonging and meaning-making for the community.

One of the most interesting outcomes of this study is the reflection on brittle versus supple rituals as demonstrated in the four different Eucharistic practices (Table 2). At first glance it would seem that those Eucharistic rituals most able to adapt to change (most supple) would best endure and be most successful (the case of the nondenominational church and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Baptist churches), and, indeed, this group seemed to struggle less than the other churches. But Eucharist in the Catholic church was the ritual practice least able to adapt (most brittle) and, after an initial period of dissatisfaction when the ritual was not available, it was reinstated in an almost identical format and the
church proceeded relatively well in convening its congregation. The fact that they could not adapt the ritual meant that the parishioners did not have to adapt as much—and during a time of rapid cultural change, this sense of normalcy in the ritual of Eucharist was a significant source of identity and bonding.

In her study of COVID-19 within the Australian Catholic Church, historian Philippa Martyr (2022) noted a correlation between “real-life worship” during COVID-19 (where individuals could come to the church to receive the elements or say confession with social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment) and a return to Mass at the church following the lifting of the restrictions. She did not find a correlation between virtual attendance only and a later return to Mass and she concluded “[s]pecifically, virtual worship lacked a distinctive separation from everyday life, blurred the boundaries between spectator entertainment and religion, and was not experienced as valid, transformative, renewing, or immersive” (Martyr 2022, 4247). While the present study of the Catholic church in a Georgia county notes continuity with what Martyr found in Australia, the case of the nondenominational church is different. While the nondenominational mega-church did have an initial decline in congregational participation via online services and loss of some members, the overall experience of online worship translated more easily in this church and the pastor noted that the congregation seemed to enjoy some of the changes they were instituting. They found that virtual worship was more effective at sustaining their religious community through the early period of COVID-19, likely due to their greater familiarity and prior use of online technologies in worship. In addition, they were more experimental as a
congregation, having left more traditional mainstream churches to form a community church.

This present study suggests that those congregations that least changed the theological context and meaning of their rituals and reinstated them quickly, even in an adapted form, had fewer problems of sustaining a common identity for their congregations. This did not mean that they did not lose members and face other challenges, but their congregations, on the whole, expressed less dissatisfaction during this period of rapid culture change.

Postlude

What now? A longer-term study could address further interesting aspects of this period. Did those who changed churches stay in the new church even after ritual was reinstated in their home churches, did they return to their roots, or did they leave church all together? What age groups were more likely to shift faith traditions instead of simply shifting churches within the same denomination? How many of the changes in Eucharist (specifically the disposable elements) were retained long-term? South African theologian and General Secretary to the World Council of Churches, Dr. Jerry Pillay, notes:

The virus has provided a window of opportunity to reimagine a new theology for the church, which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, roles and rites but being God’s transforming presence in the world. (2020, 273)

Studying ritual during moments of intense social change is important as it predicts the durability of a group or institution and the efficacy of the social group. It also helps us understand how
eventual new rituals emerge and how communities best adapt during times of change.

As religious communities emerge from the restrictions of COVID-19, there are a proliferation of studies about change during this period: the positive and negative effects on religious gatherings in Ghana (Osei-Tutu et al. 2021), the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on religious pilgrimage in Serbia (Pavlović 2020), and the limits of the practice of rituals virtually for Catholics in Bogota, Colombia (Areiza-Padilla 2022), among many others. Despite the global challenges faced during the pandemic, this period deepens our understanding of the importance of religious ritual in our communities.

Notes

1 A sacrament is a ritual believed to initiate contact with the deity and to “impart grace.”
2 See https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe/eucharist.
3 This county has a population of approximately 119,000 (2020) and is part of the outer metropolitan region of Atlanta, including both rural and urban zones.
4 This research is part of a larger study supported by a Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Teacher-Scholar Grant (IRB #UWG2020-0183).
5 The Catholic Church did not count individuals alone but “family units.” A family unit could be one or more individuals.
6 Catholic Mass was cancelled and then reinstated on different dates in different dioceses in the U.S.
7 Closure dates for Catholic churches varied across the U.S. depending on regional circumstances.
8 The State of Georgia had a shelter-in-place notice and renewal issued by the Governor from April 3-30, 2020. In March there was an earlier executive order warning those at risk to shelter-in-place (Muñiz-Rodríguez et al. 2021).
9 This pastor was pointing out that Baptists experience the Lord’s Supper as if it were a holy act.

For more on the historical relationship between the Catholic, Anglican, and Episcopal churches, see https://highlandscurrent.org/2013/09/08/episcopal-churches-are-unique-mixes-of-protestant-and-catholic-elements/.

12 A rector is an Episcopalian priest whose parish is self-supporting.

13 The Daily Office is a cycle of prayers throughout the day. It has roots in some of the earliest Christian churches.
References


Vatican Archives. Title II Sacred Times (Cann. 1244-1253).
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