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This blessed sacrament of unity? Holy Communion,  
the pandemic, and the Church of England

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### **Abstract**

A major consequence of the pandemic for the Church of England was the decision of the Archbishops on 24 March 2020 to prevent the use of churches (even for the broadcasting of services by the clergy), and the consequent sudden trajectory into online worship streamed by clergy from their homes. On Easter Sunday the Archbishop of Canterbury exemplified the challenge confronting Anglican clergy by presiding for the nation from his kitchen table. This sudden change to online services may have highlighted differences in eucharistic practice within the Church of England, differentiating between those shaped in the Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, and Evangelical traditions. This paper tests the thesis that during the initial days of lockdown this blessed sacrament of unity also embraced rich diversity among loyal Anglicans. Data provided by 3,286 laity and 1,353 clergy from the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* lend support for this thesis.

*Keywords:* pandemic, church, eucharist, empirical theology, survey

### **Introduction**

The scriptural roots for considering the eucharist as the sacrament of the Church's unity are found in 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood 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. (NRSV)

In one sense, both the foundation narrative of the last supper, held largely in common by the three synoptic Gospels, and the elements of bread and wine have become part of a unifying identity for Christian communities, with just a few exceptions such as the Salvation Army. The variety of names by which this blessed sacrament of unity is known, however, begins to illustrate the rich variety contained within this unity: Holy Communion, Mass, Eucharist, Lord's Supper. Within this blessed sacrament of unity there are diversities of liturgical practice, of theological interpretation, and of valid presidency. This notion of sacramental unity also embraces rich diversity.

Within the western tradition, the main fault lines within this blessed sacrament of unity emerged at the time of the Reformation, the time of the parting of ways between the Catholic tradition and the Reformed tradition. From that point onwards, it has been easy to recognise the sacrament as an all too visible sign of diversity, suggesting potential incompatibility of Catholic practice and Reformed practice. Within this landscape, however, the Anglican Church offers a distinctive position claiming to be rooted in both the Catholic tradition and the Reformed tradition. Consequently, within the one Church the eucharist may emerge as a blessed sacrament of unity that can struggle to hold together wide diversity of expression. It is against this background that the present study sets out to examine the extent to which the eucharist may have served both as a sign of unity and as a signal of diversity within the Church of England during the national lockdown in response to Covid-19 from 23

March 2020 to 4 July 2020. During this period, churches were closed, priests were kept away from the altar, and public worship was live-streamed or pre-recorded from the priest's domestic space (see McGowan, 2020).

### **Historical context**

The creative tension between the Catholic roots and the Reformed roots of the Church of England gained momentum during the first half of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of two distinct movements. The Evangelical Movement was rooted in the Reformed tradition (Manwaring, 1985; Hylson-Smith, 1988; Scotland, 2004; Atherstone, 2017). The Oxford Movement was rooted in the Catholic tradition (Hylson-Smith, 1993; Nockles, 1994; Pereiro, 2008, 2017). These two movements promote different theological views of the eucharist and distinctive liturgical styles and practices. The propagation of these differences was aided by distinctive styles of church architecture (Whyte, 2017), patronage societies to engineer the appointment of clergy to livings (Evershed, 1985; Bourne, 1986), and theological colleges built to train clergy within distinctive traditions (Bullock, 1941; Chapman, 2004; Atherstone, 2004; Botting, 2006).

The party differences between the Catholic roots and the Evangelical roots of the Church of England continued to exert influence on the liturgical life of the Church of England throughout the twentieth century, as evidenced by partisan controversy over the proposed 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* (Maiden, 2009), and competing interests of Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics in shaping *The Alternative Service Book 1980* (Buchanan, 1984). However, while the art of Anglican liturgy may be to compose text that can sustain multiple interpretation, those Anglican clergy shaped within the Evangelical or Catholic tradition seem to remain clear about their distinctive interpretation, implementation, and performance of such texts.

The strength and influence of the Catholic roots (reflected in the Oxford Movement) and of the Reformed roots (reflected in the Evangelical Movement) of the Church of England have shifted throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Toward the end of the twentieth century, Anglo-Catholics had declined and Evangelicals had gained strength. In preparation for the 1988 Lambeth Conference, the strength of these two wings of the Church of England were assessed by Penhale (1986) and Saward (1987). Penhale (1986) aptly chose *Catholics in crisis* as the title for his book. Saward (1987) aptly chose *Evangelicals on the move* as the title for his book. The series editor who commissioned these two titles also wisely recognised that there was a third, and equally important stream within the Church of England. Walker (1988) chose as his title for this third book, *Rediscovering the middle way*. Others may prefer to characterise this middle territory as Broad Church (Jones, 2003; Morris, 2006) or as Liberal Anglicanism (Chapman, 2017).

### **Continuing significance of church traditions**

The key study that brought the impact of church tradition (formerly referred as churchmanship) to become a focus for research within empirical theology is Kelvin Randall's (2005) book, *Evangelicals Etcetera: Conflict and conviction in the Church of England's parties*. Drawing on data provided by 340 clergy ordained to stipendiary ministry in the Church of England and the Church in Wales in 1994, Randall (2005) makes two important contributions to knowledge concerning the empirical investigation of the effect of church tradition.

Randall's first contribution to knowledge concerns clarifying the way in which church tradition may be conceptualised and operationalised within empirical research. Randall built on earlier work by members of Francis' research group who had proposed assessing church traditions by means of one or more semantic differential scales as proposed by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957). Examples of these earlier studies are provided by Francis and

Lankshear (1995a, 1995b, 1996) and by Francis, Lankshear, and Jones (1998, 2000). Randall invited his participants to identify their church tradition by selecting one point on each of three seven-point semantic differential scales. The first scale was anchored by the two terms 'Catholic' and 'Evangelical'. The second scale was anchored by the two terms 'Liberal' and 'Conservative'. The third scale was concerned with assessing the influence of the Charismatic movement. In this way three dimensions of church tradition were clearly differentiated. The validity and utility of the Liberal-Conservative and Catholic-Evangelical scales was subsequently confirmed by independent analyses on samples of Church of England clergy and laity (Village, 2012, 2018).

Randall's second contribution to knowledge concerned documenting the difference between clergy identifying as Anglo-Catholics and clergy identifying as Evangelicals across two main areas: ministry priorities, and belief and practice. In terms of ministry priorities, using a new role inventory, Anglo-Catholic clergy gave the highest priority to being a minister of sacraments and person of prayer, while Evangelical clergy gave the highest priority to being a preacher and person of prayer. In terms of belief and pastoral practices, marked contrasts emerged between Anglo-Catholic clergy and Evangelical clergy. For example, while 82% of Evangelical clergy considered that it is wrong for men and women to have sex before marriage, the proportion fell to 33% among Anglo-Catholic clergy. While 61% of Evangelical clergy agreed that they have helped people become Christians this year, the proportion fell to 34% among Anglo-Catholic clergy.

The *Church Times Survey* conducted in 2001 provided an opportunity to compare the attitudes and beliefs of 846 Anglo-Catholic clergy and 366 Evangelical clergy who responded to issues more relevant to sacramental ministry (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005). Statistically significant differences were found in the following areas. While 70% of Anglo-Catholic clergy agreed that they are helped in their faith by traditional forms of service, the

proportion fell to 39% among Evangelicals. While 94% of Anglo-Catholic clergy agreed that they are helped in their faith by ritual in services, the proportion fell to 29% among Evangelicals. While just 6% of Anglo-Catholic clergy took the view that churches should only baptise babies of regular churchgoers, the proportion rose to 34% among Evangelicals. While 91% of Evangelicals were in favour of laity preaching at communion services, the proportion fell to 70% among Anglo-Catholic clergy. While 93% of Evangelicals were in favour of laity leading the first part of the communion service, the proportion fell to 56% among Anglo-Catholic clergy. While 37% of Evangelicals were in favour of laity taking the whole communion service, the proportion fell to 2% among Anglo-Catholic clergy.

A study reported by Littler, Francis, and Thomas (2002) among 224 stipendiary parochial clergymen serving in the Church in Wales compared the views of Anglo-Catholic clergy and Evangelical clergy to the admission of children to communion before confirmation. These data identified the higher threshold for admission to communion favoured by Evangelicals. The Evangelical clergy were more likely than the Anglo-Catholic clergy to maintain that churches should not give communion to children until they are old enough to know what is happening (52% compared with 30%). The Evangelical clergy were more likely than the Anglo-Catholic clergy to maintain that churches should not give communion to children until they have committed themselves to the Lord Jesus (54% compared with 29%).

### **Research question**

Against this background, the objective of the present paper is to draw on data generated by the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* in order to explore whether there are significant differences in the views of clergy shaped by different church traditions, and significant differences in the views of laity shaped by different church traditions, concerning four key aspects of eucharistic practice brought into sharp focus by the sudden move to

online services during the pandemic. The three church traditions to be compared are Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, and Broad Church. The four key aspects of eucharistic practice concern:

- clergy celebrating communion alone in their own homes without broadcasting the service to others;
- clergy celebrating communion at home if they are broadcasting the service to others;
- clergy using virtual technology to concelebrate communion together in their various homes;
- people at home receiving communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service.

It was hypothesised that responses to these four questions would illustrate the extent to which in the Church of England the blessed sacrament of unity also embraced rich diversity.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

During April 2020 an online survey was developed using the Qualtrics platform. A link to the survey was distributed through the *Church Times* (both online and paper versions) from 8 May 2020. The link was also distributed through a number of participating Church of England dioceses. The survey was closed 23 July 2020, by which time there were over 7,000 responses. Although this survey attracted responses from outside England and from non-Anglican participants, the focus for the current analysis is on Church of England clergy and laity within England.

### **Measure**

The current analysis draws on the section of the survey designed to assess the attitudinal responses of clergy and laity toward aspects of eucharistic practice. This section was introduced by the following rubric:

Holy Communion is central to some Christian traditions, but difficult to celebrate in a virtual environment. What are your views about how it should be offered online?

This rubric was followed by the four items presented in table 1. The participants were invited to assess each item on a three-point scale: disagree (1), not certain (2), and agree (3).

Church tradition was assessed using a 7-point bipolar scale labelled ‘Anglo-Catholic’ at one end and ‘Evangelical’ at the other. It has been shown to predict well a wide range of differences in belief and practice in the Church of England (Randall, 2005, Village, 2012) and was used to identify Anglo-Catholic (scoring 1-2), Broad Church (3-5), and Evangelical (6-7) participants.

### **Participants**

- insert table 1 about here -

The analysis was conducted in two stages. Stage one differentiated between laity and clergy: 3,275 laity and 1,351 clergy. Stage two differentiated between those receiving ministry during the pandemic and accessing online services (including some retired clergy alongside laity) and those giving ministry during the pandemic (including lay ministers alongside active clergy): 2,472 people receiving ministry and accessing online services and 1,935 people giving ministry. Full details of these four groups are presented in table 1 in terms of age, sex, and ordination status, according to church tradition (Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, and Evangelical).

### **Analysis**

The statistical significance of differences in the scores for Likert items reported by the Anglo-Catholics and by the Evangelicals were tested using chi-square analysis on 2 x 2 contingency tables, for which the three-point Likert scale responses were collapsed into two categories differentiating between agreeing and not agreeing.

### **Results**

- insert table 2 about here -

Table 2 presents the responses for the three groups of clergy (Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, Evangelical) to the four issues raised by the survey. The differences between the Anglo-Catholics and the Evangelicals are quite stark in respect of three of the items. Anglo-Catholic clergy give more support for clergy celebrating communion alone in their own homes without broadcasting the service to others (50% compared with 12%). Anglo-Catholic clergy gave more support for clergy celebrating communion at home if they are broadcasting the service to others (70% compared with 39%). Anglo-Catholic clergy give less support for people at home receiving communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service (18% compared with 41%). On each of these three items Broad Church clergy occupy the middle ground. Around a quarter of clergy from each of the three groups supported clergy using virtual technology to concelebrate communion in their various homes.

- insert table 3 about here -

Table 3 presents the responses for the three groups of laity (Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, Evangelical) to the four issues raised by the survey. The differences between the Anglo-Catholics and the Evangelicals are strong but less strong than among the clergy. Anglo-Catholic laity give more support for clergy celebrating communion alone in their own homes without broadcasting the service to others (46% compared with 31%). Anglo-Catholic laity give more support for clergy celebrating communion at home if they are broadcasting the service to others (74% compared with 56%). Anglo-Catholic laity give less support for people at home receiving communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service (26% compared with 62%). On each of these three items Broad Church laity occupy the middle ground. Around a half of laity from each of the three groups supported clergy using virtual technology to concelebrate communion in their various homes.

Comparison of clerical and lay opinion within each of the three traditions suggested clergy were less likely than were laity to accept practices that were more common outside their tradition. Thus, Anglo-Catholics overall (both clergy and laity) were more accepting than were Evangelicals of clergy celebrating communion alone in their homes without broadcasting, but agreement with this practice was lower among Evangelical clergy than among Evangelical laity (12% versus 31%,  $p < .001$ ). In the opposite case, Evangelicals overall (both clergy and laity) were more accepting than Anglo-Catholics of people receiving bread and wine at home during broadcast communion services, but agreement with this practice was lower among Anglo-Catholic clergy than among Anglo-Catholic laity (18% versus 26%,  $p < .01$ ).

- insert tables 4 and 5 about here -

The preceding section (tables 2 and 3), concerned with matters of attitude, differentiated between the responses of clergy and laity. Another section of the survey (tables 4 and 5), concerned with matters of practice, differentiated between the responses of those giving ministry during the pandemic (including lay ministers alongside active clergy) and those receiving ministry and accessing online services during the pandemic (including some retired clergy alongside laity). Table 4 presents the responses for the three groups of those receiving ministry and accessing online services (Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, and Evangelical). The difference between the Anglo-Catholics and the Evangelicals is statistically significant. While 12% of Anglo-Catholics were invited to take bread and wine at home, the proportion rose to 26% among Evangelicals. Broad Church participants occupy the middle ground. Table 5 presents the responses of the three groups of those giving ministry (Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, and Evangelical). The difference between the Anglo-Catholics and the Evangelicals is statistically significant. While 84% of Anglo-Catholics never invited

people watching at home to share in communion by taking bread and wine, the proportion fell to 75% among Evangelicals. Broad Church participants occupy the middle ground.

### **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic confronted Church of England clergy and laity with an unprecedented challenge. The Government's lockdown on the nation closed shops, businesses, and places of recreation and hospitality. All except key workers were restricted to their homes, and according to the Government's way of thinking religious leaders were counted among the key workers. The Archbishops' lock-up of the churches, closed the clergy's place of work and set them to learn how to deliver their ministry from the domestic space in solidarity alongside other non-key workers. The move to online delivery of services was novel and challenging both for those giving ministry and for those receiving ministry, and not least for those unaccustomed to the online world.

The thesis of the present study is that the transition to online services raised in a novel way theological and ecclesial issues concerning the very nature of the eucharist. The hypothesis tested by the present study was that these novel issues would be seen in a different light by clergy and laity shaped in the Anglo-Catholic, the Broad Church, and the Evangelical traditions of the Church of England. It was hypothesised that these differences in perspective would illustrate the extent to which in the Church of England this blessed sacrament of unity also embraced rich diversity.

Drawing on the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* the present study analysed the responses of 3,275 laity and 1,351 clergy to four specific issues concerning the eucharist, according to three church traditions: Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, and Evangelical. Three main conclusions emerge from these data.

The first conclusion is that there is a strong differentiation between the ways in which Anglo-Catholic clergy and Evangelical clergy conceive celebrating communion in their

homes, with or without broadcasting the service to others. Parishes served by clergy shaped in the Anglo-Catholic tradition were likely to experience a higher level of broadcast communion service, while parishes served by clergy shaped in the Evangelical tradition were likely to experience fewer broadcast communion services.

The second conclusion is that the level of endorsement for clergy celebrating communion at home, with or without broadcasting to others, is similar among clergy and laity shaped within the Anglo-Catholic tradition. However, there is less agreement between clergy and laity shaped in the Evangelical tradition. Clergy shaped in the Evangelical tradition are much clearer than laity shaped in the Evangelical tradition regarding their rejection of practices that they may associate with their Anglo-Catholic colleagues.

The third conclusion is that there is no consensus among Church of England clergy and laity about the practice of people at home receiving communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service. The majority of Anglo-Catholic clergy do not agree that this practice is acceptable (82%). The majority of Evangelical laity do agree that the practice is acceptable (62%).

The strength of the present study is that it confronted the issue of identifying diverse eucharistic beliefs and practices within the Church of England at a time when new issues were emerging from the enforced and sudden move to online liturgical provision, and when the experience was still raw. The weakness of the present study is precisely that it remains locked into the rawness of that initial experience. This is one of the reasons why the research group launched a follow-up study in January 2021. It is often imagined that for Anglicans experience precedes formularies and that liturgy and liturgical texts function as the crucible for theological development. Currently we await the outcome of the follow-up study that included wider and more nuanced items on eucharistic understandings in order to discover whether further lockdown and more experience of online services has further consolidated or

unsettled the notion that within the Church of England the eucharist serves as this blessed sacrament of unity that embraces and contains expressions of rich diversity.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

#### **Conflict of interest**

No conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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Table 1

*Profiles*

	Lay				Ordained			
	AC	BC	EV	All	AC	BC	EV	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
N =	852	1792	631	3275	503	616	232	1351
Male	45	31	32	35	61	42	66	53
Female	55	69	69	66	39	58	34	47
20s	6	3	6	4	1	2	1	1
30s	7	5	6	6	10	6	7	8
40s	11	11	13	12	17	17	17	17
50s	17	20	18	19	24	29	32	27
60s	26	29	29	29	28	32	32	30
70s	28	27	23	27	16	14	10	14
80s+	5	6	5	5	4	2	2	3
	Received ministry				Gave ministry			
	AC	BC	EV	All	AC	BC	EV	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
N =	678	1366	428	2472	607	922	406	1935
Male	48	32	31	36	54	36	52	45
Female	52	68	69	64	46	64	48	55
20s	5	3	6	4	2	1	3	2
30s	7	4	5	5	11	6	7	8
40s	9	10	11	10	18	17	17	17
50s	15	18	17	17	24	27	28	27
60s	27	29	28	28	27	32	32	30
70s	31	29	27	30	15	15	11	14
80s+	6	7	6	6	3	2	1	2
Lay	89	96	96	94	31	40	48	39
Ordained	11	4	4	6	69	60	52	61

Note: AC Anglo-Catholic; BC Broad Church; EV Evangelical

Table 2

*Views on communion by church tradition: Clergy*

	AC	BC	EV	
<i>N</i> =	503	616	232	
	% Agree	% Agree	% Agree	<i>p</i> <
It is right for clergy to celebrate communion alone in their own homes without broadcasting the service to others	50	21	12	.001
It is right for clergy to celebrate communion at home if they are broadcasting the service to others	70	51	39	.001
It is right for people at home to receive communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service	18	33	41	.001
It is right for clergy to use virtual technology to concelebrate communion together in their various homes	25	27	22	NS

Note: AC Anglo-Catholic; BC Broad Church; EV Evangelical

Table 3

*Views on communion by church tradition: Laity*

	AC	BC	EV	
<i>N</i> =	852	1792	631	
	% Agree	% Agree	% Agree	<i>p</i> <
It is right for clergy to celebrate communion alone in their own homes without broadcasting the service to others	46	38	31	.001
It is right for clergy to celebrate communion at home if they are broadcasting the service to others	74	65	56	.001
It is right for people at home to receive communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service	26	46	62	.001
It is right for clergy to use virtual technology to concelebrate communion together in their various homes	51	56	58	.05

Note: AC Anglo-Catholic; BC Broad Church; EV Evangelical

Table 4

*Experience of Holy Communion services in lockdown among those receiving ministry and accessing online services: Were you invited to take communion at home with your own bread and wine?*

	AC	BC	EV	All
<i>N</i> =	678	1366	428	2472
	%	%	%	%
Invited	12	18	26	17
Not invited	88	82	74	83

Note: AC Anglo-Catholic; BC Broad Church; EV Evangelical

Table 5

*Experience of Holy Communion services in lockdown among those giving ministry: Were you able to offer online communion services where people watching take bread/ wine at home?*

	AC	BC	EV	All
<i>N</i> =	607	922	406	1935
	%	%	%	%
Never	84	80	75	80
Some Sundays	7	12	19	12
Every Sunday	6	8	6	8

Note: AC Anglo-Catholic; BC Broad Church; EV Evangelical