



## GUIDELINES

for

## METHODS OF ADMINISTRATION OF HOLY COMMUNION

and

## THE DISPOSAL OF REMAINING EUCHARISTIC ELEMENTS

### Background

Behind the practices of administration of Holy Communion and the disposal of the eucharistic elements there are major questions about what is happening at the Eucharist,<sup>1</sup> and what form of reverence is to be shown to the elements during and after the Eucharist.

This has been – quite literally – a burning issue in the history of the churches in England, and so is very significant in the historical formation of denominational identity. Yet emphases and practices differ within denominations, one “wing” not always being in sympathy with another.

The Eucharist is central to the lives of most Christian people: their understanding of the faith, their personal experience, their spirituality and their piety are affirmed, or threatened, by particular forms of celebration of the Eucharist. Such is the profundity of experience, that unfamiliarity is very disturbing.

Reverence for the Eucharist may take different forms. In the ecumenical dialogue (characterised by listening) there should be the desire to discover what lies at the heart of the other’s faith, and how that insight may strengthen and inspire one’s own faith.

One tradition will express the importance it attaches to the Eucharist by frequent communion; another by rare and rigorously-regulated communion. One may show its reverence within the service by the use of music, colour or incense; another by sombre dress and demeanour. Some will honour the eucharistic elements by genuflection; others indicate the solemnity of the occasion by spreading white clothes over the pews. Some will emphasise the communal by administering Holy Communion to a “table” of people at a time, or by everyone consuming the elements together; whereas others will emphasise the communal by the use of a common cup.

### Methods of Administration

When a Local Ecumenical Project (LEP) is a single congregation deriving from several congregations and backgrounds, there will be different expectations about the method of administering Holy Communion - by “tables”, kneeling at an altar/communion rail, individually standing, by elders/deacons bringing the elements to the congregation in the pews. Though these methods may be predominantly associated with a particular denomination, they are not exclusive to one denomination.

The LEP will wish to honour the diversity of tradition, and over a period of time to use various practices in order to value the insights inherent in each.

The use of various methods of administration will be a matter for the local church council, which may wish to consult the LEP’s Sponsoring Body or Local Advisory Group. It is important that everyone knows what is happening and why. It is important that the Presiding Minister (especially a visiting Minister) is well-briefed on practices which may be very familiar to the local congregation, but strange to the Minister.

It would be good if the method of administration were not referred to by reference to the denominational tradition it is seen to represent: i.e., not “the Methodist way today”.

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<sup>1</sup> Note :the word “Eucharist” is most frequently used in this paper, to stand for “Lord’s Supper”, “Breaking of the Bread”, “Holy Communion”, “The Mass”, all of which are acknowledged to be common usage within various traditions.

## The Disposal of Remaining Eucharist Elements

What is done with the remaining elements depends on what it is believed has happened to the elements, and what the context of their use is perceived to be – only for that particular Eucharist, or for extended communion, or reservation for the sick, or reservation for the purpose of devotion.

In some traditions it has been the practice to treat the elements with what others would regard as disrespect, in order to make a theological point. With time, what was a theological point has become a matter of indifference, and is interpreted as casualness by those from another tradition. The deep offence that this can cause has to be recognised and must be handled generously. An ecumenical respect for the other position may well lead to some form of reverent disposal.

When there is general agreement that reverent disposal is appropriate, there may still be different views on what “reverent” means. For example, some will regard it as appropriate to give bread to the birds and to pour wine into the ground, “returning the elements to nature”.

Others will see consumption of what remains as the most appropriate form of reverence: but elements can be consumed discreetly, out of full view of the congregation or after the service. Ecumenical generosity would suggest respecting those who find public consumption of the remaining elements unifying or offensive (washing-up does not usually take place at a dinner table in front of the guests) and reverent disposal may be shared by the elders/deacons/assistants. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* points to reverent consumption; the Church of England’s *Guidelines on the Ecumenical Canons* argue that “This provision for reverent consumption dates back to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and has helped to hold in unity worshippers with a variety of understandings of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist”. Those Churches with prescribed liturgies require or commend consumption.

In a single congregation LEP, the Presiding Minister and the Church Council need to talk openly about the meaning of the Eucharist and about the disposal of the eucharistic elements. The Church Council will need to understand that some Ministers will regard themselves as bound by the Canons and rubrics of their denomination. Some Ministers will need to understand the deep-seated anxieties of members of denominations not their own, to whom they are called to minister. It is better to have open discussion and explanation, than Minister, Churchwardens, Stewards, Deacons or Elders seeking their private and clandestine solutions.

There needs also to be proper discussion and explanation of what is required in terms of “the juice of the grape”. The strong opposition to alcohol in some traditions has to be recognised, as also the antipathy in other traditions to certain wine “substitutes”. The use of de-alcoholised wine – fermented grape-juice with the alcohol removed – might be investigated.

It may also be helpful to discuss the quantity of bread used. A loaf which leaves much to be consumed may cause difficulties about reverence which are avoided if a smaller roll, or a slice from a larger loaf, is used.

## Shared Buildings

The Blessed Sacrament is reserved in all Roman Catholic parish churches, and in many churches of the Church of England. Within these, there will be traditions of showing respect for the Sacrament: for example, by a light shining perpetually before the place of reservation (tabernacle or aumbrey), by bowing or genuflection. When the building is shared with those to whom these traditions are unfamiliar, inimical or offensive, considerable conversation, explanation and sensitivity are needed.

### Some sources:

“Regarding the practice of reserving the elements, each church should respect the practice and piety of the others. Given the diversity of practice among the churches... it is worthwhile to suggest:

that, on the one hand it be remembered, especially in sermons and instruction, that the primary intention of reserving the elements is their distribution among the sick and those who are absent, and,

on the other hand, it be recognised that the best way of showing respect for the elements served in the eucharistic celebration is by their consumption, without excluding their use for communion by the sick.” *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry para 32, 1982*

“The rubrics in ASB provide that, ‘Any consecrated bread and wine which is not required for purposes of communion is consumed at the end of the distribution or after the service.’ This provision\* for reverent consumption dates back to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and has helped to hold in unity worshippers with a variety of understandings of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. [ quote of para 32 of BEM] ... It is possible for the elements to be consumed discreetly after the service and to arrange for people to help where large amounts are consecrated.” *Ecumenical Relations: Canons B43 & B44 – Code of Practice Para 85, 1989 (Church of England)*

“What remains of the elements should be reverently consumed, or otherwise reverently disposed of, at the end of the service.” *Methodist Worship Book 1999*

“Any consecrated bread and wine which is not required for the purposes of communion is consumed at the end of the distribution or after the service.” *Common Worship: Services and prayers for the Church of England 2000*