

This is My Body:

A Qualitative Study into Sociological and Theological Experiences in Local Parish Eucharistic Worship

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Abstract

The theology and praxis of the Eucharist is often discussed by academics and theologians, yet most people engaged in the act of celebrating the sacrament rarely have a published or widely heard 'voice' with which to share their experience of these Holy Mysteries. This article investigates the direct experience of communicant members of the Church of England across a wide range of theological traditions. Idiographic qualitative data yielded from semi-structured interviews is analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). These results are reflected upon using the Theological Action Research model to generate relevant and practical outcomes from the data. Three key themes emerge from the participants' experiences: the significance of the gathered community; a pre-existing and dynamic reflective praxis amongst communicants; and a diverse but prevalent focus on 'mission' particularly relating to the unique nature of the rite.

Keywords

Eucharist, Communion, Congregation, Parish Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Theological Action Research

Finding a Voice

There is almost no recorded data on the views of the laity about what is happening when the sacrament of the Eucharist is celebrated in the Church of England. This article aims to bring to the fore the voices of congregation members to facilitate and encourage ongoing dialogue in the wider Church, with the ultimate aim of better equipping pastoral and



spiritual relationships in the local parish context. Helen Cameron *et al* have developed the 'four voices' structure by which theological conceptions are formed through praxis: 'normative,' 'formal,' 'espoused,' and 'operant.'¹ Whilst a strong understanding of the normative (scriptures, creeds, official Church teaching) and the formal ('theology of theologians') voices is important for context, the article will seek to understand the direct experiences of participants through the espoused and operant voices (theology of a group's articulation of its beliefs and its practices respectively) and discern themes through which these voices can be better understood, that the Church might proactively engage and respond.

The question at the heart of this research is:

What do members of parish church congregations believe is happening in the experience of sacramental Eucharistic worship, and what, if any, effect does this have on their understanding of faith and their lives outside the worship environment?

The aim is to discover more about the sociological and theological factors which relate to participants' experiences of Eucharistic worship and thereby to facilitate and improve the ministry of the Church amongst communicants.

Perspectives from the Wider Church

Kevin Irwin explores theologies of the Eucharist through different 'modes,' including 'memorial of the paschal mystery,' 'food for the road,' and 'sacramental sacrifice,' for example.² This text is distinguished from the present study as it is rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition and is limited to the USA. However, it contains important themes and connections between sociological shifts and theological experiences, as well as useful criticism of methodological approaches when discussing the sacrament of the Eucharist. Irwin argues that liturgical praxis has a significant influence upon theological belief, following the Roman Catholic principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* ('the law of what is to be prayed [is] the law of what is to be believed'). This principle is also present in Anglicanism and is supported by the key role of the historical formularies (the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal). Sam Wells proposed a very similar principle in his 2001 discussion on 'how common worship forms local character' in the Anglican Communion, albeit in the adapted form: *lex orandi, lex vivendi* ('the law of what is to be prayed is the law of living').³ This view would seem to elevate, in the terminology of Helen Cameron, the *normative* voice out of obscurity to perhaps even being the *cause* of

¹ Helen Cameron *et al*, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 54.

² Kevin W. Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005).

³ Sam Wells, 'How Common Worship Forms Local Character', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Volume 15 (2002), 66–74 (66). This is an important and encouraging paper on the subject of mission containing interesting anecdotal information. However, it does not provide sufficient depth of data or analysis to warrant a more in-depth review in the present study.

the espoused and operant voices. Interestingly, the present study also reveals a relationship between liturgy and the laity's experience of the sacrament.

Irwin presupposes that Roman Catholic liturgy contains a theology which is ready to be discovered.⁴ In particular, he focuses on the ministry of the Word, prayers, symbol, and ritual. Perhaps most significantly he observes that 'to engage in symbolic activity is to unleash a power that cannot be reduced to a single meaning.'⁵ This leaves theological space for the divine power of the sacrament to be more than can be expressed in human words. In this meeting between transcendence and immanence we find a realistic limitation of the present study: how can we express the divine in human words? Irwin is therefore open to varied interpretations of the sacrament and writes comfortably from the stance that no single model offers a fully sufficient description. This offers a helpful framework as we engage with participants describing their own personal experiences.

In contrast to the absence of data in the Church of England context, Irwin notes that in the decade leading up to 2005 Roman Catholics in the USA had been polled a total of nine times on the subject of the sacrament. He notes a particular trend in a 1994 New York Times/ CBS poll that older participants in the Mass were more likely to believe in a literal change in the elements into the body and blood of Christ. The methodology here is distinctly quantitative, relying on telephone and written responses to binary questions. Irwin helpfully cites criticism of this method by Dr Peter Casarella of the Catholic University of America, who asks 'Could an informed Catholic really choose between [symbolic presence and the memorial meal]?'⁶ The 1994 poll mostly focused on efforts to revive church attendance, whereas our present purpose is to simply understand what participants experience in their own words, the better to carry out pastoral and priestly ministry in the parish. However, it is very interesting to note that the Roman Catholic church so frequently canvasses opinion amongst their flock on this subject, in direct contrast to the Church of England.

Paulson Varkey Veliyanloor's 2011 doctoral thesis is also written from a Roman Catholic perspective in the USA but deliberately approaches transformation experienced in sacramental worship through a psychological and sociological lens.⁷ Four vectors are used to measure this phenomenon: 'entering sacred sociality, anamnestic unfolding of the self, experience of identificatory union with Christ, and covenantal commitment to serving others.'⁸

Veliyanloor interviewed ten practising Roman Catholics to establish their ideographic understanding of the sacrament. The study is distinguished from the present research in that this data was then used to develop a sacramental theology of psychoanalysis in

⁴ Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist*, 19.

⁵ Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist*, 23.

⁶ Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist*, 5.

⁷ Paulson Varkey Veliyanloor, 'Transformation in "E": The Structure and Dynamics of the Lived Experience of the Eucharist (PhD. thesis, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2011).

⁸ Veliyanloor, 'Transformation in "E"', iii.

preparation for clinical practice in this area. However, it is relevant to the present enquiry because the study seeks to use participant interviews to understand the phenomenological sacramental experiences of the participants and the effect upon their lives outside of the worship environment. The research question here was: 'What is the lived experience of the Eucharistic ritual?' Sub-questions emanating from this included: how does this lived experience affect one's self-perception, relationships, and God-concept, and what if any are the hindrances to the transformative efficacy of the Eucharist?⁹

The findings of this study are intimate and remarkable. It may be relevant that the researcher is a Roman Catholic priest when reading just how explicit and openly the communicant participants responded to the questions. Participants expressed frustration at a rushed liturgy (particularly the Confession), also at a poor homily, and explored the socio-spatial understanding of sacred worship through memories of family life and childhood, for example.¹⁰ This study models a helpful approach to sincere and empathetic appreciation of intimate details at interview which the present researcher attempted to replicate in the Church of England context.

Thomas Varickamthotty's 2014 doctoral thesis reports his research into Small Christian Communities (SCCs) meeting for worship and catechesis outside of Sunday worship in the Roman Catholic context in Nagpur, India.¹¹ Apart from the denominational difference, this study is distinguished from the present enquiry in that it relates to non-Sunday gatherings. However, the aim was to improve the participants' experience and their understanding of Eucharistic theology. The study is interesting for our present purposes because the first phase was to establish through interview the sixteen participants' understanding of the sacrament.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, being a study amongst Roman Catholic participants, the Eucharist was described as a 'sacrifice' and a 'sharing in the body and blood of Christ' by all, while only two out of the total of sixteen people described it as a 'memorial.' All participants associated Christ with a lamb who offered himself for sacrifice, and this was associated with the 'Binding of Isaac' depicted in Genesis 22.1–14. Only ten of the sixteen participants however associated the Mass with the Passover meal and a 'family gathering.' Nine participants associated the Mass with the manna of Exodus 16 and as a saving and life-giving meal.¹² Six participants described the Mass as a 'community celebration;' eleven as a 'surrender of ourselves to God;' and fourteen as 'a time of praise and worship.'¹³ Particularly interesting was the missional effect of the experience of the Mass. All participants agreed with all of the following: 'we have to forgive others;' 'we must suffer for our sins and for others;' 'we are called to live the life of Jesus – live a holy life;' 'we have to

⁹ Veliyannoor, 'Transformation in "E"', 92.

¹⁰ Veliyannoor, 'Transformation in "E"', 296, 297, 295.

¹¹ Thomas Varickamthotty, 'The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and the Life of Small Christian Communities in Their Neighbourhoods' (PhD. thesis, Catholic University of America, 2014).

¹² Varickamthotty, 'Parish Eucharist', 86.

¹³ Varickamthotty, 'Parish Eucharist', 87.

be good examples for others;’ and ‘we have to spread the Word of God.’¹⁴ In relation to life at home, participants also unanimously said that ‘we must love our neighbours’ and ‘we have to share peace with others.’ Regarding integrity in the workplace, the Mass was said by all to necessitate the spreading of the message of love at work; speaking truthfully and dealing honestly with others and offering a witness to the gospel.¹⁵ This study revealed that for all participants the Mass was relevant to life beyond church worship, particularly regarding interpersonal relationships and individual integrity.

These initial results suggest that for the participants there was an intentional teaching about the Mass as a sacrifice which generates an ‘outward-facing’ obligation as communicants turn from church worship to be sent out into their communities. This is evidenced by the sense of calling indicated in the change required and effected in relationships with participants’ ‘neighbours’ and in the workplace, for example.¹⁶

In *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* Sara Miles offers an in-depth, qualitative, autoethnographic journey through many years’ experience of Eucharistic worship.¹⁷ Miles was raised in a firmly atheistic household does not conform to what may be termed ‘conservative’ views on sexuality, and is from a ‘working-class’ background. She first received the sacrament at the age of forty-six: ‘This was my first Communion. It changed everything.’¹⁸ Miles describes ‘eating Jesus’ as ‘not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed, the bread of life.’¹⁹ What is remarkable here is that Miles’ experience of Communion enables her to see that she is already beginning to fulfil her lay vocation of feeding people as a professional chef. Miles reflects that having been called to Christ’s table, she will continue to feed people, though on a much larger scale. Miles therefore establishes a network of fresh-food pantries across San Francisco operating from St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church. In the process she struggles alongside her ‘atheist family, [her] doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of [her] newfound church.’²⁰ It is particularly interesting that Miles does not come from a church-attending family or have a long experience (or indeed any catechetical instruction) in Communion when this revelation takes hold of her future in such a profound way. Miles describes how her own cultural prejudices are overwhelmed by the call to be fed by Christ and to feed others, and she describes her experience as simply ‘hungering and thirsting for righteousness.’²¹

Miles’ reflections on theology often centre around the body, both that of the individual and that of the gathered Church, and the interconnected relationship between the two. Her discovery that the Church is not a perfect ‘club’ but ‘the suffering, fractious, and

¹⁴ Varickamthotty, *Parish Eucharist*, 87.

¹⁵ Varickamthotty, *Parish Eucharist*, 88.

¹⁶ Varickamthotty, *Parish Eucharist*, 88.

¹⁷ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

¹⁸ Miles, *Take This Bread*, xi.

¹⁹ Miles, *Take This Bread*, xi.

²⁰ Miles, *Take This Bread*, xii.

²¹ Miles, *Take This Bread*, xiii, citing Matthew 5.6.

unboundaried body of Christ' is a delight to her, alongside the view that 'all people are one body: God's.'²² Miles authentically confronts the challenges of her new ministry: 'Conversion was turning out to be quite far from the greeting card moment promised by televangelists...it was socially and politically awkward, as well as profoundly confusing.'²³ However, she continues to work alongside people with very different views to her own so that she can say with integrity in response to Christ's call: 'we fed people.'²⁴

The text describes one person's experience of the Eucharist in significant detail and is therefore highly valuable in understanding the complexities and levels of engagement through which people approach the sacrament and to what degree it can transform individual lives. Miles' experience is reminiscent of a 1990 text by Ralph A. Keifer, one of the founders of the Roman Catholic charismatic revival movement in the USA: '[all Christians are called to] remember in the active sense...to grasp our heritage with both hands and grapple with relating it to the present.'²⁵ In Miles' context this 'present' was the injustice of food poverty in an advanced economy. Keifer describes the Eucharistic experience in similar, somewhat poetic, terms to Miles: 'fragmentary and fleeting...a taste of bread and a sip of wine...'²⁶ and the invitation is described as being not merely to the Church's ceremony but to the great banquet of Christ.²⁷ Whilst perhaps limited because it serves in part as an advertisement for the work of the church and the food pantry, this text is a powerful qualitative response to what it means to be called to sit and eat at the table of Christ, and to feed others in the same way.

In 2003 the British Methodist Church published research into the experience of Holy Communion 'from the perspective of "ordinary" Methodists...from the fundamental understandings of the way that Methodists *do theology*' (my emphasis) titled *Holy Communion in the Methodist Church: 'His presence makes the feast'*.²⁸ The aim of this study was to discover whether there was a wide variety of practise in Communion services in the British Methodist Church and if so, why. The methodology was very different to the present study, being in the form of a questionnaire distributed at the Huddersfield Conference in 2000. The proportion of ministers amongst respondents was consequently very high, however recipients were given two additional copies to give to other people in their 'sending' church.²⁹ The study is therefore methodologically different from the present

²² Miles, *Take This Bread*, xv, xvi.

²³ Miles, *Take This Bread*, 70.

²⁴ Miles, *Take This Bread*, 173, perhaps reflecting on Matthew 25.35 'for I was hungry and you gave me food.'

²⁵ Ralph A. Keifer, *Blessed and Broken: an exploration of the contemporary experience of God in eucharistic celebration* (Minnesota, USA: Liturgical Press, 1990), 56.

²⁶ Keifer, *Blessed and Broken*, 57.

²⁷ Keifer, *Blessed and Broken*, 58.

²⁸ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion in the Methodist Church: "His presence makes the feast"' (2003) published on the website of the Methodist Church in Britain, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-holy-communion-in-methodist-church-2003.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2019).

²⁹ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 7.

investigation and the data is now twenty-two years old. However, it presents some interesting theological findings from UK-based research.

A clear majority stated that Christ was present in some 'special' way at Communion.³⁰ Additional free-form responses allowed participants to elaborate further, and these were grouped together in the report. For example:

Bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ...Jesus is there in the Holy Spirit; it is a spiritual presence...He just fills my heart - inexplicable... I just 'feel' him, like He's hugging me, holding me in his arms...symbolism is a gateway to perception...Christ is both priest and victim...Communion is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet...Christ is present in the body of believers, gathered together.³¹

Participants reflected further on the importance of Communion:

What Christ has done for me...the sense of fellowship with other Christians around the world and throughout history, back to the first disciples...the sense of being Christ's body, united regardless of status...Christ creates community...obedience to Christ...the opportunity for renewal...forgiveness of sins...healing...peace...a fresh start is given...engages all five senses...[it] gets beyond our obsession with words.³²

The researcher concluded from this data that participants gained *personal* strength from the sacrament, but that fundamentally their desire was to receive it *together* (my emphases): 'many respondents wrote of the power of Communion to unite the people of Christ.'³³ This sense of togetherness and the importance of community was also a key feature of the findings in the present study.

In *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* Henry McAdoo and Kenneth Stevenson offer a coherent exposition of post-Reformation English Eucharistic theology.³⁴ The authors begin with the explicit acknowledgement that 'the concept of sacramentality cannot be separated from mystery, unexplained reality.'³⁵ With reference to Jeremy Taylor and Herbert Thorndike writing during the tumultuous seventeenth century, the authors address humanity's limited capacity of comprehension before the sacrament, for example the inability to describe the 'change' which patristic writers assert the elements undergo, save that the body of Christ is present 'in, with, and under' the bread (Thorndike here referencing Lutheran consubstantiation).³⁶ In part through the work of Lancelot Andrewes the authors explore Anglican interpretations of the sacrament in relation to the theme of sacrifice. Preaching in 1592, Andrewes refers to Psalm 50.2 ('Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice') and describes the Eucharistic sacrifice as a

³⁰ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 4.

³¹ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 5.

³² Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 14.

³³ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 16.

³⁴ H. R. McAdoo and Kenneth Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1997).

³⁵ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, 12.

³⁶ Martin Luther, eds. Robert H. Fischer and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works, Vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 306. It is noted that Luther himself never used the term 'consubstantiation' though this is how his doctrine of the Real Presence has become known to academic theologians.

means to renew the covenant with God while also receiving spiritual nourishment.³⁷ This symbiosis of the two seemingly opposite ends of a theological spectrum (symbol and sacrifice) is reinforced later, at Easter 1612, when Andrewes preaches on the theme of the Eucharist being both a remembrance ('anamnesis') and a bodily reception of Christ in full comprehension ('katalepsis').³⁸ This *via media* thinking, necessitated perhaps to some degree by historical circumstance, is thoroughly woven into the unfolding Anglican tradition.

Gathering the Data

Seeking to understand the real and lived experience of individuals in sacramental worship, a participant-centred approach was adopted. Six participants each engaged in a thirty-minute interview using open questions to form a semi-structured conversation. Voices were sought from a range of church traditions, self-described as Evangelical and 'Bible-based', Liberal Catholic, and Anglo-catholic. Participants were regularly communicant (at least once per month) and of ages ranging from 35 to 75 years. Two men and four women participated. The following questions are examples of those asked at interview:

- Why do you attend Eucharistic worship?
- What is happening at the Eucharist?
- What does the Eucharist mean to you?
- Does the experience of the Eucharist have an impact on your life outside church?
- How much does the sermon affect your view of what is happening at the Eucharist?
- Is there a difference for you between the use of the Book of Common Prayer or Common Worship in your experience of the Eucharist?

All interviews took place between 16th January and 25th February 2020, notably before any restrictions owing to the Covid-19 epidemic were enacted in the UK. The research therefore provides a final experiential 'screenshot' of the lived experience of the sacrament before the global pandemic.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The results of the study are analysed through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Jonathan Smith and exemplified in his 1998 study with Mike Osborn into chronic benign lower back pain. Osborn and Smith argue that whilst empirical evidence is important, it often fails to provide reasons for patients' experiences. Further, that the narrative which forms in the minds of the patient experiencing chronic pain can force them as a lay person to develop a reconfigured biography, relating to both the past

³⁷ McAdoo and Stevenson, *Luther's Works*, 168.

³⁸ McAdoo and Stevenson, *Luther's Works*, 169.

and the present.³⁹ IPA deliberately brings the voice of the participant into the foreground, enabling the analyst to engage in a 'co-constructive' process using the data from their account.⁴⁰ IPA is therefore an 'idiographic qualitative methodology' using transcript data from in-depth semi-structured interviews.⁴¹ This 'intensive qualitative approach' facilitated for Osborn and Smith a deeper exploration of the direct experience of pain suffered by patients.⁴² Here pain is recognised as a subjective experience known directly by the patient themselves and as something in which they participate, rather than simply an objective occurrence which happens outside of, or to, the individual and is only diagnostically useful when quantified in some way.

Theological Action Research

The methodology in the theological reflection follows the process outlined by Helen Cameron *et al.* in their work on Theological Action Research (TAR).⁴³ Cameron *et al.* argue that the practice of individuals is itself a form of theology which implies that the operant voice conveys a theological praxis, whether consciously or unconsciously.⁴⁴ The espoused voice is central to the process of theological reflection, and it is interesting to note the congruence (and otherwise) between the descriptions of Eucharistic practice (also in the context of the normative and formal theological voices) and what participants themselves described happening at Eucharistic worship.

One of the key features of the TAR methodology is the conversational practice closely aligned with that of the IPA methodology of Osborn and Smith. In giving careful attention to this multi-voiced understanding of theology, studies yield an 'authentic practical-theological insight'.⁴⁵ The TAR methodology follows the IPA analysis particularly well because of the shared epistemological roots in phenomenological and experiential data, gathered through the individual voices of the participants at interview.

What Participants Said: Analysing the Results Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

During the interviews with participants, three key themes emerged:

1. the importance of community and the wider church body;
2. personal reflective praxis;

³⁹ Osborn and Smith, 67.

⁴⁰ Osborn and Smith, 67.

⁴¹ Osborn and Smith, 67.

⁴² Osborn and Smith, 67.

⁴³ Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*.

⁴⁴ Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*, 51.

⁴⁵ Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*, 56.

3. the unique nature of sacramental worship and the mission of the Church.

The Significance of Community

All of the participants talked about the importance of other people being present at the celebration of the sacrament. Three participants described this in relation to the wider worship experience, rather than specifically relating it to Eucharistic worship, for example:

'[I attend church] to reconnect with my church family...'⁴⁶

'If I were to miss a Sunday morning, I would miss the fellowship of worshipping with my brothers and sisters...'⁴⁷

'...I would go along to church to be with fellow Christians...'⁴⁸

[In relation to an Agapé Meal shared in Holy Week]: '...there's something very intimate and quite vulnerable about sharing with the people around you...'⁴⁹

Specifically referring to the sacrament, at least three participants preferred a smaller number of worshippers because of the intimacy and 'family' atmosphere:

'I think [Eucharistic worship] brings people together...You're all going up...it does bind you as a family group.'⁵⁰

'...a small, intimate group...especially if there's the right number there...it becomes the Last Supper, literally...it becomes very poignant.'⁵¹

'[in a smaller group] it feels more like a family receiving the Eucharist...it's more in the connection you have with the people around you...'⁵²

'...it's the ambience that builds up around it...if you're a small intimate group.'⁵³

There was a distinction in the responses between those who focus more on the 'Word' elements of the Church ('we're a Bible-based church'⁵⁴) and those who focused more on the sacrament itself in their worship.⁵⁵ For the former there was a communal element of sociability and 'catching up,' the church service generally being the meeting place for a combined social and worship experience:

I miss *the Communion* (emphasis voiced by participant) of 'How are you?'; 'Oh I heard that so and so happened' – that chat of Communion, catching up with my brothers and sisters, listening to the word of God, praying together corporately, and yes, receiving the bread and wine.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Participant B, question 3.

⁴⁷ Participant A, question 8.

⁴⁸ Participant C, question 3.

⁴⁹ Participant D, question 4. It is acknowledged that this is not related specifically to the sacramental experience but recalling an Agapé Meal formed part of the participant's response to this question.

⁵⁰ Participant B, question 6.

⁵¹ Participant E, question 4.

⁵² Participant D, question 4.

⁵³ Participant E, question 4.

⁵⁴ Participant B, question 7.

⁵⁵ For example, Participant E, for whom the Mass liturgy is found in the Roman Missal.

⁵⁶ Participant A, question 8.

Participants who were focused more on the sacrament itself often discussed communality as something which contributed to the 'atmosphere' or 'ambience' of the liturgy, for example:

...when it's Christmas, or Maundy...Good Friday service, Easter Day, when the church is absolutely rammed, there's also this wonderful aura because it's throbbing with everybody feeling the right...spirit.⁵⁷

It is worth noting this difference between those who value the presence of others in the specific sacrament of the rite and those who more generally enjoyed gathering with other Christians. In the context of the pandemic, we may note the huge loss of being present with others and physical contact, and the importance of this in the Eucharistic liturgy, from sharing the Peace to receiving the host placed directly into one's hands. In the ongoing debates around 'virtual' and 'physical' church the Eucharist is perhaps unique in that it requires physical attendance, and purports to offer substantial nourishment of the soul through the bodily experience of the rite.

A Dynamic Personal Theology Emanating from Praxis

All participants were already actively considering what is happening at Eucharistic worship and were deeply engaged in efforts to develop their own theological understanding of the sacrament in the light of their experience. This reflective practice is highly significant and accords with recent psychological studies into ritual and cognition. In 2016 Justin L. Barrett and Ernest Thomas Lawson carried out a study into cognitive contributions to judgements of ritual efficacy.⁵⁸ The findings of this study may be summarised as follows:

1. given only minimal information, people will have intuitions about a ritual system;
2. that which is outside the agency of the human is considered the most important element in the ritual;
3. the person acting in a particular role must be appropriate and this is considered relatively more important than any action performed.

The present article accords especially with the third of these findings: statements made by two participants were revealing on the roles of individuals in the rites of Eucharistic worship. Participant A described actively questioning their experience as a lay person occasionally administering the sacrament to a bishop: 'What does it say about my role of the priest, in my head?... [the bishop's] Communion to me is better than mine to her...?'⁵⁹ This issue hadn't prevented the participant from distributing the sacrament, but they had clearly reflected on this at length and the issue of individual roles in the rite was highly significant

⁵⁷ Participant E, question 4.

⁵⁸ Justin L. Barrett and E. Thomas Lawson, 'Ritual Intuitions: Cognitive Contributions to Judgments of Ritual Efficacy', in *Religion and Cognition*, ed. Jason D. Slone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁹ Participant A, question 4.

to them. Similarly, Participant C indicated that the person administering the sacrament should be familiar and trustworthy:

I have been in a church where Communion was given by the person next to you. Now on occasion...I was terribly uncomfortable with it...I wasn't sure about the person to be truthful...I think I prefer a minister. Or a lay pastor, or somebody that I know...somebody known in the community...I don't think anybody can do it.⁶⁰

This again appears to affirm the third finding of the study by Barrett and Lawson.

Participants displayed high levels of integrity and empathy in their engagement with Eucharistic worship. Participant A thought often about other peoples' experiences of the sacrament, including questions which many younger people might have, for example: '...why do I get a grape and you get a bit of bread?'⁶¹ Participant C was very careful not to interpret or represent subjective experiences on behalf of others: '...I wouldn't like to speak for anybody...you don't actually know what people are struggling with...'⁶² Participant F was keen to understand the nature of the questions in the research and in missional engagement with others: '...what, why, and how...it's so important...to keep nudging towards the "how."⁶³ Participant B had sought to engage thoroughly with the Confirmation process before even considering receiving the sacrament in church:

I didn't want to be a fraud. I didn't want to receive Communion until my heart was in it as well as my head...I had a lot of questions; I still have a lot of questions...it was very much a heart moment.⁶⁴

This sincere level of engagement was consistently high amongst the participants. Some expressed concern about very practical matters which objectively could have no theological bearing on the efficacy of the sacrament: '...I felt just awful that I couldn't kneel down...I would never look at anybody [in a negative way] who stood instead of kneeling.' This notion of 'what to do in church' was a recurring theme. Participant D, for example, described an experience of an unfamiliar liturgy at Eucharistic worship in an Anglican cathedral overseas: '...I just thought "this is just bizarre"...it was quite funny. But a bit frustrating at the time.' Themes of familiarity and predictability were also affirmed as important for helping the congregation to be sufficiently at ease in order to fully engage in Eucharistic worship without distress or unnecessary distraction.

The Unique Nature of Sacramental Worship and the Mission of the Church

The unique experience of sacramental worship was consistently associated with an 'outward-facing' approach in the faith of the participants. There were however clear differences between participants who felt the distinctive nature of worship to be positive,

⁶⁰ Participant C, question 4.

⁶¹ Participant A, question 6.

⁶² Participant C, question 6.

⁶³ Participant F, question 10.

⁶⁴ Participant B, question 4.

and those who felt it to be a barrier to mission. For example, for Participant A, offering a visiting friend the opportunity to approach the altar rail said that this:

...creates a little bit of difference, and a little bit of a divide. And I think sometimes for us as a worshipping community we forget how 'The Communion' is so alien to people.⁶⁵

Participant A also described how a visitor who responded to the administration of Communion with the words 'thank you' rather than the customary 'Amen' felt overwhelmingly embarrassed.

On the other hand, some participants found the distinctive nature of Eucharistic worship to be a very positive factor. For participant D, for example, the language of the Book of Common Prayer highlighted the 'special' character of the sacrament:

...the Eucharist, although it's something that we do regularly, it's not normal, and it's not ordinary...it's not everyday language. But words have a lot of power to them...it ...says "this is special."⁶⁶

Similarly, Participant E described the unusual ambience of the church building and environment as a positive factor which enabled worship:

...a shaft of light came in through the stained-glass window and hit the altar...it was as though, 'I'm here, I'm with you'...it just made that service even more poignant..⁶⁷

This contrasts sharply with the responses of Participant B, who described the church environment as potentially dispiriting for newcomers.⁶⁸

The accessibility of services caused participants to reflect on the missional outreach of their respective church communities. Participant B, for example, expressed great pride in being part of 'a big outreach church,'⁶⁹ whereas Participant E was more relaxed in their approach to mission:

...people know I am church-goer, and if they want to talk to me about church, I'll talk to them about church...I'm not going to try any conversion techniques or anything like that. It's their choice.⁷⁰

Participant C reflected on a previous church experience where a preoccupation with numerical growth had damaging effects: '...there was a huge drive to go out into the community, it was quite difficult...all the ministry was focused on that.'⁷¹ Participant F described a middle way:

⁶⁵ Participant A, question 8.

⁶⁶ Participant D, question 9.

⁶⁷ Participant E, question 4.

⁶⁸ Participant B, question 10.

⁶⁹ Participant B, question 8.

⁷⁰ Participant E, question 8.

⁷¹ Participant C, question 7.

...when you're sent out at the end...I've come to realise it's not all about 'I must go out and find people who need the Lord'...actually the people, the conversations that you have with anybody in your week ...it's all about 'How would Jesus deal with it?'⁷²

And later, on the subject of drawing people to Eucharistic worship:

How might we attract others to just start to explore? So, the ripples of the pond, instead of thinking it all starts in the middle, its actually how might we reverse that at times, and think out, and then in.⁷³

Despite significant differences in how participants approached the missional implications of Eucharistic worship, all participants did in fact make some reference to this factor to varying degrees. Participants who identified as Evangelical were perhaps more concerned with changing, rather than preserving, perceived common practices, in an effort to make the experience more welcoming for visitors and newcomers. The distinctive nature of Eucharistic worship was regarded by those more focused on the sacrament itself as a significant strength in the missional outreach of the Church.

Summary of Analysis

We may summarise the findings as follows:

1. Participants placed significant value on the presence of *other people* at Eucharistic worship, many likening the sacrament to a communal 'meal' in the manner of the Last Supper. This affirms the findings of previous studies.
2. Participants were already highly engaged in thinking about the sacrament based on their personal experience. Church praxis had high significance for participants, both positively and negatively. Integrity was important to participants, both their own and, also in accordance with previous research, that of the priest.
3. Participants expressed differing approaches to notions of 'mission' emanating from Eucharistic worship, however all participants felt that the sacrament was something unique and positive which to some degree they wanted to share more widely in their communities.

Theological Reflection on the Three Key Themes Using the Theological Action Research Model

Reflecting on the Significance of Community

The results showed that the presence of other people was a significant and positive factor for all participants at Eucharistic worship and this accords with previous research. The Methodist Conference Report of 2003 found that participants enjoyed 'the sense of fellowship with other Christians around the world and throughout history' and many

⁷² Participant F, question 8.

⁷³ Participant F, question 10.

respondents wrote of the power of Holy Communion to 'unite the people of Christ.'⁷⁴ In the study by Paulson Varkey Veliyannoor, 'entering sacred *sociality*' (my emphasis) was identified as one of four key vectors in defining the transformational experience of sacramental worship.⁷⁵

Communality has been central to the Eucharist since the institution of the sacrament by Christ in the Gospels.⁷⁶ The sense of 'togetherness' is fundamental to the rite, even when Church members show little love for one another, as depicted in 1 Corinthians 11.17–22.⁷⁷ The correlating importance of community in these studies suggests a lived experience of sanctity about the 'gathered' presence at the rite, as the Body of the Christ on earth in the Church. Since the present study focused on Church of England parish Communion, we ought to consider further the significance of people gathered *locally* and *in a particular place*. In 2019, Alan Bartlett reflected helpfully on work from 2017 by Andrew Rumsey on the theology of 'place.' Rumsey argues that 'Jesus Christ is not only the clue to history...he is also the clue to geography' which Bartlett develops in the context of incarnational theology:⁷⁸

...the implication of 'The Lord is here'⁷⁹ is that, just as Jesus was incarnate in one time and place, so each place now finds its meaning as it is reorientated to Christ who is in, and is Lord of, this place too.⁸⁰

The locally gathered Eucharistic experience mirrors the incarnational nature of the Christian faith. In the sacrament God who is transcendent may be said to be experienced as physically tangible in the consecrated elements which communicate the Body and Blood of Christ. This cosmological 'condescension' (in the best sense of the word) is illustrated in the life of the Church through the regular celebration of the sacrament just a short distance from each person's private living space. God comes to us. This is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, available close to the intimate living space of each person. Regular, local parish Communion therefore communicates the heart of the Gospel: God is not remote, but in Christ is 'Emmanuel... "God is with us."⁸¹

The primacy of communal connections is expressed in the first stage of Eucharistic worship which is termed in *Common Worship* 'The Gathering' and later in the responsorial phrase at the Fraction in the Eucharistic Prayer: 'Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.'⁸² At the national and global level this necessity of

⁷⁴ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 16.

⁷⁵ Veliyannoor, 'Transformation in "E"', iii.

⁷⁶ Matthew 26.26–29; Mark 14.22–25; Luke 22.19–20.

⁷⁷ Verse 18: '...when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you...'

⁷⁸ Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM Press, 2017), 68.

⁷⁹ From the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer.

⁸⁰ Alan Bartlett, *Vicar: Celebrating the Renewal of Parish Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2019), 57.

⁸¹ Matthew 1.23, citing Isaiah 7.14.

⁸² The Archbishop's Council, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England, Order One* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 167, 179. Words adapted from Romans 12.5 '...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.'

interconnectedness is sometimes a source of intense discomfort and pain, with doctrinal disputes at the root of deep divisions. However, it is clear that in the present sample at the local parish level, the bonds of unity between Christians participating in sacramental worship are highly valued and are considered a central purpose of the Eucharistic celebration itself. We may reflect here that humanity somehow connects with one another peacefully through Christ in this sacred moment. Peaceful unity amongst a diverse people is perhaps a good definition of the 'catholicity' which describes the 'universal' Church gathered and united in Christ. The Latin origins of the word 'catholic' are rooted in the Greek καθόλου (*katholou*), defined as 'on the whole; in general; altogether.'⁸³ This is reflected in the wholeness and unity which binds communicants in Eucharistic celebration.

This 'catholic' nature of the Christian communal life is highly reminiscent of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in particular his 1937 work *Gemeinsames Leben (Life Together)*.⁸⁴ Emerging from a Lutheran context, we should not assume that Bonhoeffer places any less importance on the Eucharistic worship experience, evidenced by an entire chapter dedicated to 'Confession and the Lord's Supper.'⁸⁵ Further, Bonhoeffer was a consistent advocate of ecumenical relations and participated in Roman Catholic worship earlier in his lifetime, notably on Palm Sunday in 1924 at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.⁸⁶ For Bonhoeffer this experience illustrated 'the universality of the church' and he 'saw the *communio sanctorum* (Communion of Saints) as a living reality before him.'⁸⁷ His chapter on Community opens with a quote from Psalm 133.1 'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!'⁸⁸ and he continues: 'It is by God's grace that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly around God's word and sacrament in this world...visible community is grace.'⁸⁹ In this exposition of communal Christian life '...the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.'⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer later cites Martin Luther's description of open Christian meetings as the 'roses and lilies' of the Christian life.⁹¹

'Community' is theologically significant for Bonhoeffer because 'First, Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; second, Christian community is a spiritual

⁸³ *The Analytical Greek Lexicon* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1968), 208.

⁸⁴ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, trans. by Isabel Best, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 1906-1945* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 182.

⁸⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Edition, Vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 108-18.

⁸⁶ Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 80-81, 36; for example, he advocated for ecumenical relations as a member of the World Alliance and as secretary of the Central Office for Ecumenical Youth Work.

⁸⁷ Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 36. Twenty years later, in a letter to friend and former student Eberhard Bethge from prison dated 23rd February 1944, Bonhoeffer advises him to attend the Maundy Thursday service at St. Peter's Basilica if his army unit remains stationed in Rome. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Edition, Vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 304.

⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 28.

⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 29.

⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

(*pneumatische*) and not a psychic (*psychische*) reality.⁹² In the context of the present research we may reflect that there is a tangible, interconnected reality experienced as humanity gathers for worship around Christ in the sacrament, alongside 'angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.'⁹³ Here the horizontal, *earthly* community is united through the sacramental crossing point with the vertical, *heavenly* community. Earthly Christian communal life (*Zusammenleben*) says Bonhoeffer, must always avoid becoming a *collegium pietatis* (school of piety), or perhaps in Church of England vernacular, a 'holy huddle,' if it is to truly engage in this sacramental meeting of the spiritual realms.⁹⁴ This notion is perhaps akin to Eastern Orthodox *Theosis* and it is interesting that Kallistos Ware, for example, quotes Jesus at the Lord's Supper on this divine-human nexus of grace: 'I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly united in one.'⁹⁵

Further, Bonhoeffer advocates the deliberate communal choice of siding with the oppressed as a central matter of faith:

The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community [*Lebensgemeinschaft*] may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door.⁹⁶

This approaches something like the 'preferential option for the poor' later highlighted in the works of Roman Catholic Liberation theologians, such as Ignacio Ellacuría, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Jon Sobrino. Deliberate identification with, and work for, the 'weak' and 'poor' in our communities should be given priority as Christians seek communion with the divine and with one another in Eucharistic worship.

The research shows that sacramental gathering is more than a two-dimensional 'meeting up,' for which a café conversation or phone call would suffice. Gathering around Christ in the sacrament, the Church meets God in and through sanctified community: 'God has taught us to encounter one another as God has encountered us in Christ. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."⁹⁷

Reflecting on Participants' Dynamic Personal Theology Emanating from Praxis

The results showed that participants were sincerely engaged in reflecting on what is happening at Eucharistic worship. Two examples are discussed here:

- 1) the role of the priest; and
- 2) the divergent theological approaches to the Eucharist.

⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 35.

⁹³ *Common Worship*, 185, the preface to Eucharistic Prayer A, Order One.

⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 35, 45.

⁹⁵ John 17.22, cited by Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 74.

⁹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 45–46.

⁹⁷ Romans 15.7, cited in Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 33–34.

In relation to the role of the priest, the Book of Common Prayer contains the *Articles of Religion*, Article 26 of which describes the 'Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament.'⁹⁸ The theological reasoning of this text is similar to that of the corresponding Roman Catholic doctrine in so far as it relies upon 'Christ's institution and promise' above the will or failings of humanity.⁹⁹ In short: it doesn't matter who the priest is, the sacrament has value and is effective in and of itself because it is of God. However, in the present study participants were in fact concerned with whether the person administering the sacrament was trustworthy or of good character. Furthermore, for the Christian minister 'trustworthiness' is a biblical requirement: 'it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy.'¹⁰⁰ Social scientific studies into trustworthy leadership have identified key components of trustworthiness as: perceived ability, benevolence, integrity, and predictability.¹⁰¹ An example of benevolence was revealed by Participant D where they described the connection they felt during the distribution of the sacrament when the priest spoke their individual name.¹⁰² This finding accords with *Eucharistic Presidency*, the 1997 theological statement by the House of Bishops of the Church of England.¹⁰³ In that discussion relating to Lay Presidency the House makes significant reference to the care with which the Church engages in discerning priestly vocations with candidates. It is noted that in the Ordinal, for example, priests are instructed to apply themselves wholly to remembering the dignity of their Orders and that through a lifelong process of vocational nourishment they must try as far as they are able to live up to this high office. The responsibilities of Eucharistic presidency are 'neither to be sought, nor to be guarded as a symbol of status.'¹⁰⁴ Rather, priests are to pursue an 'authentic tone of reverence in the presence of a holy mystery.'¹⁰⁵

The diverse theological approaches to the sacrament in the present study reflects the range of views reported in the Methodist Conference Report of 2003. That study reported, for example, that some participants believed in Christ in the sacrament as 'both priest and victim' and that the bread and wine *become* the body and blood of Christ (my emphasis), whereas others described a 'spiritual presence.'¹⁰⁶ The present research revealed a similarly wide range of views. For some, Communion was 'not a central part' of their faith¹⁰⁷ and

⁹⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer 1662* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 622.

⁹⁹ Paul Smith Jr., 'A bad priest doesn't invalidate a sacrament', a blog post on the *Catholic Exchange* website (26th November 2006) <https://catholicexchange.com/a-bad-priest-doesnt-invalidate-a-sacrament> (accessed 5 May 2020).

¹⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 4.2.

¹⁰¹ Veronica Hope-Hailey *et al*, 'Cultivating Trustworthy Leaders', University of Bath School of Management Research Report (2014), https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/cultivating-trustworthy-leaders_2014_tcm18-8971.pdf (accessed 2 June 2020).

¹⁰² Participant D, question 4.

¹⁰³ House of Bishops of the General Synod, *Eucharistic Presidency* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ House of Bishops of the General Synod, *Eucharistic Presidency*, 60.

¹⁰⁵ House of Bishops of the General Synod, *Eucharistic Presidency*, 60.

¹⁰⁶ Methodist Conference Report, 'Holy Communion', 15.

¹⁰⁷ Both Participants A and B at question 5, for example.

while it was something which they would miss if celebrated less frequently than once per month, the service of the Word was felt to be sufficient.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, for one participant in particular, the sacrament was the zenith of an experience sought four times each week: '...the pinnacle of the service...which we build up to...'¹⁰⁹ All participants rejected a formal doctrine of Transubstantiation but, like the respondents in the Methodist Church study, most accepted some 'special change' to the elements of bread and wine: '...I do it in remembrance of Jesus;¹¹⁰ '...it's the *body* that was broken and the *blood* that was shed...'¹¹¹

These active and diverse theological approaches to the sacrament also affirm the thesis of McAdoo and Stevenson that the *via media* trod during the late sixteenth, and early seventeenth, centuries by Lancelot Andrewes (and others, such as Richard Hooker for example¹¹²) remains an important safeguard for Church unity.¹¹³ Despite such significant differences in tradition and practice, none of the participants (perhaps notably all of whom were lay communicants) indicated any animosity towards someone who might theologially disagree with them. Communicants' active reflection on Eucharistic worship is to be encouraged, and a diversity of views (following praxis) is to be expected. At the outer reaches of human comprehension, both corporate and individual, we find that the Church approaches the sacrament as what Thomas Cranmer termed a 'holy mystery.'¹¹⁴ The 'mysterious' nature of the sacrament is biblically significant: the word *μυστήριον* (*mustērion*, 'that which is hidden') appears twenty-seven times in the New Testament. For example, Paul charges the Corinthian church that they should be thought of in their communities as '...servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.'¹¹⁵ Such an exhortation should encourage all communicants, and perhaps especially priests, towards humility before the sacrament. The fundamentally mysterious nature of the Eucharist offers a helpful reminder that what is sought is not perfect understanding or theoretical victory in the presence of divine infinitude, but rather salvation, belonging, and nourishment in the face of life's uncertainties and human sin.

Reflecting on the Unique Nature of Sacramental Worship and the Mission of the Church

As noted above, one of the four key vectors of 'transformation' in sacramental worship identified by Veliyannoor was 'covenantal commitment to serving others.'¹¹⁶ This was similarly the case in the present study as participants reflected on their missional role in

¹⁰⁸ Participant A, question 5.

¹⁰⁹ Participant E, question 3.

¹¹⁰ Participant B, question 4.

¹¹¹ Participant D, question 5, my emphases.

¹¹² Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1907, originally published 1594).

¹¹³ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, 169.

¹¹⁴ The Exhortation, part of The Communion service in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 250.

¹¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4.1.

¹¹⁶ Veliyannoor, "Transformation in "E", iii.

bringing people to church services, encouraging spiritual exploration with the Church, and service to others as missional activity.¹¹⁷

To what extent then is the sacrament, and the experience of Eucharistic worship, supposed to be 'missional'? Sara Miles certainly found Christ in the consecrated host at her first service for many years where she chose to receive Communion: 'It changed everything...Eating Jesus...that shocking moment of communion.'¹¹⁸ The cognitive research by Barrett and Lawson found in part that 'even people with no special knowledge of a religious system would have converging intuitions about whether or not a given ritual is likely to be effective.'¹¹⁹ Repeated attendance and practice as a way of learning about the sacrament might also be effective. By way of brief autoethnographic reflection, the author can add that the regular experience of Communion without a necessarily very strong faith can be an experiential way to grow in gradual understanding and deepen a relationship with God. As sensory, tactile, and kinetic beings then, perhaps simply 'being and doing' are effective ways of beginning to enter into the divine mystery.

For Stephen Cottrell, the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper are like an 'acted parable' which 'speak of God's reign and his love.' Christians are drawn not to a body of teaching or theoretical principles, but to 'a teacher who embodies all that he proclaims.' Cottrell's approach to church praxis correlates strongly with the present findings: 'The only way to understand the eucharist is to celebrate it.'¹²⁰ This view affirms the relational and praxis-based approach to the sacrament described by the participants. Although responses vary in emphases, all participants indicated that the Eucharist encouraged them to share the love of Christ with others in appropriate ways. For Cottrell, the Eucharist is both 'parable and encounter' into which humanity is invited to participate:

...we, the people of God, tell the story of God's love using our own insights, experiences, and gifts; and as we do so we meet Jesus, present in our midst, inviting us to his table.¹²¹

There is then something missional in the ritual manner of Eucharistic worship: affirming the regularly communicant in their faith while spiritually nourishing them for the journey out into the world to 'love and serve the Lord' in both word and action.¹²²

In relation to the rite itself, we must consider the participants' varying responses in the light of the intense cognitive processes which the newcomer may experience. Participant B, for example, saw the 'strangeness' of ritual as a barrier to mission:

¹¹⁷ Participant A, question 8; Participant B, question 10; Participant F, question 8.

¹¹⁸ Miles, *Take This Bread*, xi.

¹¹⁹ Barrett and Lawson, *Religion and Cognition*, 13.

¹²⁰ Stephen Cottrell quoted in Pete Ward (ed.), *Mass Culture: Eucharist and Mission in a Post-modern World* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999), 73.

¹²¹ Ward, *Mass Culture*, 72–73.

¹²² A recurrent theme for some participants, for example Participant B, question 8, where the phrase was referred to on two occasions.

...we are not encouraging informal atmospheres for people to just come and be themselves. I think we have...[put] this structure up that means you've to be to one of us...people feel inadequate...the Church needs to be more flexible...without that rigid structure and language.¹²³

Yet for others the unique character of the rite is positive: 'singling it out...using language that sounds different...draws a line under it and says "this is special."¹²⁴ It is worth noting here that there is perhaps a tension between the working assumptions in the national Church and the responses of these participants in the present study. It may be said by some that the Eucharist is 'inward looking' and perhaps to newcomers at worst 'incomprehensible.' But whilst some participants expressed concerns along these lines, the unique nature of the rite does not appear to be a barrier to mission. Rather the evidence points to a 'special' and beautiful aspect which is not found elsewhere, perhaps a beauty and order which may be severely lacking in school, the workplace, and in family experiences for many people.

Approaches to missional outreach flowing from sacramental worship were varied amongst the participant responses. However, as in the theology of Stephen Cottrell above, a priority for the Church must be that newcomers are in every way encouraged to feel welcomed into Christ's presence at the Lord's table. Since Jesus is not like other people, and his 'kingdom is not from this world,' it is perhaps no bad thing that sacramental worship is unlike any other gathered experience.¹²⁵ The Church must offer this unique experience in conjunction with a sincerely open and welcoming love for all Christ's children, who might be anywhere along the journey of faith as they cross the threshold of their local church door.

Conclusions and Implications for Action

Reflecting through the theology of Bonhoeffer, it is clear that the Church has a responsibility to build communities through accessible Eucharistic worship, not neglecting anyone or permitting any culture of exclusion, by act or omission. The *open* church may be considered that which is authentically accessible to all. The Church of England should therefore move away from serving a perceived *majority* to prioritising and actively seeking out the *lost sheep* in communities.¹²⁶ This means not only those who have left, but also those who are interested and keen to explore, but perhaps put off by the institutional and historical failings of the Church. Direct personal connection with individuals and offering worship to which communicants would be pleased to invite those who trust them, are good starting points. Authentic and life-affirming pastoral care, including home Communion, may not be considered radical or exciting but they tangibly connect the ritual of the gathered

¹²³ Participant B, question 10.

¹²⁴ Participant D, question 9.

¹²⁵ John 18.36.

¹²⁶ Matthew 18.12–14; Luke 15.3–7.

community to the perpetual offering of healing and hope received freely in the presence of God's self-sacrificial love.

Local parish communities gathered around the beating heart of the sacrament are uniquely placed to point towards the mystery of divine love as the foundation for being. Therefore, offering regular Eucharistic services to mark Saints Days, commemorations, and indeed on a daily basis (as a regular and dependable *daily bread*) is one way to encourage continual reflection on the centrality of Christ in the human experience. Funding for adaptations to church to better include those with various disabilities should be introduced without hesitation: full wheelchair access, and provision for the hearing and visually impaired, for example. It would be a testimony to the high importance placed on notions of hospitality and sincere welcome if such missional funding were to come from the national Church. True diversity is a mark of the gathered community in Christ, not only in the sense of culture and ethnicity as we are commanded (Galatians 3.28) but also embracing neurodiversity for example, aided so often by the tactile and unspoken moments of the sacramental rites.

The praxis of church is distinctive and must always embody the great welcome at the heart of the Gospel. We have seen that psychologically for congregations this means developing trustworthiness over time, particularly in the priest as president at the rite. Fundamentally this will mean deploying priests in every parish who are enabled through the wider Church structures to spend time 'on the ground' with the people of the parish in the actual lived reality of their personal circumstances. The lack of trust which is fostered by their absence will erode the place of the Church and thereby Christ in the experience of the wider community, a (spiritually and eternally) fatal choice which cannot be permitted in an age of such great spiritual starvation. There is undoubtedly the question of how this physical presence of the priest in every parish can be maintained and a roadmap for this solution is outside the scope of the present article. However, as studies such as that by Veronica Hope-Hailey *et al.* into institutional trust have shown, physical presence and direct relationship-building amongst communities is key to long-term goodwill and foundational to trust. Personal acquaintance with an accessible parish priest who is willing and able to respond to sincere questions and to regularly celebrate the sacraments in 'my local church' is a huge step in growing trust that the Gospel, and all that God communicates therein, might also be 'for me'.

The qualitative data for the present study was gathered before the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is worth reflecting on the effects of online church in the context of Church praxis as it has evolved. Not everyone has come back to church. Some have remained cautiously at home, or joined another church online, whereas others have simply ceased congregational worship altogether. But for those for whom the sacrament is highly significant, returning to this physical presence of the Body and Blood, and to one another, has been a joyous relief. It is interesting that the Tyburn Convent live streamed the consecrated host on YouTube to enable perpetual Adoration of the sacrament well before

the pandemic and the more widespread use of live streaming technology. This was offered in addition to, not instead of, communal Eucharistic worship. As the world emerges from the pandemic this dual approach is perhaps to be embraced, but not at the expense of church attendance, to which the Body of Christ in the people of the Church remains called. Ultimately this is about being a gathered community, getting up and going to something as an indicator of its significance in our lives. It is also about seeking and finding nourishment in a literal time and place.

In addition, the *via media* (*middle way*) traditions of the Church of England illustrate a diversity in church praxis which has the potential for great strength. Churches might therefore look to their local ecumenical colleagues for stronger partnerships and the sharing of resources, alongside open discussions about beliefs and histories. Worshipping communities, particularly newcomers, may quite reasonably expect confident and questioning teaching on such central matters as the sacraments. Ministers should therefore aim to have the very highest standards in personal education and praxis in relation to the Eucharist. The specific traditions of a local parish church will continue to vary, but the concern of the Church should be integrity, authenticity, and diligent worship in a manner which is the very best the Church can offer to God, who has already given all to the Church.

The Church has a particular responsibility to communicate how sanctification in Christ, celebrated in the Eucharist, is woven into each Christian's family, work, social, and political life, well beyond the walls of the church building. This might include things like preaching and teaching about public service amongst the wider community, as congregations are sent out from the Eucharist 'to love and serve the Lord.' However, we must take account of Stephen Cottrell's significant argument that the best way to understand the sacrament is simply to celebrate it. Regular, frequent offering of the sacramental rite weaves the great gift of the Eucharist into the heart of daily living. This constant offering, always available in every community, is the best missional gift humanity has been given to communicate the love of the incarnate Christ to all. It represents victory over sin, and in the face of death and decays of many kinds (internal, cultural, psychological, bodily, and communal) the holy sacrament of the Eucharist offers resurrection, nourishment, and a steadfast reminder of the Christian inheritance of eternal life. As the Church's heart is mended and the oppressed are set free in Christ there can be no better illustration of the life, passion, death, and resurrection which transforms the world than the rite which Jesus himself has given us. It is time now to reassert this truth and to be unashamedly boastful (in Christ alone!¹²⁷) of the tremendous and beautiful Mystery which has been prepared for all at the Lord's table.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Galatians 6.14.

¹²⁸ This article is founded on research carried out in preparation for a thesis for a Master's Degree in Theology, Ministry, and Mission which was supervised by the Revd Canon Dr Joanna Collicutt, to whom I owe enormous thanks for her guidance, academic nurturing, and graciousness in that process. I am thankful to the editors of this journal for the opportunity to share this work and for their encouragement in bringing it to fruition. I am most thankful to my wife Mariama for her steadfast encouragement and loving support.