

*The Reserved Sacrament –
some observations on its administration
in lay-led worship*

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1. Introduction

Ecclesial history surrounding the Reserved Sacrament is almost as old as Christendom. Theologian, liturgist and Anglican, Benedictine monk, Dom Gregory Dix (1901–52), made it clear in his *magnum opus* that the principal reason for reservation was to symbolise the liturgical presidency of a bishop within his church.¹ As the church grew larger, and its bishops were perforce required to warrant their presbyters with authority to consecrate the sacramental species, deacons carried portions of the Eucharistic bread (the *fermentum*) from the bishop's celebration to be included with those of the presbyters. This action was undertaken to identify that they were in communion with their bishop and to demonstrate that the bishop remained the high priest of the community and its principal, liturgical minister, whether he was present at a celebration or not. This use was attested in about AD120, at least thirty years before a practice was introduced in which consecrated bread was taken home by worshippers. Dix wrote that it was a common practice in the pre-Nicene church for the communicating faithful to take portions of the consecrated bread home with them so that they could make their communions on mornings when the liturgy was not celebrated. By the third century, deacons carried the sacrament to those who could not get to the Sunday service; this activity was later assumed by acolytes or assistants.² Dix described the basic use of the reserved sacrament as being essential for the daily communion of the faithful; it was not necessarily used for the communion of the sick.

2. Developments

At the time of the Protestant Reformation several completely different and contrasting understandings of the Eucharist coexisted. From Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's First English Prayer Book of 1549 through to the Proposed Revised Book of Common Prayer of 1928 rubrics that are meant to determine actions and activities associated with the service order have had significant changes down the centuries. The Reformation Church held the view that the 'consecrated' bread and wine were merely vehicles whereby communicating Christians could receive the grace of God, through individual faith (*sola fide*). By the early years of the nineteenth centuries liturgical and doctrinal developments, promoted particularly by the leaders of the Oxford Movement, saw the Blessed Sacrament as a focus for prayerful adoration and worship. Thus there have been views that any consecrated bread and wine left over at the end of a service should be taken by the priest for his domestic use through to them being retained in a

¹ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (London: Dacre Press, 1945), 134.

² *Ibid*, 285.

sacred space, be it tabernacle or aumbry. Only in recent years has the Reserved Sacrament been used for administration during lay led Eucharistic services.

3. Today's church

Our church today is seriously different in structure and management from that in Dix's world (first half of the twentieth century). Much has been written about the increased costs of maintaining stipendiary clergy in post and the concomitant result of more and more parishes sharing fewer and fewer resources. The current economic climate has only exacerbated these problems and there seems little likelihood of improvements in the foreseeable future. Church life has also been disrupted by the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our places of worship, especially those in remote locations, or with small congregations, have often been left in the hands of retired clergy, where these exist, or are the responsibility of lay readers and leaders. While these latter can and do provide a regular framework of worship there is often difficulty with the provision of sacramental services. Some of these lay leaders have been given authority by their bishops to conduct Eucharistic services, administering consecrated elements reserved for that purpose. However, there is much disquiet about this practice, not least within the Bench of Bishops.

John Mantle (1945-2010), Bishop of Brechin in the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC), instigated a debate on this complex subject, initially in the pages of SEC's *inspires* magazine.³ In general terms he criticised the practice of lay-led Eucharistic worship, not least because of some abuses that he had observed. However, an informal lunchtime meeting, chaired by Bishop John, during the 2009 SEC General Synod in Edinburgh was so well attended that there was standing room only. Despite many points of view being raised, no conclusions were reached. Yet, it proved to be an important issue, certainly in the minds of those who attended, demanding weighty considerations in another forum.

4. The problems

The most serious concern is raised by those who believe that the Blessed Sacrament can only be properly administered during a celebration of the Holy Eucharist celebrated by an episcopally ordained priest. This is, of course, a very valid argument and, given the necessary means (both financial and human), is the obvious solution. However, as we have seen, these resources are often scarce and not always available. Should we expect our remote and clerically impoverished congregations to rely on a diet of Services of the Word until a priest can be found for them? We are a sacramental Church in which, by and large, celebrations of Holy Communion are the most common, most popular, most well attended and most expected services. To propose their abandonment, however well-intentioned or necessitated, will not satisfy our members' craving for 'the bread of life'. Indeed, such a practice would drive many into the arms of Presbyterian churches which, essentially, offer just that style of worship.

³ Mantle, J, 'Is it a fuss about nothing?', Scottish Episcopal Church, *inspires*, April, 2009, 6f.

Given that some Lay Leaders are trained and given episcopal sanction to conduct Eucharistic services there are still many questions to answer, problems to solve and difficulties to overcome. Many of these revolve around where the elements are consecrated, and when. Can the Reserved Sacrament be taken from one place, perhaps the Cathedral, for use in a remote church? Should such a procedure only apply to Episcopally consecrated elements, in, perhaps, a modern-day equivalent to the early Church's use of the *fermentum*? Can it be reserved in one church and taken to another, perhaps equally remote, location for a Eucharistic service there? Alternatively, if, as some suggest, the sacrament can only be reserved in the place where the consecration takes place, how is this to be accomplished, bearing in mind the difficulty of getting a priest in the first place. How should the Sacrament be conveyed? Then there is the question of how long the sacrament may be reserved in one place. In some remote locations this may be weeks or months - but some of our clergy, especially those who are unsure about the need for this practice, say that the limits are, quite arbitrarily, two weeks, or three weeks, or a month.

There is a serious question of what constitutes Eucharistic worship. Some have argued that 'Eucharist' is a translation of the Greek word for 'thanksgiving' and it is only through the presence of the priest at the celebration that the people may properly give thanks to God for the ultimate sacrifice made by Christ at Calvary. Are there other valid opinions?

5. Some solutions

A serious debate needs to take place in our Church to air all points of view on this complex issue. Our bishops and clergy, who may feel threatened by these changes, need to appreciate the differing understandings of what constitutes reception of the sacrament. It seems to me that most of our congregational members understand reception of the sacrament to be just that - they receive the sacrament from whosoever offers it to them. The worshipper in the pew does not seem to mind, or care about, how the sacrament that they receive came to be consecrated, where this action took place, or when, although I think it is important to make this clear at the commencement of a lay-led service.⁴ I have conducted Eucharistic worship for many years now and have had bishops, priests and deacons in my congregations, as well as numerous lay folk. I have never known anyone refuse to receive the Reserved Sacrament at any of the services that I have conducted.

I firmly believe that earthly time scales are unimportant in the things of God. Consecration is a one-off event. Things that are consecrated include churches, chapels, altars, chalices and patens, graveyards and the Blessed Sacrament. There is never a requirement to re-visit this consecration - it is for all time. So it is with the elements of bread and wine. God imposes no time limit on the things he uses in his service. Time constraints are entirely illogical and have no meaning, other than, perhaps, to comply with basic food hygiene standards or to satisfy the irrational qualms of some of the detractors. The question about 'thanksgiving' is best answered by suggesting

⁴ In lay-led Eucharistic services that I conducted I always concluded the Intercessions with the words: 'We thank God for those who celebrated and attended the Holy Eucharist where these elements of bread and wine were consecrated and with whom we are in communion in this service'.

that there is no occasion when a congregation together with its leader cannot give thanks to God for his mercy and providence.

6. Conclusions

Had he lived longer, I am sure Bishop John Mantle would have welcomed a serious debate on this necessary development of Eucharistic practice, a change that is slowly being recognised as vital to the future of the church. He had observed lay led Eucharistic services in France many years ago and initially thought them a good thing; a transformation that was deemed necessary for the needs of the times. For some reason he changed his mind, perhaps under pressure from conservative members of the clergy. I have no doubts that the church will have to modify its thinking on this important matter. Congregational members will demand their sacramental rights - they have been led to believe that they belong to a church that cherishes its sacraments, they are Anglicans not Presbyterians. Already I have witnessed, and taken part in, lay led Eucharistic worship in remote and rural dioceses of the Church of England. The Roman Catholic Church now allows some of its lay Eucharistic Ministers to offer Reserved Sacrament services. We have experienced it on our Scottish island for many years, with great success and total acceptance by our local congregation and our many visitors.

Please may the Church at large have that serious debate so that the clergy and the laity may understand the lay-led, Eucharistic services that a few bishops are sanctioning, indeed, in some places, encouraging? It must be made clear that LLMs are not undermining the office and work of our priests; they are desperately needed to allow sacramental services to continue. There are no plans to emulate the Australian Diocese of Sydney and introduce lay presidency of the Eucharist. Lay people have an increasingly important part to play in the sacramental life of our church. We need the approval and encouragement of Diocesan Synods and the Colleges of Bishops. The pressure for change grows. Please may we see lay-led Eucharistic worship put on agendas for discussion - soon!!

Biographical note:

Dr David Fuller is a Licenced Lay Reader in the Scottish Episcopal Church, Diocese of Argyll and The Isles. Between 2001 and 2011 he conducted over 150 lay-led Eucharistic services and gave Communion to over 3000 worshippers at his Church of St Columba, at Gruline on the Isle of Mull. Holiday makers in his congregations have included, *inter alia*, an English diocesan Bishop, a Dean emeritus and, on one occasion, the Primus (Archbishop) of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

A useful resource:

Based on his experiences of leading Eucharistic worship he has written a book which explains both the theoretical concerns and the practical considerations associated with it. The volume has received recognition and approval by four consecutive Bishops of Argyll and The Isles and is available from:

Publisher – Lulu Publishing Inc – www.lulu.com
Title – The Lay-led Eucharist: A Practical Handbook
ISBN – 9780244832704
Pages – 102
Price – £11.50