

## **Individual Cups in the Anglican Eucharist Following Covid-19**

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The Covid-19 pandemic has thrust many changes upon us, requiring congregations to figure out new ways of doing things. One of these has been how to serve the eucharist. Across parts of the Anglican world, decisions have been taken to receive only the bread at communion, as a temporary measure. More recently the question has arisen as to how Anglican congregations should receive the wine post-Covid—for some, concern about transmission of viral infection raises the question of whether to resume receiving the wine by the common cup. At our congregation we have taken a survey of our members, and they are overwhelmingly not wanting to go back to the common cup—a very large majority of our members want to use individual cups, as is the practice of many denominations, including our United and Presbyterian sisters and brothers in Christ.

Liturgical theologian Hilary Bogert-Winkler notes that the use of individual cups for communion originated in late 19<sup>th</sup> century North America, from “the desire to prevent disease transmission.”<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, the same reason the topic has arisen in our time. This paper will describe three arguments for why individual cups should not be provided as an option in Anglican worship. Then I will make a number of arguments for why individual cups should be considered a valid option for those Anglican congregations which desire this method of eucharistic distribution.

### **The Segregationist Argument**

The first argument we can call the segregationist argument. Bogert-Winkler points out that individual cups, though initially motivated by public health concerns, quickly came to be used by some predominantly white congregations to reinforce segregation in churches, by wealthier whites not having to share the common cup with those who were “unclean—primarily Blacks, immigrants, Indigenous people, the poor, and other social outcasts.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore churches today should avoid a eucharistic practice that is associated with this history of abuse.

This is clearly an important argument; I would suggest, however, that this serves as an important caution, but not necessarily a prohibition. Humans have a tremendous capacity to turn any good to harmful use; yet just because a good thing gets abused does not necessarily mean eliminating the good thing—first, the possibility of reform needs to be considered. For a simple example, my belt serves a good purpose, to hold up my pants. As we all know, however, belts can also be used for abuse, such as strapping a child. Nonetheless, we don’t get rid of belts because of the risk of abuse; rather, we develop self-control, legislation, and cultural values to inhibit potential abuse. We can see the same principle elsewhere: church buildings have been used for abusive purposes, as have church choirs, even the priesthood and episcopacy at times.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, we have not removed these from Anglican life; rather, we reform their use appropriately.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev Dr Hilary Bogert-Winkler, “Individual Communion Cups, Community, and Covid-19” (an unpublished paper commissioned by the Anglican Diocese of Quebec, dated 30 June 2020). Dr Bogert-Winkler is former Director of Pastoral Studies at Montreal Diocesan Theological College, and current Assistant Professor of Liturgy at the School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee.

<sup>2</sup> Bogert-Winkler, “Individual Communion Cups, Community, and Covid-19,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> In the last of these examples, a particularly egregious example is the support, even promotion, of slavery, including branding of slaves, by Church of England bishops and theologians, including an Archbishop of Canterbury. See Adam

Another example is particularly apt. At the time of the segregationist use of individual cups, Anglican churches throughout North America and England were using variations of the pew-holder system, whereby pews were either purchased or leased for Sunday worship. The wealthy paid the most for the front pews, the poor were at the rear with free pews (if such were provided in a particular church), and between them pews were priced at varying levels. This was a blatantly segregationist practice, publicly ranking parishioners at Sunday worship by their wealth. (This practice only died out after the Second World War). No one, however, is suggesting we get rid of pews because of this former segregationist practice—instead we have reformed how we use pews by eliminating pew fees. (Some churches today are removing their pews, but for other reasons.) As with pew fees and so many other practices that have been abused in the past, so likewise with individual cups—past abuses are reason for reform and ensuring appropriate use, not necessarily reason for prohibition.

Moreover, few if any of our members are even aware of the segregationist history associated with individual cups. Indeed, I was unaware of this prior to reading Bogert-Winkler's article, and I believe myself to be far more knowledgeable about church history than my parishioners. Furthermore, in the case of our parish, we are a multicultural and racially diverse congregation, and the request for individual cups crosses ethnicities. Our members are simply aware that many churches use individual cups (or they themselves have previously belonged to congregations which use them), and so they see individual cups as a pragmatic option in the face of a significant public health concern.

Furthermore, in our Canadian Anglican context, given our socially egalitarian and socially progressive denominational culture, I find it a very low risk that the use of individual cups would either be motivated by segregationist interests or implicitly condoning of segregationist values. It is certainly worthwhile for Bogert-Winkler to draw our attention to this history, for it alerts Incumbents and parish leaders to be aware of the history of abuse, and so to be alert to any such potential in one's own congregation. Yet in our diocesan and parish context I believe the risk of segregationist motives and associations to be very low, and thus not sufficient reason to avoid individual cups.

### **The Individualism Argument**

Bogert-Winkler's second argument we could call the individualism argument. She states: "The theological problem with individual cups lies in their very individuality....We drink from a common cup as a strong symbol of unity and our willingness to accept each other. We share our love and lives as we share the cup... Replacing the common cup with individual cups risks losing this incarnational reminder of our shared baptism vocation and our commitment to one another....[Individual cups] privileges the individual over the community."

I share this concern. The hyper-individualism of Western culture today concerns me greatly—indeed, I am currently involved in a writing project motivated precisely by this problem. So, I take this objection as particularly pertinent. Nonetheless, again I see this as reason for caution, not prohibition.

I will consider this through the psychology of symbolism. Symbols may be located on a spectrum of centrality. For instance, both the cross and the ichthys (fish) are symbols of Christian identity, but the cross is far more central than the ichthys as a symbol of Christian identity. Other central or essential symbols of Christian identity are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Other helpful but less central or non-essential Christian symbols are candles (the light of Christ), the descending dove (the Holy Spirit), ascending flames (also the Holy Spirit), seasonal liturgical colours, and other such elements of Christian or Anglican ritual and symbolic life.

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Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 68-69.

Such elements have symbolic meaning because we create meaning for them, we attach meaning to an object or practice. We attach meaning (and degree of centrality) to baptism and the Lord's Supper because scripture instructs us to. We attach meaning (and centrality) to the cross as a symbol not because scripture tells us to but because of widely held convention (or tradition) among Christians since the time of the Early Church. We attach meaning to candles (as representing the light of Christ) because Christians have long found it spiritually helpful to create and attach meaning to objects used in worship, even if just practical objects like candles. (Candles originated in Early Church worship simply to give light to church gatherings before sunrise or after sunset, but symbolic meaning was quickly given to them.) Likewise with seasonal colours—we create meaning for the colours because we find it spiritually helpful to attach such meaning. In many cases we choose to accept existing (traditional) meanings for ourselves. Any symbol can, however, be given different meanings. For instance, non-Christians or former Christians may attach very different meanings to any of these examples (perhaps due to some disappointing or painful experience they associate with a particular symbol).

When it comes to attaching a meaning of *unity* or *belonging together* to something, it is because we have chosen to do so. In other words, if symbols of unity and belonging are important (which they are), then we can create symbols of unity and belonging. Which brings us to the common cup. Drinking from shared cups is indeed a lovely symbol of unity, but it is a created symbol with meaning created and accepted by us. This is illustrated by the use of multiple cups of wine at communion when numbers warrant. Once a community uses two or more cups to serve wine at a communion service, there is no longer a single common cup. So, do we suddenly see the community as a divided community, into two or three factions, because two or three cups are being used? Of course not. Instead, we choose to invest the two (or more) cups with a meaning of unity anyway, because we create the meaning ourselves. We may even seek to overcome the "division" of using two (or more) cups by creating another means to symbolize unity, such as by saying that the wine in the different cups came from the same flagon.<sup>4</sup> We create meanings and attach those meanings to objects or practices as we choose. Likewise, we can do this with whatever means of giving the wine we employ, whether a common cup or individual cups.

So, if a congregation chooses concern for public hygiene over the symbol of unity associated with the common cup, they can create eucharistic symbols of unity and belonging together in other ways. For instance, individual cups are served from a circular tray; the tray can be invested with symbolic meaning of unity and belonging. Indeed, the visual effect of the individual cups held together in the tray is a remarkably apt image or symbol of individuals gathered together in unity in the physical space of the church. At the same time, other actions and symbols of unity can be identified. The act of collectively saying certain parts of the liturgy is itself a symbol of unity. Receiving the elements (bread and wine) at the communion rail is itself a sign of eucharistic unity (and we don't consider the congregation disunified if the bread and wine need to be taken to someone in their pew because they have mobility challenges). The very act of a community sharing in the eucharist together is the most significant symbol of eucharistic unity over individualism, regardless of how the wine is given.

In effect, while the common cup is a helpful symbol of such communal (counter-individualist) qualities as unity, belonging, equality, and mutual commitment, the common cup is not an essential symbol of these, for other symbols can be readily created and invested with such meaning.

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<sup>4</sup> One colleague has commented by email to me, "One way unity could be symbolised when using individual cups would be to ask people not to drink the wine as soon as they receive their cup, but to wait until all have been served, and then, with the appropriate accompanying language, all drink at the same time." With regard to the bread during the pandemic he comments, "When I have served each congregant with their wafer, I have asked them not to eat it straight away, but to wait until everyone has received and then again, as an act of unity, to eat together with appropriate accompanying language." (The Rev Nick Brotherhood, 5 April, 2022.) This illustrates our ability to develop acts and signs of eucharistic unity beyond just the common cup.

Most important of all, however, is that the people of any congregation are *actually* unified in their relationships and mission. Many a congregation has shared the common cup as a symbol of their spiritual unity in Christ while at the same time being in relational disunity, even conflict, with one another. This issue, of ensuring that unity, belonging, and mutual commitment are the actual reality of the community, exists for whatever symbols of unity we may use or create. So likewise with the problem of individualism: much more important than communal symbols as an antidote to individualism are the actual lived communal practices that embody alternative values to individualism. In short, churches need to be alert to the risk of being more concerned with the symbolism than with the substance to which the symbols refer.

### **The unAnglican Argument**

The third argument we can call the unAnglican argument. Bogert-Winkler does not make this argument, I imagine because she knows Anglican history too well. Nonetheless, this is an argument that Anglicans often make in the face of any sort of change they don't like—that the particular change “is not Anglican.” In this case, that using individual cups is not Anglican.

This is, however, the weakest of the three arguments. The problem with this argument is its premise—that Anglicanism doesn't change. In fact, however, there have been many, many changes in worship and theology over the course of Anglican history (almost 500 years!)—changes which at the time were considered “unAnglican” but are now mainstream Anglican. The list is long, but here I will give just a few examples. Hymns and organs were not introduced into Anglican worship until the mid to late 1600s; prior to that, the only singing in Anglican worship were Psalms sung acapella, led by a cantor, and there was widespread objection to the introduction of organs and hymn singing at the time. During the first hundred years or so of Anglican history, the people only took communion a few times per year, even once per year; then Anglicanism went through a long period of communion once per month; whereas today in many parts of the Anglican world communion is now every Sunday. For most of Anglican history Anglicans didn't use seasonal colours—seasonal colors were introduced in the 1800s. Likewise with individual wafers for the eucharistic bread, which today are almost universally used in Anglican communion—though prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican communion used real bread, not wafers. Women were not ordained in the Anglican church until just 70 years ago. Blessing of same sex unions, then marriages, is less than a decade old. Public worship in Church of England congregations is often confined to an hour in length at very most, whereas for African Anglicans public worship can extend several hours. For centuries, divorce was an impediment to ordination in many parts of the Anglican world, whereas today it is not. The list of “unAnglican” changes that today are commonplace within Anglicanism could go on. How things have changed over time! So, if we begin to offer individual cups along with the shared cup, it will certainly be a change, but change in response to circumstances is a long-standing part of Anglican practice.

### **Permitting Individual Cups**

As already noted, prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Anglicans used loaves of bread for communion, not wafers. (Wafers, liturgical colours, and weekly communion were some of the changes introduced by the Tractarian movement of the 1800s.) Indeed, the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* rubrics state: “And to take away all occasion of dissension, and superstition, which any person hath or might have concerning the bread and wine, it shall suffice that the bread be such as is usual to be eaten [i.e., loaves as eaten in one's home].” Likewise in the Early Church, as St Paul writes: “We who are many are one body, because we all partake of the single loaf (*tou henos arton*)” (1 Cor. 10:17). It is, then, inconsistent to argue that using individual cups undermines the unity-symbolism of the common cup without also arguing that the use of wafers undermines the unity-symbolism of a single loaf of bread.<sup>5</sup> Yet I know

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<sup>5</sup> This paragraph is abridged from Ian Paul, “Receiving Communion in individual cups: round two,” *Psephizo* blog

of no one who opposes individual cups who also opposes wafers. In other words, if wafers are permissible in Anglican eucharist, so too individual cups should be equally permissible.

There is also an important missional argument here. There are many reasons that Anglican Churches in the Western world are in decline, but I would argue that one reason is an excessive value on, even pride in, uniformity of practices across contexts. For this value has undermined another value for which Anglicans should be concerned, namely encouraging innovation and variation for effective local mission, as discerned by parish leadership in response to their local context. In other words, the proclivity in Anglican culture for a high degree of liturgical conformity across contexts undermines contextual flexibility for local mission as an important liturgical value. If one congregation judges that the common cup is most pastorally and missionally effective for their context, and another congregation judges that individual cups are most pastorally and missionally effective for their context, then Anglican theology, if it is concerned for missional effectiveness, needs to give space for such liturgical variation and local judgements.

Paul's teaching in Romans 14 provides a complementary perspective on this. Here Paul discusses various controversies among Christians. Examples he gives are eating meat versus not eating meat, holding one day holy or another day holy, and drinking wine or not drinking wine. Then he says, "He who regards this day or that day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord; and he who abstains from meat, does so to the Lord." This Pauline patience with diversity of practices is not a virtue Anglicans have mastered. Moreover, as Paul later points out in another epistle (1 Cor. 12, where he teaches about the importance of different parts of the body), the unity of the body is actually served by its diversity! Giving space for variation in how the wine is served at the eucharist is a good opportunity to put these Pauline teachings into practice.

A final point concerns the Last Supper itself. At Passover meals there is no common cup. Even if the four-cup Seder was the practice at the time of Jesus (which is historically unclear), the four cups of a Seder are not single cups shared by everyone in turn; rather, each participant uses their own cup for the four-cup ritual. So, whether the Last Supper took the four-cup form or not, we have no reason to think that some sort of common cup was used. In effect, using individual cups today has the further merit of being more representative of the Last Supper itself.

Let us now return to the motivating concern behind this whole issue. Many parishioners and some clergy have an intuitive wariness about sharing a common cup in a post-pandemic world—they see this as a public health issue, as well as an issue for their own health. It is worth noting a recent study in which the authors reviewed a number of studies of potential bacterial transmission by saliva in using a shared communion cup. In the case of bacterial transmission, "the common communion cup may theoretically serve as a vehicle of transmitting infection, but the potential risk of transmission is very small." In the case of viral (as opposed to bacterial) infection, however, they state, "It should be noted that all authors [of previous studies] have focused their investigations on bacterial isolation from the chalice or the sacramental wine, and none has investigated the viability and transmissibility of viral agents via the common communion cup....The need for well designed, large-scale, cohort studies targeting

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July 27, 2020: <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/receiving-communion-in-individual-cups-round-two>. An issue that has also been raised by some concerns ritual purification of the individual cups. Here I would also note the following comment in the same article: "In some Anglican parishes, every chalice is ritually cleansed during the service, with rinsing, and wiping, and more drinking, to ensure that every drop of wine is removed. Some priests may therefore quail at the prospect of purifying a table-full of cups. But these purity rituals are not universal Anglican practice. The *Book of Common Prayer* only directs that surplus consecrated bread or wine must be 'reverently' consumed after the service has finished. Any wine in an individual cup touched by a communicant will already have been reverently consumed by that communicant."

viral transmission is apparent.”<sup>6</sup> In effect, the intuitive wariness of parishioners to receive the wine via the common cup is completely reasonable.

Throughout Anglican history, change has often come in response to circumstances. The reasonable desire of eucharistic participants to receive the wine in a manner which relieves them of concern for their health and the health of others, so they can fully attend to the moment of reception, needs to be respected and honoured. The loss of the shared cup as the sole means of distributing the wine does not mean the loss of an essential Christian symbol of unity, nor the loss of relationships which are actually unified. The creation of liturgical meaning has always involved theological imagination, and with a bit of theological imagination the symbolic meaning of congregational unity attached to the common cup can be equally attached to the use of individual cups. Giving space for such diversity of liturgical practice should not be viewed with concern, as is often the case in Anglicanism, but rather seen as a strength. This would conform well with Paul’s call on the Roman Christians to give respectful space for the different practices of others in the community, and with Paul’s call on the Corinthian Christians to recognise diversity as an actual strength of the Church. In short, there is a range of good historical and theological reasons for Anglican congregations to be given freedom to use individual cups at the eucharist if they assess this practice to be pastorally or missionally efficacious in their context.

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<sup>6</sup> Spantideas, N., Drosou, E., Barsoum, M., & Bougea, A. (2020). “COVID-19 and Holy Communion.” *Public Health*, 187, 134–135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.08.012>