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# Toward a reinterpretation of sacramental theology in the context of pandemics: The case of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe

## ABSTRACT

*The advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent closing of religious institutions through lockdowns created a pandemonium that saw churches not being able to meet physically for worship. COVID-19 lockdowns diluted the traditional meaning of sacramental theology for mainline churches. The effects of the pandemic were so bad that churches in Zimbabwe were closed towards Lent season in 2020. Mainline churches that used to shun the technologisation of religion were forced to embrace technology, in order to be relevant. Unfortunately, sacraments that demanded face-to-face administration remained a theological dilemma. Using the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe as a case study, the aim of this article is to challenge the church's traditional sacramental theology and propose a theological treatise that has relevance in the context of pandemics such as COVID-19. The article proposes a reinterpretation of sacramental theology that makes the rite sacred to the lives of the parishioners, even during pandemics.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, the church once again faced a challenge of pandemics more related to other epidemics in the history of humanity. Scheidel (2017:291) articulates the impact of pandemics on humanity well, arguing that

[i]n a long succession throughout history, pandemic outbreaks have decimated societies, determined outcomes of wars, and wiped out entire populations, but also, paradoxically, cleared the way for innovations and advances in sciences, economy, and political systems.

The point raised by Scheidel is clear testimony that pandemics are as old as humanity, and that they have contributed to innovations and technology. As will be discussed in this article, the technologisation of religion by the vast majority of mainline churches in Zimbabwe, in particular, was a result of the lockdown and the banning of the in-person services imposed by the government (Mujinga 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic rocked the world, leading to the closing of businesses, religious institutions, marketplaces, and learning institutions; the banning of travel both locally and internationally, as well as the imposition of COVID-19 rules such as social distancing, sanitisation, and masking up. The imposition of lockdowns created pandemonium that saw a total change in life (Biri 2020). Churches were not spared, as the physical worship of God during the pandemic was viewed as a source of spreading the virus, while church gatherings were described as super-spreaders of the pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 was so great that the church that used to worship through gatherings viewed the closure of the institution as the devil attacking the body of Christ (Cordeiro 2020). The effects of the pandemic were strong on the mainline churches, in particular, as they were not used to propagating the gospel through other means than physical gatherings (Mahiya & Murisi 2022:1). Electronic media became the new normal way for propagating the gospel, although this was not an easy media for the mainline churches (Mujinga 2021:263). The lockdowns diluted the traditional meaning of administering sacraments in the whole of Christendom (Mpofu 2021:2). In Zimbabwe, the effects of the pandemic were so bad that churches were closed towards the Lent season in 2020. People could not gather for Easter, sacraments were abandoned, singing was abolished, and coming together in fellowship was also banished.

Although mainline churches finally embraced the technological ways of propagating the gospel, sacraments that demanded face-to-face administration remained a theological challenge for them, in order to maintain their sacredness. Using the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe as a case study, this paper aims to challenge the mainline churches' traditional means of sharing God's grace. It proposes a theology that keeps the sacredness of the sacramental rite during pandemics such as COVID-19. To achieve this aim, the paper starts by giving a brief background of pandemics. This is followed by the definition of sacrament and sacramental theology. The definitions lead the discussion to the understanding of sacraments in the Methodist Church as taught by its founder John Wesley to find the impact of the theology and

ecclesiology of the rite during pandemics. The article then proceeds to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's sacramental theology and concludes by proposing a reinterpretation of sacramental theology that remains sacred, even in the context of pandemics such as COVID-19.

## 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PANDEMICS

The history of humanity has always been characterised by pandemics. In the Old Testament, we learn that the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was possible after a series of pandemics and disasters that rocked Egypt (Ex. 7:20-10:13). While the term "pandemic" is modern and was never used in the Scriptures, the Hebrew and Greek words for pestilence and plagues are recorded at least 127 times in the Bible (Rosenberg 2020). Gusha (2020) argues that, since 165AD-2015, pandemics have killed people. Among these pandemics was the Antonine Plague of 165 - 180 CE, which claimed 5 million people in Europe (Scheidel 2017). This was followed by death caused by the Plague of Justinian (Byzantine Empire) in roughly 541-542 CE, which claimed ten per cent of the world's population. The Japanese Smallpox Epidemic of 735 - 737 CE claimed almost one third of the entire population. Moreover, the Black Death of 1346-1353 killed between 75 and 200 million people, including the population in North Africa. In addition, smallpox killed nearly 500 million people in over 100 years. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the American Plagues claimed 90 per cent of the indigenous population (Gusha 2020). Another pandemic that affected the world from 1918-1920 was the Spanish Flu, a deadly influenza that claimed over 500 million people (Scheidel 2017). In the 1980s, Human Immuno Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) affected the global population, claiming over 35 million people. Ebola also manifested in 2014 and affected some parts of Africa, killing roughly 11,000 people. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly at the end of 2019, a novel pandemic called Coronavirus, or COVID-19, began in Wuhan, China. This epidemic is the major subject of this article.

Although HIV/AIDS was a deadly disease, people had learnt to live a positive life, and the disease resulted in that people, who tested positive with the virus, could live longer, even with the disease. Theology scholars and students almost lost the appetite for research about the impact of the disease. More focus on research was on the missiological discourse of the church, concentrating on the misleading theologies that include the commercialisation of the gospel with healing ministry, prosperity gospel, health and healing, well-being and being well topping the theological discourse. However, the discovery of COVID-19 and how it decimated the socio-economic, religious, and political life of many systems, cultures, businesses, institutions, individuals, and communities changed the language in the religious fraternity.

To end the pandemic, health and political leaders agreed on protocols, one of which was the closure of worship services, resulting in the church remaining in a compromising position. The suspension of worship gatherings and the encouragement of their congregants to stay at home as a preventive measure against COVID-19 was a contrast to the biblical mandate of encouraging people to meet for worship (Hebrews 10:25). Discouraging people to meet meant a redefinition of the essence and essentials of theology. The church shifted from being an assembly of believers, who gather together for fellowship meals, sacraments, and liturgical services and a centre where congregants receive both physical and spiritual healing, to becoming a centre of “contamination and infections”. Although online services became the means and ways of propagating the gospel, sacraments as a means of grace were difficult to administer via these online platforms. The need to share the Lord’s table but without an opportunity by most of the Christians led to the reminiscence of the way in which the means of grace must be administered.

### 3. DEFINITION OF SACRAMENT AND SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

One of the most difficult tasks in research is the definition of terms. For example, McGrath (1994:427) argues that

the term sacrament is notoriously difficult to define, given the controversy within the Christian churches upon the nature and number of the sacraments.

These controversies are evident as the Catholic Church observes seven sacraments, namely baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction, while the Protestant Churches observe two sacraments, namely baptism and Eucharist (Holy Communion).

[A] sacrament is an effectual sign of grace performed by Christ himself ... under Christ, the Church is also the fundamental sacrament, and the Church can be described as the continuation of the incarnation, and this is sacramental theology. The church fulfils this sacramental theology function by word and sacrament and the two must not be dissociated (Richardson & Bowden 1989:516).

English (1982:373) alludes to the fact that a sacrament does not only include the oral proclamation of the Word but also is itself an acted proclamation. It is a Christian rite that is recognised as of particular importance and significance in the church (Stice 2007:41).

St Augustine of Hippo is regarded as the one who laid down the general principles relating to the definition of sacraments. For St Augustine, sacraments are outward signs of an inward grace instituted by Jesus Christ (McGrath 1994:428). Augustine's definition was further revised by Hugh of St Victor in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He points out that:

A sacrament is a physical or mental element set before the external sense represented by likeness, signified by its institution, and contained by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace (McGrath 1994:428).

Hugh of St Victor's definition of sacrament also remains unsatisfactory, as it includes incarnation, church, and death as sacraments (McGrath 1994:428). Lombard provides another definition and he omits any physical or material element as sacrament. Lombard defines a sacrament as a sign of the grace of God and a form of the invisible grace (McGrath 1994:428). This definition refers to the seven sacraments observed by the Catholic Church as a visible symbol of the reality of God, as well as a channel for God's grace. Since this paper is anchored within Methodist theology, two sacraments, namely baptism and the Last Supper/Holy Communion, are the point of reference. John Wesley succinctly articulated the justification to use baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Methodist ecclesiology. He argues that

[t]here are two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. Those five commonly called sacraments, namely confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and extreme unction, are not to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel; being such as have partly grown out of the corrupt following of the apostles, and partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures, but yet have not the like nature of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, because they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God (Wesley 1784).

The other reason for using the two sacraments is the agreement by both the Catholics and the Protestants that they were instituted by Christ. In addition, the Protestants uphold the two sacraments. Moreover, many denominations, including Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Reformed churches, hold on to the definition of sacrament formulated by Augustine of Hippo, as argued earlier (see also McGrath 1994:428). During the Reformation, Martin Luther taught that sacraments refer to those things which God has instituted, commanded, and ordained with the Word. This is as firm and sure as if God has sworn an oath to this effect (McGrath 1994:430).

There are various views on the existence and meaning of the Lord's Supper. The rite is viewed as a proclamatory sacrament that proclaims the death of Jesus. As Christ administers this sacrament, Christians remember the words on the night that he was betrayed, when he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: "This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me". In the same night, after the supper, he took the cup and said: "This cup is God's new Covenant sealed with my blood, drink it, do so in remembrance of me" (see also Luke 22:19-22; Mt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; 1 Cor. 11:24-25).

In explaining the sacrament instituted by Jesus, English (1982:373) argues that the sacrament of the Holy Communion is understood as a means to remember Jesus' death for humanity, while anticipating the perfect enjoyment of his presence that will begin when he comes again. The sacrament instituted by Jesus has a number of names such as the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, and the breaking of the bread. The Catholics speak of the altar, the eucharist, or the mass (English 1982:373). Sacraments signify God's grace in a way that is outwardly observable to the participant but represents something that is inward.

#### 4. MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRAMENTS IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

The Methodist Church draws its sacramental theology from its founder John Wesley, an Anglican priest. In 1784, Wesley authored the Methodist Articles, commonly known as the "Twenty-five Articles of Religion" (Bratcher 2018). These were his adaptation of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion from the Anglican Church. Several of the Articles were aimed directly at distinguishing the beliefs held by both Wesley and the Anglicans, from Roman Catholicism (Bratcher 2018). In Article XVI, Wesley (1784) states:

The sacraments ordained of Christ are not the only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken but also strengthen and confirm, our faith in him.

In his teachings, Wesley viewed sacraments as a means of grace.

For Wesley, means of grace are instituted and they are often referred to as works of piety and they include prayer, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving, seeking the scriptures by reading, meditating, and hearing, receiving the Lord's Supper which is the constant duty of every believer, fasting especially on Wednesdays and Fridays which are the practice of the ancient church and attending Christian Conference deemed a necessity because it is very difficult to order your conversation right without the help of the community of faiths (Collins 2007:257).

Wesley believed that the value of the means of grace depends on their actual subservience to the end of religion, that consequently all these means, when separated from the end, are less than nothing and vanity (Collins 2007:258). The means of grace are linked to the love of a neighbour. As such, one could not employ the means of grace without necessarily advancing in the love of God and neighbour (Collins 2007:258). In referring to sacraments as a means of grace, Wesley was influenced by St Augustine's definition of the same as outward signs of the inward grace and a means where Christians receive the same reality, to which humanity has the responsibility of outward response. Without our response, the sacrament is not completed (Collins 2007:259). In his further definition of the means of grace, Wesley responded to the question: How does one receive God's prevenient, justifying, sanctifying, and perfecting grace? His answer to this question has become known as the means of grace – how "God's riches at Christ's expense" (GRACE) come to humanity (Collins 2007). For Wesley, there are two basic kinds of means of grace, namely the sacraments and the sacramentals (Collins 2007).

In the Methodist Articles of Religion, the Lord's Supper is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves to another, but also a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death. The love of God so resplendent at Calvary has consequences in the present salvific graces of justification and sanctification received by means of this sacrament (Wesley 1784). Wesley teaches that the grace of God given by sacraments confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them (Neal 1996). The banning of religious institutions and the people's separation from this means of grace meant that humanity that was supposed to be drawn closer to Christ was truncated by COVID-19. Wesley emphasised that, in the Lord's Supper, we receive not only infinitive mercy, but also several blessings so that we may obtain holiness on earth. The Lord's Supper is the emblem of the gospel that was instituted by Christ to be the means of conveying not only prevenient grace, but also justification and sanctifying grace (Wesley 1784). Wesley's position was clear that sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about; but we should duly use them (Wesley 1784). Unfortunately, most of the mainline churches and Methodists alike lost this means of connectedness because of COVID-19.

Wesley described Baptism in Article XVII as a sign not only of profession and a mark of difference, whereby Christians are distinguished from others who are not baptised, but also as a sign of regeneration or the new birth (Wesley 1784). If baptism is regeneration, it meant that, for almost over two years, the church was dead, as no baptisms were being conducted to regenerate people. Wesley understood sacraments as more than simply outward obedience. Through the application of, and participation in the

sacramental act, Wesley believed that grace could be received. Hence, he viewed baptism as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace (Wesley 1784). Wesley identified baptism as the church's external recognition, affirmation, and proclamation of prevenient grace: God is calling on our lives, comes to us apart from anything that we do, and we have the responsibility of response – that response comes in one of the sacramentals, namely confirmation (Wesley 1784).

In Article XVIII, Wesley (1784) talked about the Lord's Supper:

The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death; insomuch that, to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise, the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ.

It is saddening to note that, although Christendom experienced pandemics in the past years, COVID-19 distorted sacramental theology as a means of grace received by people who come together in worship.

## 5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY IN THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE

COVID-19 impacted on religion in various ways, including cancellation of worship services; closure of Sunday schools, and cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies, and festivals. Many churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples offered worship through livestream amidst the pandemic. Mujinga (2021) argues strongly on how mainline churches struggled with the technology of religion and how they ended up embracing the new normal. Livestream services became a relief to the spiritual lives of the congregants. White (2020) mentions four positive ways that changed worship, namely shift to online church; viewing the church as people and not as a building; more people seeking God's Word, and drive-in churches. However, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe suffered a big blow because of the pandemic. The church lost many congregants and six ministers in less than six months. The worst experience was when three ministers died of the pandemic in two consecutive days.

While some relief wings of religious organisations dispatched disinfection supplies, powered air-purifying respirators, face shields, gloves, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagents, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe pumps,

infusion pumps, and food to the affected Methodist Church, that did not do much to strongly support its members with these essentials. The church, however, continued to educate its members about the pandemic, encouraging social distancing, sanitisation, and face masking, and inviting medical personnel to encourage awareness. Some ministers of the gospel labelled COVID-19 as an evil sent to destroy the wicked people only. This message was so strong that, even when the vaccination was discovered, some congregants refused to take the medicine as the devil's means to wipe out the spiritually weak. In the process, social media pages such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube were activated as means to propagate the gospel. The Methodist Church went further to partner with Glow Petroleum and introduced Sunday services that were broadcast on the National FM. The initiatives were besides the preachers who were appointed every Sunday and Wednesday to preach on the Facebook page.

All the above-mentioned initiatives did not solve the administration of the Lord's Supper and baptism, as they remained part of the Christian services that were labelled as a super-spreader of the virus. This belief was in spite of the value and sacredness of the rite of the Lord's Supper, as discussed earlier. Maschke (2006:172) argues that the distribution of elements should be done in a dignified manner because the gathered guests are receiving the gifts from the host – Jesus himself. The word "gathered" means "coming together for worship". This coming together for worship was labelled as a means of spreading COVID-19. The body of Christ, which was meant to be a centre of healing, was labelled the centre of contamination, and sacramental theology lost its value. In the Protestant Churches, the Lord's Supper is the centre of life and witness of the church; its liturgy is also present in the confessional prayers (Mujinga 2018:222). The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's Lord's Supper liturgy asserts that some illnesses are caused by sin and, as such, private confession before partaking of the sacrament is encouraged, as it is a means of healing. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe believes that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of healing because it was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. The food he gives to Christians in the sacrament is his own divine life in the form of bread and wine which preserves their bodies and souls into eternal life (Mujinga 2018:223). The closure of churches and the imposition of social distance regulations devalued the sacredness and value of the Lord's Supper.

During the era of the spread of COVID-19, it was assumed that intinction was far more likely to spread the virus and germs simply because the act of dipping the bread in the wine means that people's fingers would probably come into contact with the wine. This is even truer in churches where the minister dips the bread in the wine, and then places it on the parishioners'

tongues, meaning the minister's fingers can come into contact with both the wine and multiple people's tongues. This implies that there is body conduct and no maintenance of social distance.

With the advent of COVID-19, the Methodist Church, like many churches, cancelled the sacrament of the Lord's Supper because the use of the common cup at communion was one of the most suspected agents of spreading COVID-19. The cancellation of this rite raised questions about the sacredness of the rituals. The sacredness of the Lord's Supper was compromised and the profaning of the ritual was the worst thing that the pandemic brought to Christendom. The centre of most of the worship services could mean putting others at risk more than extending the healing power of God. In some churches such as the Catholic Church, the Lord's Supper/mass/eucharist is at the centre much as the altar is at the centre. The vast majority of Methodists hardly spend a quarter of the year without the Lord's Supper and, therefore, spending a year without the Lord's Supper was a serious drift from grace. For example, at the Trinity Methodist Society in Harare, the 07:00 service observes the Lord's Supper every Sunday because the missionaries planted this tradition. If missing communion for a week is an offence in such a service, then missing it for a month and worse a year or two meant profaning the rite. The sudden separation of members from receiving this rite, although as a privilege to confirmed members only, challenged sacramental theology not only during, but also beyond COVID-19.

It cannot be disputed that COVID-19 made Christians deaf to the powerful words spoken by Jesus on the night when he was betrayed and said:

Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you and this is my blood shed for you and for many, do this in remembrance of me (Osborne 1988:10).

With these words, Jesus asked the disciples to connect with him spiritually through his biological being. Jesus invites his followers to take and eat his flesh and drink his blood. Jesus' invitation recalls the deep incarnation theology of God where the word became flesh. In the incarnation, God becomes an integral part of the biological process of being born, eating, drinking, and dying (Osborne 1988). This incarnate God invites Christians to partake of this flesh, this body, and blood. God is present in, with, and under the bread and the wine – the biological elements chosen for this sacred meal. Yet COVID-19 disrupted such conflating of God and humanity, as people were banned from meeting physically which was the only means of administering the Lord's Supper.

## 6. METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE'S RESPONSE TO SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY DURING COVID-19

The continued cancellation of the church gathering made the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Rev. Dr Solmon Zwana, work with the Mission Department led by Rev. Blessmore Chinhara and Evangelism Coordinator, Rev. Daryl Maturi, to join the online church to administer the Lord's Supper virtually during Easter 2020. This idea was influenced by some Western churches that are technologically advanced. For example, in his article, titled *Religious rituals go viral amid coronavirus: Baptism, funerals and more*, Parke (2020) explains the benefits of the online church in the United States but did not emphasise the church on the Lord's Supper. Douglas (2020) cautions that

the changing nature of modern communication is considered in the context of the possibility of the use of a 'virtual' Eucharist, where a priest in one place with a set of bread and wine, consecrates the bread and wine, while at the same time a person in their own home consumes another set of bread and wine with the assumption that second set of bread and wine is also consecrated. However, biblical, theological and constitutional perspectives are then considered to argue that 'virtual' Eucharists are not considered appropriate at any time, including during a global Covid-19 pandemic, in the Anglican Church of Australia.

The Methodist Church suffered a serious theological dilemma and responded to the traditional custom of receiving the sacrament by some unorthodox means. During Easter 2020, the Presiding Bishop invited the church to a moment of prayer and sacrament virtually. The elements were consecrated online and, at home, the parishioners were to create a worship environment by wearing their respective uniforms for those who belonged to uniformed organisations and then prepare their Holy Communion elements. The setting of the table was not the same because the elements were different. Most of the congregants could not afford wafers, but bread, wine, and raspberry. Congregants were instructed to place the elements on their "table" or any other surface. The Presiding Bishop could lead the Holy Communion liturgy, bless and take his portion online. The congregation would then follow suit and receive the blessings.

The Methodist Church, being traditional and liturgical, suffered a theological conflict as the clergy had mixed feelings about the consecration of the rite. They felt that their role in the sacred physical conduct of the sacrament had been profaned. Although some clergy created a theological dilemma in a crisis that was already caused by COVID-19, some congregants, especially those

from the low density of the suburban communities, and the fellowships who had already embraced the use of virtual platforms, welcomed the idea as a divine intervention. The virtual administration of sacraments remains a norm in the diaspora fellowships, as they naturally find it difficult to meet physically. For example, Methodists in New Zealand and Australia, who are under one chaplain, viewed the online sacraments as God intervening in a crisis. Yet Methodists in Zimbabwe viewed the move as profanity rather than as an expression of the sacred. Besides the challenge of the virtual platform, the other dimension was the preparation of the elements at home and not at a physical place of worship. The controversy of understanding at what point sacraments are holy disturbed the Methodist community.

Although the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe acted according to the situation, the concentration of the rite did not make any impact because, first, people were used to seeing the minister doing it in their presence. Secondly, they were also used to seeing the On Trial members and children being segregated from this rite. Thirdly, as the vast majority of people did not have enough data bundles to either watch Facebook, join the Zoom or Teams platforms, or follow the WhatsApp videos, it remained an imaginary consecration, as some ministers were also criticising the means of sharing grace. This process of administering sacraments at home did not bring the same sacredness that it had when the minister conducted the service in the church.

Having faced a pandemic such as COVID-19, it cannot be denied that such pandemics can be experienced again and that the church must be braced with a sacramental theology that gives relevance and sacredness to the Lord's Supper. This article proposes ways to reinterpret and redefine sacramental theology without profaning the rite.

## 7. TOWARD A REINTERPRETATION OF SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF PANDEMICS

From the understanding of sacramental theology discussed earlier, it cannot be denied that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, like many other churches that partook from the Lord's table, found their theology vehemently suffering because of the pandemic. The question of the sacredness of the sacraments was challenged. The question commonly asked was: To what extent are sacraments means of grace? Although this and other questions characterised the sacramental theology discourse, sacraments remain at the centre of

Christendom and churches have to be prepared to share the means of grace in future if pandemics erupt again. This paper proposes three options that can be used to administer sacraments as a sacred rite without profaning the rite.

## 7.1 Reverse approach: Redirecting the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church to the 1<sup>st</sup> century

The Early Church that was left by Jesus grew by centralising the home as the centre of worship. Acts 2:46-47 records that

the earliest Christians continued to meet in the temple courts, they broke bread in the homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The justification for proposing home as a centre of worship in the context of pandemics is that, first, in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, the Lord's Supper is a pride of those who are confirmed into full membership. This segregation of membership was caused by the coming of the missionaries who played a double standard role in the administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The church was divided into two groups of worshippers, namely the English community and what they called the Native Church Community for the Black people. In the English community church services such as Trinity in the central business district of Harare, the Lord's Supper was celebrated by invitation, whereas in the native or Black community church, sacramental invitation was for those confirmed into full membership. As the gathering of people for the purposes of worship was banned, the pride of the confirmed members of receiving the Lord's Supper in the face of On Trial members and children was challenged, as both confirmed and unconfirmed members had no access to the means of grace. The sacramental theology that had brought disparity and controversy in the Methodist theology challenged its ecclesiology. If home is the centre, it means that the congregants are not divided according to the membership status but according to their beliefs. The church can still make use of the virtual administration of the Lord's Supper so that even those who cannot make it to the church can share the rite with their kith and kin.

## 7.2 Rereading of the Lord's Supper liturgy

Relating to the Early Church approach of administering sacraments assists in making the whole church the body of Christ, where every sinner partakes of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. This statement is confirmed by the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's Lord's Supper liturgy, where both the minister and the congregants say:

Lord, we come to your table trusting in your mercy and not in any goodness of our own. We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table, but it is your nature always to have mercy and on that, we depend on ... (Methodist Church 1992:B15; Methodist Church in Zimbabwe 2011:31).

The liturgy is clear that the Lord's Supper is for those who are not worthy to receive crumbs under the table of fellowship. It also gives room for confession of sins that seems to show that Holy Communion is free for all. Davies (1954) maintains that the Lord's Supper is the Holy Communion of all Christian people and the festival of the whole church. If it is a service for the whole church, then it should not be confined within the four corners of the church as such; the home can still remain a centre of receiving the means of grace. One of the commonly sung vernacular hymns during the Lord's Supper, Hymn 108, reads

3. Handifanire kupinda  
Kudenga kutsvene  
Asi imi makaripa  
Mhosva dzangu dzose

Literally "I am not worth to enter your heavens but you paid for all my sins"

4. Ropa renyu rine simba  
Gwayana raMwari  
Rokutsikinura vose  
Kuti vatsveniswe

"Your blood is powerful, the Lamb of God to redeem all to be sanctified."

The song does not emphasise the place of worship or the holiness of anyone who should receive the rite, but it allows all people to appreciate their mortality and wickedness which is cleansed only by Jesus. As such, everyone has the right to partake from the table of grace wherever they are once the minister consecrates the elements.

### 7.3 Redefinition of the sacraments

*According to Wesley*, Holy Communion is the means of grace whereby we receive the real presence of Jesus. The reality of Jesus' divine, grace-conveying, life-transforming presence in the sacrament of Holy Communion must not be minimised (Wesley 1784). Wesley did not accept the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation which explains how Jesus is present in and through the bread and the wine. Wesley nevertheless affirmed that Jesus was really, efficaciously present to the believer when the believer ate and drank of the elements with faith. Wesley closely identified this means of grace with sanctifying grace. The Holy Communion gives Christians access

to the grace which they need to literally walk the Christian walk and improve their Christian living toward the goal that God has for them in Christ Jesus (Calejero 2020). The two sacraments are the principal means of grace that God gives humanity in order to access what we need as sons and daughters of God. In both sacraments, baptism and Holy Communion, Jesus is made known to humanity in the blessed water and in the broken bread and blessed cup. The Lord's Supper is supported by the liturgy used for services in English congregations: "Though we are many, we are one body because we shall share in the one loaf" (Methodist Church 1992:B14).

The Holy Communion is a remembrance of what Christ did for humanity in his atoning death. This is the predominant lens through which Methodists understand communion where people confess their sins and recommit themselves to Christ. Communion thus serves as a kind of reset button on one's relationship with God. Before one goes forward, one has to repent of both sins of omission and commission. Unlike in the Catholic Church, where confessions are done to the priest, confession in the Methodist Church is individualistic and does not need the four corners of the church but the consecration of the rite and partake even from home because a sacrament is a divinely appointed meeting place where a person can experience God's gracious presence and power in his/her life.

## 8. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 had a serious impact on the theology and ecclesiology of sacraments of all the churches that are linked to the divine love of Christ. This article discussed the development of pandemics and noted that these catastrophes are as old as humanity. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, COVID-19 affected the whole of Christendom and the sacredness of the Lord's Supper. Instead of viewing the Lord's Supper as sacred, COVID-19 lockdowns redefined the rite as profane, as people were used to partake in the rite only when they were gathered. John Wesley's survey of the understanding of the rite demonstrated that the Methodist Church moved from the centre of theology where sacraments as means of grace found themselves as a means of disgrace. The disgrace was evident because it was easy to find alternatives to propagate the gospel and there were controversial means of receiving the means of grace like the Lord's Supper.

The article concluded by proposing to revisit the Early Church theology where home was the centre of worship, a rereading of the Lord's Supper liturgy, and a redefinition of sacraments as means of grace. Whereas baptism is a rite of passage for Christians to be accepted in the house of the Lord, the Lord's Supper is a channel of forgiveness of sins that releases humanity from

the tyranny of guilt. If pandemics take longer without people meeting, it cannot be denied that Christians will be pushed further from the communion of Christ which is made possible by sacraments as a means of grace. Sacraments prepare people for reconciliation in our relationship with others and with God and, as such, they should be celebrated all the time. In addition, sacraments cater for all, much as Jesus came for sinners and the righteous.

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