

## What makes liturgy? The key elements

Stephen Burns

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. I was given the title ‘What makes liturgy? The key elements’ and asked to refer to the digital environment. I don’t want to presume that all of my perspectives from my place will find traction in your place, and I make some deliberate oscillations between more and less positive takes on liturgy in the digital environment.<sup>1</sup> At the very least, perhaps my presence in the conversation today can be a reminder that looking and listening cross-culturally can introduce strangeness that can lead to questions about what has been assumed and ‘normed’ in our own settings?

So, about my own context: here in Melbourne (now the most locked down city in the world) we are still living with stay-at-home orders not quite as tight as they have sometimes been, but nightly curfews and travel limits remain fixed in place, and there are only a very limited number of reasons to be out of the house: medical appointments—including vaccination; essential shopping; a little exercise; and with the recent reprieve of up to five fully vaccinated persons from only two households now able to meet outdoors for a picnic—but not one with alcohol.

In much of Australia, the Delta strain of the Coronavirus eventually proved unmanageable and the ‘elimination strategy’ that was at play has now yielded. Who is to say what the comparatively low death- and hospitalisation-rate that Australia has ‘enjoyed’ will look like here on in? Vaccination roll-out has been chaotic, with Astrazenica introduced and then withdrawn for persons under 60 years of age, and very long waits while doses of Pfizer were imported, with a disgraceful lag of availability of vaccines for healthcare and other ‘front-line’ workers quite apart from others, and with many challenges remaining in lifting the numbers to a ‘safe’ percentage for society to ‘re-open’ in some sort of ‘new normal’.<sup>2</sup> Protests, sometimes violent and riotous, have been recurrent on the streets—last week, over four days, just one km from my home—with such rallies now feared to be ‘super-spreader’ events. We wait to see.

Like schools, universities, and many businesses, churches have been shut for months. In the theological college in which I work (Uniting Church in Australia,

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<sup>1</sup> My reflections are shaped especially by: Gordon W. Lathrop, ‘Thinking Again about the Assembly in a Time of Pandemic’, *Cross+Accents* 28.2 (2020): 9–17, one of the first liturgical-theological responses to the current pandemic, written before a vaccine was developed (see <https://alcm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/04-Thinking-Again.pdf>) and Bryan Cones, ‘Essential Workers, Essential Services: *Leitourgia* in Light of Lockdown’, *Religions* 12.2 (2021): 1–10, written late last year (see <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/2/101/htm>), and Cones’ recent writing on the CRC website, ‘The Church with “Long COVID”: Navigating the Opportunities and Pitfalls of “Online Church”’ (see <https://www.crconline.org.uk/resources/articles/church-long-covid-navigating-opportunities-and-pitfalls-online-church>). Both Cones and Lathrop write from US contexts.

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Reddie, ‘Not Returning to the New Normal’, in *Doing Theology in the New Normal: Global Perspectives*, ed. by Jione Havea (London: SCM Press, 2021), 243–257—a powerful distillation of Reddie’s long work on British racism and white supremacy (in which he implicates the Church of England). He asserts, ‘returning to the old normal would be the worst thing that can happen to us’ (254). His chapter would make for a worthwhile parish study via Zoom or in-person.

strongly ecumenical), candidates for ministry in the second year of their formation have now not shared communion together, nor even sang together—so both central and simple practices of Christian worship have been absent. At the only large in-person gathering for church at which I have been present in the last two years—an ordination, in a reprieve between lockdowns—people were served communion in plastic thimbles, each one unwrapped from its own plastic case, with another plastic encased ‘host’ wrapped on top of the plastic glass. It will give a clue as to ‘where I am coming from’ that I didn’t partake, and the split-second decision not to bother was an important insight for me that what I might be missing about gathered worship is not the ‘thing’ of a sacrament.<sup>3</sup>

The current situation I have started to describe may perhaps be recognisable in the UK at least as a reminder of how things used to be, before so-called ‘Freedom Day’. But whose freedom? It must be as true in the UK as it is here in Australia that the burden of Coronavirus has been borne appallingly disproportionately by the poor, the disabled and the vulnerable, the folks innocuously described in the kind of daily updates on infection numbers that still happen here as having ‘underlying health conditions’. Concern for such persons and about such matters surely must be central to whatever we find to say about worship—think Urban Holmes’ *bon mot* that ‘to love God is to relieve the burden of those who suffer. The rest is a question of tactics’.<sup>4</sup>

### Some memorable on-line experiences

While in lockdown working-from-home, many of the practices of my theological college have fallen away—not only communion and communal singing, but much fieldwork. One of very few students who was able to continue in fieldwork (because the aged-care agency in which she was working as chaplain was also her ‘secular’ employer) often spoke of her pastoral visits to residents. They, alone in their rooms, ‘met’ with her as chaplain as she stood outdoors on the other side of their window. Such has been even some of the most ‘personal’ pastoral care of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Indeed now might be a good time to ask, after Tissa Balasuriya, ‘Why is that in spite of hundreds of thousands of eucharistic celebrations, Christians continue as selfish as before?’<sup>6</sup>

But while much fieldwork has fallen away, at the seminary some sort of ‘worship’ has continued, on-line, with at least a regular service of the word comprised mainly of reading and a preaching of kinds and then open prayer. We have also met

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<sup>3</sup> My colleague Geoff Thompson recently asked a good question in conversation: ‘What is it that people are missing that online worship is providing?’

<sup>4</sup> Urban Holmes III, *What is Anglicanism?*; cited by Martyn Percy, *Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment and Communion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 23.

<sup>5</sup> The Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union* speaks of ‘pastoral care exercised personally on behalf of the Church an expression of the fact that God always deals personally with people’ (paragraph 16; <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/HistDocs/basisofunion1992.pdf>).

<sup>6</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*; cited by Cones, ‘Essential Workers’, 3.

online for other things, with one of the practices we have explored together being *lectio divina*—technically not ‘liturgy’ but ‘devotion’.<sup>7</sup> Several weeks ago (the Sunday between August 28 and September 3), a reading from the Song of Songs spoke of the ‘beloved’, the ‘loved one’, ‘gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice’ (Song 2.9).<sup>8</sup> In at least some Christian readings since Origen, the Song has been understood as christological allegory.<sup>9</sup> For me at least, the fusing of the ministry-candidate’s pastoral encounters through the glass from the gardens of a residential home and Song 2’s image of looking in through the window has been a powerful picture of the Christa,<sup>10</sup> perhaps opening up my own most affecting experience of prayer in lockdown and something I have carried with me through this time, even as much ‘worship’ in on-line or occasional gathered mode—those plastic-wrapped communion elements—has not appealed to me at all.

### Some questions: Public service and participation

To move, then, to some key points about liturgy. I start with basic meanings: as is well-known, the word ‘liturgy’ conflates some Greek words, *laos*—‘people’ / *leitōs*—‘concerning the people’; and *ergon*—‘work’. Hence it can be rendered ‘work of the people’ or ‘work for the people’. The latter meaning, work for the people, is ancient: earliest Christianities understood liturgy as some sort of public service, done for the common good, an action undertaken for the sake of the *polis*—the city-/state. Think again here about the question ‘whose freedom?’, and what was wrong with the ‘old normal’.

Then to shift to the former meaning, work of the people: liturgy is done not only on behalf of people but by the people: and in turn this leads to the pervasive contemporary stress in liturgical renewal on *participation*.<sup>11</sup> This stress was very apparent in the reforms of the Second Vatican Council—which we do well to remember may have been the most important thing to affect Protestant churches in the twentieth-

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<sup>7</sup> See Ricky Manalo, *The Liturgy of Life: The Interrelationship Between Sunday Eucharist and Everyday Worship Practices* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), a study of Roman Catholic communities that can usefully be read across traditions in search of analogies.

<sup>8</sup> See Gordon Lathrop and Gail Ramshaw, eds, *Readings for the Assembly, Cycle B* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1966), 382.

<sup>9</sup> See John O’Keefe ‘Origen (c. 185–c. 253), *Commentary on the Song of Songs*’, in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. by Arthur Holder (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 1–12.

<sup>10</sup> See Nicola Slee, *Seeking the Risen Christa* (London: SPCK, 2011); also, *Speaking of Christ/Christa/Christx*, ed. by Stephen Burns and Janice McRandal (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> For more on these meanings, see Stephen Burns, *Liturgy (SCM Studyguide)* (London: SCM Press, [2] 2018), 1–15 (‘Of and For the People’).

century,<sup>12</sup> so although a Roman Catholic source an ‘ecumenical treasure’.<sup>13</sup> As is also well known, Vatican II’s *Document on the Sacred Liturgy* speaks of ‘full, conscious and active participation’ ‘by all the people’ as the aim to be considered ‘above all else’ (#14). This translates into Protestant traditions as, for e.g., the insistence that ‘the congregation is not an audience’.<sup>14</sup> It is being echoed when James White speaks of people as ‘the primary ingredient’ of liturgy, of people as ‘the primary liturgical document’.<sup>15</sup>

White’s words are at the very least a reminder that if we refer to books or texts for prayer as ‘liturgy’ we are using a kind of shorthand—I’d suggest a pretty unhelpful one—because liturgy is an *event*, ‘an event with a shape’,<sup>16</sup> in which words are breathed out of *bodies* in *ceremonial scenes* engaging the *senses*: speaking and listening and seeing, yes, but also touching and tasting; doing these things together, with *the assembly the celebrant* of the event. As a Catholic commentator on the liturgy document of Vatican II has rightly and pithily insisted, ‘no participation, no liturgy’!<sup>17</sup> He—Gabe Huck—goes on: ‘It is the nature of the liturgy to be done by people. It is not done to people. It is not done for people. It is not done in the presence of people. People do it and the plural is correct because it is as a Church assembled that people do liturgy.’<sup>18</sup> The same author also speaks smartly about liturgy in terms of verbs: ‘gather, greet, reflect, confess, seek mercy, pray, read and listen, observe silence, chant, acclaim, preach, intercede, share, praise, thank, lament, embrace, break bread, process, eat, drink, sing, bless, take leave’—but note that ‘watch’ is not on his list.<sup>19</sup> All of this helps to underline that liturgy resists spectatorship; it opposes passivity.

It seems plainly obvious to me that these emphases—public service for the common good, and the people’s participation, liturgy *of* and *for* the people—were not

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<sup>12</sup> Don E. Saliers, ‘Christian Spirituality in an Ecumenical Age’, in *Christian Spirituality III: Post-Reformation and Modern*, ed. by Louis Dupre and Don E. Saliers (London: SCM Press, 1989), 520–544 (538).

<sup>13</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, ‘Strong Center, Open Door: A Vision of Continuing Liturgical Renewal’, *Worship* 75:1 (2011): 35–45 (35).

<sup>14</sup> *Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), 5; *Uniting in Worship 2* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2005), 131.

<sup>15</sup> James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: WJKP, 1989), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, ‘The Shape of the Liturgy: A Framework for Contextualization’, in *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, ed. by Anita Stauffer (Geneva: LWF, 1996), 67–75 (67).

<sup>17</sup> Gabe Huck, ‘The Very Nature of the Liturgy’, in *Finding Voice to Give God Praise: Essays on the Many Languages of the Liturgy*, ed. by Kathleen Hughes (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 299; also Stephen Burns, ‘No Participation, No Liturgy’, in *Fully Conscious, Fully Active: Essays in Honor of Gabe Huck*, ed. by Bryan Cones and Stephen Burns (Chicago: LTP, 2020), 1–12.

<sup>18</sup> Huck, ‘Very Nature’, 299.

<sup>19</sup> Gabe Huck, ‘A Rite Within a Rite Within a World’, cited by Burns, ‘No Participation, No Liturgy’, 3.

always very evident in a lot of churches before the current digital turn in the Covid pandemic. Far too many churches were insular, inward-turned, adrift in terms of what they have to contribute to their wider communities. And far too many had lost grasp on the idea that the congregation is the celebrant, deadened by ritual lines that rendered the majority of persons lumpen on the sidelines. Far too much liturgy was clericalized in grim ways—and there are Protestant as well as Catholic possibilities as to how this might happen, none of them good.<sup>20</sup> We might not appreciate Eric Mascall's air of Anglican superiority in a book he published a few years before Vatican II, *The Recovery of Unity* (1958), but we can still learn from his even-handed castigation of clericalism in different modes: e.g. when in Catholic circles it is as if the 'sole executant' of the mass is the priest, or its Protestant variant when the minister 'performs' the liturgy with 'intolerable verbosity', praying, reading, exhorting, and preaching, while 'the laity are hardly allowed to say a word from start to finish'.<sup>21</sup> As Mascall sees it, all of this is part of the 'medieval legacy'. And Gordon Lathrop's revival of C. W. Mönnich's notion of 'antiliturgica' is essential reading for learning to spot what Lathrop calls the 'hierarchical distortion' and the 'closed-circle' distortion of liturgy-gone-wrong.<sup>22</sup> Note that these distortions mess up the participation of all the people (hierarchy) and public service (closed circle). To cite some of Lathrop's cautions: re. the distortion of hierarchy—a grand chair for the presider, 'an entrance procession like the arrival of a monarch', servers fussing on around the leader, pulpits way above people's heads, places accessible only to the clergy, the presider standing while others kneel, bishops in 'phallic hats'. And on goes the dismal list. And re. the closed circle—lines around 'our group', fencing the table, heavy teaching about boundaries, lots of rules, creating an in-crowd, withdrawal from the context, all means of closing the door. That the digital environment might alleviate many of the problems of clericalism doesn't seem at all self-evident to me, given that from the get-go it is vulnerable to the closed circle—for starters, who distributes and controls the Zoom link?—and so far as I can see, at almost every turn it is susceptible to hierarchy: how easily in Zoom the 'gallery' gives way to 'speaker view'... So I want to suggest that 'digital worship' might need not just care but suspicion about both clerical take-over and further retreat from the public realm.

### A time of opportunity?

However, perhaps some of what I have said so far might be put more positively, or at least the present time might be one of opportunity for learning more fiercely to contest what was already wrong about a lot of liturgy. For example, when Bryan Cones suggests

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Mascall, *The Recovery of Unity: A Theological Approach* (London: Longmans, 1958), with uncritical Anglican blinkers at e.g. 115.

<sup>21</sup> Mascall, *Recovery of Unity*, 4–5.

<sup>22</sup> See Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 179–197 ('Antiliturgica: On the Making of False Worlds') in which he refers across to further examples in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

that ‘Zoom is an improvement on the banks of forward-facing pews in our church building. Instead of the back of so many heads, we see a sea of faces—which casts in digital relief the idea that the church is simply people joined in common prayer and purpose’,<sup>23</sup> although I am not sure that I have seen much Zoom in practice ‘level the assembly’ I hope that it might be possible to learn ways of using it that do. And as Zoom makes near impossible (and certainly makes ugly) ‘unison prayer’—texts proposed to be spoken by ‘all’, words put into people’s mouths—perhaps lots of that will die, which will be a good thing. If we hold on to the Prayer of Jesus (‘Lord’s Prayer’/‘Our Father’) and keep some ‘prayers we have in common’, I suggest that we can do without an awful lot of what might otherwise be foisted upon us; I would be pleased if it didn’t come back when ‘in-person’ worship resumes.<sup>24</sup>

And I do see other opportunities. I’ve mentioned one already, in my appreciative comments about *lectio divina* via Zoom, as well as open prayer. In my theological college, we used Gail Ramshaw’s ‘template for the prayers of intercession’ to help people find their voices in the prayers of the people, and I strongly commend her resources.<sup>25</sup> And alongside *lectio divina*, I think that a kind of ‘*visio divina*’ is something that Zoom could well facilitate, a collective attention to art and pictures that might be analogous to practices of reading.<sup>26</sup> Of course, these are not practices that we needed to wait for a pandemic to begin to explore, and perhaps a great—albeit a disturbing—revelation in the time of pandemic has been how slim/thin/slight/fragile the communal spirituality of so many assemblies seems to have been.

It does seem to me that the felt-need some have for ‘digital communion’ must be about liturgical spirituality shrunken down such that there was nothing much else than eucharist going on and so eucharist is what is now sought on-line. We might of course recall (and admire) that the liturgy document of Vatican II talks of eucharist as ‘source and summit’ of liturgy (#10); but it is another thing when it is hook, line and sinker, when it has become not just central but smothering of a

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<sup>23</sup> Bryan Cones, ‘Virtual Worship Has Become The People’s Work’, *Christian Century*, August 11, 2020 (see <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/virtual-worship-has-become-people-s-work>)

<sup>24</sup> For my own reserve about unison prayer, see Stephen Burns, ‘Liturgy After the Abuse’, in *Vulnerability and Resilience: Body and Liberating Theologies*, ed. by Jione Havea (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 173–186.

<sup>25</sup> See Gail Ramshaw, *Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks: A Collection of Litanies, Laments, and Thanksgivings at Font and Table* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2017), 20–21.

<sup>26</sup> Bridget Nichols, ‘Presidential Address, July 2021’, *Societas Liturgica* (as yet unpublished) does not use the term ‘*visio divina*’, but this is effectively what she pursues in her reflections. There is currently a flurry of examples on the internet, though ‘emergent’ worship communities have been doing likekind for decades, and all kinds of resources are at hand, e.g. The United Church of Christ’s visual series around the lectionary, *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource* (3 volumes, various editors, Cleveland: UCC Press, 1994–1996).

wider liturgical repertoire, the ‘principal’ service<sup>27</sup> in effect the only one. (Perhaps current conditions have shown up starkly some of the shadow-side of the ‘Parish Communion’ movement?) While we might be sceptical about the claim made in the opening words of a new book on choral evensong: ‘over the course of the past 25 years, a quiet but persistent revolution has been taking place in English cathedrals, in some larger churches in major towns and cities, as well as the chapels of many university chapels’,<sup>28</sup> we might agree that liturgical spirituality is larger than communion. So perhaps current reasons for exploring the digital possibilities of liturgy suggest that it would be good to recover more than may have been lost in the pandemic? How many Anglican churches, for examples, had searched for and found ways to celebrate locally *Common Worship*’s encouragement of rediscovery of the catechumenate, baptismal remembrance, prayer for healing, lament, testimony, daily prayer, and so much else?

As I see it, the greatest opportunity of the present time is to encourage some new exploration of liturgical spirituality. So in the time left, just two things on that.

### More opportunities? Towards a larger liturgical spirituality

First, the Anglican tradition is not the only branch of the church to have in recent years proliferated resources for daily prayer. To cite just some of the most creative among a very diverse range: the daily services and daily devotions of *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (1989/2020);<sup>29</sup> prayer during the day as well as the fulsome offices of *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* (2006);<sup>30</sup> the adaptation of monastic cycles in the US-based Episcopal Church’s *Daily Prayer for All Seasons* (2014).<sup>31</sup> We could easily add excellent examples from ecumenical counterparts, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA’s) *Book of Common*

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Principal service’ is the nomenclature of *Common Worship*. See the Sunday book and lectionary especially (London: CHP, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Lighten Our Darkness: Discovering and Celebrating Choral Evensong* (London: DLT, 2021), 11.

<sup>29</sup> *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (Auckland: Collins, 1989, [2] 2020). See <https://anglicanprayerbook.nz/index.html#contents>

<sup>30</sup> *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* (London: CHP, 2006), at its most flexible here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/daily-prayer/prayer-during-day>

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Prayer for All Seasons* (New York: Church Publishing, 2014). See [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wpcontent/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/daily\\_prayer\\_all\\_seasons\\_eng\\_final\\_pages\\_0.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wpcontent/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/daily_prayer_all_seasons_eng_final_pages_0.pdf) On recent Anglican developments in everyday prayer, see Stephen Burns, ‘Learning Again and Again to Pray’: Anglican Forms of Daily Prayer, 1979–2014’, *Journal of Anglican Studies* 15.1 (2017): 9–36.

*Worship* (2018)<sup>32</sup> with its strong daily recollection of baptism. Perhaps there's no time like the present for both personal and communal exploration of such things in absence of gathering or the restricted gatherings of current experience, wherever we are?

Finally, eucharist always has been 'a service of word and table', as Methodist tradition sometimes names it. And Vatican II has talk of two tables: the table of the word (#54) and the eucharistic altar. Gordon Lathrop reminds of Jerome's ancient conviction that 'We eat the flesh and drink the blood of the divine saviour in the holy eucharist, but so do we in the reading of the scriptures',<sup>33</sup> and he also draws focus towards Luther's encouragement: 'When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you... When you see how he works... how he helps everyone to whom he comes... then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you... he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel'.<sup>34</sup> I wonder: if these ideas figured more strongly, would there be a push/rush for on-line communion? So how might a fuller engagement with the word come forward at this time?

And 'radical Christians' who might perceive their relation to scripture (and to sacrament) more critically might ponder the possibility of for e.g. learning how to take up some feminist liturgical practice of (to echo Letty Russell)<sup>35</sup> 'talking back to the tradition' around their reading of scripture, or postcolonial strategies of contrapuntal reading as they think about what use of the Bible<sup>36</sup> might be like both in communal gatherings on-line and/or in-person. Again, there's nothing in this that we needed to wait for a pandemic or an on-line platform to explore.

These two examples—daily prayer, and bible reading—are just starting reminders that there is much more than eucharist to sacramental and liturgical spirituality. Perhaps the current pandemic (endemic?) and/or the digital environment might help us to make a larger liturgical spirituality our own—however impeded we may have been by hierarchies, closed circles, lurking clericalisms, the unwitting narrowness of Parish Communion, all deleterious long before the advent of COVID-19. What it might now be possible to discover/recover, we will do well not to lose whenever the 'new normal' appears.

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<sup>32</sup> *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: WJKP, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>34</sup> *The Annotated Luther, Vol. 2: Word and Faith*, cited by Lathrop, 'Thinking Again', 16.

<sup>35</sup> See Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Church in Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993), where this theme that runs across her work is particularly in focus.

<sup>36</sup> See Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 69–87.

*Some questions:*

- 1. 'Why is that in spite of hundreds of thousands of eucharistic celebrations, Christians continue as selfish as before?'*
- 2. 'What is it that people are missing that online worship is providing?'*
- 3. What has been lost—or gained—on-line in terms of public service?*
- 4. What has been lost—or gained—on-line in terms of participation by all the people?*
- 5. What pre-Covid 'antiliturgica' would it be good never to see again?*
- 6. What have you discovered/recovered (digitally or otherwise) towards a larger liturgical spirituality?*