



# Diversity of Eucharistic Ritual in COVID-2019 Context

*A comparative study of CITAM Valley Road and PCEA St Andrew's in Nairobi, Kenya*

Samwel Kiuguini NDUATI

ORCID: 0009-0009-3141-0057  
Egerton University, Nairobi, Kenya  
*nduatisam1973@gmail.com*

Linda OCHOLA-ADOLWA

ORCID: 0000-0003-0539-8989  
International Leadership University,  
Nairobi, Kenya  
*lindaochola@gmail.com*

## Abstract

Discussing diversity in the celebration of the Eucharistic ritual in COVID-2019 contexts, this is a comparative study of CITAM (Christ is the Answer Ministries) Valley Road assembly and St. Andrew's PCEA (Presbyterian Church of East Africa) in Nairobi, Kenya. COVID-2019 had a great impact on the order of worship in Christian churches across the world. Churches were closed down at times. Whereas CITAM Valley Road administered the Eucharist in the virtual space, St Andrew's PCEA did not adopt virtual Eucharist and had to wait until the lockdown prohibiting church meetings was lifted. This ethnographic study was carried out in Nairobi County at CITAM Valley Road and St. Andrew's PCEA over a period of six months from late 2021 to early 2022. The methodological approach taken by the researchers was a blend of ethnography and grounded theology. Data was collected through virtual ethnography, participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings from the study demonstrated an emerging trend of administering the Eucharist digitally as the Church in Kenya navigated both continuity and change. The findings also revealed the fact that religious change advances not suddenly, or as a single complete change, but in specific expressions that are local and distinct. The researchers posit that in the PCEA, believers could not imagine themselves administering virtual Eucharist in their homes; in CITAM also some Christians felt that administering the Eucharist in the virtual space was different from when it was administered in the physical space.

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### Résumé

Cette étude comparative porte sur la diversité de la célébration du rituel eucharistique dans les contextes COVID-2019. Elle porte sur deux congrégations religieuses différentes, toutes deux situées à Nairobi, au Kenya : l'assemblée *CITAM* (*Christ is the Answer Ministries* ['Le Christ est la Réponse Ministères]) qui se réunit sur la rue *Valley Road* et l'église de S' André *PCEA* (*Presbyterian Church of East Africa* ['Église Presbytérienne d'Afrique du l'Est']). Le COVID-2019 a eu un impact considérable sur le déroulement du culte dans les églises chrétiennes du monde entier. Des églises ont parfois été fermées. Alors que le *CITAM Valley Road* a administré l'eucharistie dans l'espace virtuel, *PCEA* de S' André n'a pas adopté l'eucharistie virtuelle et a dû attendre que la fermeture interdisant les réunions d'église soit levée. Cette étude ethnographique a été menée dans le comté de Nairobi au *CITAM Valley Road* et à *PCEA* de S' André sur une période de six mois, de fin 2021 à début 2022. L'approche méthodologique adoptée par les chercheurs est un mélange d'ethnographie et de théologie ancrée. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'une ethnographie virtuelle, d'une observation participante, d'entretiens et de discussions de groupe. Les résultats de l'étude ont démontré l'émergence d'une tendance à administrer l'eucharistie numériquement alors que l'Église du Kenya naviguait à la fois dans la continuité et le changement. Les résultats ont également révélé le fait que le changement religieux ne se produit pas soudainement, ni comme un seul changement complet, mais dans des expressions spécifiques qui sont locales et distinctes. Les chercheurs avancent que dans le *PCEA*, les croyants ne pouvaient pas s'imaginer administrer l'eucharistie virtuelle dans leurs maisons ; dans le *CITAM* également, certains chrétiens estimaient que l'administration de l'eucharistie dans la salle de bain était une pratique qui ne pouvait pas se faire à l'extérieur de la maison.

### Resumo

Discutindo a diversidade na celebração do ritual eucarístico em contextos COVID-2019, este é um estudo comparativo de duas congregações eclesiais diferentes, ambas em Nairobi, Quênia: a assembleia *CITAM* (*Christ is the answer ministries* ['Cristo é a Reposta Ministérios']) ue se reúne na estrada *Valley Road* e a igreja de St André *PCEA* (*Presbyterian Church of East Africa* ['Igreja Presbiteriana da África Oriental']). A COVID-2019 teve um grande impacto na ordem do culto nas igrejas cristãs de todo o mundo. Por vezes, as igrejas foram encerradas. Enquanto o *CITAM Valley Road* administrava a Eucaristia no espaço virtual, a *PCEA* de St André não adoptou a Eucaristia virtual e teve de esperar que o confinamento que proibia as reuniões da igreja

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fosse levantado. Este estudo etnográfico foi realizado no condado de Nairobi, no *CITAM Valley Road* e no *PCEA* de St André, durante um período de seis meses, entre o final de 2021 e o início de 2022. A abordagem metodológica adoptada pelos investigadores foi uma mistura de etnografia e teologia fundamentada. Os dados foram recolhidos através de etnografia virtual, observação participante, entrevistas e discussões em grupos de discussão. As conclusões do estudo demonstraram uma tendência emergente de administrar a Eucaristia digitalmente à medida que a Igreja no Quênia navegava tanto na continuidade como na mudança. Os resultados também revelaram o facto de que a mudança religiosa não avança subitamente, ou como uma única mudança completa, mas em expressões específicas que são locais e distintas. Os investigadores afirmam que, no *PCEA*, os crentes não se imaginavam a administrar a Eucaristia virtual nas suas casas; no *CITAM*, também alguns cristãos sentiam que administrar a Eucaristia nas casas de família era uma tarefa difícil.

**Keywords**

Eucharist, CITAM, COVID-2019, PCEA

**Mots-clés**

Eucharistie, CITAM, COVID-2019, PCEA

**Palavras-chave**

Eucaristia, CITAM, COVID-2019, PCEA

**Introduction**

The Eucharist — also known as Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, the Mass, and the Divine Liturgy — is a sacred time of fellowship with God and with one another, where believers remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.<sup>1</sup> The Lord's Supper has always been and “remains the central Christian ritual. It celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – whose death is at the heart of the gospel of salvation.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself instituted Holy Communion, as seen in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Mathew, Mark, and Luke). In the Matthean account, Jesus instituted the Communion in the following way:

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph N. McMichael, *Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Edison Muhindo Kalengyo, *Celebrating the Lord's Supper: Ending the Eucharistic Famine*, 4. Baptism, of course, is equally central to Christian faith and practice — but baptism is intended as a single event, whereas we are intended to partake of the Lord's Supper repeatedly.

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Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matt 26:26–29, RSV).

Paul adds the following saying of Jesus from the tradition he had received: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembers of me" (1 Cor 11:25, RSV). Across Christian traditions, Holy Communion symbolizes Christ's death, participation in the benefits of Christ's death, spiritual nourishment, the unity of believers, the affirmation of Christ's love for Christians, Christ's blessings of salvation and the affirmation of a Christian's faith in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Around the world, the pandemic had an immeasurable effect on ecclesial life, as has been widely studied.<sup>4</sup> Following the first reported case of the coronavirus epidemic in Kenya in March 2020, religious and other social gatherings were suspended to contain the spread of the virus. Where possible, social gatherings including churches, mosques, temples, weddings, and burials were discouraged. As an alternative, social media and virtual meetings were recommended as a way to maintain devotion and worship. The goal of this was that congregants were encouraged to pray and worship from their homes to prevent exposure to the virus. While many churches made technological adaptations to ecclesial life during the pandemic — some enthusiastically, others reluctantly — it is generally clear that "the use of technologies is not as much a new way of being church as an adaptive practice to maintain the connection."<sup>5</sup> The longterm impact, of course, remains to be seen. While there are many

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 988.

<sup>4</sup> Articles are too numerous to list. Notable books specific to the impact of COVID-19 on Christian faith and practice specifically in Africa include, e.g., Mookgo Solomon Kgatle and Collium Banda, eds., *Pastoral Interventions During the Pandemic: Pentecostal Perspectives on Christian Ministry in South Africa*; Harvey C. Kwiyani and Joseph Ola, eds., *Wash and Pray: African Theological Discourse on COVID-19*; Martin Munyao, Joseph Muutuki, Patrick Musembi, and Daniel Kaunga, eds., *The African Church and COVID-19: Human Security, the Church, and Society in Kenya* [editors' note: this text was reviewed in vol. 1, no. 1 of this journal]; Emiola Nihinlola and Folashade Oloyede, eds., *The Church & the COVID-19 Pandemic*; and Owajaiye, Babatomiwa M. *Evangelical Response to the Coronavirus Lockdown: (Insights from the Evangelical Church Winning All)*.

<sup>5</sup> Geomon K. George et al., "Lament in the City," 45.

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published studies regarding the the pandemic's impact on Christian faith and practice, its effects on participation in the Eucharist has received less attention.

**Administering Eucharist Virtually at St. Andrew's PCEA during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

During the lockdown of the churches in Kenya, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa did not administer Holy Communion for a period of several months. This was despite the fact that historically, the Presbyterian church of East Africa had celebrated Holy Communion once a month as corroborated in the earliest records of the St. Andrew's Church. The St. Andrew's church leadership noted that the impact of virtual meetings and the absence of the ritual of Holy Communion resulted in decreased emotional solidarity among church members. The youth service media team articulated similar views in a focus group discussion, noting that interaction with others in a virtual space was limited. As a result, the emotional solidarity or warmth experienced in gathering physically and in sharing rituals such as Holy Communion were all but non-existent. To assess the perceptions of the church members with regard to the impact of virtual services on the worship experience, the church members were asked which practices could not be substituted by the virtual space. One of the practices they highlighted was Holy Communion. They noted that the absence of Holy Communion from their experience affected their sense of belonging. The absence of the opportunity to gather and ask for God's forgiveness and to receive absolution in community as well as to pray together and to eat the bread and drink the wine seems to have impacted on the sense of belonging and communality experienced by the members of the church.

To compare the differences between the physical worship experience and the virtual worship experience, congregants were asked to indicate the degree of the emotional solidarity experienced in both. The respondents consistently noted that "it is hard to interact with others when one is watching virtually." Thus a common view among the interviewees was that community and fellowship would be lost if the church were to remain totally in the virtual space. A recurrent theme in the discussions was a sense that the beauty of fellowship and the warmth of the people that encouraged the faith of members to grow was missing from the virtual experience.

When the church reopened partially, allowing limited numbers to come to church services, the requirement to maintain social distancing affected the administration of communion. Contrary to expectations, there was no uniform way prescribed by the church in which communion should be administered. Kenya's Ministry of Health provided guidelines in consultation with religious institutions including the PCEA. Broadly, these guidelines included the wearing of masks in public space and the washing of hands with soap and running water.

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Many churches including St. Andrew's Church provided these facilities. St. Andrew's and other churches also provided clearly demarcated seating spaces to enable the congregants maintain a physical distance of a meter from one another. The mode of administering communion also changed to accommodate COVID protocols of minimizing physical contact. The congregants at first had to pick the bread or wafers up with a spatula and dip the cup in a basin with water after partaking of the elements.

**Administering Eucharist Virtually at CITAM Valley Road during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

In a similar way, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a pastoral and theological challenge to CITAM (Christ is the Answer Ministries) congregation on Valley Road because of the containment measures which led to the closure of all physical gatherings at least for a time. CITAM Valley Road had to adopt new strategies to maintain a sense of community, whilst adhering to health protocols provided by the state. Besides the struggle to preach to and reach the congregants virtually, CITAM Valley Road Church also struggled with the administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion in the virtual space. In traditions such as CITAM Valley Road, where the altar and the clergy remained the focal point of worship, there were two main options. The first was to distribute the pre-blessed elements to the congregation the day before so that communicant members could receive them together in real time. This, however, posed health risks and severe legal repercussions based on the laws of the country. The second alternative, which was adopted by CITAM Valley Road Church and in which one of the researchers also participated, facilitated a virtual blessing of the bread and wine supplied by the households themselves.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the government in Kenya mandated that only "essential services" remain open. Worship was considered to be an essential service. This dealt an irreparable blow for churches and their leaders. Some pastors — especially Pentecostal ones — resisted this move by the Government. They met physically with congregants against the moratorium. Others, secretly hoping for things to return to normal in a few days, became complacent. In this latter group, the transition to an online format soon picked up as people became desperate for spiritual and clerical guidance. Even the most reluctant of pastors realized that this was no time for a sabbatical especially after noticing the rapid growth of online worship services.

**St. Andrew's Church and CITAM Valley Road: Historical Comparison**

There are important reasons for choosing St. Andrew's PCEA Church and CITAM Valley Road when researching the different ways in which churches addressed the administration of Holy Communion during the legal suspension

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of physical gatherings. One of these lies in the basic difference between St. Andrew's PCEA and CITAM Valley Road Church.

To begin with, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa is one of the four largest denominations in Kenya with about four million members in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.<sup>6</sup> By 1929, the number of converts had risen to over 5,000. Since 1935, PCEA pastors have been trained at St. Paul's United College alongside Anglican and Methodist clergy. The PCEA has played and continues to play an important role in Kenya, having pioneered in educational and medical work. PCEA founded the first hospital in Kenya. The church currently sponsors over 700 primary and secondary schools across the country. In terms of its online presence, the Nairobi region has nine presbyteries. A total of fifty-seven parishes within these presbyteries have online services and only fifteen do not have an online service.

The Presbyterian Church of East Africa grew out of the work of the Church of Scotland starting in 1891.<sup>7</sup> Preston provides an in-depth analysis of the historical beginnings of the PCEA Church.<sup>8</sup> The first service connected with the Scots church was conducted in May 1908. The foundation stone of St. Andrew's church in Nairobi was laid in 1910 with the involvement of both the foreign mission and the colonial committee. The church continued to grow under its successive ministers even against the backdrop of the world war of 1939–1945. In its earlier years under the Rev. Howieson, the church grew both through missions to various parts of Kenya and Uganda as well as through monthly wireless broadcast services and by the congregational magazine which the minister edited. Whereas the Presbyterian Church of East Africa came into being as a mission church founded by the white settlers and reflects the liturgy and structures of the Church of Scotland, some aspects of members' African culture have been retained. These include the use of vernacular language for worship, the use of dance as an expression of worship, and the practice of communal eating and drinking, particularly in the context of the district fellowships, but also on special occasions in the congregation, to enhance the sense of community. Khasandi-Telewa notes that the Scottish missionaries embraced the use of the local vernacular to enable the new converts to read and understand the Bible clearly.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that for the PCEA in general, even though many years have passed, the use of vernacular is still a unique characteristic of the PCEA churches even in highly cosmopolitan urban areas,

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<sup>6</sup> PCEA, "About Us," n.d., <https://PCEA.or.ke/about-us/>

<sup>7</sup> PCEA, "Our History," n.d., <https://PCEA.or.ke/about-us/>

<sup>8</sup> David Preston, *History of the Colonial Mission of the Church of Scotland*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Vicky Khasandi-Telewa, "'She Worships at the Kikuyu Church': The Influence of Scottish Missionaries on Language in Worship and Education among African Christians."

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such as Nairobi, where St. Andrew's Church is located. Whereas this team of researchers did not observe the use of vernacular language at PCEA St. Andrew's Church in particular, PCEA St. Andrew's predominantly remains the preserve a single community or language group, the Kikuyu. This means that the aspect of a shared way of life, shared values and obligations, shared meanings and understanding remains vibrant even the midst of the apparent formality of the church processes and procedures.

On the other hand, Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) began about fifty years later, in 1959 when Nairobi Pentecostal Church (NPC) was founded as a multi-ethnic church grounded in the Word of God and sound doctrine.<sup>10</sup> The initial congregation which became CITAM was established as a ministry of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). In September 1960, the congregation moved to Valley Road where the present CITAM Valley Road campus is located. In 2003, Nairobi Pentecostal Church changed its name to Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM). By 2016, CITAM had a total of eighteen assemblies: seven located in Nairobi (Valley Road, Woodley, Parklands, Karen, Thika Road, Buru, and Embakasi), four within the environs of the greater Nairobi area (Ngong Town, Kiserian/Rongai, Athi River, and Thika Town), four in other towns (Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret, and Kapsabet), one in Namibia, and two outside of Africa (Romania and USA). Within Kenya, CITAM runs mission stations in Marsabit, Isiolo, and Turkana Counties, with additional outreach to the Rendille, Borana, Burji, Gabra, Elmolo, Samburu, and Turkana communities. CITAM Media comprises radio and TV stations which also stream online. The radio station, Hope FM, has become a premier station with a large listenership in Nairobi and its environs, Mombasa, Western Kenya, and streaming to other parts of the world. CITAM Valley Road church has grown from a small assembly with a morning service attendance of about twenty to thirty people in 1959 to an estimated attendance today of 45,000 and more than 250 regular staff.

The phenomenal growth of the Nairobi Pentecostal Church can be clearly seen. Among other factors, the growth of CITAM can be attributed to its focus on evangelism, which has been expressed through a variety of approaches including the adoption of cyberspace long before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. CITAM Valley Road in particular had already invested heavily in the equipment necessary to stream its content live through various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube. Consequently, the use of the virtual space to administer Holy Communion was embraced quickly by CITAM Valley Road which had already adopted online services long before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. St. Andrew's Church however, like

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<sup>10</sup> Christ is the Answer Ministries [CITAM], *2016–2015 Strategic Plan*, 4.



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many other mainline Churches, found itself in a dilemma on how Holy Communion could be administered in the virtual space.<sup>11</sup> The PCEA primarily establishes new congregations in person. This strategy involves existing congregations starting new ones when there are enough potential members nearby.

**St. Andrew's and CITAM Valley Road: Theological Similarities around the Eucharist**

Nonetheless, there are enough similarities between St. Andrew's and CITAM Valley Road to warrant a worthwhile comparison. Both St. Andrew's and CITAM Valley Road share a common Protestant understanding of the Eucharist, based on a symbolic and spiritual presence of Christ. John Calvin and other reformers argued that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper did not physically change into the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation), nor did they somehow contain the body and blood of Christ. But they symbolized the body and blood of Christ, and they gave a visible sign of the fact that Christ Himself was truly present. Today most Protestants would say, in addition to the fact that the bread and the wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ, that Christ is also spiritually present in a special way as Christians partake of bread and wine.

**Eucharist and Ritual theory**

Ritual theories assert that focused interaction, which these theories refer to as ritual, is at the heart of all social dynamics.<sup>12</sup> Rituals generate group emotions which are linked to symbols. These symbols form the basis for beliefs, thinking, morality, and culture. People use the capacity for thought, beliefs, and strategy to create emotion, which in turn generates interactions in the future. This cycle

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that across the PCEA as a denomination, there was no single prescribed way to administer Holy Communion after the church resumed physical gatherings. Once congregations began gathering again, the ministers exercised a lot of creativity around that time including pre-packed communion. Pre-packed communion as an approach has been preserved to this day due to the ease and efficiency, in spite of its greater expense. While the clergy were given a communication to administer communion in a way that ensures the health of the congregants, there was no one particular prescribed way. In addition, there was no communication forbidding virtual administration of the Holy Communion. Some congregations silently allowed the families to take communion. If a family took communion, no one chastised them or consider them to be out of order. Some families took communion by themselves but not officially. There were conversations around how long this could be continued. If COVID-19 had extended, how was this to happen?

<sup>12</sup> Erika Summers-Effler, "Ritual Theory," 135.

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forms patterns of interaction over time. These patterns are the most basic structural force that organizes society.<sup>13</sup>

Durkheim was one of the first to put forward a strong theory of ritual and emotion, building his theory on ethnographic accounts of the ritual behavior of aborigines in central Australia.<sup>14</sup> Durkheim investigated the mechanisms that held society together from many angles, focusing on religious ritual, and ultimately arguing that ritual is the fundamental mechanism that holds a society together. He provided a powerful theory of the role of ritual in group life. He illustrated how religious ritual leads to increased interaction, especially focused, intense, and rhythmic interaction. Durkheim described how rituals generate emotional arousal, which he referred to as collective effervescence. Collective effervescence is experienced as a heightened awareness of group membership as well as a feeling that an outside powerful force has sacred significance.

We argue that the Eucharist fits into Durkheim's definition of a ritual, given that it is a focused interaction that lies at the heart of the social dynamics between Christian believers. In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christian group emotions are linked to the bread and wine as symbols, thereby forming the basis for beliefs, thinking, morality, and culture. In this way, Christians use their capacity for thought, beliefs, and strategy to create emotion-generating interactions in the future. During observance of the Eucharist, the Christian community gathers, asks God's forgiveness for its sins, and listens to readings from the Bible including a reading from one of the Gospels. A sermon or homily may be preached, and the community prays together. Bread and wine (or substitutionary elements) are brought to the table (called 'the altar' in some traditions), the celebrant prays a Eucharistic Prayer, and in some traditions everyone recites the Lord's Prayer together. The community then receives the consecrated bread and wine. At the end of the service, the community is sent out into the world as a 'living sacrifice' to live and work to God's praise and glory.

Given the historical and doctrinal significance of the Eucharist as the central ritual of the Church (along with Baptism), handed down by Christ himself, the difference in the responses of St. Andrew's PCEA church and CITAM Valley Road is particularly curious, especially given that they were each functioning in the same geographical context of Nairobi and were facing the same global challenges as other churches across the world. We explored the concerns behind their different responses as we sought to understand the emerging trends in the administration of the Eucharist during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>13</sup> Summers-Effler, "Ritual Theory," 135.

<sup>14</sup> Emile Durkheim, "The elementary forms of religious life."

## **Findings**

Two issues were identified arising from the divergent positions adopted by CITAM Valley Road and the St. Andrew's Church, PCEA. The first was the question of distinguishing between communicants and the non-communicants. The PCEA does not celebrate an open Holy Communion table. St. Andrew's Church offers communion exclusively for confirmed members. From the 1950s, participation in Holy Communion was restricted to a specific group called communicants. Data from archival records point out that a period of instruction was undertaken for adults as well as for young people in several high schools including the Kenya High School for girls, among others. Thereafter, an application for admission to become communicants was made. Once the minister was satisfied with the knowledge and professions of the applicants, prescribed questions were put to the applicants and upon satisfactory answers, the applicants were confirmed in their baptism through prayer and in the name of the kirk session and admitted to communion.<sup>15</sup> These early records indicate that the process by which individuals were admitted to the church was quite clearly laid down. Similarly, the early records of St. Andrew's Church indicate that the practice of the church was to prepare and update a roll of members and adherents. The roll was to be updated by a committee composed of the moderator and two others. To accommodate the growth of the church, it became necessary to separate the rolls of each district, overseen by an elder. In the past, the practice was to make the communion roll available for members to scrutinize and to make changes in case of mistakes. The absence of communion during COVID may be explained by the fact that in a virtual service, there would be no easy way to distinguish between those confirmed and those not confirmed and no easy way to hold services for communicants alone. It would have been possible for anyone from among those following on YouTube, Facebook, and the church hub, to participate in Holy Communion — not all of whom were necessarily communicants. Although the respondents acknowledged that church was not limited to a physical building or the physical gathering of its members, those interviewed specifically noted that some of the practices that could not be substituted in virtual forms included weddings, confirmation, baptisms, and Holy Communion. Despite the fact that the members of St. Andrew's Church who participated in the research felt that the virtual church met the spiritual needs in the same way as the physical service, nevertheless given that they could not access Communion except through i- person presence in church services, they also acknowledged that certain elements that would be lost if the church were to totally remain in the virtual space including Confirmation and Communion. In the course of the research period, one

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<sup>15</sup> David Preston, *History of the Colonial Mission of the Church of Scotland*, 74. Note that 'kirk' is the Scots English word for 'church.'

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ordained minister remarked: "Imagine, we have not had Communion since last year April!"

CITAM Valley Road took a different position and opted to administer Holy Communion virtually. Most Protestants agree that only those who believe in Christ should participate in it,<sup>16</sup> and many Protestants also argue that only those who have been baptized should participate in the Lord's Supper. However, some churches practice what is called *open communion* while others practice a 'members only' *closed communion*. Because they practice closed communion, PCEA congregations bar a visiting Roman Catholic from the Table and Roman Catholic congregations bar visiting Christians who are not Roman Catholic from participating in Holy Communion.<sup>17</sup> While most who practice open communion only limit communion to the baptized, others object to such restriction advancing an argument that 'genuine believers' should be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper whether baptized or not.<sup>18</sup> CITAM Valley Road made the decision to practice open communion, leaving the choice of whether or not to participate virtually in communion in the hands of those participating, without being concerned as to whether participants were CITAM members or even whether they had been baptized.

A second emerging issue was the question of who should administer the Eucharist. Some recognize that scripture gives no explicit teaching about who should administer communion and therefore conclude that there is freedom to decide on what will benefit the believers in the Church.<sup>19</sup> To guard against abuse, some who take this view assume that a responsible leader ought to oversee the administering of the Lord's Supper. However, there is no reason other believers cannot assist the leader to distribute the elements. This was the view espoused by CITAM Valley Road in its decision to administer Holy Communion virtually. Other traditions limit the role of presiding over the Table to particular ordained individuals.

At St. Andrew's Church, as well as the Presbyterian church of East Africa in general, the administration of the Holy Communion requires the elders or presbyters. It is the elders who prepare the communion and then pass it on to

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<sup>16</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 996.

<sup>17</sup> Historically, in the Presbyterian tradition the practice of closed communion was referred to as 'fencing the Table.'

<sup>18</sup> The question as to whether someone who has refused baptism can nonetheless be a 'genuine believer' is beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, many congregations — whether practicing closed communion or open communion — operate under a *de facto* 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, and announce that communion is only for members or only for the baptized but then will serve anyone who wants to be served.

<sup>19</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 998.

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the members. The role of supporting the minister in the administration of the Holy Communion is one of the reasons why elders are ordained. Uncertainty around the question of whether a member of the church alone could expressly take communion without the presence of an elder was the principal concern for PCEA leadership. The challenge was more ecclesiastical and traditional than theological as theologically the minister can offer communion without assistance. In church practice, the PCEA minister administers communion with the support of an elder under normal circumstances. This is similar to baptism, during which a minister is also paired with an elder. In traditional PCEA practice, Holy Communion is a sacrament administered by an elder and minister together. That is the order. During the pandemic shutdowns, it was difficult to find a way to administer communion since the minister was not in the same place as the members. In the practice of the St. Andrew's Church and the PCEA as a whole, the minister can double as an elder, so he is not limited in terms of administering communion if there is no elder present. Conversely however, although the minister is sufficient by himself, the PCEA elders cannot offer communion on their own. For example, the district fellowships in the past have been one of the contexts within which Holy Communion can be administered in the presence of a minister and an elder. In this regard, the question arose as to whether the head of a family could stand in for an elder in the absence of the elder or whether the faith of a believer could suffice in the absence of an elder.

One important question still remains to be answered. Given that there was no evidence of members missing a particular grace while they did not access communion for several months, what is the value of communion for PCEA members? What then is the necessity of Holy Communion, given that during the COVID-19 pandemic church members did not access Holy Communion for several months? What was the efficacy of Holy Communion if people went on with their lives and missed no grace in the months when no communion was taken? Was it just a ritual whose value could be mediated in another way if it could not be done?

Perhaps, the critical question is the conceptualization of administering Eucharist in the virtual space. What was the perception of Christians on the virtual administration of Eucharist? The evidence from this study suggests that some Christians (from St. Andrew's PCEA) were completely disoriented when they stayed for some months without partaking of the Holy Communion. This study has raised an important question on whether the urgency to receive or administer the elements in isolation concealed an even greater pursuit, namely, the search for God-with-us. This question suggests that if Christians see God as not dwelling in a building, then everything is understood as sacramental. In this sense, he is deeply immersed within the realm of human and cosmic beings.

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There is great need therefore to have a renewed understanding of sacrament and especially in the administration of Eucharist. While some may have temporarily experienced a pandemic-induced “eucharistic famine”, perhaps others did not ‘miss’ participation in Holy Communion due to “a general ignorance of its importance and its benefits” among many Africans.<sup>20</sup>

Although the current study is based on a relatively short period of study within the two churches, between October 2021 and March 2022, it has shown that CITAM Valley Road and St Andrew’s Church, PCEA adopted different approaches to the administration of Holy Communion when physical contact became untenable as a result of the containment measures introduced by the governments of the World. These included physical closure of religious institutions. This paper contributes to our understanding of the impact of the adoption of virtual church services on the unchangeable constants of Christian worship.

The pandemic lockdowns brought about an onslaught on a global scale triggering a universal revolution with reference to social and ecclesial norms. Aiava asserts that they

prompted a retrospective turn to ‘what was’ as the ‘new normal’ had become overrun by physical isolation. Things formerly taken for granted, for instance, communal worship, face-to-face learning, or even simple things like shaking hands, stimulated an inevitable rethinking of normalcy in both public and private spheres. Even for countries and cultures like those in the Pacific, where subsistence living is predominant, a ripple effect was clearly visible. Some more than others had finally realized how far ecology had been enslaved by the economy and worse, how far the Christian faith had been systemically isolated from both.<sup>21</sup>

Administration of Holy Communion was greatly affected despite its place as a venerated sacrament in a Christian life. Its role in the Christian life is vital:

The sacrament of Holy Communion is a foundational resource for the life of faith, an imperative of our Lord, and one of the key ways in which our belonging within the body of Christ is affirmed. It also plays a pivotal part in shaping the church’s mission and witness in the world, by calling members of the body of Christ to the daily practice of sacramental living.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kalengyo, *Celebrating the Lord’s Supper*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Faafetai Aiavā, “Pacific Christianity online or on the line? Renewing church, sacrament and worship amidst the pandemic,” 129.

<sup>22</sup> Wessel Bentley, “Celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion during COVID-19: A Methodist perspective,” 129.

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The proper way to take part in that Holy Communion is to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic Bread and Wine both *spiritually* (in faith) and *physically* (with the body), *oraliter* (with one's mouth), as some reformers put it the latter dimension. The COVID-19 pandemic would not allow this to continue. However, the use of technology helped the Churches to appeal to the virtual space. Virtual spaces became innovative places of worship and as Aiava (2022) posits, it became apparent that if interpersonal communication through virtual spaces can communicate God's grace and compassion to others, then it too can be a place of worship.<sup>23</sup> Administering Eucharist as a Christian Sacrament had to have a new meaning in the virtual space. 'Sacrament' is frequently glossed as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace."<sup>24</sup> According to Aiava, this "Augustinian formula . . . has served the church for eons" and "in the context of ecclesiology," Christians seldom negate this teaching.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

We set out to study the emerging trends of the Eucharist and its administration in two faith communities in Kenya. Given the impact of the containment measures of COVID-19, we have discussed the fact that this fellowship among believers was not available during the covidian lockdown of churches, which resulted in divergent approaches to addressing the issue. We have shown that there are differences in terms of the adoption of virtual services on the worship of PCEA and CITAM amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These distinctives find their basis in the differing ecclesiologies and sacramental theologies held by the PCEA, is a historic mission church, and CITAM, a Pentecostal church. These case studies may indicate that it was easier for a Pentecostal church, which shares many characteristics with AICs, to inculcate ecclesial practice to a new situation, while a mission church was more bound by its inherited tradition.

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<sup>23</sup> Aiavā, "Pacific Christianity online or on the line?," 136.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., so Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, 285.

<sup>25</sup> Aiavā, "Pacific Christianity online or on the line?," 131.

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<sup>26</sup> A photocopy of the manuscript is held at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi.