

Article

Essential Workers, Essential Services? *Leitourgia* in Light of Lockdown

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Abstract: Within days of the outbreak of COVID-19, the language of “essential work” and “essential workers” became commonplace in public discourse. “Church workers” and their in-person liturgical services were largely deemed “non-essential”, and most assemblies shifted worship to online platforms. While some reflection on this virtual “church work” has appeared in the intervening months, there has been less evaluation of the gathered assembly’s absence from the public square, along with the contribution its liturgical work might offer in interpreting the pandemic and its effects. This essay imagines a post-COVID-19 agenda for liturgical studies that focuses on a recovery of Christian liturgy as public, in-person, and “essential” service done for the sake of the *polis*—a public example of “church doing world”—that proposes a countersign to the inequalities of contemporary consumer culture laid bare in these last months. It begins by engaging in dialogue with the *leitourgia* of groups who insisted on the essential nature of their public service, in particular the public protests against police violence that marked the summer of 2020. In doing so, it seeks ways liturgical assemblies might better propose a “public theology” of God’s work in the world understood as the *concursum Dei*, the divine accompanying of creation and humanity within it.

Keywords: public theology; liturgy; eucharist; COVID-19; pandemic; assembly; liturgical theology; protest; Black Lives Matter



Citation: Cones, Bryan. 2021. Essential Workers, Essential Services? *Leitourgia* in Light of Lockdown. *Religions* 12: 101. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020101>

Academic Editor: Edward Foley
Received: 14 January 2021
Accepted: 29 January 2021
Published: 2 February 2021

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1. Introduction: What Is “Essential Work”, and Who Bears Its Risks?

The outbreak of COVID-19 made immediately commonplace the language of what is “essential” in terms of both work and access to goods and services. Those judged “essential workers”¹ included health care providers, first responders, public servants, and many retail sector employees. This designation unveiled the relative value assigned to the work and workers required to maintain “the essential”: Many roles are poorly compensated, and many workers belong to gender, racial, and ethnic groups that have suffered historic and systemic policies of inequality and exclusion. These “essential workers” were assigned to take the risk of providing essential services during the pandemic while simultaneously continuing to bear longstanding injustices based on race, gender, and class.²

“Church work” in its customary, in-person forms fell among what was deemed “non-essential” and thus exempt from such risks; churches were even forbidden from engaging them. My own context in this case was as pastor of a mid-size, suburban Episcopal church, which was primarily White, largely professional, financially secure with some exceptions, generally “progressive” in terms of politics and theological outlook, if not particularly politically active. Few of us were counted among the “essential workers”, though virtually

¹ See, for example, the [National Conference of State Legislatures’ \(2020\)](#) description of the broad range of work deemed “essential” across industries.

² A U.S. National Institutes of Health Study, for example, connected the higher rates of death due to COVID-19 for non-Hispanic Blacks directly to their overrepresentation in occupations judged “essential”, especially in the U.S. Midwest. Researchers conclude, “The racial disparities among essential workers in the United States that we highlight are a byproduct of longstanding systemic racism and structural inequalities, combined with a lack of public policy aimed at protecting the lives of essential workers who risk their lives daily to protect and/or provide for others” ([Rogers et al. 2020](#), p. 321). The [Institute for Policy Studies \(2020a\)](#), a progressive think tank, provides a broad picture of the uneven effects of the pandemic across a range of marginalized populations.

all members routinely interacted with such workers through their everyday economic activity.

Soon after the suspension of in-person worship, the congregation began a weekly Zoom “liturgy of the word”,³ which provided the primary moment of interpretation, first, of the pandemic with its uneven effects, and second, of the concurrent public responses to police violence against Black bodies. While some of our prayer did attempt to address those events, primarily through the preaching and intercessory “prayers of the people”, its primary audience was members of the church. As I surveyed other local churches, especially others in my Episcopal diocese,⁴ the judgment seemed to hold: From diocesan communications through to the congregational level, the prayer we engaged served primarily as pastoral care for those who took it up, both as a means of maintaining relational connections and of interpreting world events. While preaching and prayer inevitably addressed what was happening “out there”, the conversation was limited to church members in relation to each other and God. It may have been “essential” to us, but likely to few others, nor did it directly engage the “essential workers” at the front lines of exposure to the pandemic and its effects.

What follows is my own attempt to interrogate the limited reach of much Christian liturgy during the COVID-19 pandemic beyond an assembly’s members. It imagines a post-COVID-19 agenda for pastoral liturgical studies⁵ that focuses on a recovery of Christian liturgy as public, in-person, and “essential” service done for the sake of the *polis*. In doing so, the assembly proposes a public example of “church doing world”⁶ that actively engages the inequalities of consumer culture laid bare in these last months and proposes a countersign to the political and economic status quo. I take for granted that Christian liturgy is a form of “public theology”⁷ in dialogue with the world around it undertaken by a “corporate theologian”, the Christian assembly gathered as a “primary symbol”⁸ that refracts God’s work to the wider *polis*. It begins by engaging in dialogue with the *leitourgia* of the secular public protests that marked the summer of 2020 for ways liturgical assemblies might better propose their “public theology”. It concludes by imagining a possible expression of such “essential” *leitourgia* from my then-context in an Episcopal Church in suburban Chicago, Illinois, U.S.

2. What “Work” Have We Been Doing, and for Whom?

Beyond my own context, broader reflection on liturgical prayer in an online environment echoes the contention that common prayer during the pandemic has been largely directed to church members. Among the topics producing widespread commentary, for example, is whether it is possible to celebrate “virtual eucharist”, with concern primarily

³ My own reflections on our online attempts at common prayer can be found in “How Do We Gather Now? What We Have Lost—and Gained—through Virtual Worship” (Cones 2020a).

⁴ A representative example from my own local Episcopal bishop, Jeffrey Lee (2020), suffices, in which he encouraged the churches in his oversight to “a Lenten fast from public worship”, which has since been renewed in various forms.

⁵ Domenico Sartore, developing the work of the late Mark Searle, describes “pastoral liturgical studies” as a three-step task: “(1) an empirical task: a phenomenological description of the event of celebration, explanation of the meaning of the words and deeds that constitute the rite, liturgical attitudes, and the specific assembly’s receptiveness; (2) a hermeneutic task: how symbols work and how symbolic language communicates, and whether our contemporaries effectively engage in communication with them; (3) a critical task: comparison with the results of other disciplines, critical evaluation of the various forms of religious imagination in the various churches, and identification of the various forms in which contemporary liturgy can be alienated and alienating” (Sartore 1998, p. 71). See also Searle (1983).

⁶ The expression evokes Aidan Kavanagh’s oft-quoted claim that liturgy “play[s] extremely hard ball with the world by remaining clearheaded about what the world can and cannot do for itself.” Just prior Kavanagh notes, apropos of the current pandemic, “*Orthodoxia* has every reason to regard a child dead of war or starved by poverty as anything but normal” (Kavanagh 1984, pp. 158–59).

⁷ Elaine Graham provides a helpful guide to the genre of public theology, with a nod to the possibility that liturgy might find a place on her “map”: “Public theology has a ‘performative’ dimension, since actions may speak louder than words” (Graham 2020, p. 14). Edward Foley (2008) gives a more fulsome articulation of the connection between liturgy and public theology. More recently, James Farwell (2020) describes liturgy as a “formation” for public theologians.

⁸ This expression reflects the contention of Robert Hovda through his many “Amen Corner” columns in the journal *Worship*. It was most clearly stated in a document of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (1977, para. 28), Environment and Art in Catholic Worship: “Of all the symbols with which the liturgy deals, none is more important than this assembly of believers.” See also Hovda (1988).

for church members deprived of communion. Most Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed denominational level reflection has discouraged these practices,⁹ drawing attention to the necessity of embodied gathering as the *sine qua non* of eucharist in particular (though not necessarily of other forms of liturgical prayer) and encouraging a focus on the presence of Christ in the proclaimed scripture. Other commentators have taken a different approach, with Deanna Thompson (2020) arguing that, although mediated by technology, a virtual gathering remains embodied. Diana Butler Bass has protested what she judges to be a “forced fast”, contending that “the church”—by which she apparently means the clergy—“has been, in effect, hoarding the bread and wine, restraining the healing beauty of Eucharist when hungry people most need to feast” (Butler Bass 2020). While these arguments may make sense among some Christians, David Jacobsen argues that “to ecclesial outsiders”, such debates may “tend to read like the premise of some home decorating shows on cable: what should be the center of the room, the framed Chagall print or the family heirloom reading desk on the opposite wall?” (Jacobsen 2018, pp. 372–73).

Taken as a whole, then, most liturgical prayer in response to COVID-19 and reflections upon it have focused on the effect of the suspension in gathering on Christian communities. There has been comparatively less reflection on the loss of the assembly’s *leitourgia* in the public sphere, its “essential work” proposing the reign of God as an alternative to the current economic and political order. Nevertheless, the consumer economy has continued to function more or less without major interruption, its inequities further magnified by the pandemic. However, maintaining it has been judged worth the risk of infection among “essential workers”. Their work has yielded immense profits for a few, exacerbating the already overwhelming wealth and income divide across the very race, class and gender lines traced in the judgment of what is “essential work”.¹⁰

The narrow focus among many church commentators on the eucharistic elements or even their absence suggests “eucharist” as yet another “consumable” product functioning, in the words of Carvalhaes, “in tandem, with or against, the economic order” (Carvalhaes 2017, p. 471), though as Belcher (2020) notes, that connection is often veiled. In this case, eucharist does not particularly disrupt or interrogate the marketplace and its effects.¹¹ This congruity calls to mind Daniel Rhodes’ (2020) commentary on the failure of Christian liturgy to engage “disaster capitalism”, through which public goods are privatized to generate profit in response to disaster. Rhodes sees a need for “a liturgy interfused with a counter-politics” (Rhodes 2020, p. 95), but it would be hard to argue that many churches’ “public service” has yet risen to this task in the matter of COVID, much less been ready to bear the risks that might be involved in doing so. This is arguably a “pre-existing condition,” as Carvalhaes (2017, p. 466) makes clear in his description of a “dichotomy” in much liturgical and theological thinking between *doxa* and *praxis*, between congregational prayer and Christian engagement with the world.¹² This was likely no less true before the pandemic, but its widespread yet uneven effects and the inequalities it has magnified have laid bare the limited ability of most Christian *leitourgia* to propose a divine alternative to the economic status quo.

⁹ These reflections are both widespread and widely available. By and large, denominational bodies and theologians have discouraged attempts to celebrate eucharist without gathering in person. See, for example, the Episcopal Church’s Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’ (2020) statement, “On Our Theology of Worship”; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’ (2020) “Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19/Coronavirus”; and “Using Our Rites and Resources” (Anderson et al. 2020) offered by “theologians and scholars of Methodist worship.” Gribben (2020) offers a helpful and wide-ranging evaluation of these in his comments on The Uniting Church in Australia’s decision to permit celebration of online communion. See also The Uniting Church in Australia (2020), “Temporary Arrangements for Holy Communion”.

¹⁰ Institute for Policy Studies (2020b) summarizes the results of studies that document an increase of \$1 trillion among U.S. billionaires through December 2020.

¹¹ Kimberly Hope Belcher argues that there is a direct, if often concealed, connection between sacramental and everyday economic exchanges, with the former proposing an eschatological subversion of the latter: “The Christian sacramental revelation is not the separation of the eschatological from the worldly, but the subversion of the worldly into the eschatological” (Belcher 2020, pp. 17–19).

¹² Elsewhere, Carvalhaes (2020) echoes Tissa Balasuriya, who more than 40 years ago asked, “Why is it that in spite of hundreds of thousands of eucharistic celebrations, Christians continue as selfish as before? Why have the ‘Christian’ Mass going peoples been the most cruel colonizers of human history?” (Balasuriya 1977, p. 2).

At first glance, such challenges seem beyond the reach of any assembly's *leitourgia*, no matter how well intentioned. Nonetheless, as many have argued, Christian liturgy has functioned throughout the ages—for better and for worse—as public acts of theological interpretation, which interact in the public square with those proposed by others.¹³ Hilton Scott (2020b) argues that the pandemic has thrust assemblies into an unusual experience of liminality, in which their primary public theology is no longer able to function as it generally has. He sees this time, and I agree, as a creative, open space for assemblies to seek new forms of contextual *koinonia* and *communitas*, which, in light of the pandemic, received liturgical practices appear limited in their ability to propose.¹⁴ A promising place to engage this creative space is in dialogue¹⁵ with those who refused to comply with the public orders to suspend their *leitourgia* in response to the inequalities unveiled in this time. What adjustments do they propose to Christian liturgy that might amplify an assembly's "public service", even render it "essential"?

3. Learning from Others' *Leitourgia*

Among those refusing to comply with restrictions on in-person gatherings were the millions who gathered to protest police violence against Black bodies. My participation in one of these stirred my own thinking about the *leitourgia* of the churches, a strategy Sharon Fennema (2018) has deployed in her own reflections on marches protesting gentrification in Oakland, California.¹⁶

The march in question gathered several thousand people in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, a center of LGBTQIA+ culture and entertainment. It is, however (as organizers pointed out), one with a history of excluding Black and transgender members of the rainbow. Notably, a majority of those gathered were non-Black, which became clear as the protest unfolded and reflected the city's well-documented racial segregation by "neighborhood",¹⁷ of which I am a part as a White resident of the city's majority White North Side.¹⁸

A number of elements would be familiar to anyone in a church on Sunday. First were the litanies that accompanied the mile-long procession, dominated by "Say their/her/his name", depending on the gender identity of the victim of police violence being named. These were interspersed with broadly familiar chants that mark civil rights protests ("no justice, no peace", "this is what democracy looks like"). The cumulative effect echoed liturgical lament,¹⁹ though in this predominantly White North Side assembly, it also had the

¹³ As Edward Foley notes, "Whether we agree with it or not, societies, cultures, and even countries are already promulgating their own public theologies" (Foley 2008, p. 41).

¹⁴ Hilton Scott proposes in his South African context a renewed understanding of the concept of *ubuntu* ("I am because we are") in light of the indiscriminate nature of COVID-19 infection, "a new status quo that is fully human and therefore able to accept difference and otherness as well as navigate such relationships without discriminating" (Scott 2020b).

¹⁵ Foley argues that dialogue is key to public theology proposed through liturgy, "not simply supplying answers to questions and problems posed by the world, but ritually responsive in the ways it symbolizes, celebrates, and consecrates God's brooding Spirit afoot in the liturgy of the world" (Foley 2008, p. 47).

¹⁶ The connections between liturgy and public protest have long been a thread in liturgical theology, if underdeveloped, at least as a matter of most congregational practice. Harold Leatherland, for example, argues, "I am predisposed to the view that protest is not alien to liturgy, that protest can be uttered liturgically, and that liturgy itself can be considered, from some aspects, as protest" (Leatherland 1974, p. 18).

¹⁷ The reality and effects of racial segregation in Chicago's "city of neighborhoods" are well-documented. See, for example, the joint report of the Metropolitan Planning Council and Urban Institute (2017), "The Cost of Segregation: Lost Income. Lost Lives. Lost Potential."

¹⁸ Michael Jaycox (2017, pp. 307–9) notes the importance of acknowledging the social location one brings to a direct action, particularly as a White person and academic at a Black Lives Matter protest, including the dangers of appropriating the stories of those marginalized by race, gender, or class. For my own part, as a White, queer, and cisgender male Chicagoan, I joined this protest as a regular visitor and participant in the culture of Lakeview, and thus see myself as complicit in the injustices raised in the protest, which I also hope to resist and repair.

¹⁹ Burns (2020) explores the interaction of confession (directed toward individual actions) and lament ("confessing more than sin," or its larger manifestations) in Christian assemblies through the work of Gail Ramshaw. While the former is quite common across the traditions, Burns finds fewer of the latter (apart from Ramshaw's work), which limits many assemblies in their ability to name and mourn much of the inequality the pandemic has unveiled. See also Ramshaw (2017, pp. 22–27). Suna-Koro (2019, p. 34) proposes a recovery of lament as a "a profoundly counter-hegemonic liturgical practice that can empower Christians to name and subvert the polarizing imaginaries of dehumanization, resentment, and hostility" characteristic of anti-migrant and racist policies.

feel of a confession—perhaps in response to a “call” from the march’s Black leadership.²⁰ The embodied juxtaposition between call and response refracted through those racialized identities calls to mind Carvalhaes’s identification of the limits of most “generalized” denominational confessions, which “seldom make us think about real reparations to Black and Indigenous people” (Carvalhaes 2020, p. 30). Unlike most church litanies, however, these arose from various groups within the processing assembly and were often modified in the chanting and were not directed from “the front”. Whatever the character of the litany, it arose from the “body”, not from the “head”. It evoked Aidan Kavanagh’s description of the “many-to-many” interaction characteristic of liturgical prayer as a “social occasion” (the protest) (Kavanagh 1984, pp. 137–39), which he distinguishes from the “one-to-many” interaction of a lecture hall or the “one-to-one” character of a personal conversation. Kavanagh notes that one of the purposes of such a many-to-many “social occasion” is that it produces an “effective symbol of social survival” (Kavanagh 1984, p. 137). This description is particularly apropos of the protest as a “ritual or quasi-liturgical” activity that allows those gathered to “construct and become a narrative-based collective” (Jaycox 2017, p. 310).

Once the procession arrived at a major intersection, the organizer shifted to “presider”, directing this assembly’s attention, proposing and modeling what to do, and yielding to other voices. The call to order began with the presider inviting any Black persons present to come “up to the front”, with the rest of the assembly parting to create an aisle and spontaneously applauding as Black and transgender persons filtered forward. Their appearance at the end of the procession suggested to me the customary place of the vested ordained ministers in an Episcopal procession. While I fear it appears clerical there, in this case, it seemed a felicitous “ordering” of the assembly, with Black and transgender bodies proposed as privileged norms within a primarily White and presumably cisgender assembly.

The presider then proposed the equivalent of an embodied ritual action, instructing those gathered to kneel on the pavement and hold a nearly nine-minute silence to recall George Floyd’s suffocation. While I have experienced such silences in Christian liturgy, the “sacred space” created by contact with asphalt and the press of people gave it a profound anamnetic character, both “embodied and empathetic”, that Fennema finds in Oakland. While it echoed one particular “crucifixion”, it refracted those terrible minutes in a way that made present countless others; it further proposed a vicarious identification with its victims among those, such as myself, who had never experienced its direct effects. As Fennema writes, it was an act of “remembrance and imagination, when we begin to make the connection between the experience of others and our own in a way that affects us . . . reclaiming the space and making visible the people—the many faces of Christ—who have been suppressed or erased” (Fennema 2018, p. 385). Though displaced from Minneapolis, the asphalt common to every American city combined with the bodies pressed against it evoked the character of a liturgical “real symbol”,²¹ The action effectively made present the place of Floyd’s death and referred further to Chicago’s own places of similar deaths.

4. Adjusting an Assembly’s “Public Service”

This example of protest suggests to me some dimensions of liturgical practice that need attention if liturgies are to offer the “essential public service” of a countersign to the political and economic status quo. First among these is a shift in mentality for many assemblies, my own included: We must adopt the attitude that, like a public protest, our work is directed primarily to the *polis*, not the *ekklesia*. The purpose of being “called out”

²⁰ While this interpretation is my own conjecture, one of Jaycox (2017, p. 320) interviewees, “Alice”, who is Black, wondered if White protesters want Black participants “to absolve them of their sin”.

²¹ Michael Skelley, interpreting Karl Rahner, describes a “real symbol” as the “the supreme and primal form of representation in which one reality renders another really present” (Skelley 1991, p. 38). Jaycox (2017, p. 312) also argues that protest is “symbolic action,” which “has the power to mediate the world that can and should exist, but does not yet exist in its fullness, but which through ritual participation in the action already begins to break into our reality.”

is to render a “public service” so essential that “salvation”, incarnationally manifested in the flourishing of those made marginal, depends on it. This will likely require a shift in attitude from seeing worship as the assembly’s work offered to God to understanding it as the *leitourgia* God’s Spirit is groaning to do for the world through the assembly.

Building on that shift in attitude, the correlative need to adjust²² the assembly’s common action and the manner of its address in prayer becomes clear. I would argue that the relative passivity of many assemblies in relation to the world is directly related to the passivity they experience in most liturgical celebrations: Most remain “in their places” from beginning to end; any “marching” is limited to a few designated for that purpose and “chanting” is carefully ordered to certain voices. If liturgy is to be not only an act of public theology or, as Sally Brown (2013) describes it, formation in “discerning the public presence of God”, the manner of its celebration is every bit as important as the words it voices.

Brown’s concern about the weak connection between liturgical practices and public forms of action²³ suggests a need for more accessible “ritual vernacular” (to accompany linguistic ones).²⁴ Such common embodied action can propose the essential relationship between Christian liturgy and Christian mission as manifestations of the church’s participation in the *missio Dei*, which Duraisingh describes as “the already up-and-running mission of God in the world” (Duraisingh 2010, p. 10). While that might lead to an assembly undertaking a public act akin to a protest,²⁵ an imagination shaped to make that connection needs a regular embodied *poiesis*—a ritual vernacular—to, in the words of Charles Fensham, “aid in the formation of collective identity, the creation of free space, the harnessing of emotions, and the shaping of a culture of advocacy and change” (Fensham 2016, p. 158).

In the matter of gathering, then, whenever possible, a more porous entrance from outside the church is in order. In the assembly I served, the “opening procession” obscured this connection by beginning and ending “indoors”, from the front of the space for worship, to the back, and up front again. Nothing suggested the completion of a gathering bearing the “liturgy of the world”²⁶ “in” from “out there”.

A fairly straightforward adjustment would be to begin outside and include a more representative procession not limited to those members of the assembly who have roles of leadership. To the extent that such a procession “orders” the assembly, it should reflect as much as possible the differences gathered, particularly those marginalized either outside or within it. Every assembly bears differences that are shunted to the side or excluded, whether based on age or ability or neurological function, not to mention race and cultural heritage. I have argued elsewhere (Cones 2020b) that these qualities are part of the “text” of any liturgy that can serve as sources for its public theology. The shape of an assembly’s gathering is, in the words of Carvalhaes, an opportunity to “ascribe worthiness, or honor, to somebody or something” (Carvalhaes 2017, p. 477) as the street protest did in calling forward the Black and transgender members of that assembly. Despite the real risks of failure in the Christian assembly, for example, the danger of “tokenism”, the gathering is a

²² I use this term deliberately to evoke Aidan Kavanagh’s definition of liturgical theology: “the adjustment to deep change caused in the assembly by its being brought regularly to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God.” See Kavanagh (1984, p. 74).

²³ Jaycox (2017, p. 339), more trenchantly than Brown, laments that “Catholic practices of incorporation have tended to, at best, capitulate to, or, at worst, amplify and affirm the habituating power of white supremacy,” a judgment that could also be applied to my own Episcopal context.

²⁴ Judith Kubicki, among others, argues that liturgical meaning is “primarily non-discursive and exhibitiv. That is, meaning is not asserted by means of propositional content in worship, but exhibited or manifested in the interplay of symbolic activity” (Kubicki 2006, p. 15). Thus, while the pandemic, its effects, and responses to it may have appeared in “discursive” forms in many liturgies (in preaching and prayers), these meanings lacked an accessible, non-discursive analog in ritual. Fensham argues that ritual, in this case Christian liturgy, can do so by bringing “a kind of insight with wider and more encompassing ethical and moral implications” (Fensham 2016, p. 160).

²⁵ There are many examples of “liturgies after the liturgy” documented by both scholars and practitioners, though I would suggest these remain exceptional among the majority of churches. See, for example, Stewart (2012); Nóda (2017); and Scott (2020a).

²⁶ Karl Rahner proposes God’s self-disclosure in creation as “the terrible and sublime liturgy, breathing of death and sacrifice, which God celebrates and causes to be celebrated in and through human history in its freedom,” which Christian liturgy symbolizes, reflects upon, and interprets. See Rahner (1976, pp. 179–80). See also Skelley (1991, pp. 133–58).

moment for an assembly to state what qualities in itself it proposes to value, particularly differences that have been made marginal.

As to the word and song that gather the assembly, while the “chants” may differ from those found at a protest, the manner of their leadership and performance could better correspond to it. The “call to order”, for example, need not originate from the same voice; indeed, in the case of a procession with some already “in place” and some moving through, the dialogue might be between those groups, laying the groundwork for the “many-to-many” interactions of the liturgy as it unfolds. Intercessory prayer offers further opportunity for active, communal engagement beyond their content. The diversity of voices that entered the room needs refraction in its prayers for the world. There is no reason beyond the logistics of finding enough willing voices for there to be a single “prayer leader”, nor to restrict the prayers themselves to what is printed on a page. The Korean prayer pattern *Tongsung Kido*,²⁷ which includes an invitation to prayer, space for intercession from the assembly’s members, and a sung response has promising possibilities for contextualizing such “prayer of the people”.

After such prayers, most assemblies of my experience turn to the table and its proposal of *communitas* or *koinonia* within and beyond the gathered group. This turn is harder to discern in the *leitourgia* of public protest, though Fennema (2018, pp. 383–84) proposes the concept of “pilgrimage” as one promising analog. Nevertheless, the nine minutes of silence held by with the “real symbol” of all those bodies pressed to pavement did evoke a unity-across-difference, though perhaps without proposing its reconciliation. Regardless of its intent, it embodied a compelling “ritual vernacular” available across differences of race, class, wealth, gender, orientation, age. It suggested a “real symbol” of what M. Shawn Copeland has called “a praxis of solidarity” (Copeland 2010, pp. 124–28), which she connects to eucharist, embodied at an intersection and in the intersections of those gathered. How often do Christian assemblies render their eucharistic “public service” in such accessible and compelling ways?

What may be lacking in many assemblies is the “ritual vernacular” that makes the connection between the eucharist and the hunger of the world²⁸ (or in one’s own backyard) a more accessible dimension of the assembly’s imagination. Put plainly, if the *poiesis* of eucharist had been doing its “essential public service” all along, there would be no hunger at all, at least within reach of any who celebrate it. Nevertheless, the (pre-existing) hunger starkly exposed in the pandemic also reveals the relatively weak effect much eucharistic *leitourgia* has had on the hunger it is meant to contest. Belcher (2020) suggests this limit in imagination is the result of a “concealment” of the connection between sacramental eucharistic practice and everyday economic activity, which I would argue has analogs in the practice of many assemblies: It is often difficult to identify the food placed on the altar with what is plucked from the grocery shelf, much less the divine and human exchanges Belcher identifies in both.

An embodied expression unveiling these relationships, like the march that gathered the assembly, surely must include more than a few representatives bearing meager “gifts” rendered invisible by their containers and handed over to the clergy at a distant table. An assembly might start by never again using something called “a host” in favor of actual food, that is, real bread and wine or other culturally appropriate analogs that meet actual hunger. A more fulsome procession of full hands bearing a wider range of gifts would better propose a “vernacular” real symbol of a meal able to feed everyone and an economy refracting divine abundance. This must surely include the assembly pressing close to its own table—the infrastructure of the meal analogous to the asphalt of the city liturgy—to experience its own eucharistic solidarity with all who hunger.

²⁷ This practice is commended by Alexander (1992, p. 445). See also Cones (2018).

²⁸ This expression evokes Monika Hellwig’ (1992) classic study on eucharist and hunger (originally published in 1976). See also Bieler and Schottroff (2007).

A eucharistic practice with a more outward turn might also call into question any “fencing” of the meal: While “open table” practice²⁹—in which any who wishes can receive communion—disrupts the expectation of baptism before communion, it also suggests a broader catholicity in the meal, not least in a culture in which access to food is “fenced”. Jacobsen argues this requires a shift in eucharistic imagination from “private visions of ‘family dinner’ in favor of ‘public banquet’” (Jacobsen 2018, p. 376). Granting the concerns documented by Jean Cotting about “entrapping” the “unbaptized in an unwanted obligation” (Cotting 2020, p. 234), the qualifying difference between the baptized and others gathered is that the former have a particular Christian appreciation of what God is doing in them. A less well-defined or simply different understanding brought by someone who does not share Christian faith need not mean exclusion from the symbol. On the contrary, it may contribute to the “surplus of meaning” that is the hallmark of liturgical prayer. To again invoke Carvalhaes, “if our worship space is really public, it means it will be a place where anyone can come and be a part of it” (Carvalhaes 2017, p. 284).

This inevitably leads to the adjournment of the assembly’s gathering “until next time” presumably to embody in some form whatever new encounter with the living God it has experienced. While it may not be helpful to add more words to an already language-centric event, it would seem that an exit from the assembly must include a call to engage God’s work in the world. Perhaps here the “business meeting” of the church might include an announcement of the “public service” it engages beyond the liturgy. It might also include those sent out immediately from the assembly to do the “liturgy after the liturgy” in the church’s name, whether to carry food to relieve hunger or join others in common efforts to make public the “adjustment to deep change caused in the assembly by its being brought regularly to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God,” including engaging the risk this work might entail. As the assembly entered, so it goes out, as a body, to do the work the Spirit groans to have its members do. Moving through the liturgy together, as if in pilgrimage or even protest, might propose what Christopher Duraisingh has called the *concurus Dei*: “God’s unceasing accompaniment with creation, calling and evoking [the assembly’s] participation in God’s movement as God leads it patiently and persuasively, both in judgment and grace, to its future in God’s future” (Duraisingh 2010, p. 20).

5. Conclusion: Walking Together in Common Vulnerability

As I reflect on my own context, a church that shares a parking lot with a local hospital among the first to treat patients with COVID-19 in Illinois, I wish I had had the imagination to suggest that we take some of the risk asked of “essential workers”: to gather in the safest way possible for a liturgy of pilgrimage around that hospital. Its “stations” might have refracted in lament, confession and prayer the risk borne by the “essential public service” of those caught between a natural pathogen and societal failure to engage it, as well as our own privileged “exemption” from that risk. I can imagine us calling the names of those bearing that risk—nurses’ aides, food service workers, patients and their families—and inviting their prayers in conversation with hospital staff. Perhaps family members excluded from accompanying their loved ones might have joined us, enriching the symbol beyond our members and proposing a shared *koinonia* of common vulnerability to COVID-19. As that liturgy changed, it may have drawn greater attention to the injustices related to race, gender, and class unveiled and magnified over these many months and invited those gathered to action. We could not have saved anyone, but, as we surrounded and joined those most affected, we might have signified that *concurus Dei*, “mirroring the divine accompaniment through... solidarity and compassion with all” (Duraisingh 2010, p. 22).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

²⁹ “Open table” refers to practice in some Episcopal and other congregations that make an explicit invitation to all gathered to receive communion, regardless of whether they have been baptized or identify as Christian. This has been a subject of debate in my own Episcopal Church. See, for example, Cones (2016, pp. 693–96); and Malloy (2017, pp. 157–58).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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