

The virtual sacrament: A literature survey of the Eucharist as liturgical ritual online

By

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## **Summary**

In this study, the Eucharist as a liturgical ritual celebrated in the online space is explored. The study begins with an exploration of the terms worship, liturgy and ritual, settling on the term liturgical ritual. The methodology of practical theological interpretation is then considered, with the first step, the descriptive-empirical task being undertaken. The conceptual framework for the study is located within the post-modern discourse of liminality, using the metaphors of language, play, bricolage, embodiment, time and space to explore the intersection of liturgical ritual, network culture and liminality. A literature survey considers the research completed in the area of online ritual, and highlights two major themes, those of embodiment and community, which challenge the Eucharist online becoming a reality.

## **Key words**

Eucharist, liturgical ritual, liturgy, online

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This introductory chapter will look at the impetus or catalyst for the study, the aims of the study as expressed in research questions, broad descriptions of the key terms, as well as the methodology and conceptual approach used. Finally, an overview of the division of chapters will be presented.

### 1.1 Background

The impetus for this study came from an increasing awareness of the pervasive presence of social media even extending into the sphere of organised religion: both the Pope (@Pontifex) and the Archbishop of Canterbury (@JustinWelby) have Twitter feeds, as does the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (@ArchbishopThabo), while Christ Church, Arcadia, a traditional Anglo-Catholic church which allows little technology in the service apart from electric lights and microphones, is exploring a social media programme to reach its parishioners (Wakama 2014). Anglicans Ablaze, a bi-annual conference held by Growing the Church in July 2014, organised all registrations online and has maintained contact with delegates through Facebook (Anglicans Ablaze 2014). The Church of England has created an entire virtual community, including the Big Bible Project (with 148 000 visitors), Facebook (with 700 million active users), Twitter feeds), and now the so-called Twurch of England, which “follows over a thousand Anglicans organisations and individuals, including bishops and other clergy” (Lewis 2013).

The impulse has led to further questions of what the Anglican Church is doing on the Internet, particularly in terms of liturgy, and more specifically in terms of the sacrament of the Eucharistic feast, which forms the centre of worship in the Anglican community. Questions concern the difference between the enacted rite of the Eucharist, which takes the form of bread, or specially made wafers, and wine in Anglican churches, and the enactment of such rites online. It is the ritual around these simple items that makes for a feast, the communion of those sharing in the enacted rite through both participation and response that is transformative. In stark contrast to this highly participatory rite, is the virtual reality offered by the Internet, where participants simply become viewers of a rite in which they play no part. Initial questions raised were: can those participating in the traditional celebration of the Eucharist benefit from the online phenomenon? Can the two complement each

other? Will a combination of the two be the future of the Anglican Church, in the face of plummeting numbers of church goers and the paucity of ordained ministers? These questions have been distilled into the aims of the study.

## 1.2 Aims of the study

This study is entitled: “The virtual sacrament: A literature survey of the Eucharist as liturgical ritual online”. The aim of the study is therefore to explore literature regarding the celebration of the Eucharist online and offer a thorough description of the phenomenon.

Research questions are:

- What is a liturgical ritual? How is the Eucharist a liturgical ritual?
- Which methodology would be useful to study liturgical ritual online?
- Which theoretical approach would be useful to study liturgical ritual online?
- What is the history of liturgical rituals online?
- What is the current research on the liturgical ritual online, in particular, the Eucharist?

## 1.3 Conceptual approach to worship, ritual and liturgy

The approach to this study developed from an exploration of the terms worship, liturgy and ritual, beginning with historical definitions, and moving towards a description located within our late-modern society where definitions have been deconstructed and fragmented in accordance with our post-modern thinking.

White (2000:22-23) in his *Introduction to Christian worship* offers a series of definitions of worship, referring, amongst others, to Martin Luther’s *Catechism*, which says that in worship, there is duality of revelation and response; John Calvin’s notion of Christian worship as union with God, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who saw worship as directed to God’s glory and human rectitude. White (2000:23-25) goes on to look at Orthodox definitions of worship, where the corporate is essential, and Roman Catholic ideas of sanctification of the faithful.

However, according to White (2000:18), worship is best described through the outward and visible forms of human behaviour it encompasses: characteristics of

such behaviour include repetition, social activity or communal functionality, and specific purpose. Using these characteristics, worship can be seen as ritualistic; indeed, White (2000:19) suggests that, “Christian worship, as a repeated social behaviour with definite purposes, is probably the most common form of ritual in many Western societies.” Analysing Christian ritual is possible particularly because of the stable and permanent forms which it has taken and continues to take across different cultures and historical epochs: White (2000:19) refers to these as “structures and services”. Barnard, Cilliers and Wepener (2014:3,28), locating worship specifically in postmodern society, use alternative terminology, referring instead to “liturgical ritual practices”.

Fletcher and Cocksworth (cited in Hebenton 2009:19) explain liturgy as “time-honoured words, actions and ways of structuring those words and actions; together with spontaneous words and actions,” echoing the notion of stable and permanent liturgical forms. It is true that for centuries, liturgy was rigidly controlled, especially in the case of the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, with Anglican churches (as attended by the researcher) still making use of a set Prayer Book (see CPSA 1989) and the priest “saying Mass” on Sundays (Suggit 2009:12). However, for late-modern scholars of liturgy, and Christians of many denominations, liturgy goes far beyond the words of a prayer book.

Instead, Barnard et al. (2014:27) suggest that liturgy refers to “the complex of Christian rites and symbols,” and go on to give a variety of examples, including a Sunday morning service in a mainstream church; a worship service in an African Independent Church; and a Christian ritual on the internet. Clearly, Sunday worship no longer has monopoly; rather, it stands alongside “spectacle worship” of mass events, rituals on the internet, and even private, home-based rituals as part of liturgy (Barnard et al. 2014:8). It is into this notion of rituals on the internet that this study speaks.

What is central to all of these so-called structures and services is the intentionality of liturgy, with Barnard et al. (2014:28) describing it as humans individually or in a group intentionally using symbolic speech acts and actions to break out of their closed domain and to “reach out to the God whom they expect to come.” This is based on Schleiermacher’s notion that the purpose of liturgical ritual is for human

beings to reach out toward a God on whom we can depend totally, and who can affect us totally (Barnard et al. 2014:29). As Long (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:3) notes, worship “accomplishes more than its context would suggest”, that is, worship is always concerned with an encounter with God. In this sense, then, religious behaviour refers to more than simply itself, hence Driver’s (1991:238) notion of ritual as a “planned or improvised performance that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative framework within which the everyday is transformed.”

However, Barnard et al. (2014:27), working from the point of view of anthropology, emphasise that liturgical ritual is also “determined by its cultural and anthropological contexts”, that is, influenced and indeed conditioned or created by the people involved and the culture in which it is celebrated. This anthropological approach to religion is explored by Geertz (cited in Casey 2006:78), who suggests that religion by its very nature is a cultural system, based on social ties – the term *religare* means to tie back. In this sense, religion is a guide to action, particularly through, according to Geertz, a system of symbols which provide motivations for behaviour. Historically, then, religion has been a primary instrument of social cohesion, helping people make sense of their lives.

More recent thinking on rituals (such as by Miczek 2008:147 and Barnard et al. 2014:3) is located within postmodern discourses of dynamism, fluidity, hybridism and even liminality. Ritual becomes discursive, with the meaning negotiated via a wide range of approaches, peeling back several aspects of rituals, that is, layers including performance, agency, space, silence or gender. In this way, ritual is no longer regarded as a fixed, unchangeable, community-based subject handed over from one generation to another – a more dynamic approach is evident (Miczek 2008:147). Indeed, if liturgical ritual establishes and reinforces religious identity, and if that ritual finds itself in a shifting position, then religious identity has to be characterised as unstable, dynamic, in constant movement; Barnard et al. (2014:8) use the notion of liminality to characterise this process of liturgical ritual border crossing, while sticking to fixed identities.

The implications of liminality for liturgical practices will be further explored in Chapter 3. However, suffice to say here that notions of fluidity in liturgical ritual in terms of



discourse, space and time render the internet or so-called cyberspace<sup>1</sup> particularly suitable as a new ritual space, because of its non-physical nature, hence being regarded as entirely potentially spiritual or sacred (Casey 2006:77).

In fact, Jennifer Cobb (cited in Casey 2006:77) sees the world of spiritual and cyberspace so deeply connected that she has coined the term “cybergrace”. This new exploration of liturgy, ritual and worship on the internet is crucial as Casey (2006:73) argues: “it is critical to examine the ways in which the Internet functions as a mediator of religious practice, specifically religious ritual.”

#### **1.4 Methodological approach**

The chosen methodological approach is that which Osmer (2008) terms “practical theological interpretation”, which is intended to guide interpretation of and response to practical theological situations. Osmer (2008:13,15-16,17) argues that this basic structure of practical theological interpretation can be applied to all specialised sub-disciplines of Practical Theology: in fact, acknowledging the common structure of practical theological interpretation can help us to recognise the interconnectedness of ministry in the congregational system (that is, preaching ministry, teaching ministry, biblical literacy, spirituality at home, and so on) and the congregation’s interaction with its context. The latter is particularly relevant to the study at hand, since liturgical rituals are no longer only practised by a constant congregation in a church building – instead, emerging liturgical rituals take place in less defined spaces and times, by less stable groups, even to the extent of the space, time and participants being “virtual” in that they are played out on the internet (Barnard et al. 2014:11). Just as the internet becomes a context for liturgical ritual, so the internet also becomes a metaphor for connection, as a World Wide Web: indeed, Miller-McLemore (in Osmer 2008:16) describes the focus of practical theological interpretation as a “living human web”, that is, the interconnected bonds that link

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<sup>1</sup> Casey (2006:77) defines cyberspace as “a particular electronic space associated with computer networks. It is a geographically unlimited, non-physical space independent of time, distance, and location in which transactions between people between computers, and between people and computers takes place.” According to Duce (2013:11), the term was first coined by the author William Gibson in his 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer* to refer to a computer-generated world.

families, individuals, congregations, and communities, while Capra (in Osmer 2008:16) reminds us that social systems are located in an interconnected web of natural systems i.e. not just human web, but a web of life.

In Chapter 2, Osmer's (2008:4) description of the approach as asking and answering four questions, that is, what is going on; why this is going on; what ought to be going on; and how to respond, will be elucidated. However, Osmer (2008:4) goes further than simply to express the approach in terms of questions; instead, he associates each question with a task which helps to structure the practical theological inquiry, that is, the descriptive-empirical task; the interpretative task; the normative task; and the pragmatic task.

As a literature survey, this study is located in Osmer's (2008) first question, that is, what is going on and hence takes the form of a descriptive-empirical task. According to Osmer (2008:48), descriptive-empirical research has four steps or elements: purpose of the project; choice of a strategy of inquiry, formation and execution of the research plan, and, finally, reflection. Chapter 2 will explore these elements in detail; however, it is important to note that although the project will be planned out, at this stage, the descriptive task will be completed, while the empirical section of the research will form a later part of the study.

## **1.5 Division of chapters**

**Chapter 1** forms the introduction.

**Chapter 2** focuses on the methodological approach.

**Chapter 3** offers a conceptual framework.

**Chapter 4** presents the literature survey itself.

**Chapter 5** concludes the study and sketches recommendations for further study.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This introductory chapter has offered a background to the study, particularly the catalyst for the research into the Eucharist online. A possible methodology has been introduced, as well as a conceptual framework in which the research can be located. Finally, a chapter division has been presented. The following chapter will begin with a further elucidation of the methodological approach.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

As Pattison and Woodward (2000:9) argue, “The methods employed in practical and pastoral theology are as varied as is demanded by the issues being considered. Different issues or phenomena require different approaches and methods.” The method chosen for this study is that of Osmer (2008), as it allows for a suitably non-linear approach, in keeping with the concepts of a post-modern approach, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, as Miller-McLemore (2013:11) points out, practical theology is not only a scholarly exercise: there is always an element of pastoral practice, which is central to Osmer’s thinking as well.

“Practical theological interpretation”, as termed by Osmer (2008), is an approach to the interpretation of and response to practical theological situations. Osmer (2008:4) describes the approach as asking and answering four questions, that is, what is going on; why this is going on; what ought to be going on; and how to respond. Osmer (2008:4) then associates each question with a task which helps to structure the practical theological inquiry, that is, the descriptive-empirical task; the interpretative task; the normative task; and the pragmatic task.

It is important to note, however, that Osmer (2008:11) does not intend for these steps necessarily to be linear: instead, the image of a hermeneutical circle suggests that interpretation is composed of four distinct but interrelated moments. In other words, the four tasks “interpenetrate”. In a sense, then, practical theological interpretation should be viewed as a spiral rather than a circle, constantly circling back to tasks that have already been explored, as initially expressed by Lartey (2000), in his analysis of the pastoral cycle.

This chapter aims to explore Osmer’s approach, and its possible application as a methodological approach to the liturgical study at hand.

## 2.2 The descriptive-empirical task

The practical theological approach begins by answering the question: what is going on? Although this could simply be a matter of engaging with the world and its systems, practical theological interpretation is often evoked by the experience of being brought up short (Osmer 2008:25). Lartey (2000:75-76) describes this in terms of concrete experience, that is, an encounter with people in the reality of life's experiences. Osmer (2008:12) distinguishes here between three categories of situations, which he terms episode, situation and context, all of which distinguish between different focal points of practical theological interpretation in time and space. So, for instance, an episode is defined as an "incident or event that emerges from the flow of everyday life and evokes explicit attention and reflection", that is, events call into question the taken-for-granted assumptions of our world and therefore our own interpretative activity, challenging us and demanding new insight (Osmer 2008:12, 22). An episode is located with a situation, a broader pattern of events, relationships, and circumstances (Osmer 2008:12). Situations, in turn, unfold within a context of social and natural systems, that is, networks of interacting and interconnected parts; for example, a congregation is an organisational system. This image of interconnection reminds us again of the World Wide Web, which creates information flows connecting individuals, communities and systems around the world (Osmer 2008:16). Indeed, the network has become a common metaphor with which to describe modern culture, being such a pervasive image through information technology – hence, the term network society (Barnard, et al. 2014:50).

So, the descriptive-empirical task is prompted by an interpretative impulse (see also Pattison & Woodward 2000:10). In this case, the impulse came from an episode, that is, the introduction of a Twitter awareness campaign at Christ Church Arcadia, and hence, the situation described in Chapter 1, that is, the pervasive presence of social media and the online environment in the church. Even a cursory search of any religious group or Christian denomination renders thousands of hits, with sites ranging from informational websites or home pages for churches (e.g. Christ Church Arcadia's website) and blogs (e.g. Rev. Mindi Mitchell's Rev-o-lution) to memorial Facebook pages (e.g. RIP Reeva Steenkamp) and virtual churches (e.g. Alpha Church). The impulse led to questions of what the Anglican Church in particular is doing online, as well as curiosity about liturgy and therefore the sacrament of the

Eucharistic feast, which forms the centre of worship in the Anglican community, that is, the broader situation and systems in which the interpretative impulse can be contextualised.

Osmer (2008:37) locates the response to the interpretative impulse on a continuum from informal (active listening, conversation, etc.) to semiformal (staff meeting) and finally to formal. It is in this formal response that the task of investigating particular episodes, situations, and contexts through empirical research begins. Osmer (2008:40) highlights the importance of empirical research not only as “a disciplined way of attending to others in their particularity” through exploring the dialogue between a congregation’s shared life and mission and the normative sources of the Christian faith. In addition, empirical research helps to recognise social trends that are impacting people’s lives and shaping the context of ministry. It is for this reason that empirical research is so appropriate to the study of liturgy online.

According to Osmer (2008:48), descriptive-empirical research has four steps or elements, which will be discussed below.

### **2.2.1 Purpose of the project**

A first step is to gain clarity about the purpose of the project, that is, specific reasons for carrying out the research, usually expressed as clear questions the research is designed to answer (Osmer 2008:48). The purpose of the research will be related to the kind of research being undertaken. For example, some kinds of research focus on specific problems or programmes within a church, such as summative evaluation, which could determine, for instance, a programme’s effectiveness. Osmer (2008:49) offers the example of the need for a church to evaluate its adult education programme because attendance has declined over past five years. Research in the form of formative evaluation could then be undertaken to improve the programme. Other kinds of research Osmer (2008:49) highlights are action research, which aims to solve a specific problem, such as the problem of asylum seekers and refugees in a parish (Southwark J&P n.d.) while basic research contributes to the fundamental knowledge and theory of a field, and applied research illuminates a societal concern.

The current study is envisioned as applied research, entitled: “The virtual sacrament: A literature survey of the Eucharist as liturgical ritual online”. The purpose of the study is therefore to explore literature regarding the celebration of the Eucharist online and offer a thorough description of the phenomenon.

Research questions are:

- What is a liturgical ritual? How is the Eucharist a liturgical ritual?
- Which methodology would be useful to study liturgical ritual online?
- Which theoretical approach would be useful to study liturgical ritual online?
- What is the history of liturgical rituals online?
- What is the current research on the liturgical ritual online, in particular, the Eucharist?

### **2.2.2 Choice of a strategy of inquiry**

The next step is determining a particular methodology to guide the research project, connecting the methods used to the outcome desired (Osmer 2008:48). Importantly, as practical theology deals with a variety of issues from economics to ritual, and from human rights to liturgical development, Pattison and Woodward (2000:9) emphasise the necessity of using interdisciplinary methods and approaches, apart from the traditional historical and exegetical approaches favoured by theologians.

Using approaches from social science research offers there are two categories of strategies, that is, quantitative research, which gathers and analyses numeric data to explore relationships between variables; this approach is useful when looking at broad statistical patterns and relationships, such as in extensive surveys. A second strategy is that of qualitative research, which seeks to understand the actions and practices in which individuals and group engage and the meanings they ascribe to experience; this approach is suited to studying a small number of individuals, groups, or communities in depth. The two methods may be combined as mixed-methods research, for instance as a large-scale survey with in-depth interviews (Osmer 2008:50).

The purpose of the research will suggest a strategy or methodology. For example if a programme in a church is to be studied in-depth, then qualitative research will be undertaken to provide a richly textured picture of the programme. So-called case study research means that a single case will be studied in depth for a specific period of time, using multiple sources of data, such as interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and brief surveys (Osmer 2008:51). An example of case study research is that by Hutchings (2007, 2011), who explored three online churches over a period of five years using a case.

Osmer (2008:51-52) offers further examples of qualitative research strategies, including life history or narrative research, which focuses on gathering and telling stories of individuals, where data gathered through conversations. This was the approach of Noomen, Aupers and Houtman (2011) in their conversations with Catholic and Protestant web designers. Grounded theory research aims to develop a theory closely related to the context of phenomenon being studied and uses a so-called zigzag approach to move back and forth between data gathering, analysis, and reflection throughout the research process. Finally, a theory emerges from the research, rather than research testing a theory. Phenomenological research is undertaken to describe the essence of a particular type of event or activity for a group of people, while advocacy research is grounded in an explicitly political agenda, seeking to contribute to social change. Advocacy research is by nature practical and collaborative, and focuses on social issues debated in public domains, giving voice to perspectives overlooked or misrepresented in such debates. The goal of such research is often to shape an action agenda for change, in the context of AIDS studies or feminist research for example (Osmer 2008:51-52; see also Miller-McLemore 2014:13).

The research project at hand will be undertaken through qualitative research, aiming to produce a detailed, holistic description of liturgical ritual, particularly the Eucharist, in the virtual realm. As a literature survey, the focus will be on secondary research, that is, an exploration of existing research, the synthesis of major themes and concerns, as well as reflection thereon.

The empirical section of the study would take the form of primary research, to explore actual examples of the Eucharist online. This would take the form of participative research and observation, aiming to produce a description of patterns of both practice and meaning, producing a coherent image but also the cracks and tensions evident in, for instance, the dual experience of what is happening on the computer (online world) and what the participant is doing in front of the screen (offline world). Where descriptions of whole communities are desired, such as members of an online church, for instance, Second Life, ethnographic research will be undertaken, which develops a “thick” description of a cultural or social group. The researcher will examine the group’s observable patterns or behaviour, customs and way of life over an extended period of time, gathering information through fieldwork (Osmer 2008:51).

Researchers have also begun exploring particular methodological tools for studying liturgical ritual on the internet. Kluver and Chen (2008:116), in their study of online church, Church of Fools, used an ethnographic study through the virtual portal itself, as well as interviews with participants. Miczek (2008:151) highlights that virtual 3D environmental research (VER) continues to use methods from anthropology and empirical social research (e.g. participant observation, textual and discourse analysis), but raises the challenges of with technological issues, such as computers crashing or other participants switching off a programme, thus extra care is needed in analysing and interpreting data. In addition, interviewing avatars means that facial expressions and gestures are often absent, which adds a further challenge to the interviewer.

### **2.2.3 Formation of the research plan**

This stage is concerned with how the project will be carried out in a specific time frame, including what or who will be investigated, who will conduct the research, as well as methods of data gathering and analysis (Osmer 2008:48).

The practicality of a research plan must be linked to the purpose of the project, as Osmer (2008:53) points out, since the research questions are inextricably linked to the sources of data required. In the same way, the formation of a research plan both influences and builds on the choice of a method of inquiry. For example, in terms of



quantitative research, the data needed may be demographic and a sample population chosen. In such a case, the data collection would be by survey to obtain information on age, income, gender, and educational level to create a demographic profile for comparison. In terms of an example of qualitative research, on the other hand, narrative research would necessitate using interviews as a data-gathering method, that is, verbal data obtained by asking questions; such data would also be helpful for phenomenological and ethnographic research (Osmer 2008:54).

The first section of the current research, that is, a literature survey of the Eucharist as liturgical ritual online, will be undertaken through artefact analysis of visual and printed texts (Osmer 2008:54), which can, as Denny (2013:123) points out, allow for the development of innovative ideas.

For the empirical section of the research, however, the tools of ethnographic research will be used, as recommended by Barnard et al. (2014:25): participant observation will supplement this research, that is, through the collection of verbal and visual data by observation and participation in the setting in which they occur (here, actual performed rite on the internet) (Osmer 2008:54). Participant observation allows the researcher to generate knowledge that would otherwise not have existed, as the researcher herself will enter the field, making first-hand observations which render the research much more dynamic and original Denny (2013:123).

A further aspect of empirical research, that is, how the service of communion online is experienced by the worshippers, or, indeed, appropriated by the worshippers, will be obtained through individual interviews, and, if possible, through focus groups of online participants in communion (Denny & Wepener 2013:2). Interviews are useful for obtaining information, as Osmer (2008:9) points out: "It is worth noting in passing that gathering stories of the congregation's past [and present] leads me back to the descriptive-empirical task." In other words, understanding what participants take part in the services online are doing can help to understand why they are doing it. Focus groups, on the other hand, obtain verbal data with a homogenous group of 10 or under, using a discussion leader (Osmer 2008:54). In this case, the focus groups will be semi-structured, with members being informally selected from participants in the

services. The purpose of such groups will be to gather information from a wide array of participants, both those who regularly attend such online services, as well as others who are less regular. Using a broad array of respondents helps the researcher to obtain as representative as possible an insight into how the participants appropriate their experience of communion online (Denny & Wepener 2013:2).

The question of who will conduct the research is particularly pertinent if, for instance, an extensive survey is being undertaken and several people are required; other research may necessitate the training of researchers, if, for example, research is being undertaken within a church context where others are recruited to help carry out research (Osmer 2008:55). In this case, as the research is limited in scope, the researcher will be undertaken by a single researcher.

Furthermore, for larger projects, a sequence of steps needs to be elucidated in order to carry out the project in a specific time frame: tasks need to be linked to dates and roles to team members. In the case of interviews and focus groups, interviewees will need to be sourced (Osmer 2008:56). Sourcing interviewees and members of the focus group for this project will be undertaken through the snowball sampling method as used by Broaddus (2011:6) in his study of the lived experiences of online worshippers. This technique is often used when it is difficult to gain access to a group - especially if they are in virtual reality - but once an access point is identified, snowballing allows the researcher to access the given group. Snowball sampling occurs when individuals who know of other individuals who share a characteristic of interest to the researcher refer them to the researcher, thus allowing the researcher insight into a homogeneous group.

#### **2.2.4 Execution of the research plan**

The research plan should then be carried out, beginning with the collection and recording of the data (Osmer 2008:56). This is followed by data transcription, where a recording or notes are transferred into written text or video, and data analysis and interpretation, where notes are reviewed in order to focus on repeated images, patterns, themes, and so on, and to code data into categories for organisation and comparison. Finally, the findings will be presented in some form, either written or

“performed” (Osmer 2008:56). Chapter 4 will present the findings of the current research.

### 2.2.5 Reflection

The fourth stage of the descriptive-empirical task consists of reflection on the metatheoretical assumptions informing the project, such as assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, human beings, and moral ends of life (Osmer 2008:48). This is because “the network of beliefs and values justifies why researchers work the way they do on a particular project” (Osmer 2008:58). In other words, researchers need to be aware of these beliefs and how these background assumptions influence the way research is done. This allows for a critical reading of research.

In this case, the Anglican beliefs of the researcher need to be borne in mind as a background to the project, as the Eucharist is regarded by Anglicans as a sustaining sacrament, not just a memorial of something which happened in the past, but the liturgical rite by which the events of salvation are made present for the participants: through *anamnêsis*, the Eucharist becomes a present encounter of worshippers with the risen Christ, whose sacrifices becomes a present reality. In other words, the risen Lord is sacramentally present with his people, who, through accepting this by faith, renew their commitment and reaffirm their baptismal vows (Suggit 1999:19). This is in contrast to Charismatic churches where the celebration of the Eucharist is not necessarily part of the worship service and becomes what Denny (2013:10) describes as “a nip and a sip”.

This is important background because, as Osmer (2008:59) argues, there is no such thing as pure description – it is always from a particular perspective. This is why the descriptive-empirical phase includes not only a description of what the researcher sees and hears, including the exact words and actions, the setting, the sequence of events and emotions, displayed, but also own subjective responses and hunches. The researcher’s own experiences becomes a source of description as the research requires a movement from outsider to insider, unfamiliar to familiar, to gain fresh insights and then to reflect on what why or what ought to happen (Osmer 2008:59). The latter forms the substance of the next tasks, the interpretative and normative tasks.

As the project at hand is one of limited length, only the descriptive-empirical task will be undertaken. However, Osmer's (2008) approach continues with three further tasks.

### **2.3 The interpretative task**

The second task of Osmer's practical theological interpretation is that of interpretation, that is, to answer the question: Why is this going on? The interpretative task, as Osmer (2008:80) argues, is essential in distinguishing between the theory necessary to understand a situation and the reality of the situation itself, highlighting the need to remain open and not merely attempt to impose a theory on a situation; in other words, the necessity to be discerning about the appropriateness of theory to reality.

Osmer (2008:82) speaks of the continuum of interpretation, from what he terms "sagely wisdom", moving through thoughtfulness, to wise judgement (particularly in practical situations at churches) and theoretical interpretation. This continuum is perhaps better understood when considered in the context of Lartey's (2000) pastoral cycle: following experience, Lartey's (2000:76) next phases are situational analysis, using an interdisciplinary, multiperspectival approach, while theological analysis explores the encounter through the faith perspective. In the practical context, Osmer (2008:24) here sees the practical theological task as "facilitating a dialogue between people whose interpretation of life has unravelled and the resources of the Christian community." Here analysis moves back and forth between theological and situational analysis. This image of flow, of connection between steps or phases of a practical theological task is typical of the network metaphor, concerned as it is with connection. This would also equate to Osmer's (2008:11) question as to why an episode is taking place within a specific situation and context.

In the context of practical theological interpretation as a research approach, theoretical interpretation is the most important part of the continuum, in that it is the ability to draw on theories of arts and sciences to understand and respond to particular episodes, situations or contexts. As mentioned in 2.2.5 above, theories construct knowledge from a particular perspective or position and it is therefore

necessary to a researcher to observe from many perspectives to understand a multidimensional phenomenon.

Indeed, as Denny and Wepener (2013:6) note, the aim of research into liturgy is not merely “to discover what worshippers want and then just give them more of that”. Rather, the information obtained needs to be explored in the context of the theology and traditions of ritual, particularly in terms of liturgical inculturation, the process whereby liturgical traditions are handed over through the centuries, with interaction taking place between the people of the church and the traditions themselves, in the form of appropriation of the liturgy (Wepener 2008:315,316). Specifically, Chupungco (cited in Adams 1999:2,3) suggests that, “Liturgical inculturation is basically the assimilation of the liturgy of local cultural patterns,” and that “the liturgy is inserted into the culture, history, and traditions of the people among whom the Church dwells.” If, as Barnard et al. (2014:11) suggest, modern liturgy takes place within a network society, one in which, as Hine (in Radde-Antweiler 2008:1) states, the Internet has become “a cultural context in its own right”, then the perspectives offered through liturgical inculturation will be of particular focus.

#### **2.4 The normative task**

The third task of practical theological interpretation seeks to answer the question: What ought to be going on? This is what Osmer (2008:131) terms the normative task of practical theology, or prophetic discernment. Importantly, this is where practical theological interpretation diverges from traditional academic research, with Osmer (2008:131) highlighting three aspects of this task, including theological interpretation, the use of ethical principles and good practice.

Theological interpretation is the use of theological concepts to interpret episodes, situations and contexts (including those in which we are involved) informed by a theory of divine and human action. An example of theological interpretation is that of H Richard Niebuhr, who argues that one can only answer “What shall I do?” (i.e. the moral question) once “What is going on?” has been answered. That is, responses are based on the interpretation of an action upon us, shaped by the community of interpretation in which we identify (Osmer 2008:140). As Christians, Niebuhr (in Osmer 2008:140) believes that our task is to respond as God wishes us: “God is

acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action,” that is, we are to know that God is acting to effect divine purpose through human and natural events. In another example, Osmer (2008:146) suggests that Liberation theologians would focus on other interpretative patterns, such as Christ the liberator and respond by exposing structures of political and economic oppression.

A second aspect of the normative task is the use of ethical principles, rules and guidelines to guide and reflect on practice, which helps to determine what ought to be accomplished, that is, to guide action towards moral ends (Osmer 2008:131). Osmer (2008:148,149) offers the example of Browning, whose practical theological interpretation follows the practice-theory-practice model, where it is important to note that practice is filled with values and norms, which may be in conflict in terms of the different people involved in episode. Browning (in Osmer 2008:149) draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur, who seeks first to identify the shaping ethos of a moral community that is embodied in its practices, narratives, relationships, models (e.g. sacrificial love, agape love). Secondly, identify the universal ethical principles that a moral community uses to test its moral practices and vision, and take account of moral claims beyond this community. For example, is this norm adequate to the Christian tradition? Does it give the interpreter adequate perspective on the situation? Finally, practical moral reasoning is needed to apply moral principles and commitments to particular situations (Osmer 2008:149).

A final aspect of the normative task is the need to consider examples of good practice in the present and past, or by engaging reflexively in transforming practice in the present, so as to derive norms (Osmer 2008:149). Examples of good practice provide normative guidance in two ways. First, they are a model of good practice with which to reform a congregation’s present actions; in other words, they help the congregation to imagine how to do things differently, to provide resources, and to shape guidelines (e.g. by observing other congregations, or reviving past practices). In terms of the research process, examples of good practice can offer similar guidance (Osmer 2008:152). However, and perhaps more importantly, models of good practice can generate new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by received tradition: here good practice is more than

a model – it is epistemic, that is, yields knowledge that can be formed only through participation in transforming practice (Osmer 2008:153).

In terms of transforming practice, Osmer (2008:154) offers the example of Elaine Graham who argues that practical theology must face up to the challenges of a postmodern context characterised by a high degree of pluralism, fragmentation and scepticism. In this context of uncertainty, there is no consensus on social values, nor traditions sources and norms. Instead, new ways of developing truth claims and values that will be persuasive in sceptical modern world are necessary. Graham (in Osmer 2008:154) , in particular, does this by transforming practice to help the church, and society at large, move beyond the oppressive legacy of patriarchy, where male/man is norm. This patriarchal normativity needs to be approached reflexively, through dialogue and reflection, rather than prescription. Importantly, practical wisdom should emerge from communities of practice, which may be located in in Christian praxis of freedom and love, or, as Graham has it (in Osmer 2008:158), in the priority of transformation: if the priority is feminist, it is necessary to make space for women’s voices.

Norms that emerge from transforming practice therefore emerge reflexively from a specific community and the practical wisdom that has emerged from this context. Such norms cannot be imposed from outside, as they only become binding and authoritative because they are life-giving to those within the community (Osmer 2008:159). Yet this life-giving spirit has to be grounded in “the willingness to encounter ‘otherness’ in the form of other communities and individuals whose experience of transformation may be different from one’s own” (Osmer 2008:160).Transformation thus becomes a communal practice, where all reflect together to disclose God, make available knowledge and feelings of God that cannot be accessed any other way

Because of the collaborate nature of transforming practice, practical theology as an academic field is inherently cross-disciplinary in nature, which entails the use of concepts, models and sources of theological discourse to develop a constructive theological perspective, while bringing this perspective into dialogue with other fields (Osmer 2008:163; see also Pattison & Woodward 2000:11). More specifically,



Osmer (2008:170) speaks of dialogue not merely in cross-disciplinary terms, but also in so-called transversal terms, where disciplines lie across one another, extending over, intersecting, meeting and converging with one another, then diverging. Osmer (2008:171) explains that this only “tends to be achieved when there is maximum communication among the different levels and, above all, in different meanings.” This image of a fluid, dynamic relationship between disciplines also echoes the image of a network, which has been used here to describe Osmer’s very method, as well the conceptual theoretical framework of Barnard et al. (2014), which will be discussed in the following chapter.

To answer the “what ought it to look like” question, the current research will necessarily have to dialogue with other fields, This means theology listening carefully to other disciplines, learning from them, perhaps revising traditional beliefs and practices in the light of their insights (Osmer 2008:166) This may be critical dialogue between academic disciplines, but also social movements, where the dialogue is between praxis as well as theory (Osmer 2008:167). Clearly, the pluralism of interpretation is essential when establishing norms or models to go further.

## **2.5 The pragmatic task**

If the knowledge yielded through practical theological interpretation is transformative only in practice, it makes sense that the final task of practical theological interpretation is the pragmatic task, which asks: How might we respond? (Osmer 2008:11; see Pattison and Woodward 2000:14). In the same way, Lartey’s (2000:76) cycle calls forth a response, which feeds back into the encounter, re-visioned.

Since the pragmatic task is essentially a concrete one, in the context of a church, it may be understood as the task of forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable (Osmer 2008:176). In the case of a research project such as the one at hand, the pragmatic task could be the development of an online church through live streaming, or merely to open a conversation about discipleship in the digital age (Lewis 2013).

Osmer (2008:176) proposes such research as a response to the question of declining numbers in the mainstream church, including in the Anglican church of



Southern Africa, where, as in many other mainstream churches, leaders “face not only the external challenge of a changing social context, but also the internal challenges of helping their congregations rework their identity and mission beyond the era when they were at the centre of cultural influence and power”.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Practical theological interpretation as presented by Osmer (2008) is useful as it offers a simple way of approaching pastoral care: through answering the question, what is going on?, it provides a general picture of field in which an episode develops; through answering why is it going on?, it provides a background to that episode; through answering what ought to happen, ways that might shape the field towards desired goals emerge; and through considering a response, guidelines to carry out these particular actions or practices can develop.

In terms of being a method of approaching research in applied theology, Osmer’s guidelines can be equally useful, guiding the researcher to circle or spiral between four tasks, the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretative task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. These tasks encompass research from the planning of a research project, including setting questions and determining methodology, through to interpretation of findings in terms of both theological and other disciplinary approaches, to an analysis of best practice, and finally to a response offering practical inputs. It is for this reason that Osmer’s approach will be undertaken for the research at hand.

## Chapter 3: Conceptual framework

### 3.1 Introduction

Barnard et al. (2014) explore liturgical ritual in the context of the network culture, through the notion of liminality, using a variety of metaphors with which to explore the intersection of liturgical ritual, network culture and liminality; those of special interest to the research include language, play, bricolage, embodiment, time and space. Each of these concepts will be discussed below. The chapter will begin, however, with an exploration of the notion of liminality.

### 3.2 Liminality

The word liminality derives from the Latin *limen* or threshold, and comes to fore in the cultural anthropological study by Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:4,46) refers to three spaces: the pre-liminal space of separation; the liminal space of transition, that is, the betwixt and between, being a period of autonomy yet instability, such as the novitiate; and the post-liminal space, of reincorporation into a community. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:46) extends the notion of liminality to refer to an alternative form of human existence coming into being, which he terms *communitas*, not community.

#### 3.2.1 Liminality and the network society

Barnard et al. (2014) develop the notion of liminality to refer to late-modern society, as characterised by what they term the network culture. With the advent of the Information Age and the World Wide Web, which creates information flows connecting individuals, communities and systems around the world – which then are rooted in each other (Osmer 2008:16) – the image of a network has become such a pervasive image that it is used a common metaphor with which to describe modern culture – hence, the term “network society” (Barnard, et al. 2014:3, 50).

Late-modern society can be described in this way because “a network consists of an infinite number of possible connections, and you can move through the network according to your own choice.” (Barnard et al. 2014:5) Theories of deconstruction suggest that there is no longer a dominant discourse that has power to suppress all other discourses. Instead, a network culture or society allows a multitude of

discourses to be audible and visible – literally, through the internet – although it is important to remember that many may be without access to technology and hence this notion renders their discourses silent, invisible (Barnard et al. 2014:6). This is a possible description of how society functions: although metaphorically based in connectedness, the network society can be characterised rather by constant flows of information, economic, financial and cultural, even flows of human beings in permanent transformation, crossing borders, travelling and transgressing (Barnard et al. 2014:49). This image of flow suggests instability, transgression and transformation, rather than structure and stability, which seem to have moved to the margins. The notion Barnard et al. (2014:4, 49) use for this characterisation is that of “liminality”, suggesting that, “[l]iminality has become the central notion and dominant state of our current world.”

### **3.2.2 Liminality as a theological notion**

Turner (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:4, 46, 47) offers Christianity as an example of a liminal *communitas*, with Jesus inhabiting a liminal world on earth, living as a vulnerable member of unstructured, non-structured society: we have the image of the Son of Man having nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20), and Jesus’ final action of sending his apostles to the end of the earth (Mark 16:15). Developing from this are the pilgrims and the mendicants, Turner (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:47) giving examples of the Franciscans and other mendicant, marginal groups which stood outside the structured society: transition becomes a permanent condition for Christians.

In a sense, God is liminal – always moving, the Spirit hovering over the earth (Gen. 1:2). The Bible is filled with examples of liminal spaces, with each scriptural metaphor articulating a different nuance of liminality: for example, the tomb suggests grief, the pain of leaving behind or the destruction of old identities, hence the nuance of lament; the wilderness highlights the possibility of new and surprising encounters with God, hence, the nuance of the reframing of life and identity; exile sharpens the sense of longing, looking forward to the promised land, hence the eschatological elements of faith and anticipation (Barnard et al. 2014:4,45,63).

The cross may be seen as the prime icon of liminality, including as it does all aspects of the above metaphors: pain, humiliation, and meeting of God and human. The cross becomes a liminal symbol of the hope of alleviation of human suffering by being a transition point of suffering/glory; ascent/descent, criminality/kingship, even life/death (Barnard et al. 2014:45, 66, 67). As Christians, we share in this dynamic movement of the cross, but are only able to share in a transitional understanding of the liminal mystery: “now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.”(1 Cor. 13:23).

Our Christian faith itself is liminal in nature, since Christians remain *en route*, having left home, but not yet arrived at our destination; we cross borders, but make ourselves at home; we inhabit an eschatological space: already, but not-yet. In this way, Barnard et al. (2014:62) can suggest that, “Religion is flowing and rooting.” This image of the pilgrim echoes again, as it is only in “... the place of liminality, when stripped of all structures of support and security, that the pilgrim and God are free to encounter each other in new and life changing ways” (Barnard et al. 2014:63).

### **3.3 Liturgical ritual in the network society**

Barnard et al. (2014:11) highlight the contrast between the worldwide growth of evangelical and Pentecostal worship often disseminated over the internet, and the fortifying of traditional and particular liturgical forms (e.g. the Latin mass), suggesting that it encapsulates the dual forces of globalisation and particularisation. In other words, different contexts for and forms of liturgical ritual reflect the state of transformation or change that our society finds itself in, yet at the same time, also the desire for stable, often nostalgic identities, especially where strictly denominationally rooted liturgy maintains itself, such as in the Anglican church. This tension between the connected and the rooted is a central metaphor for the network society. As Barnard et al. (2014:8) point out, if liturgical ritual establishes and reinforces religious identity, and if that ritual finds itself in a shifting position, then religious identity has to be characterised as unstable, dynamic, in constant movement. The notion of liminality is used to characterise this process of liturgical ritual border crossing, while sticking to fixed identities (Barnard et al. 2014:8).

What are the implications for liturgy in a state of liminality? One implication is that, just as many discourses exist, there can no longer be a central liturgy as point of reference: “it is simply impossible to declare one of the many liturgical rituals ... to be the central rite or the normative form of worship” (Barnard et al. 2014: 27). On the one hand, Roman and Anglo-Catholic churches embrace the Eucharist as the central rite, defining services as “the Mass”. Indeed, as Suggit (2009:13) explains, the Eucharist expresses the common membership of the participants in the church, which was why, in early times, “only the baptised could share in the Eucharist”. Suggit (2009:13) goes so far as to express this belonging in Jungian terms as a shared secret which “serves as a cement binding the tribe together.”

On the other hand, as discussed in 3.2.2 above, Christianity always inhabits a liminal space, and one way in which human beings experience this liminal space is through liturgical ritual, which can itself be regarded as inhabiting a liminal space, an autonomous and dynamic phase, in between lamentation and anticipation, suffering and glory, characterised by a poetic and metaphorical language (Barnard et al. 2014:5). Elsewhere, Barnard et al. (2014:61) describe liturgy as “the place where the holy lives”.

### **3.3.1 Liturgical ritual, language, play and performance**

In order to explore liturgical ritual in terms of liminality, Barnard et al. (2014) make use of poetic and metaphorical language themselves, in an attempt to approach an understanding thereof. One important aspect is that liturgical rituals are characterised as language: verbal and written; active, in terms of celebratory gestures and facial expressions; as well as in objects, such as the bread and cup. According to Structuralist theory, language is a set or lexicon of signs, made up of the signifier and the signified, related to each other by the laws of grammar. In Derridean post-structuralism, the relationship between sign and signifier is uncoupled, and the notion of an external centre outside language, or discourse as he terms it, is impossible (Selden 1989:52, 90-91). By implication, language, and therefore ritual, moves freely in a free discourse or text that opens up an endless chains of meaning (Barnard et al. 2014:85, 86). However, our belief in the *logos*, God as the Word, creates benchmarks within this endless interpretive network of languages to hold together signifier and signified: Jesus Christ as the true word.

In a related metaphor, that of play, Barnard et al. (2014:86) see religious convention, such as the Apostle's Creed, as a stabilising benchmark in the Christian liturgical ritual language game. In a similar way, with particular reference to the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is the chosen point of departure from which the whole rite becomes "readable": with the proviso that the flow of meanings thus launched is not curbed or restricted by a single interpretation, but rather that the ritual in a specific time and specific place launch the flow of ever new meanings (Barnard et al. 2014:86). The Eucharist thus becomes "a free Christian game that has sprung from the name Jesus Christ" (Barnard et al. 2014:86). An important implication of the play metaphor is that the congregation is not passive in the creation of meaning. Barnard et al. (2014:97) introduce a notion of performance to suggest that while the priest (here termed "presider of liturgical order") appropriates both the literal text of the Bible and the metaphorical text of the liturgical ritual in leading/performing the liturgy (both as an individual and, for example, an Anglican), so too the worshippers appropriate both texts, actively generating meaning in responding to/co-performing the liturgy. Both are responsible for producing and receiving the text. The word/Word of God is dynamic, including our human response to the process of transformation. As mentioned earlier, our knowledge of God is not complete or absolute, but is rather in the process of being known and making itself known: the revelation of God is continual. In a sense, then, the liminal nature of liturgical ritual directs our attention to the liminal character of the Christian faith and of biblical language, even our Trinitarian God (Barnard et al. 2014:64).

As a result, the idea of a fixed, unchanged liturgy, which does not stimulate continuous re-appropriation by both leader and congregation, although common, possible and regarded as the norm in many churches, becomes absurd: Barnard et al. (2014:69) describe it as "false, not faithful to the times and contexts and ultimately not faithful to the biblical witnesses of the living God". Instead of speaking truth into a particular congregation at a particular time, instead of speaking prophecy over believers, an unchanged liturgy "represents a way of escaping from time, from the continuation of time, and from God's revelation in time; it is a grasping back into history to avoid contemporary realities and the future" (Barnard et al. 2014:69-70).

What then is the alternative? Barnard et al. (2014:69) speak of the challenge to create new liturgies, “liminal liturgies” that envision new images of God, opening up hitherto unknown and unimagined possibilities and interactions. One new metaphor, perhaps even an “un-template”, is that of bricolage liturgy.

### 3.3.2 Bricolage liturgy

One outflow of liturgy in the liminal space is that of bricolage liturgy, building on the concept of bricolage as something constructed or created from a diverse range of things, which Barnard et al. (2014:5) describe as follows:

A local and instantaneous form of liturgical ritual, which is not the expression of a tradition or of a set of confessional doctrines. It is liturgical ritual understood as a flow of meanings, as a story and as imagination that in a specific local and temporal context has been activated and actualised. It is uprooted liturgical ritual that took a particular, more or less random, shape.

Bricolage liturgy challenges the discourse or language of liturgy itself, freeing it “from its traditional straitjacket” (Ward cited in Barnard et al. 2014:33) and producing and interpreting it from non-fixed cultural or religious experiences and contexts. In an extreme example of deconstruction of language, the notion suggests that silence is as important as sound in liturgy (Barnard et al. 2014:109). This is not new, however, since silence has long been considered a space where we wait to encounter God.

Silence is indeed an essential part of liturgical ritual: as Barnard et al. (2014:109,110,111) explain, word-centeredness does not mean driven by words; indeed, liturgy needs to come from a place of silence, just as the world was created from silence, and the Bible came from silence. Literally, this means times of meditation, silent prayer and preparation as part of the liturgy.

In practice, bricolage liturgy contains a combination of styles, idioms and traditions of worship. At the recent Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Pretoria and Rustenburg (18-21 September 2014), a wonderful example of bricolage liturgy emerged: the event was couched in the ninth century Latin hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, a call on the Holy Spirit, but other hymns ranged from Wesleyan favourites to popular Setswana choruses; the words of the liturgy were combined from South African, New

Zealand, Welsh, Canadian and Scottish liturgies; clergy wore a range of items from mitres and copes to albs and jeans; participants responded in a variety of South African languages simultaneously, using gestures including crossing oneself, clapping, drumming and dancing. What could have been a formal, impersonal service became an informal, spontaneous and personal encounter with God, a bricolage liturgy with an Anglican flavour.

Barnard et al. (2014:122) ask: “Is bricolage a token of God’s multifaceted grace, or are these forms of liturgical ritual only expression of the individual reflexive and expressive late-modern selves?” The example above speaks volumes about the appropriation of a very English rite by South Africans, and the delight in encountering God in so many different ways, yet within the framework of the Anglican Church.

### **3.3.3 The internet as a context for liturgical ritual**

Barnard et al. (2014:11,55,56) note that liturgical rituals are no longer only practised by a constant congregation in a church building – although this is still common, particularly in terms of Roman Catholic and Anglican worship; instead, liturgical rituals take place in less defined spaces and times, for example, using multimedia as the basis for an event locates it in the network society/culture; provisional liturgical spaces (e.g. sports stadium or theatre) are created, where the stage becomes a provisional pulpit; or an online worship event, such as the perpetual adoration of the Host, or even an online Eucharist.

The contrast of a fixed worship event in a fixed building with that of online worship, highlights the liminality in society: a central characteristic of the internet is that information is transferred over the entire world within literally no time: distance in time and space between two points is zero (Barnard et al. 2014, 204). This raises the tension between the so-called “timeless time” of the internet and the very local time of fixed worship events; the “space of flows” and the local space; the dislocation of a virtual reality and the (re)location of reality; the connectedness, yet rootedness evident in late-modern society (Cassells cited in Barnard et al. 2014:3,181). This suggests at least two more concepts to be discussed when exploring liturgical rituals on the internet: time and space (Casey 2006:75). However, a useful starting point is that of embodiment, since the question of physical presence is perhaps the most



obvious difference between a liturgical ritual in a church and a liturgical ritual online, which forms the focus of the research study at hand.

### **(a) Embodiment**

Barnard et al. (2013:135) speak of the physical body engaged in liturgical ritual as a performing body: “To participate in liturgical ritual is to participate bodily.” In other words, liturgical ritual is embodied – there is no worship apart from a bodily and corporeal performed liturgy (Barnard et al. 2014:139). Brown (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:139) explains how embodiment is divine communication:

God’s pre-eminent form of communication is seen to lie in a particular human body and it is its interaction with other human bodies (including our own) that constitutes humanity’s way to salvation. Christ’s suffering body demonstrated a new way towards identification with God. Risen and ascended, it now anticipates our own bodily destiny to live in close union with God.

This is of particular relevance when considering the Eucharist, where, in the tradition of Jewish liturgical practice, Christ’s body is seen as a literal sacrifice, associated with the Passover lamb: “Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7). Extending this image, there is the notion of Christ as the revelation of God’s humanity, being flesh and blood. In the Old Testament sense, blood is the source of life, and at the Eucharist, Roman Catholics in particular believe in transubstantiation of the bread and wine literally into flesh and blood: however, for Anglicans, “to eat the flesh of ... Jesus Christ and to drink his blood” (CPSA 1989:128) is a metaphorical statement, where the Eucharist becomes a liturgical expression of commitment to and unity with Christ (Suggit 2009:17, 63).

In this sense, then, the Eucharist expresses the common membership of all participants in the church, which is also described as the body of Christ by St Paul (1 Cor. 12:27), that is, the community created by Christ’s body (Suggit 2009:13). But because Christ’s body is a broken, yet glorified body, a body destroyed, yet healed, in the Eucharist we see, hear, taste, feel and even smell the tension of already and not-yet, experienced in the tension between vulnerability and healing, crucifixion and glory, between Christ present and absent. This reminds us again of the liminality of

the communion experience, of the Eucharist is a liminal space where we are incorporated bodily into Christ broken and resurrected (Barnard et al. 2014:158).

What does this imply for a virtual body of believers, who are not physically together at the Lord's Table? If liturgical ritual itself inhabits a liminal space, then participants in a ritual on the internet, also a liminal space, can be seen in a special light, as described by Barnard et al. (2014:47):

Released for a moment from social structure, persons in liminality can relate to each other simply and fully as human beings and experience an intense quality of human communion usually impossible in structured society."

A liminal space is thus ideally suited for c(C)ommunion, being open to the possibility of revelation and transformation.

### **(b) Time**

Time in the network society becomes an eternal now, without sequence (Barnard et al. 2014:182): the internet is always accessible, always "open for business". This intersects in an interesting way with the notion of time in liturgical ritual, particularly the Eucharist, where remembrance, discernment and anticipation combine (Barnard et al. 2014:186). On the one hand, there is the question of the memorial aspect, where we take cup and bread in memory of Christ, of the Last Supper: the Second Eucharistic Prayer of the Anglican Prayer Book urges us to "do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (CPSA 1989:121). The Third Eucharist Prayer, translated from Latin, uses the future tense as Jesus says: "This is my body which will be given up for you" (CPSA 1989: 123): as Suggit (1999:35) suggests, this places the words of Jesus at the Last Supper in a historical setting, where Jesus is to die the following day. However, the purpose of the Eucharist is not merely to erect a monument to a past event.

On the other hand, St Paul tells us that "when you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he should come" (1 Cor. 11:26). In other words, the Eucharist becomes a ritual of anticipation, a re-telling of gospel of Christ's death until he comes again. Suggit (2009:18) sees the Eucharist as "the liturgical

anticipation of the fulfilment of God's purposes, the expression of our sure and certain hope": the Eucharist is eschatological.

However, the liturgy is performed in the present – but a reconstituted present, in which time is “condensed”. The term “anamnesis” is relevant here, not in its translation simply as remembrance or memory: instead, something is actually made present in the very act of remembrance (Suggit 1999:35). Both Barnard et al. (2014:188) and Suggit (2009:18) highlight, at the Eucharist, the future and past are symbolically brought together and become a present reality: “The experience of liturgical ritual time is liminal; the worshipper embarks on the transition from past to present and back, from present to future and back. Past, present and future are thickened in the now of the liturgy.” Purcell (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:190) speaks specifically of “Eucharistic Time”, which arises in the past and points to the future, yet in this way establishes a present. Barnard et al. (2014:187) further argue that “revisiting the past is a reformulation of the past, in accordance with the perspective of current times.” In other words, identity and culture are sought in remembrance, but also established retrospectively in it. This identity is also shaped through a yearning for the future, through a close connection between the saving presence of Christ who has already come, and the future coming: Barnard et al. (2014:190) express this as the coming of the present One. In a sense, then, the Christian body, or community, is reconstituted each time the Eucharist is said.

### **(c) Space**

The theories of space of Lefebvre and Soja (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:192) offer a classification of three kinds of space, starting first with the mapped, geographical space; secondly, the imagined or idealised space; and thirdly, the actual environment in which people live, that is the immediate, existential space. Post (cited in Barnard et al. 2014:193) defines a further kind of space, a liminal space defined in the context of other places in the domain of religion, remembrance, culture and recreation; the church, for example, is a place of contrast, spirituality, and transcendence, with the primary characteristic of anamnesis. Importantly, museums are not included in this category, as they are places for historicism, nostalgia, and aestheticism.

Barnard et al. (2014:193, 194) develop Post's fourth space as an addition to the three spaces defined above, as a liturgical-ritual space, one of participation and anticipation, where time and space merge. This fourth space is one described as "holy ground", a sacred place which is transformed by the presence of God. This space can be formalised, such as in the Jewish temple with the Holy of Holies, or in a church building today. However, a liturgical ritual cannot simply be enacted and demand or guarantee the presence of God to establish a space as sacred: rather, God "is the first to enter the liturgical space; he invites us to dance" – he takes over our human act, and transforms it to "his" act (Barnard et al. 2014:199,204).

God does not merely transform the physical space - through the Eucharist, as mentioned above, the participants in the ritual are given a new identity as the body of Christ, and they too are transformed into a place where Jesus lives. In this way, the sacred space now exists in a community of people, who become the house or temple of God where Jesus lives. Just as past and future time become condensed in the present, so too does the spatially absent Jesus become condensed in the participants, themselves constantly moving in the liminal space of already and not-yet. In other words, participants in liturgy then become the liturgical space themselves (Barnard et al. 2014:199). This is particularly pertinent when considering the virtual space of the internet, where a group of worshippers are not physically present: instead, through the performance of liturgical ritual, they are transformed into a body, albeit a liminal one.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Research into liturgical ritual online can be explored through the concept of liminality, which allows for an understanding of liturgical ritual as residing in a liminal space and time. In addition, locating the study in the context of the network society allows for a further exploration of the internet as a liminal space/time. Concepts of embodiment, language, play and performance, as per Barnard et al. (2014) add to an understanding of how liturgical ritual is enacted via the internet, particularly in terms of the Eucharist creating/transforming those who participate whether physically and literally, or virtually.

## **Chapter 4: Literature survey**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a literature survey carried out to explore the Eucharist as an online ritual. A first question to be answered in an exploration of the literature is to do with the history of liturgical rituals online, while a second question is concerned with the state of current research on the liturgical ritual online, in particular, the Eucharist.

### **4.1 Religion and the internet**

The development of a religious presence on the internet is not simply an arbitrary phenomenon: as Hoover (2002:28) explains, “The need to think more broadly and inclusively about religion has coincided with ongoing redefinition of the fields of mass communication and media studies.”

#### **4.2.1 A brief history of religion and technology**

Horsfield and Teusner (2007:279) locate the rise of religious usage of the internet in the long history of religion’s relationship with technology, particularly in terms of development of printing in sixteenth century, as expressed in the words of German historian Johann Sleidan, writing in 1542: “As if to offer proof that God has chosen us to accomplish a special mission, there was invented in our land a marvellous and subtle art, the art of printing.” However, printing only developed when the conditions were mature, that is, the development of print technology itself; access to good quality paper; distribution through good roads and safe travel; and the social conditions of the Renaissance with the growth of scientific thinking and investigation, and the concomitant desire for religious reform (Horsfield & Teusner 2007:282-283).

Similarly, the internet was only able to develop in the context of the convergence of social, cultural, economic, political and technological factors bubbling throughout the twentieth century including urbanisation, print media and broadcasting, consumerism, and globalisation (Horsfield & Teusner 2007:284). For example, Robinson-Neal (2008:230) refers to Dwight L. Moody, the tent revivalist, using radio for mission in the 1920s, while Archbishop Fulton Sheen “an early media evangelist” was one of the first preachers to have a radio ministry and was the first to have a television ministry broadcast in the 1940s. In the 1950s, so-called electronic church

developed and by the 1970s, American Radio and TV National Religious Broadcaster's executive director (cited in Horsfield & Teusner 2007:279) was saying: "I believe that God has raised up this powerful technology of radio and television expressly to reach every man, woman, boy and girl on earth with the even more powerful message of the gospel". Kluver and Chen (2008:137) associate the rise of electronic church in the 1970s with the rise of individually oriented and pluralistic religious faith, as seen in the trends towards Eastern religions and spiritual seeking by the hippy sub-culture. In the same way, they associated the rise of religious involvement in computer-mediated communication with the 1980s and 1990s phenomenon of church consumerism.

The first evidence of religious involvement in computer-mediated communication can be dated to the 1980s, with the American Presbyterian Church's pioneering use of BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems) for ministers and leaders to share sermon advice and have religious debates and discussions (Campbell & Lövheim 2011:1084,1085; Hutchings 2007:243,244). Other early examples are an "online" church launched in 1985, where, according to a 1999 document by the Church of England Board of Social Responsibility entitled *Cybernauts Awake*, "for the first time people could worship in spirit and in truth and not be distracted by others ... people are pared down to pure spirit" (cited in Hutchings 2007:244). Similarly, a memorial liturgy offered online after the Challenger space shuttle disaster offered a text-based forum for prayers, scriptures, meditation, and open discussion (Hutchings 2007:244), while O'Leary (1996) describes early online pagan rituals in chatrooms.

From this discussion forum and outreach medium, Horsfield and Teusner (2007: 287,288) go on to track the development of the internet from the 1990s in terms of technology and access, quoting Brian Murley (cited in Horsfield & Teusner 2007:279; see also Kluver & Chen 2008:122) in his reference to "the mediahood of all receivers", likening the web, particularly the use of blogs, to the Protestant theological campaign of a "priesthood of all believers". Indeed, the development of the internet and social media, in particular, allowed for much more than Bulletin boards and chatrooms. Hutchings (2007:245) cites Charles Henderson's First Church of Cyberspace, launched 1994 by Presbyterian minister in new Jersey, as one of the first online churches, with a chatroom, daily services, images, music, and

an online Bible, while the first online ritual, a wedding which took place on 8 May 1996 between Janka and Tomas in the United States, is described by Jenkins (2008:99) and Miczek (2008:145): the happy couple created a 3D environment with avatars to represent themselves and their guests, who took part in the event which lasted three hours. This was the first religious example of what Miczek (2008:144) refers to as a virtual world, that is, “a computer-based simulated (often) 3D environment” where the user moves via an avatar, a graphical representation that interacts in the virtual world.

Other early online experiments include the Ship of Fools and its subsequent incarnations, as recorded by one of the developers, Jenkins (2008:99-114). Ship of Fools is a net magazine, which was launched on 1 April 1998 and became a virtual community, with 130 000 visitors looking at 2.7 million pages. The project made use of bulletin boards to foster community to such an extent that the developers went on to produce “The Ark” in 2003, an internet reality game show where people acting as Biblical characters through their avatars were “trapped” on an Ark for 40 days and 40 nights and completed a series of challenges watched by a global audience, in an online “Survivor” scenario. Followers urged the development of an online church, a project sponsored by the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Bishop of London. The establishment and workings of the Church of Fools, a short-lived 3-D church environment populated by avatars, is described by Jenkins (2008:101), who explains their motivation:

Just as the Methodist church leader John Wesley took his preaching out of churches and into the fields and streets in the eighteenth century, we wanted to take church to where people are in the twenty-first century – on the Net.

The notion of using the internet as “a medium for Christian outreach in fulfilment of divine mandates to capture the world for Christ” has become common particularly in Pentecostal and evangelical churches, including American megachurches, as well as those in Ghana as described by Asamoah-Gyadu (2007:225), for whom the internet was really an extension of TV and radio ministries. In fact, Bekkering (cited in Hutchings 2011:1126) has coined the term “intervangelists”. An examples of such



intervangelism is the so-called internet campus of Lifechurch.tv (Hutchings 2011:1125).

The virtual environment of Church of Fools was ground-breaking, not only in its creation of a church online, but also in their adaptation of liturgy: Church of Fools created what Barnard et al. (2014:5) describe as bricolage liturgy: “A local and instantaneous form of liturgical ritual ... understood as a flow of meanings, as a story and as imagination that in a specific local and temporal context has been activated and actualised. It is uprooted liturgical ritual that took a particular, more or less random, shape.” Kluver and Chen (2008:137) similarly state that the Church of Fools is example of the “faithful eclecticism” of postmodern culture, concluding that, “[t]he online environment appears to favour the development of religious and spiritual practices that are more personally expressive and more individually oriented.”

Most recently, technology has developed in the area of 3-D churches: using the terminology of gaming, many people use the virtual space simultaneously in so-called multiplayer mode, with the world continuing even if the user is offline: such environments are all referred to as MMORPGs – multiplayer online role-playing games (Miczek 2008:144). Robinson-Neal (2008:228), moving away from the violent associations of games such as World of Warcraft, refers instead to a Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE). Two examples are Alpha World and Second Life, where, in May 2004, a “Catholic” Mass was first held in a virtual cathedral – however, the ritual stopped short of communion (Jenkins 2008:99).

Kluver and Chen (2008:137) question whether “the internet exacerbates the trend for religious individualism, or whether it provides a marketplace of commodity culture for the purposes of spiritual or religious exploration”. Horsfield and Teusner (2007:279) would locate the answer in their study of history: in both periods, those of the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, the shapes and structures of Christianity were already being destabilised by the convergence of social, political, economic, cultural changes in a broader context. In other words, change is not instigated by the media alone, but rather by a greater context enabling developments which would otherwise not take place, such as the association of Reformation Christianity with the rise of



commercial publishing, and perhaps a transformation in Christianity with the rise of the internet.

#### **4.2.2 Research into religion and the internet**

##### **(a) The first wave**

By the turn of the millennium, religious practice was becoming prominent in the internet landscape, such that Pew Foundation, dedicated to data collection and research on numerous projects in the United States, compiled information on how the internet was being used by churches and synagogues in the United States from 2000-2004; their findings showed that the internet was being used by congregations “to strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of their members, evangelise and perform missions in their communities around the world, and perform a wide variety of pious and practical activities for their congregations” (Pew Foundation cited in Robinson-Neal 2008:230; see Casey 2006:73,75). By 2004, the internet had become a useful platform for the faith-based activities of 50% of Americans, including information sharing and outreach to a wider community, but also for “personal spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions” (Pew Foundation cited in Robinson-Neal 2008:231).

Beginning with the Pew Foundation’s work, researchers refer to a “first wave” of research into religion on the internet at the turn of the millennium (Dawson 2000:26; see Lundby 2011:1219; Campbell & Lövheim 2011:1085), where researchers and practitioners began to reflect on the use of the internet as a religious space. In this period, Helland (2000:205) established the typology for the next decade of study in his distinction between “religion online” and “online religion”: religion online refers to informational, hierarchical material, such as a website of a traditional mainstream church, where there is a transfer of information from official offline sources (i.e. the physical, local world) to online. Online religion, on the other hand, is characterised by the participation of internet users, not professionals, who may, for instance, attempt to create spiritually orientated communities outside the framework of institutional religious bodies and organisations.

The notions codified by Helland's typology had already sparked a debate on the possible replication, transformation – largely in negative sense – or even the replacement of offline by online religion in the form of religious communities online (Hutchings 2011:1120; see Campbell & Lövheim 2011:1083). Indeed, early studies of online Christian ritual suggest that online practices will someday replace offline forms (Schroeder, Heather & Lee cited in Hutchings 2011:1120), while a 1998 report by the Barna Research group, *The cyberchurch is coming*, prophesied mass exodus from pews (Hutchings 2011:1120).

These possibilities in turn sparked a normative debate: is online ritual good or bad for religion? In 2002, the Vatican (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002) made a statement affirming the use of the internet as a tool for religious teaching and other observances, making it clear, however, that “there is a marked reluctance to endorse the idea that online spiritual experiences are effective substitutes for offline participation.” In other words, the internet was only to be used as an aid to religious devotion. Scholars stepped into the fray, for example, Goethals (2003:257), who rejected the internet as a new ritual space, arguing that online church “falls short of ritual activity because it is essentially disembodied. Human beings moving, touching, praying, singing, lamenting, praising and gesturing in concrete liturgical settings, in real space and time: this is genuine ritual experience.” Similarly, O’Leary (cited in Hutchings 2007:253) argues, “I do not believe that any cyber-ritual ... will ever be able to replace ritual performance in physical sacred space ... the participant in such ritual remains too much of a spectator, separated from the virtual space by the box on the desk.” A later study in the same vein is that of Kluver and Cheong (2007) in Singapore, where they found that there was nearly unanimous agreement among Christian, Buddhist and Hindu faith leaders that the internet is not an acceptable substitute for religious participation. Such studies show that the main objections to online worship are that worship is intensely interpersonal – the artificiality and impersonal aspect of internet does not bring contact with God, yet others argue that worship is a corporate matter and one cannot worship alone on computer (Kluver & Chen 2008:119).

### **(b) The second wave and beyond**

The second wave of research into religion online/online religion offers a more balanced, analytical approach to religion on the internet, focussing on the question of how the internet can and should be used for religious purposes. For a start, Miczek (2008:145) builds on Helland's distinction between online religion/religion online, working with the notion of online ritual/ritual online, where ritual online refers to ritual texts, prescripts, and descriptions on websites where the ritual itself is performed offline. In contrast, online ritual is performed online, that is, in virtual space. Casey's (2006) research also focusses on ritual, systematically describing various forms that religious ritual takes in cyberspace, including the differences and continuities that exist in translating ritual forms into a media environment, while Duce (2013:49) builds on Casey's "ritual view of communication," to understand the nature of the Internet as a ritual space.

Casey's (2006) study also explores which faith groups choose to embrace media environment for the purpose of ritual. In the same vein, Asamoah-Gyadu's (2007) research compares the use of the internet by traditional Christian denominations and Pentecostal/charismatic churches in Ghana, while a similar study of Roman Catholic and Pentecostal churches in Latin America has been done by Jesús Martín-Barbero (cited in Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:235).

As Campbell and Lövheim (2011:1086) suggest, the second wave shows the internet as a unique sphere of engagement: for example, Dawson (2004:85) speaks of how the "larger framework of our social lives is now the social network more than the community as traditionally conceived". Several researchers offer descriptions of online religious practice, as well as comparisons with offline religion, particularly in terms of the communities established: Casey's (2006:18-85) research offers a descriptive and analytical case study of St John's Internet church, the online ministry of real-world church in Alabama, Communion of Evangelical Episcopalian Churches, using the areas of time, space, and co-presence as key, while Miczek's (2008:150) study of Church of Fools as well as churches in MUVes, such as Second Life, considers change as transformation, invention or exclusion. Other descriptive-analytical studies include Kluver and Chen's (2008) study of the Church of Fools, which considers whether the mediated environment can adequately capture all that a

religious service should be, while Robinson-Neal's (2008) reflections on her experience in and survey of users of Second Life consider users' motivations in using online religion. In perhaps the largest of such studies so far, Hutchings (2011:1118) has completed a four-year (2004-2010) ethnographic study of five online churches, focusing on the fluid, multi-layered relationship between online and offline activity, including blogs, chatrooms, video streams, virtual worlds. Notably, as Noomen, Aupers and Houtman (2011:1099) show, more recent studies focus on appropriation of new technologies within various religious groups – scholars are less focussed on the question of how new cyber-religions emerge online, but rather how established religious groups handle new internet technologies, how they put these into use and how they incorporate these into previously established practices.

In what can be seen as the beginning of a third wave, Lundby (2011:1220) moves beyond the notion of community, locating his study of patterns of what he terms “belonging” across the online/offline interface. Similarly, Barnard et al. (2014:46), in exploring their theme of liminality, refer to an alternative form of human existence coming into being, termed *communitas*, not community, which also crosses boundaries. Duce (2013:25) also uses cultural studies as a basis for her arguments about the possibility of community on the internet, arguing that online communities are networks, which reflects the kinds of connections and interactions characteristic of contemporary society as a whole: “network” is seen as an adequate way to describe community, hence, when persons in cyberspace are involved in networks, they are involved in community. This speaks into the same space as Barnard et al.'s (2014) “network society”, characterised by both connection and disconnection.

At the same time, in typical postmodern fashion, connection is contrasted with rootedness: research by Noomen et al. (2011:1098,1112) considers how online religion/religion online is dealt with in traditional Dutch Catholic and Protestant milieus, and the dilemmas and struggles faced as mainstream churches feel that the internet is the only remaining viable way to reach out and make oneself heard “in the radically pluralist cacophony of voices that has resulted from processes of secularisation and religious change”.

### 4.3 The Eucharist online

A particular focus of the research at hand is on the Eucharist itself, as it manifests online. As seen in 4.2.2 above, several researchers have described the liturgy of various online churches (see Casey, 2006; Miczek 2008; Hutchings 2007; Hutchings 2011). Miczek (2008:145) refers to an online Eucharist on Alpha Church, however, in none of these articles is a Eucharistic rite actually described or referred to as a common ritual on the sites researched. In fact, where references to the Eucharist appear, they highlight the absence of the ritual.

However, a recent dissertation by Duce (2013:1) offers a description and analysis of a once-off online Eucharist, which took place in 2008 in the context of an online class affiliated with Nazarene Bible College in Colorado. This faith community created a “cybersanctuary,” and by utilizing an mp3 file from a church website, and a chat room, the professor and his online class observed this sacrament together. Duce’s (2013:2) research deals with the nature of the Internet itself and its capacity to operate as a venue for a religious ritual such as the Eucharist.

The practicability of the Eucharist being celebrated online is also raised by Kluver and Chen (2008:131) in their study of Church of Fools: they note the absence of the Eucharist, arguing that there is no way to physically take bread and wine and ingest them on the internet. The taking of bread and wine could, of course, have digital equivalents: Jenkins (2008:104) describes how avatars in the Church of Fools could walk, sit, talk and kneel, as well as make various social and religious gestures such as blessing, crossing themselves, raising arms in praise, and tearing their hair out (as a sign of lament). In the case described by Duce (2013:77), the Eucharist takes a dual form: the service consists of text, music files and images, and when the service leader typed, “Let’s ‘serve each other and remember the Lord”, an image of bread and wine was sent to the first student with the message, “When you have been served and partaken of the bread and cup, please type in your words to the next person. As you do, you are passing the bread and passing the cup.” The recipient typed an acknowledgement, partook of the physical bread and wine they had at their computers, and then offered the elements to the next person by typing.

In addition to a case study of this event, Duce (2013:2) raises further questions about nature of the Eucharist itself and whether or not reformatting it online is

appropriate (i.e. theologically sound). Robinson-Neal (2011), in her survey of participants in internet churches, found concern among many worshippers “because the notion of participating in faith ceremonies such as Holy Communion through the Internet is considered almost sacrilegious”, while Miczek (2008:169) concludes, “Due to heated theological discussions on online sacraments, most of the churches exclude this element from their services.” Similarly, in his description of two internet churches, i-Church and the Cathedral of the Epiphany on Second Life, Hutchings (2011:1126) notes that while both claim Anglican identity, neither offers a digital equivalent for the central Anglican ritual of Eucharist; the presence in each congregation of large numbers of Anglican believers seeking an online Anglican space is paradoxical, as they remain unwilling to compromise their core belief that the Eucharist is a necessarily material event and continue to attend local churches for this purpose.

However, Duce (2013:218), arguing from Wesleyan and Calvinist views, argues that the Eucharist is indeed compatible with a meaningful practice of the ritual in cyberspace. Using theory of ritual as further underpinning, Duce (2013:219) sees the Eucharist in cyberspace being “a networked communication medium of grace characterized by the agency of the user, who joins other participants in a sacramental encounter with Christ”. Kluver and Chen (2008:120,131), also working within a Wesleyan approach of “means of grace” by which one encounters God, refer to the Eucharist as Communion, where “communion” refers not only to the sharing of the Lord’s Supper, but also to the communion of believers, the intimacy that can arise from interaction with one another. In other words, they suggest, even though the bread and wine have not been shared, communion as community does exist.

Similarly, Labenek (2014:83), in exploring the online Eucharist from a Roman Catholic point of view, in the context of the negative stance from the Vatican, concludes that while a virtual Mass cannot replace the physical activity of attending a real world Mass, a virtual Mass can be viewed as a substitute activity for those who want to engage in Christian community, but who cannot because the activity of a physical Mass is impossible for them: “[i]n this case, the activity of attending a virtual Mass is a way of substituting for the physical in the sense of a sign of commitment to Christian community”. Labenek (2014:84) goes further to suggest that participation in

a virtual Mass could become a sign of solidarity with those who cannot attend physical Masses, “as well as a sign of hope for a future when we all can join together as an embodied community”.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This literature survey shows that much has been written on worship, liturgy and ritual, including where it is practised online. Religion has a long relationship with technology, and researchers are able to sketch a history dating from the advent of print to the latest 3-D role-playing games. At least two so-called waves of research have taken place in this field since the 1990s, from those focussing on what was seen as the mutual exclusivity of religion and computers, to more recent studies celebrating the fluidity of current religion, and its ability to cross boundaries of time and space. However, very little research has been done on the Eucharist online and hence the research at hand will contribute to new learning.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### 5.1 Overview

The aim of the study is to explore literature regarding the celebration of the Eucharist online and offer a thorough description of the phenomenon. This study has therefore presented a literature survey on liturgical ritual online, with particular reference to the Eucharist. The research questions laid out in Chapter 2 are as follows:

- What is a liturgical ritual? How is the Eucharist a liturgical ritual?
- Which methodology would be useful to study liturgical ritual online?
- Which theoretical approach would be useful to study liturgical ritual online?
- What is the history of liturgical rituals online?
- What is the current research on the liturgical ritual online, in particular, the Eucharist?

Chapter 1 offers an introduction to the study, as well as an exploration of what a liturgical ritual is. Chapter 2 then presents a possible methodological framework based on Osmer's (2008) practical theological enquiry, which asks and answers four questions, that is, what is going on; why this is going on; what ought to be going on; and how to respond. Each question is associated with a structured task, that is, the descriptive-empirical task; the interpretative task; the normative task; and the pragmatic task. As a literature survey, this study is located in Osmer's (2008) first question, what is going on, and hence takes the form of a descriptive-empirical task, which in turn consists of four elements, that is, the purpose of the project; choice of a strategy of inquiry, formation and execution of the research plan, and, finally, reflection. Each of these elements has been explored in the light of the research questions.

Chapter 3 considers a possible theoretical approach or conceptual framework for the study, locating it in the post-modern thinking of Barnard et al. (2014) who approach liturgical ritual from both a theological perspective, but also from a cultural and anthropological perspective, identifying a trend of freeing of liturgy from traditional forms, moving between established churches and traditional liturgical forms and less



defined, spaces, times and groups on the other. This suggests a changing, migrating religiosity, a religiosity in transformation, “liquid church”, so to speak (Ward cited in Barnard et al. 2014:33). Liturgical ritual is seen as a “floating signifier”, where “the language of the liturgy, previously held captive in predefined theological and confessional codes that determined what orthodoxy was, has gradually been freed from its traditional straitjacket, and is produced and interpreted from non-fixed cultural or religious experiences that do, however, often use traditional images” (Barnard et al. 2014:33). One of the areas in which liturgy finds transformation is on the internet, and the notion of liminality is a useful lens through which to study this phenomenon, challenging as it does traditional notions of time, space and embodiment.

Chapter 4 presents the literature survey itself, beginning with a brief history of religion and technology so as to contextualise the internet as space for liturgical ritual. The chapter then explores two waves of research into religion on the internet, a first wave which distinguished between religion online and online religion (Helland 2000:25), that is, the difference between simply using the internet as a platform for information, and using it as a ritual or liturgical space. This first wave of research was characterised by normative debate on whether the internet is good or bad for religion in general. By the time of the second wave, the reality of the internet had been accepted and offered more analytical and balanced exploration of different faith groups’ use of the internet; the internet as particular sphere of engagement for ritual in particular; as well as case studies of religious uses of the internet.

## **5.2 Findings**

From the attempt to explore liturgical ritual online through a literature survey, various findings can be highlighted. A first finding is the vast number of applications that the online environment has for religion, and liturgical ritual in particular. Endless examples of websites, chatrooms, blogs, virtual churches and services can be found, emphasising that with an online medium, rather like God, nothing is impossible. However, the challenge of this environment is the notion, as Mark Pinsky (cited in Pulliam 2009) suggests in a report on “cyber-church today”, that “[t]here is a tendency for some in the church world to fall in love with technology as a magic

bullet...” Of course, the use of technology such as the internet can be seen as a means of growing churches as part of the Great Commission. This is indeed what so-called intervangelists do, whether by using the internet simply as a site for streaming offline sermons or services, or whether by planting virtual churches, such as Lifechurch.tv’s church in the online virtual world Second Life. This is also what led early theologians and scholars to consider the possible replacement of offline by online religion (see Hutchings 2011:1120; Campbell & Lövheim 2011:1083).

As it became clear that the internet would not replace other forms of church, implications of the nature of the internet as virtual medium came to be explored. A second finding of this study is that the internet as a ritual context that is essentially disembodied has particular implications: the centrality of the body to ritual practice is discussed in Chapter 3, where the physical body as performing body in liturgical ritual is highlighted. Barnard et al., (2014:135,136-137) argue that “there is no worship apart from a bodily and corporeal performed liturgy”, linking embodiment in such sacraments as baptism to the notion that religion is not merely cognitive knowledge, but a sensuous experience through which faith and knowledge are constructed. This emphasis on bodily participation is also important in the South African context, where an African understanding of the body is as undivided unit, with the physical an essential part of the ritual – in addition, through physical worship, participants become each other in the truest sense of *Ubuntu* (Barnard et al. 2014:142-143).

The rise of MMORPGs or MUVES, that is, 3-D environments in which participants are embodied as avatars is a possible online response to the notion of embodiment, suggesting that just as avatars engage in sexual practices online, so could they engage in other physical activities, such as taking communion. This is an area warranting further research, however.

The question of disembodiment remains one of the strongest objections to the online Eucharist, particularly by Catholics and Anglicans. As Labenek (2014:24) highlights, the virtual Mass does not facilitate the presence of Christ through the commemoration of the Last Supper in the blessing and distribution of bread and wine

to a community of the faithful: this is particularly relevant to notions of the Eucharist as literal body and blood which is then shared physically by the community as the body of Christ: “As a Church, we share the body and blood of Christ and we commune through the reception of the bread and wine. In a virtual church, this reception of the same bread and wine is not physically possible” (Labenek 2014:24).

A final finding is linked to the problematic of how Christ is present in the celebration and reception of the Eucharist. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (cited in Labenek 2014:47), argues that the virtual reception of the Eucharist is impossible because there is “no sacrament that can bypass the body”; importantly, Williams is not merely referring to the lack of a physical transubstantiated bread and wine, but to “the lack of presence of embodied persons standing beside each other and receiving the bread and wine together,” that is, the body of Christ as community.

The nature of community is one tackled intensively in the literature, with several arguments for the existence of the internet as a sphere of community: a first suggests that being a religious community is defined by the patterns of belonging between members of the community, rather than the material aspects of community (Lundby 2011). Another argument is based on the concept of networks (Duce 2013:25; see Barnard et al. 2014), which challenge our understanding of physical, time and space-bound communities and imply that connections between people in late-modern society no longer need the material either. Indeed, Duce (2013:21) suggests that, theologically, the Eucharist itself is a mediating event in which the ritual functions as communication between Christ and His church: a virtual community simply reconfigures the medium of the ritual to retain what she terms “the essential features of an experience of Christ”

However, it is perhaps because the notions of embodiment and community remain a challenge that few examples of the Eucharist online exist, and hence fewer studies of the phenomenon.

### **5.3 The way forward**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, this study has focussed only on a literature survey of the Eucharist as liturgical ritual online. However, the other elements of Osmer’s (2008) approach are yet to be covered. A useful starting point would be to plan and execute

an empirical leg of the project, which could consist of two stages. A first stage could be that of participant observation, with research into specific examples of the Eucharist online. A second stage could research how the service of Communion online is experienced by the worshippers, or, indeed, appropriated by the worshippers, with data being obtained through individual interviews, and, if possible, through focus groups of online participants in communion. This research would help to answer Osmer's second question, that is, why is this going on, that is, the interpretative task, and add to the conversation on liturgical inculturation in the network society. Chapter 4 offers a brief history of the role of technology in liturgical inculturation, which could form a basis for such future research. Furthermore, the conversation could be focussed particularly on the Anglican Church in South Africa, where liturgical reform is currently being undertaken, although still in the form of a Prayer Book, rather than an online format.

In terms of the third question, what ought to be going on, that is, the normative task. For instance, functioning examples of the Eucharist online could be researched and described as examples of liturgical best practice. This could feed into church policy on the use of the Eucharist online, no examples of which have been found for the Anglican Communion worldwide. This could then lead into the fourth question, that is, how to respond, with pragmatic suggestions for use of the Eucharist online: for instance, in rural South Africa several chapelries are associated with parishes; unfortunately, a priest cannot visit every chapelry every week, and hence a streamed or online service would mean the congregations could still access a worship experience. In other instances, the online Eucharist could be a real benefit to housebound people who cannot come to church; this could be their only chance to experience worship at all.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has offered an overview of the study as a whole, highlighting both the methodological and conceptual approaches. In addition, the chapter has offered a discussion of the main findings of the study, that is, that while the internet is commonly used as a context for liturgical ritual, questions of embodiment and community remain a challenge to the celebration of the Eucharist online. Further

empirical study of actual instances of the Eucharist online may offer increased insight into both the issues of embodiment and community.

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