

# THE Meaning OF HOLY Communion

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*in The United  
Methodist Church*

E. Byron Anderson

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# INTRODUCTION

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**I**t is a great and holy thing to be invited to feast at the Lord's table. For some people, the invitation to the table evokes memories of other holy times in life, special church relationships, and the unbounded grace of God. For others, it brings memories of the reality of the disunity of the church: the lack of welcome received in some churches, the need for reconciliation within church communities and families as well as between various churches, and sinfulness and failure. These situations invite us to examine our understanding of this holy meal.

This booklet is designed to provide a brief introduction to the meanings and practices of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church, especially as set forth in *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (hereafter *THM*), adopted by the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church and readopted in 2012. We will explore several basic and common questions about the meaning of Holy Communion: What does Scripture tell us about the holy meal? What do the various names for Holy Communion mean, and how do they shape our understanding of its meaning? How does the context and shape of the service of Holy Communion (Word and Table in *The United Methodist Hymnal*) influence this understanding? What is the prayer of Great Thanksgiving at the Lord's table? What does Holy Communion do in and for the life of the church? Who can receive Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church? How often should we celebrate or receive Communion? Why do we receive Communion in so many different ways in our churches? In addition to these questions of meaning, we also provide answers to a number of frequently asked questions concerning our practices of Holy Communion, especially questions about who presides at Holy Communion, how we care for the elements, and how to respond to the emerging digital church culture.



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## THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

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A number of Bible stories help us understand Holy Communion. We most often turn to the accounts of Jesus' meal with his disciples in the upper room on the night he was betrayed (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; and Luke 22:7-23). Each of these gospels records how Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples with the words: "This is my body." After the supper, he took a cup of wine, blessed it, and gave it to his disciples with the words: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

As Paul recounts the origins of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, he reminds the church of the tradition he received from the Lord Jesus and handed on to the church and to us.

The stories recounting Jesus' words at the table in the upper room are called the *institution narrative*. They tell how Holy Communion was begun and recount Jesus' command that the church continue to celebrate this meal in his name for his remembrance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* [hereafter *THM*] (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2004), "The Meaning of Holy Communion," 8-9.

All of these stories emphasize the importance of Jesus' self-giving, his faithfulness to God in the face of death, and his continued care for his disciples. Set in the context of a Passover meal, these stories about the Last Supper focus our attention on the relationship between the events of the Passover (Exodus 12:1-28) and Jesus' death on the cross. In the Exodus story, the blood of the lambs the Israelites use to mark their doorposts serves as a sign to God not to bring judgment upon their households. In the gospel stories of the Last Supper and crucifixion, Jesus' blood serves as the sign to God not to bring judgment upon the people for their sins.

These are not the only stories that help us understand the meaning of Holy Communion. Some stories, such as those of the feeding of the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13, 25-59), are connected to the meal in the upper room by the repetition of Jesus' actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. In each of these stories, we see Jesus caring for those who have followed him. The stories suggest that Jesus satisfied their spiritual hunger with his teaching, and their physical hunger with bread.

John's account (John 6:25-51) reminds the church that this was neither the first nor the last time that God would provide food in the wilderness. John reminds us of the story of the Exodus and Israel's journey in the desert (Exodus 16:1-17). God provided for Israel in the wilderness with the gift of manna and quail, even when Israel tested God (Psalm 95:9).

Other stories that also are marked by Jesus' actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving are found in the accounts of Jesus' appearances to the disciples after his resurrection. In Luke 24:13-35, Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Although they do not recognize Jesus while on the road, they invite him to join them in a meal. After Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives bread, the disciples' eyes are opened and they recognize him. In a similar manner, John records that when Jesus appeared to the disciples on the shore, he prepared a meal for them and they recognized him (John 21:4-14).

In Acts 2:42-47, we read how the early church continued to remember Jesus in the teaching of the apostles, in the fellowship of the community, in the breaking of the bread, and in the common prayers. These actions became distinguishing marks of the early Christian community.

In each of these stories we hear accounts of Jesus' presence with and care for the community of faith. In the story of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus takes the place of the sacrificial lamb (Passover story) on behalf of our sins. We are reminded of the Exodus story in Jesus' teachings about the bread of life. Jesus' actions are joined to God's continuing care for the covenant community, providing sustenance even in the desert. In the feeding of the multitudes, the sharing of a meal is a sign of Jesus' compassion for those people who would follow him and listen to his teaching. In the post-resurrection accounts, Jesus continues to be present to the disciples and the community of faith with this care. In the life of the early church recorded in Acts, the church remembers in its weekly gatherings the sacrifice, fellowship, and care that Jesus provided as he gathered around him people from all walks of life to share a meal.

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## NAMES FOR HOLY COMMUNION

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Different churches call the holy meal by various names: Eucharist, Lord's Supper, Holy Communion. While there are other names, these three are most commonly used in United Methodist Churches. Each name has its roots in the New Testament witness and the life of the early church.

Some denominations describe this holy meal as a sacrament, while others call it an ordinance.<sup>2</sup> As United Methodists, we understand Holy Communion to be a sacrament. Holy Communion (and baptism as well) is a means by which God encounters us, works in us, and

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<sup>2</sup> *THM*, "Names of the Sacrament," 3-4.



sustains us in mercy and love. Sacraments are “certain signs of grace, and God’s good will toward us.” In the sacraments, “God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening, and confirming our faith.”<sup>3</sup>

The word *sacrament* comes from a Latin word that means pledge or oath. In this case, it is a pledge from God of God’s continued presence in our lives. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a symbol of this pledge from God to the church and a sign of the mystery of God’s love for the world.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, an ordinance is a command, rule, or law. When we speak about the holy meal as an ordinance, we are saying that we participate in the holy meal to fulfill Jesus’ command that we “do this” in remembrance of him.

Understanding the holy meal as a sacrament emphasizes God’s actions in and through the meal. Such an understanding stresses the way in which God’s love comes to us as a gracious gift. Understanding the holy meal as an ordinance focuses the attention on our obedience and action in the meal. This understanding emphasizes the duty we have to respond to God’s gracious presence and consequent command.<sup>5</sup> As United Methodists, we give priority to God’s gracious work in our lives, and thus to the sacramental character of the holy meal. Our obedience and action always follows in response to God’s action in our lives.



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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist—2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), ¶104, pages 67 and 72.

<sup>4</sup> THM, “The theology of sacraments,” 7.

<sup>5</sup> This point is at the heart of John Wesley’s sermon “The Duty of Constant Communion.”

The word *Eucharist* comes from a Greek word that means to give thanks.<sup>6</sup> In the accounts of the meal in the upper room, as well as in the stories of the feeding of the multitudes, the action of Jesus is described as taking, blessing or giving thanks, breaking, and giving. In Matthew (26:26-27) and Mark (14:22-23), Jesus blesses the bread and gives thanks over the cup. Calling the meal Eucharist helps us remember that at the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, Jesus gave thanks to God for God's saving work in the world. It also emphasizes the praise and thanksgiving that we offer to God in our prayer at the Lord's table and our sharing in the bread and cup.

When we use the words *Lord's Supper*, we are drawing on Paul's description of the meal in 1 Corinthians 11.<sup>7</sup> In this passage Paul takes the church to task for its abuse of the Supper. The Corinthian church had allowed divisions to occur and inequity to grow between members of the community. Some in the church arrived early, eating and drinking in such a way that those who arrived later went hungry (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). For Paul, such action betrayed the intent of the Lord's Supper as an act of the whole body of Christ, which is the church.

It is tempting to believe the holy meal belongs to the church. But Paul's warning to the Corinthian church suggests that it is not our holy meal to which we invite others but Christ's meal—the Lord's Supper—to which we are invited. That is, we are not the host to the meal; Jesus Christ is our host. He invites us to his supper that we may be joined with him and with one another around his table.

The third common name for the holy meal is *Holy Communion*.<sup>8</sup> This name reflects the fact that as we gather around the Lord's table, we commune with Christ and with one another. When Paul challenged the Corinthian church, he challenged their failure to see how communion with God required communion with one another. The Corinthians failed to recognize the body of Christ was truly present in the community of faith gathered at the table. Through our sharing

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<sup>6</sup> *THM*, "Names of the Sacrament," 4.

<sup>7</sup> *THM*, "Names of the Sacrament," 3.

<sup>8</sup> *THM*, "Names of the Sacrament," 4.

of the bread and cup together in the community of faith, we are brought into relationship with God in Christ Jesus as well as into a relationship of love for one another. In Holy Communion our giving thanks to God and sharing in the Lord's Supper becomes a means by which we begin to fulfill the two great commandments to love God and our neighbors.

When we call the holy meal *Eucharist*, we remember the thanksgiving Jesus offered to God as he gathered his disciples for a meal. In Eucharist, we continue to offer our praise and thanksgiving to God. We thank God not only for the bread and cup (symbols of Christ's life, death, and resurrection) but also for all that God has done and continues to do to save the world.

When we call the holy meal the *Lord's Supper*, we focus on the One who invites us to the meal, the One who offers us the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

When we call the holy meal *Holy Communion*, we name the result of our gathering at the table: We are brought into and sustained in a relationship with God and neighbor.

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## WORD AND TABLE

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The framework of the service of Holy Communion is found in the services of Word and Table.<sup>9</sup> The basic shape of the service can be seen in the Emmaus story in Luke 24:13-35.<sup>10</sup> Traveling the road to Emmaus, the disciples are joined by the risen Christ. Jesus interprets the Scriptures to them and then eats with them. It is in the breaking, blessing, and sharing of bread that the disciples' eyes are opened and

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<sup>9</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 6–31. See *THM* “The basic pattern of worship” 18-20 and “The ritual of the church,” 23-25.

<sup>10</sup> *THM*, “Background,” 4.

they recognize Jesus. The disciples return to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

This basic pattern of proclamation and response (Word) and thanksgiving and communion (Table) provides an outline of United Methodist worship today.<sup>11</sup> It assumes the Word proclaimed in Scripture readings and sermon is the same Word proclaimed at the Lord's table. It also assumes the Word enacted at the table in the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup is the same Word enacted in reading and preaching. That is, this pattern reflects the essential unity of Word and Table. We cannot do without either in our worship. The breadth of this pattern also offers the church a model for a basic unity in worship even as it reflects the great diversity of practice in our various churches.

Within this basic pattern of Word and Table, the pattern for the service of the Table reflects the four-fold shape we see in the accounts of the meals Jesus shared with his disciples: Jesus 1) takes the bread and cup, 2) blesses God or gives thanks to God, 3) breaks the bread and pours the cup, and 4) gives the bread and cup to his disciples.

The church through the centuries has understood Jesus' command to "do this" to include not only the breaking and giving of the bread and cup but also the taking and blessing or giving thanks to God for what the church has received and continues to receive from God in creation, redemption, and sanctification.

In taking and blessing (thanksgiving), we prepare the table and ourselves to share the gift God provides to us in Jesus Christ. On the one hand, this is as simple as setting the table as we would for any meal. On the other hand, this preparation involves the preparation of our hearts and minds, so that we may know that Christ is present with us in our sharing of the bread and cup with one another.

In breaking and giving (communion) we are confronted with the practical necessity of breaking the bread in order to share it with one

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<sup>11</sup> *THM*, "The basic pattern of worship," 18.

another. We are reminded that, as Jesus broke the bread in anticipation of the breaking of his body for the world, Jesus continues to offer his broken body to us for our healing and the healing of the world.



In thanksgiving and communion we engage in the practical work of setting the table and making it possible for a community to share in the meal. We also engage in the theological work of giving thanks to God, which reminds us of what God continues to do with and for us. This theological work leads to a communion with God and one another in which God calls us to share our daily bread with the least among us.

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## THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

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The prayer of thanksgiving in the service of Word and Table is called the Great Thanksgiving or the Eucharistic Prayer.<sup>12</sup>

The Great Thanksgiving reflects our Trinitarian understanding of God. The whole of the prayer is thanksgiving directed to God the Father. Included within this thanksgiving are specific remembrance of what God has done in Jesus Christ and an invocation of the Holy

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<sup>12</sup> See *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 9–10 and *THM*, “The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving,” 20–22.

Spirit on both the gifts of bread and wine and the whole community gathered around the Lord's table.<sup>13</sup>

Even as this Trinitarian shape provides the church with the opportunity to give thanks to God, to remember Jesus Christ, and to invoke the Holy Spirit, it gives voice to our communion with Christ, one another, and the world. It also reminds us that this holy meal is but a foretaste of what we will receive at Christ's heavenly banquet.

In outline, the Great Thanksgiving has five component parts:<sup>14</sup>

1. Opening dialogue
2. Thanksgiving to God
3. Remembrance of Jesus Christ
4. Invocation of the Holy Spirit
5. Concluding doxology

## *The Opening Dialogue*

The Great Thanksgiving begins with an opening dialogue between the pastor and the congregation:

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them up to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**<sup>15</sup>

This dialogue does several things. It begins with a greeting between the pastor and congregation in which we invite the Lord to be with each of us and bless us as we gather at the Lord's table. The next exchange

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<sup>13</sup> *THM*, "The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving," 21.

<sup>14</sup> *THM*, "The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving," 21.

<sup>15</sup> "A Service of Word and Table I" in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 9.

directs the preparation of our hearts. We give our hearts and minds in attention and love to God. The final exchange is important because it is a reminder that the thanksgiving offered by the pastor is not the pastor's alone but is offered with the whole congregation.

## *Thanksgiving*

The second section of the prayer explicitly addresses God the Father with thanksgiving. Here we remember God's acts of salvation throughout history. We remember especially God's work of creation, God's covenant and steadfast love when humanity has been unfaithful, the deliverance from captivity and exile, and God's care for us through the words of the prophets. This section comes to a close with the congregation's spoken or sung response: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might...." This brief song of praise draws on the angel's song around the throne of God reported in Isaiah 6. It also draws on the processional greeting from Psalm 118:26, with which the crowds greeted Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9). Our song of praise joins that of the angels and the crowds.

## *Remembrance*

The third section of the prayer turns our attention to the specific work and ministry of Jesus, and includes the institution narrative.<sup>16</sup> In this section the church remembers the good news of release, liberty, and healing preached by Jesus. (This prayer paraphrases Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:18-19). We remember that in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, we are released from slavery to sin and death and are given freedom for life in God. These themes reflect United Methodism's historic commitment to mission in the world.<sup>17</sup> This section often is

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<sup>16</sup> See page 8, above. Also see *THM*, "The Meaning of Holy Communion," 8.

<sup>17</sup> *THM*, "Holy Communion and Ethical Discipleship," 35.

shaped to reflect the particular themes and emphases of the church year, such as Jesus' birth in the poverty of the stable (Christmas) or his forty days in the wilderness (Lent). Having remembered God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ and Christ's offering for us, we join ourselves to Christ and offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving. This section comes to a close with a brief congregational acclamation, or song of praise, in which we confess our faith and hope as Christian people: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again."

## *Invocation*

The fourth section of the prayer invites the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to come upon the bread and cup as well as on the community gathered at the Lord's table. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ as we become the body of Christ for the world.<sup>18</sup> Joined to Christ and to one another in God's love and power, we are given responsibility to take the good news of God's love to the whole world.

## *Doxology*

The fifth and final section, a concluding doxology or song of praise, ends the Great Thanksgiving as it began. The prayer draws to a close with praise and thanksgiving to the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We end the prayer by offering God honor, glory, and praise. To all of this the congregation responds with a resounding "Amen." By this we affirm that all that has been prayed in our name is truly our prayer. The "Amen" is the congregation's way of saying, "Yes, this is our prayer."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *THM*, "The Meaning of Holy Communion," 9.

<sup>19</sup> *THM*, "The Whole Assembly," 20.



## Questions about Praying the Great Thanksgiving

**Q.** *We don't have enough time in our service to use the entire liturgy for Holy Communion. What is the shortest version of The Great Thanksgiving that will "get the job done?"*

**A.** Pastors, as most of us, seem to be always under pressure to do things more quickly, more efficiently. But, as *Living into the Mystery* suggests, time should not matter "more than the gracious and generous celebration of Holy Communion."<sup>20</sup> The Service of Word and Table III in *The United Methodist Hymnal* provides the option of a prayer composed by the pastor. (Note, however, that Word and Table III is not the "short version." Rather, it provides the outline for the prayer along with the "cue lines" that prompt the congregation's responses.) This prayer could be somewhat shorter in length. However, it must still include the "introductory dialogue, thankful remembrance of God's mighty acts of creation and the salvation made possible through Jesus Christ, the institution of the Lord's Supper, invoking the present work of the Holy Spirit, and concluding praise to the Trinity."<sup>21</sup> Yet, as Hoyt Hickman suggests in *The Worship Resources of The United Methodist Hymnal*, pastors who choose to use Word and Table III should "carefully consider and prepare the content of the Great Thanksgiving" as it "puts into the words of the Church's understanding both of God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ and the meaning of Holy Communion."<sup>22</sup> Finally, "Bishops, pastors and congregations are expected to use the services of Word and Table in the official United

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<sup>20</sup> *Living into the Mystery*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *THM*, "The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving," 21.

<sup>22</sup> Hoyt Hickman, *Worship Resources of the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 74.

Methodist hymnals and books of worship. Knowledgeable use of these resources allows for a balance of flexibility to meet contextual needs, and order that reflects our unity and connectional accountability.”<sup>23</sup>

*Q. When should the pastor first break the bread—at the words of Jesus about the bread, or later? Why?*

*A. The rubrics regarding the presider’s actions at the institution narrative in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (p. 11) and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (pp. 37 and 39) indicate that the bread is broken *after* the Great Thanksgiving and Lord’s Prayer.*



This position is both biblical and practical. It is biblical because it honors the four-fold pattern provided by the various institution and meal narratives in the gospels and 1 Corinthians: take, bless, break, and give.<sup>24</sup> In preparing the table for the service—whether simply uncovering the bread and wine already on the table or bringing it to the table as part of the offertory—we are “taking” the bread and cup. We then bless and give God thanks for these gifts in the Great Thanksgiving. We break the bread after giving thanks in order that it may be given to the gathered community. We take to bless; we break to give.

This position after the Great Thanksgiving is practical because it helps keep our attention on praying the Great Thanksgiving rather than watching the presider’s actions.

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<sup>23</sup> *THM*, “The ritual of the church,” 24.

<sup>24</sup> *THM*, “The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving,” 21; *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 27-29.

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## WHAT HAPPENS?

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Through the sharing of the bread and cup, we experience in Holy Communion, perhaps at the most basic level, the presence of God in Christ and fellowship with our neighbors. Bread and wine are brought to the Lord's table, thanksgiving is given, bread is broken and the wine is poured, and the community shares in the holy meal. (We note here that "the historic and ecumenical church uses wine in celebrations of Holy Communion."<sup>25</sup> Although there is no remaining prohibition against the use of wine, United Methodists usually use grape juice.) It is an experience of our relatedness to God and to one another through Jesus Christ. This experience brings to our awareness the steadfast love, mercy, and grace of God even when we cannot explain how this happens.<sup>26</sup>

This experience of God's love through Holy Communion, as well as through baptism, the reading of Scripture, prayer, fasting, and Christian conferencing, has led United Methodists to speak of these practices as the ordinary means of grace. That is, while God is not limited in the ways God reaches out to us, these have been the means throughout the church's history by which people of God have experienced this grace.<sup>27</sup>

Although it may be tempting to believe that this experience is something God imposes on us, John Wesley was always careful to remind the Methodist people that this experience of grace depended on God's gift and our response in faith. In other words, as God continues to invite us to the feast, our participation in the feast depends on our willingness to accept the invitation.<sup>28</sup>

Wesley believed that the benefits of participating in the Lord's Supper are two-fold: Our sins are forgiven and we are strengthened to live

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<sup>25</sup> See *THM*, "The Communion Elements," 30.

<sup>26</sup> *THM*, "Toward a richer sacramental life," 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> *THM*, "Grace and the means of grace," 6-7.

<sup>28</sup> *THM*, "Toward a richer sacramental life," 10.

the Christian life.<sup>29</sup> The themes of forgiveness and strengthening continue to be important to United Methodists today for our understanding of the Lord's Supper. But as we have seen in our exploration of the shape of the Great Thanksgiving, these themes function at both a personal and social level. Through the holy meal we are drawn toward holiness of heart and of life.

Not only do we receive forgiveness and strength as individual people of faith, but we also receive these gifts as communities of faith. In our thanksgiving we remember that God has reached out to communities of faith throughout human history with saving words of forgiveness and care (for example, Isaiah 40:1-11).

We remember that it is with a community of disciples that Jesus gathered on the hillsides of Galilee and in the upper room to share a meal.

We also remember that it is on the frightened community of disciples after Easter (John 20:19-23) and on the multinational community gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-42) that God pours out the Spirit of forgiveness and power. The strengthening we receive in Holy Communion is the strengthening of the community of faith. The Holy Spirit is poured on the gifts of bread and wine and on the gathered community, that we may be the body of Christ for the world and that we may be in ministry and service to the world.

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## REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST

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One of the questions about Holy Communion that occupied medieval and reformation times in the church was the question of how Christ was present to us in the bread and wine.<sup>30</sup> Answers to the question of Christ's real presence in the bread and wine depended on particular philosophical systems of the day.

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<sup>29</sup> *THM*, "The issue of 'unworthiness,'" 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> *THM*, "The Presence of Christ," 11-13.



The Wesleys acknowledged the importance of this question, but they offered a practical rather than philosophical response. They called attention to the reality of the presence of God's grace in Jesus Christ experienced in the Lord's Supper. Charles Wesley's hymn "O the Depth of Love Divine" provides not only a summary of their response but also a response for United Methodists today:

O the depth of love divine,  
the unfathomable grace!  
Who shall say how bread and wine  
God into us conveys!  
How the bread his flesh imparts,  
how the wine transmits his blood,  
fills his faithful people's hearts  
with all the life of God!

Let the wisest mortals show  
how we the grace receive;  
feeble elements bestow  
a power not theirs to give.  
Who explains the wondrous way,  
how through these the virtue came?  
These the virtue did convey,  
yet still remain the same.

How can spirits heavenward rise,  
by earthly matter fed,  
drink herewith divine supplies  
and eat immortal bread?  
Ask the Father's wisdom how:  
Christ who did the means ordain;  
angels round our altars bow  
to search it out, in vain.

Sure and real is the grace,  
the manner be unknown;  
Only meet us in thy ways  
and perfect us in one.  
Let us taste the heavenly powers,  
Lord, we ask for nothing more.  
Thine to bless, 'tis only ours  
to wonder and adore.<sup>31</sup>

The hymn suggests that while we should continue to work at understanding Christ's presence at the table, we need not understand precisely *how* God conveys God's grace and love to us. It is enough to know *that* in this sharing of bread and wine, we taste and feel the love of God for us, the forgiveness of our sins, the nurture required for life together, and the needed strengthening for service to the world.

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## WHO CAN RECEIVE?

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The witness of the early Christian community offered in the New Testament indicates that those who responded to the good news of Jesus Christ began their lives in the Christian community through baptism.<sup>32</sup> This became the entry point into the life of the church.

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Wesley, "O the depth of love divine" in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 627.

<sup>32</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 14.

Once joined to the community through baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, they were nurtured in this life through "the apostles' teaching and fellowship, . . . the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early church described the relationship between baptism and Eucharist as the relationship between birth and the sustenance required for growth following birth. In this way the holy meal serves to confirm to us the forgiveness of sins we receive and the grace that God continues to extend to us in Jesus Christ.

Throughout most of the church's life and history, baptism has served as the rite of entrance to the Lord's Supper.<sup>33</sup> By limiting the fellowship of the Lord's table to the baptized, the church attempted to preserve the holy character of the communion. This restriction also grew out of the church's understanding that formation and instruction in the Christian life was required before a person was permitted to join in the table fellowship. Needless to say, the church has been inconsistent in the application of this understanding, often denying Communion to baptized children or to those baptized people who are mentally disabled. If baptism is the rite of entrance to the Lord's table, then the Lord's table is the right of all who are baptized, regardless of age or ability.<sup>34</sup>

What, then, is open Communion? The early days of the Methodist movement in England brought several challenges to the church's understanding and practice of Holy Communion. On the one hand, most people were baptized as infants in the Church of England. Although the Lord's Supper was their right, few participated in the Lord's Supper on more than an occasional basis. In response to this, Wesley encouraged Methodists to partake of Holy Communion as often as possible.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, Wesley observed that baptism did not guarantee the holiness of those who gathered for Communion. In response to this, Wesley set out to call Christian people to awaken to faith in Christ

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<sup>33</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 14.

<sup>34</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 15.

<sup>35</sup> *THM*, "The basic pattern of worship," 19.

and to a new birth in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was the evidence of those awakened to faith through the Lord's Supper that led Wesley to understand the Lord's Supper as a converting ordinance and to invite all who sought to live the new life in Christ to come to the Lord's table. Even so, Wesley could assume that those who were awakened to faith and now came to the table had been baptized.<sup>36</sup>

It is an understanding of Holy Communion as both a confirming and a converting ordinance that leads United Methodists today to practice an open Communion. All who desire to live and lead a Christian life, regardless of age, ability, or denomination, are invited to the Lord's table for the holy meal. (Churches that practice closed Communion restrict participation to those who are baptized members of that particular denomination. When worshiping as visitors in those churches, United Methodists should comply with these restrictions.<sup>37</sup>)

In many United Methodist congregations today, this invitation to the Lord's table includes reminders that Jesus shared meals with sinners as well as with the righteous. We also are reminded that the table to which we are invited does not belong to a particular congregation or denomination but to Jesus Christ. It is Christ who invites us to share the meal with him.<sup>38</sup>

So there is for us this tension between an open welcome to the table and appropriate church discipline. We never turn anyone away who comes to the Lord's Supper. This would be contrary to the grace of our Lord. On the other hand, *By Water and the Spirit*, the official United Methodist statement on baptism, says:

In celebrating the Eucharist, we remember the grace given to us in our baptism and partake of the spiritual food necessary for sustaining and fulfilling the promises of salvation.... Unbaptized persons who receive communion should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism as soon as possible.

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<sup>36</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 15.

<sup>37</sup> *THM*, "Holy Communion and the unity of the church," 38.

<sup>38</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's table," 13-14.



The gracious gift anticipates a response in faith and love that leads to personal commitment.<sup>39</sup>

## Questions about Who can Receive

**Q.** *How old do you have to be to participate in Holy Communion? Do you have to be baptized first? Do you have to be a member of the church?*

**A.** The United Methodist Church places no age or membership restriction on participation in Holy Communion. This principle is affirmed by statements in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* and *By Water and the Spirit*, our statement on the meaning and practice of baptism. *The Book of Worship* states, “All who intend to lead a Christian life, together with their children, are invited to receive the bread and cup.”<sup>40</sup> *By Water and the Spirit* similarly claims, “Because the table at which we gather belongs to the Lord, it should be open to all who respond to Christ’s love, regardless of age or church membership.”<sup>41</sup> We therefore have a responsibility “to provide ongoing age-appropriate nurture and education” about the sacraments to persons of all ages.<sup>42</sup>

On the question of baptism as a requirement to participate in Holy Communion, *THM* expresses the tension between evangelical welcome and Christian discipline that we noted in the previous section: On the one hand, “nonbaptized

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<sup>39</sup> *THM*, “Invitation to the Lord’s table,” 14-15.

<sup>40</sup> *United Methodist Book of Worship*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> “By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism” in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church—2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 939.

<sup>42</sup> *THM*, “Invitation to the Lord’s Table,” 14.

people who respond in faith to the invitation in our liturgy will be welcomed to the Table.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, “Holy Baptism normally precedes partaking of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a meal the community who are in covenant with God through Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

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## WHO IS WORTHY?

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Beyond the question of open versus closed Communion has been a long tradition of concern for sharing in the Communion in a worthy manner.<sup>45</sup> This concern grows out of the church’s expectation that the holy gifts of bread and wine be shared only with a holy people. This concern for our worthiness continues to be reflected in the “Prayer of Humble Access” that has been a part of Methodist worship throughout much of its history. Many United Methodists have grown up hearing and praying: “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.” This sentence often has overshadowed the one following it, which reminds us that God is merciful nonetheless: “But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.”<sup>46</sup>

The concern for worthy reception also developed from a misreading of Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 (NRSV):

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

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<sup>43</sup> *THM*, “Invitation to the Lord’s Table,” 15.

<sup>44</sup> *THM*, “Invitation to the Lord’s Table,” 14.

<sup>45</sup> *THM*, “The issue of ‘unworthiness,’” 17-18.

<sup>46</sup> “A Service of Word and Table IV” in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 30.

In writing this, Paul was addressing particular abuses of the meal in the Corinthian church, not the question of personal worthiness. Paul's warning calls our attention to the need to live holy lives not only as individuals but also as a community of faith. Paul reminds us to pay attention to the way in which we as a church live as the body of Christ in the church and in the world.<sup>47</sup>

In his hymn "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast," Charles Wesley draws together our questions about the open invitation to the Lord's Supper with our concern that we eat and drink worthily.

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;  
let every soul be Jesus' guest.  
Ye need not one be left behind,  
for God hath bid all humankind.

Do not begin to make excuse;  
ah! Do not you his grace refuse;  
your worldly cares and pleasures leave,  
and take what Jesus hath to give.<sup>48</sup>

Regardless of who we are, God invites each of us to the gospel feast. Jesus stands waiting to take us in. The invitation is ours to accept.



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<sup>47</sup> *THM*, "The issue of 'unworthiness,'" 18.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Wesley, "Come, sinners, to the gospel feast," in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 616.

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## HOW OFTEN?

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The Wesleyan movement understood itself to be both an evangelical and a sacramental revival. However, the relationship between the early Methodists and the Church of England, as well as the growth of the Methodist movement on the American frontier, made it difficult to hold these two ideals together.<sup>49</sup> In many ways, the peculiar history of the Methodists in North America accounts for the diversity of the frequency of our celebration of Holy Communion. The early church, as well as the Protestant reformers (such as Martin Luther and John Calvin), expected the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every Lord's Day. Nevertheless, we know from the history of the churches the long conflict between ideal and actual practice.

By Wesley's day, country churches may have celebrated the Lord's Supper only quarterly. City churches celebrated more frequently. Anglican Church law required that Christian people receive Communion at least at Easter each year. Part of the resistance to more frequent reception of Holy Communion was the concern for worthy reception (as discussed in the preceding section) and the need to prepare oneself for such reception.

This context prompted John Wesley's sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion." Wesley argues that Christian duty requires Christians to receive the Lord's Supper as often as they can.<sup>50</sup> He argues that God does not call for occasional obedience but for constant obedience to God's commands. To the question of worthiness and desire for appropriate preparation, Wesley calls Methodist people to be in a habitual state of preparation. Then he reminds us that God acts with mercy in spite of our unworthiness.

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<sup>49</sup> *THM*, "American Methodism," 6.

<sup>50</sup> *THM*, "The basic pattern of worship," 19. Wesley's full sermon is available at <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-101-The-Duty-of-Constant-Communion> (accessed 16 December 2015).

The relative infrequency of Holy Communion in early American Methodism was initially caused by a lack of ordained pastors to preside at the Lord's table. It was this concern for the sacramental life of American Methodists that led Wesley to seek and provide for the ordination of his Methodist preachers. Wesley advised the ordained elders to celebrate the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day.<sup>51</sup>

Holy Communion was celebrated infrequently in American Methodist churches in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for many reasons. In rural settings, the occasional availability of itinerant ordained pastors made weekly celebration difficult. Some people argued that frequent celebration of the sacrament brought an over-familiarity with the sacrament and a lack of care in personal preparation. The camp meetings of the early nineteenth century were sacramental occasions that moved from preaching and decision for Christ to baptism and celebration of the Lord's Supper. Even so, the church's growing concern for conversion to faith on the American frontier eventually overshadowed the concern for confirmation and strengthening of faith provided by the sacrament. In our own day, we have added a pragmatic concern for the length of the service to the concerns for personal worthiness, over-familiarity, and conversion.

Although all of these concerns about frequency continue today, several decades of ecumenical conversation, scholarship, and worship reforms encourage United Methodists to reclaim the weekly balance provided by the service of Word and Table. Certainly, there has been a move toward more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. Some United Methodist churches now celebrate the Lord's Supper every week—some in special chapel services, others in the main Sunday service. The vast majority of United Methodist churches in the United States celebrate the Lord's Supper once a month, often the first Sunday of the month. Some of these also celebrate on special days of the church year such as Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Thursday, Easter, and Pentecost. Even where it is not

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<sup>51</sup> *THM*, "The basic pattern of worship," 19.

the usual practice, there is an expectation that weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper is normal for Christian people.<sup>52</sup>

It is, in the end, an invitation and a desire to respond to that invitation that brings us to share a meal with Christ and the Christian community. It is the encounter with God's grace that encourages us to return as often as we can.<sup>53</sup>

## *Questions about Frequency and Time*

**Q.** *Many of my members skip church on the days we have Holy Communion because they don't enjoy it. Do we have to celebrate Holy Communion the first Sunday of every month, or can we just have it on special occasions?*

**A.** There are two levels of response to this question, the first requiring learning why your church members skip Holy Communion Sundays. If it is a concern about how they understand or do not understand Holy Communion, then you have an opportunity for education with your congregation. *THM* points both to the benefits of a richer sacramental life<sup>54</sup> and of the opportunities Holy Communion provides for inviting people "into a fuller living relationship with the body of Christ."<sup>55</sup>

If the concern expressed is more about your church's practice of Holy Communion—the length of time the service takes,

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<sup>52</sup> *THM*, "The basic pattern of worship," 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's table," 13.

<sup>54</sup> *THM*, "Grace and the Means of Grace," 6-7 and "Toward a richer sacramental life," 9-11.

<sup>55</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 15.

the lack of care for the service itself—you might review some of your basic assumptions about the shape, content, and performance of the service. A companion to *THM* is *Living into the Mystery*. There it suggests some basic principles: “Be real. Take time. Focus on action. Conduct the people’s worship. Offer the best you can. And thereby show in your leadership and participation in worship that together you are the body of Christ redeemed by his blood in the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>56</sup>

The second response is to the question of less frequent celebration. *THM* notes that “Those seeking to live as Christian disciples have constant need of the nourishment and sustenance made available through both the Word and the sacrament of Holy Communion.” Therefore, in practice, congregations are encouraged to move toward “weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper at the services of the Lord’s Day” and on “other occasions in the life of the church.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, celebrating Holy Communion the first Sunday of each month is a kind of minimum, calling us toward more frequent celebration.

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## METHODS OF RECEIVING

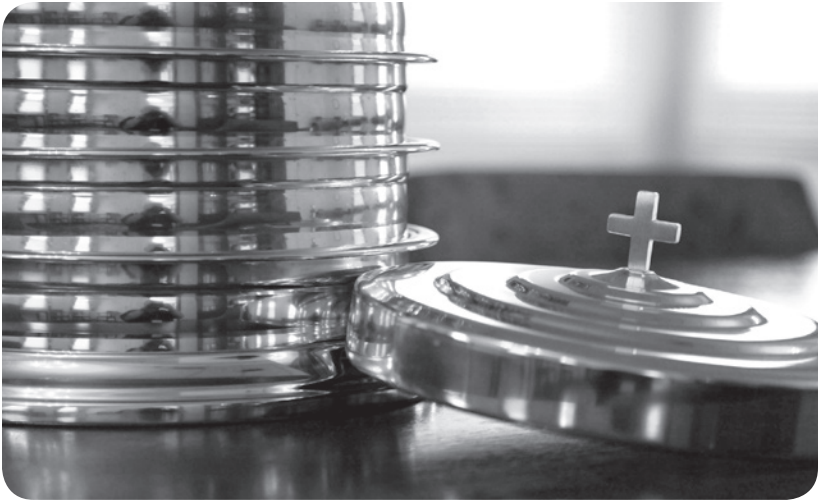
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The frequency with which we receive Holy Communion says some things about our understandings of the holy meal. How we receive the bread and cup also reveals some of our understandings of the meal. How we receive the bread and cup also reflects the diverse histories of our various congregations as the Evangelical, United Brethren,

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<sup>56</sup> *Living into the Mystery*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> *THM*, “The basic pattern of worship,” 19.



and Methodist traditions were brought together to form The United Methodist Church, in which there is no one right way. There are many valid ways of receiving Holy Communion, each emphasizing a different understanding of what is happening in the meal.<sup>58</sup>

In some United Methodist congregations, the congregation receives Communion while remaining seated and passing trays of bread and small cups from person to person. In others, the congregation moves toward the chancel rail, where people kneel as they receive the bread and cup. In others, people process to various stations at the front of the church or in other places around the church to receive the bread and cup.

These various postures—seated, kneeling, or standing—all express something of our understanding of Holy Communion.

Remaining seated as others bring the bread and cup to us reminds us that we are somehow called to sit at and participate in a banquet. It also reminds us that God first comes to us in Jesus Christ with the offer of love and grace. Gathered around the one table of the Lord,

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<sup>58</sup> *THM*, “The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving,” 22.



we are served, often with trays of silver and gold, from the abundance of the feast.

When we process to the altar rail and kneel, we are responding to the invitation to come to the Lord's table. We come forward at God's invitation, knowing that God already has come to us and waits for our response. Our kneeling at the rail reminds us, however, that the one who invites us is Lord of all heaven and earth. The rail, which prevents us from coming too close to the holy place of the table, reminds us of our place before God. Unworthy as we are to approach the holy throne of God, we come with bended knee and bowed head, humbly beseeching God's mercy and grace.<sup>59</sup>

As with our movement toward the altar rail, we physically respond to God's invitation to the feast when we rise from our seats and move toward stations to receive the bread and cup. We hear the invitation "come, let us eat" and we come. Remaining standing reminds us that we come to the table in a posture and attitude of joy and thanksgiving. Having confessed our sins and heard the assurance of our forgiveness, it is a "right, and a good and joyful thing," to give thanks to God as we gather before the table.<sup>60</sup>

In some United Methodist congregations, Communion is served from a single common cup (in larger congregations, several large cups) and the breaking of a single loaf of bread. Other congregations use trays of small individual cups and trays of cubed bread.

The use of individual cups became popular in the early twentieth century in part because of the increased knowledge about the transmission of disease and in response to an influenza epidemic. Their use today often continues from this concern for hygiene. When we think about the character of the Communion itself, however, the use of the individual cups tends to emphasize the communion between the individual and God rather than the communion with

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<sup>59</sup> See the "Prayer of Humble Access" in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 9.

one another. Some congregations address this concern by asking people to hold the bread and cup until all have been served, so that the congregation can eat and drink together.<sup>61</sup>

The use of the common cup and single loaf has been the more common practice throughout the church's history. It draws our attention to the biblical stories of the upper room, in which Jesus shares a single cup and breaks a single loaf of bread with the disciples.<sup>62</sup> It also calls to mind Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 10.16-17 (NRSV):

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

How we receive Communion in our United Methodist churches often is determined more by a practical concern for how long the service will last than by the pastoral concern to help us experience a communion with God and our neighbor. Whether we sit, kneel, or stand, whether we use a common cup or individual cups, our sharing in the Lord's Supper calls us to a holy communion with God and one another.

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## OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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In the midst of this diversity of practice and understanding, we might well ask if there are celebrations that do not fully honor our current theological statement. The discussion throughout this booklet suggests a number of concerns. First, at both a practical and

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<sup>61</sup> *THM*, "The Communion elements," 30-31.

<sup>62</sup> *THM*, "The Communion elements," 31.

symbolic level, it is important that the bread we use is real bread, inviting remembrance of and connection with the stories that what is offered to us is, in a very real way, the bread of life.<sup>63</sup>

Second, we recall Paul's admonition that we discern the body of Christ in our midst. Therefore, practices that obscure the character of the holy meal as a communion with God and neighbor—self-serve or drop-in services where bread and wine are pre-consecrated and set out for people to receive when and if they will—are not consistent with the intent of our United Methodist understandings of the holy meal.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, services that exclude any baptized person, especially baptized children or persons of diminished mental capacity, also fail to discern the body of Christ.<sup>65</sup>

### *Questions about Celebrating the Sacrament*

**Q.** *What liturgy do we use for our Christmas Eve “Come and Go” Communion service? Does one of the pastors have to stay there the whole time, or can we just leave the consecrated elements on the altar for people to serve themselves?*

**A.** As noted above, the THM states, “The practice of consecrating elements ahead of time...is inappropriate and contrary to our historic doctrine and understanding of how God’s grace is made available in the sacrament (Article XVIII, The Articles of Religion, *BOD*; page 64).”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *THM*, “The communion elements,” 30.

<sup>64</sup> *THM*, “The Communion elements,” 32.

<sup>65</sup> *THM*, “Invitation to the Lord’s Table,” 15-16.

<sup>66</sup> *THM*, “The communion elements,” 32.

This principle builds, in part, on the principle that the Communion elements “are *consecrated and consumed* [my emphasis] in the context of the gathered congregation.”<sup>67</sup> That is, our celebration of Holy Communion is never simply about our individual communion with God; it is a way in which we practice our communion with each other. “Holy Communion is the communion of the church—the gathered community of the faithful, both local and universal. While deeply meaningful to the individuals participating, the sacrament is much more than a personal event.... The sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be.”<sup>68</sup>

These principles concerning the gathered congregation leads *THM* to clearly state that “Both ‘self-service’ Communion, where people help themselves, and ‘drop-in’ Communion, where the elements are available over a period of time, are contrary to the communal nature of the sacrament, which is the celebration of the gathered community of faith.”<sup>69</sup>

**Q.** *We livestream our worship for those members who prefer to attend church online. What is the proper way for them to join in celebrating Holy Communion?*

**A.** The answer to this question, though more complicated than that of “drop-in” communion, builds on similar principles.

A foundational claim is the principle that the Communion elements “are consecrated and consumed in the context

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<sup>67</sup> *THM*, “The community extends itself,” 22.

<sup>68</sup> *THM*, “The Meaning of Holy Communion,” 8.

<sup>69</sup> *THM*, “The community extends itself,” 23.

of the gathered congregation.”<sup>70</sup> This principle builds on a statement made earlier in the document: “Holy Communion is the communion of the church—the gathered community of the faithful, both local and universal. While deeply meaningful to the individuals participating, the sacrament is much more than a personal event.... The sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be.”<sup>71</sup> A similar principle appears near the conclusion to *THM*: “Holy Communion is to be conducted in ways that make apparent the inherent link between the Table and holy living, both individual and corporate.... Communing with others in our congregations is a sign of community and mutual love between Christians throughout the church universal.”<sup>72</sup>



There are two tangible signs of such communion: The first is that, as a gathered community, we share from the same bread and cup. As our communion liturgy reminds us, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10.17). The second sign is that we do not serve ourselves but receive the bread and cup, set apart by the community’s prayer for sacred use, from the hands of another.

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<sup>70</sup> *THM*, “The community extends itself,” 22.

<sup>71</sup> *THM*, “The Meaning of Holy Communion,” 8.

<sup>72</sup> *THM*, “Holy Communion and ethical Christian discipleship,” 36.

These principles and claims suggest that, while we may “attend” church online and experience some sense of connection to a congregation through this experience, our physical separation from the congregation prevents us from participating in Holy Communion through the same media.

As noted above, the church encourages congregations to find new ways to share the Gospel, including through the responsible use of technology. While it is always appropriate to invite those watching a worship service over the internet to engage in prayer while a congregation is receiving Holy Communion, in 2013 the Council of Bishops issued a moratorium on the practice of United Methodists receiving communion online.<sup>73</sup>

What, then, is the proper way for persons attending church online to participate in Holy Communion? The same way as all others who “wish to commune but are unable to [physically] attend congregational worship.” The bread and wine that has been used in the community’s celebration should be brought to them by the pastor or representatives of the congregation.<sup>74</sup> Those who are at such physical distance from the congregation to prevent such visits by pastor or representatives should be encouraged to connect to a local church community.

*Q. If we believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion, shouldn't we be taking the elements to places like train stations and bus stations and giving them out to any who wish to receive them?*

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<sup>73</sup> For more information on this decision and the consultation that preceded it go to <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-united-methodist-view-of-communion>.

<sup>74</sup> *THM*, “The community extends itself,” 22; “Assisting Ministers,” 28; “The Communion elements,” 32.

A. At a theoretical level this makes sense, but let's explore this more deeply.

First, a United Methodist understanding of Christ's presence in Holy Communion does not "locate" that presence strictly in the bread and wine. "Christ is present through the community gathered in Jesus' name...through the Word proclaimed and enacted, and through the elements of bread and wine shared."<sup>75</sup> The communal character of this presence is reinforced by the claim that "we understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms."<sup>76</sup>

Second, Holy Communion is not celebrated in separation from the proclamation of the gospel in scripture and preaching. Word and Table "complement each other so as to constitute a whole service of worship. Their separation diminishes the fullness of life in the Spirit offered to us through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>77</sup> "Partaking of Holy Communion is a response to and continued participation in the Word that has been proclaimed."<sup>78</sup>

These first two principles suggest that offering Christ requires the offering not only the bread and wine but of a gathered community and the celebration of a service of Word and Table with that community, *wherever* that community gathers. This means taking not only the bread and wine to these new places, but the whole worshiping community. As suggested in response to other questions, the communion elements "are consecrated and consumed in the context of the gathered congregation."<sup>79</sup> These principles also point to the importance of the service of the Word in scripture and preaching as a necessary part of the service of the Table.

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<sup>75</sup> *THM*, "The Presence of Christ," 11.

<sup>76</sup> *THM*, "The Presence of Christ," 13.

<sup>77</sup> *THM*, "The Basic Pattern," 18.

<sup>78</sup> *THM*, "The Basic Pattern," 19.

<sup>79</sup> *THM*, "The community extends itself," 22.

Third, there is a difference between indiscriminate sharing of the bread and wine and open communion. This is made clear by *THM*'s insistence that the service of Holy Communion always begins with the invitation, confession, and pardon. This invitation presumes that all who come to the table, regardless of denominational tradition, come as a response in faith, as a response to Christ's love proclaimed and enacted within and by the church.<sup>80</sup> Indiscriminate sharing of the bread and wine, as suggested by the question, does not make possible participation in the community's celebration of Word and Table, avoids the invitation to repentance and faith, and neglects the church's responsibility to invite persons into the "journey of faith and growth in holiness."<sup>81</sup>

## *Questions about Presiding and Ministry*

- Q.** *I am a certified lay minister serving a rural congregation. Should I have my District Superintendent or another elder pre-consecrate the elements on Communion Sunday? Can she do it by phone or Skype?*
- A.** *THM* is explicit in addressing this question: Regardless of how it might be done (telephone, Skype, FaceTime, or other electronic media), "the practice of consecrating elements ahead of time...is inappropriate and contrary to our historic doctrine and understanding of how God's grace is made available in the sacrament (Article XVIII, The Articles of Religion, *BOD*; page 64)."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 13-15.

<sup>81</sup> *THM*, "Invitation to the Lord's Table," 15.

<sup>82</sup> *THM*, "The communion elements," 32.



A primary concern in this claim is that the Great Thanksgiving is not primarily about “consecration” but about the gathering of the church around the Lord’s Table in thanks and praise to God. “The Communion elements are *consecrated and consumed* in the context of the gathered congregation.”<sup>83</sup>

**Q.** *Who is authorized to bless elements people prepare at home or that may have been mailed to them for use in an online, televised or radio broadcast service of Holy Communion? Would this be limited only to elders, or may a licensed local pastor do so as well?*

**A.** *THM* clearly states, “An ordained elder or a person authorized under the provision of *The Book of Discipline* presides at all celebrations of Holy Communion.”<sup>84</sup>

However, as we noted in answer to the question about participating in communion via the livestreaming (see above), online celebrations of Holy Communion as well as participation through televised and radio broadcasts are currently prohibited by the 2014 Council of Bishops’ call for a moratorium on all online sacramental practices, so preparation of the elements for such use is inappropriate.



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<sup>83</sup> *THM*, “The community extends itself,” 22).

<sup>84</sup> *THM*, “Presiding Ministers: Elders and Licensed Local Pastors,” 25-26; *Book of Discipline—2012*, ¶316.1, 332, 340.2.b.

Q. *We have an ordained deacon serving as part of our staff. What is the role of the deacon in the celebration of Holy Communion?*

A. The *Book of Discipline*—2012 (§ 320) states that deacons are to assist “the elders in the administration of the sacraments.” *THM* develops this further, stating “In continuity with historic and ecumenical practice...the role of the deacons in services of Word and Table appropriately includes reading the Gospel lesson; leading the concerns and prayers for the world, the church and the needy; receiving the elements and preparing the table before the Great Thanksgiving; assisting the elder in serving the Communion elements; setting the table in order; and dismissing the people to serve before the elder offers God’s blessing.”<sup>85</sup> *Living into the Mystery* expands on this description of the deacon’s work at the Lord’s Table: “The deacon may receive the bread and flagon, and place them in appropriate places on the Lord’s Table. The deacon may also pour the wine into the chalice, and then ensure that all things and all people are in their proper places for the beginning of the Great Thanksgiving. If the gifts are already placed on the Lord’s Table and covered, the deacon may lead or work with others, such as communion stewards, to unveil the gifts in an appropriately simple, gracious, and powerful way, and place the cloth in an appropriate place on a side table.”<sup>86</sup>

Q. *We have two pastors on staff, and they like to share the role of celebrating Holy Communion. What is the proper way to divide the liturgy for two people to pray?*

A. While *THM* does not provide an explicit answer to this question, it does give us some hints. First, we need to remember that the Great Thanksgiving is a single dialogical prayer (rather than a “collection” of sacred words) shared

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<sup>85</sup> *THM*, “Assisting Ministers: Deacons and laity,” 27.

<sup>86</sup> *Living into the Mystery*, 29-30.

between the presiding minister and the congregation. Therefore any sharing of the prayer needs to respect this character as communal prayer. Sharing of the prayer also needs to preserve the sense of the prayer as a single prayer. Also, there is no portion of this prayer that may be delegated to a deacon or lay ministers. As *THM* notes, “an elder or authorized pastor leads the congregation in praying the Great Thanksgiving, in which the whole assembly takes an active role.”<sup>87</sup>

Second, as *THM* indicates, “All elders or deacons who are present may be invited to...stand with the presider at the table, and assist in distributing the elements.”<sup>88</sup> *THM* seems to suggest, then, that even when there are multiple elders present, a single elder normally presides at the table.

A first answer, then, is to suggest that the two elders alternate presiding responsibility each time the congregation celebrates Holy Communion. This has the advantage of making clear to the congregation that all elders, regardless of their status as “senior” or “associate” pastors, male or female, are equally authorized for sacramental ministry in the church. It also provides an opportunity for the congregation to experience the different voices and ways of embodying the prayer represented by the two elders.

A second answer requires that the two elders be attentive to the theological shape of the Great Thanksgiving as a *single* prayer and to divide it in such a way that reflects that theological shape. It should also be well rehearsed to avoid any awkwardness in praying. Using the Great Thanksgiving in Word and Table I<sup>89</sup> as an example, the following respects such a division:

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<sup>87</sup> *THM*, “The Great Thanksgiving,” 22 and “Presiding Ministers,” 26.

<sup>88</sup> *THM*, “Presiding Ministers,” 26.

<sup>89</sup> *United Methodist Hymnal*, 9-10; *United Methodist Book of Worship*, 36-38.

E1: Opening Dialogue through “the breath of life.”  
 E2: “When we turned away...through the prophets.  
 E1 and E2 together: “As so, with your people on earth...”  
 All: “Holy, holy, holy...”  
 E1: “Holy are you...when you would save your people.”  
 E2: “He healed the sick...your Word and Holy Spirit.”  
 E1: “On the night...in remembrance of me.”  
 E2: “When the supper was over...in remembrance of me.”  
 E1: And so, in remembrance...the mystery of faith.”  
 All: “Christ has died...”  
 E1: Pour out your Holy Spirit...by his blood.”  
 E2: By your Spirit...at his heavenly banquet.”  
 E1 and E2 together: “Through your Son Jesus Christ...”  
 All: “Amen.”

Such a division will require that the two elders rehearse carefully so as to make the transitions and gestures that accompany the prayer as smooth and as prayerful as possible.

## *Questions about Care of the elements*

- Q. When should we take the blessed elements to those who could not attend when we celebrate Holy Communion? Is later that week okay? Later that month? May we freeze the elements to help them keep longer?*
- A. While THM does not explicitly answer this question, it does set out as a basic principle that “the Table may be extended, in a timely manner, to include those unable to attend because*

of age, illness, or similar conditions.”<sup>90</sup> Implicit in this principle is that taking the bread and wine to those unable to attend is an *extension* of a particular celebration by the gathered community. It is neither a form of “reserving” the sacrament nor a kind of eucharistic “leftover.” What we are sharing is not only the bread and wine, but also the sense of communion we have with one another in Christ. It is this communion we celebrated with one another in the gathered community around the Lord’s Table that we now “extend” to those unwillingly absent.

In practice, we should bring communion to those absent that day or, at the latest, the next day given that the bread will spoil and the juice ferment. Any further delay obscures the sense of extended communion that we are intending to share. When such a timely visit is not possible, the pastor should arrange a separate visit for the purpose of celebrating Holy Communion with the person. (See *Extending the Table* by Mark Stamm, as listed in “For Further Reading” for a comprehensive discussion of this ministry.)

**Q.** *What are the proper ways to dispose of leftover bread and juice?*

**A.** *THM* sets out a basic principle for the disposal of leftover bread and juice: “The consecrated elements are to be treated with reverent respect and appreciation as gifts of God’s creation that have, in the words of the Great Thanksgiving, become ‘for us the body and blood of Christ’ (*UMH*; page 10).”<sup>91</sup> It further notes these instructions provided in *The Book of Worship* (page 30): “What is done with the remaining bread and wine should express our stewardship of God’s gifts and our respect for the holy purpose they have served.”

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<sup>90</sup> *THM*, “The Community extends itself,” 22 and “The Communion Elements,” 32.

<sup>91</sup> *THM*, “The Communion elements,” 31.

In practice this means the following, in order of priority: First, the remaining bread and wine should be returned to the sacristy to be prepared by the deacon or communion stewards for distribution to the sick and to those unwillingly absent from the service.

Second, since these are gifts of food, “the pastor and/or others at the pastor’s direction” should “consume them in a reverent manner following the service.”<sup>92</sup>

Finally, they may be “returned to the earth by pouring... burying, scattering, or burning.”<sup>93</sup> They should not be poured down the drain or placed in the trash. *Living into the Mystery* provides a helpful caution: “Directly returning some elements to the ground can make an important ecological witness. At the same time, we would recommend that any unconsumed elements be returned to the earth in relatively small amounts. The sight of large pieces of bread sitting on the church lawn or flowerbeds can be unattractive or a sign of wastefulness. This may be avoided when only the amount of bread needed for a given service is prepared.”<sup>94</sup>

- Q. *We are celebrating communion with our youth group at the end their retreat. Would it be acceptable to substitute Fruit Punch and Donuts for the elements in place of bread and grape juice?*
- A. While substitutions for bread and grape juice can be made in certain cultural contexts, they must be within the parameters established by the church. *THM* emphasizes the importance of our “historical continuity with the universal church” reflected in our use of bread and wine. Regarding the bread, *THM* states, “In accordance with the words of

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<sup>92</sup> *THM*, “The Communion elements,” 32.

<sup>93</sup> *THM*, “The Communion elements,” 32.

<sup>94</sup> *Living into the Mystery*, 51.

Christ and Christian tradition, the church uses bread in celebrations of Holy Communion.” In practice this means that, while the loaf “may be made from any grain according to availability,” it should “both look and taste like bread.” It may be leavened or unleavened, but it should be “plain bread (no frosting, nuts, raisins, artificial coloring, or other additions).” *THM* states a similar principle for the wine: “In accordance with Scripture and Christian tradition, the historic and ecumenical church uses wine in celebrations of Holy Communion.” Many churches, Protestant and Catholic have always used wine, but United Methodists, at least since the late nineteenth century, have customarily served unfermented grape juice.<sup>95</sup>

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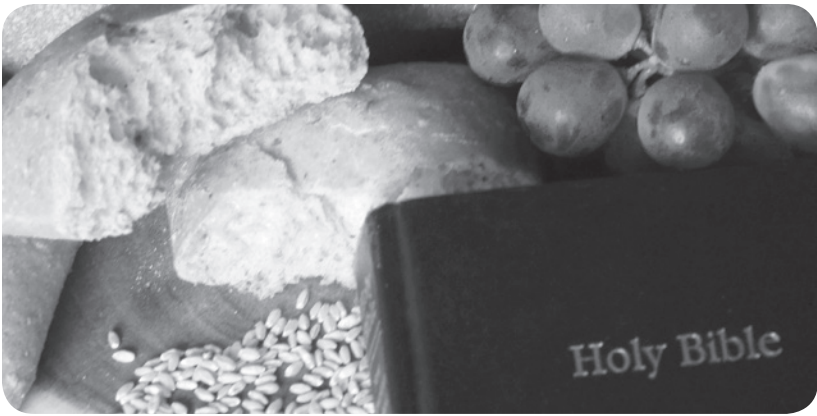
## A EUCHARISTIC SPIRITUALITY

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What does Holy Communion mean for United Methodists? At the Lord's table we are shaped in the language of thanksgiving and remembrance. We experience a sign of the fulfilling of the commandments to love God and our neighbor. We receive a continuing sign of God's love for us, even when we are not or do not feel worthy of that love. The giving of thanks, participating in the Lord's Supper, and the sharing together offers an image of what and who we are called to be today and of what our lives may yet be in the fullness of time. Whether we call this holy meal Eucharist, Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, in it we experience something of the promise of God's new creation, receive sustenance for the life of discipleship, and are sent with the power of the Holy Spirit to be Christ's body in mission and ministry to the world.

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<sup>95</sup> *THM*, “The Communion Elements,” 30-31.



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## FOR FURTHER READING

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*Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church*, by Laurence Hull Stookey (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

*Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest*, by Mark Stamm (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

*Living into the Mystery: A United Methodist Guide for Celebrating Holy Communion* (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2007).

*The Worship Resources of the United Methodist Hymnal*, by Hoyt Hickman (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

*This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2004)

*This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion Study Guide*, by Gayle Carlton Felton (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2005)

*This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion A Study Guide for Children*, by Carolyn Tanner (Akron: OSL Publications, 2006).



“The Duty of Constant Communion,” by John Wesley, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 3, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pages 427-39.

“The Means of Grace,” by John Wesley, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 1, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), pages 376–97.

*Worshipping With United Methodists: A Guide for Pastors and Church Leaders*, by Hoyt L. Hickman (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

*Worship Matters* (Volumes I and II), edited by E. Byron Anderson (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999).

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