

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

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Ministry of the Church

Today we live in a world which changes so rapidly. The church seems to be following where the world is going rather than leading the world. Driven by the prosperity gospel models of worship through media, every denomination seems to want to follow suit. Watching these services, one would notice that the preachers are surrounded by their followers, which means that the services are not meant for the members but for the “church shoppers” or those who are homebound.

The debate on online communion in the United Methodist Church (UMC) needs serious questions to be asked as to why a person would choose to be a virtual member. It is one thing to share information online relating to spiritual growth is another to become a full virtual member. For this person, where did their baptism happen? If it was in a face-to-face environment and that community vowed to nurture the candidate, so why are they running away from that community that nurtured them when it comes to the second sacrament, Holy Communion? Can it be that they are running away from places where they can meet with people they do not agree with on theological issues which are at the discussion table today in the UMC?

To talk of online communion, there is need to first look at the church membership and its role in church and society. Some of the questions today are: How can we continue bringing people to Christ without at the same time diluting the spirituality of the same people in the process, especially in areas where the membership is declining? As a worldwide church, what is

it which can unit and keep us faithful to the importance of sacraments, especially the Holy Communion, and also help us grow both numerically and spiritually if it is not physically gathering and fellowshiping together for that sacrament?

We all know that evangelism is a way of ushering people into the body of Christ. These numbers can be gathered through different avenues. If we look for membership through the Internet, will we truly have honest conversations which will give them spiritual depth? From my point of view, face-to-face nurturing is central to spiritual growth and this takes place in a Local Church.

The first responsibility of the Local Church is to evangelize. That then means that evangelism is a component of the mission of the church. John Z. W. Kurewa believes that “evangelism is the heartbeat of ministry... every local church needs to regard the ministry of evangelism in its community as a priority... It is at the local church level where the powers of righteousness engage in battle with the powers of darkness...”¹

When the church does its missions well through evangelism, a person makes a decisive move to become a Christian and a process of Christian initiation takes place. This initiation assists a person to go through the sacrament of Baptism, together with other Christian rites of passage, that includes the receiving of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the UMC, these steps take place in a Local Church. All these are not treated as private but communal activities. *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* clearly states the importance of this ministry through the Local Church:

¹ Kurewa, John Wesley Zwomunondiita, *Labouring Side by Side: The Local Church as the Most Significant Arena for Disciple-Making*, (Nashville: Discipleship Resources International: Africa, 2011), 31.

The local church provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. It is a community of true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.²

The Local Church is the starting point of the nurturing journey of a person. In some societies in our worldwide church today, people are craving to build strong physical communities; this is why church buildings are continuing to be built. But the challenge we have is that in every society there are so many people today who move from one denomination to the other, seeking something. What are they really looking for? We know that when a person is still a seeker, he/she can easily hop from one church to another because there are no roots in his/her spirituality.

In the scriptures we observe that Jesus' life, through to his ascension, was filled with physical encounters. Today, in the Zimbabwe UMC for example, small groups are very helpful in evangelizing and nurturing the spirituality of people. Many Zimbabweans experience the presence of God through weekly small group and organizational meetings, revivals and sacraments. All these groups follow the pattern of John Wesley's Societies and Bands.

August 15-17, 2014 the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area held a historical event called "Ebenezer Convention: 117 years of ministry" where over 55,000 (fifty-five thousand) people gathered in the National Sports Stadium for worship. Due to the large numbers, we did not have Holy Communion as is the practice during revivals. As the special advisor for evangelism and worship, during our planning stage and throughout the convention, a number of both clergy and

² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 143

laity asked me why we were not going to have Holy Communion. It was a very difficult question to answer because we had never had revival meetings without Holy Communion. The response was that they were going to have a chance to commune in their local churches since this arena was set for the purposes of evangelism and it was not conducive to serve Holy Communion. This is evangelism in the African context where the presence of a physical gathering is critical.

We know that with so many societal challenges today, many people are choosing to become members of a particular Local Church, sometimes because of programs which can cater for the needs of their children and the parents themselves are not very much interested in what goes on in the church, relating to their spirituality. These kinds of people can be among those who can choose to become virtual members because being physically present calls for physical contribution to the church and society. The *United Methodist Book of Worship* has a very important statement in the service of reception into the denomination which says: “Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, **your presence**, your gifts, and **your service**?”³ Can these activities be done online?

Besides bringing people to Christ through the Local Church, Christians also have an obligation to society. This we call “ministry,” *diakonia* in Greek, which is the work of all believers. The *Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* tells us that: “Ministry in the life and experience of the church is a larger reality than the ‘ordained ministry’ of the clergy...new forms of service for nourishment and leadership in the church will continue to emerge under the

³ “The Baptismal Covenant III: Reception into the United Methodist Church” in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 109.

guidance of the Spirit of Christ ...”⁴ Using the examples of the New Testament on the face-to-face ministry, the *Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* tells us:

The traditions concerning ministries in the church contained in the New Testament are traditions formed in the context of the *sacramental worship* of the church ... The Pauline and other epistolary traditions as well as the gospels and Acts of the Apostles are in a real sense *liturgical* traditions, developed for and handed on within the praying assemblies which were gathered for the preaching of the word and the “the breaking of the bread”... The Acts of the Apostles presents a Lucan perspective on the origins of the church and her ministries, especially in its portrayal of Paul’s missionary travels and the communities which he is credited with establishing... Paul, Barnabas, as well as the churches established in their ministry, are portrayed as the ministries of the Spirit which identifies Jesus and gives origin and shape to his ministry.⁵

The early church did their ministry face to face as they listened to the Word and broke bread together in a physical space. Paul’s missionary work was a “people touch” ministry where he physically went where the people were.

The *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) document of the World Council of Church says that God’s mission needs to be fulfilled by everyone who has accepted and believe in Godself. The ministry of the church is the calling of the whole people of God.⁶ The church now has a duty to make people come to Christ by proclaiming the Gospel and through the sacramental services. “The Spirit calls people to faith, sanctifies them through many gifts, gives them strength to witness to the Gospel, and empowers them to serve in hope and love... This mission needs to be carried out in varying political, social and cultural contexts.”⁷ This implies that the ministry of the church can be done in many ways in order to bring people to Christ and nurture

⁴ Fink, Peter e., S. J. ed., *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 828.

⁵ Ibid, 829.

⁶ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 16

⁷ Ibid, 20.

them. According to BEM, ministry is the entire service of the people of God. God first called people to ministry when he spoke to Israel and later fulfilled through the birth of Jesus Christ.⁸

We live in a busy world where people are constantly traveling or are busy with one thing or another. Because of the hunger of being in community, ministry can be done online to uplift each other, then at some point interact with the physical Local Church.

“Do this in Remembrance of Me”

The sacrament of Holy Communion was instituted by Christ and given to the church. Through this sacrament, the Holy Spirit makes God’s presence known in worshipers’ lives in a personal and communal way. This sacrament strengthens the relationship of the congregants and forms a strong community which we call Local Church.

To have Holy Communion, there is need to have a community celebrate with one another. Jesus celebrated meals with multitudes during his earthly ministry and even after his resurrection. Laurence Hull Stookey indicates that:

The meals which Jesus is recorded as sharing during his earthly ministry proclaim and enact the nearness of the kingdom of which the feeding of the multitude is a sign. In his last meal the fellowship of the kingdom was connected with the immense of Jesus suffering. After his resurrection, the Lord made his presence known to his disciples in the breaking of bread. Thus the Eucharist continues these meals of Christ during his earthly life and after his resurrection always as a sign of the kingdom. Christians see the Eucharist pre-figured in the Passover memorial of Israel’s deliverance from the land of bondage and in the meal of the covenant on Mount Sinai. It is the new Paschal meal of the church, the meal of the new covenant which Christ gave to his disciples as the anamnesis of his death and resurrection.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stookey Laurence Hull, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast With the Church*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1993). 10

Holy Communion “is the new paschal meal of the church, the meal of the New Covenant, which Christ gave to his disciples as the *anamnesis* of his death and resurrection, as the anticipation of the Supper of the Lamb (Rev19:9).”¹⁰

In the case of the Methodists, John Wesley wanted them to understand the meaning of Luke 22:19, so that they appreciate the importance of having Holy Communion very often, following Jesus’ command of “Do this in remembrance of me”.¹¹ Heitzenrater emphasized Wesley’s conviction that the issue of the importance of the physical presence at Holy Communion services was core of Methodism from its conception. “As the expanding revival continued to consolidate and the preaching-houses became the locus of the Methodists’ religious self-identity, there was increasing pressure from the preachers and people to receive the Sacrament from Methodist hands.”¹² The history of Methodism in North America also tells us of the importance of a physically gathered community in relation to sacraments. Due to the fact that the movement was lay people driven, the access to the sacraments was limited and people were craving for them. Gayle Felton points out:

Not only did many of the preachers covet sacramental authority, but also many of the people were desirous of the privilege of receiving the ordinances from their preachers. ...the issue was not finally settled until Wesley’s provision of ordained ministers for America at the time of the 1784 Christmas Conference.¹³

¹⁰ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 10

¹¹ Wesley, John, “The Duty of Constant Communion” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 7, Third Edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1996), 147-157.

¹² Heitzenrater, Richard P., *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 191ff

¹³ Felton, Gayle Carlton. *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 50.

Christians celebrate what Christ is doing among them and Holy Communion now is strengthening their friendship with Christ and with each other. Therefore this sacrament unites all to Christ and the faithful into one body of Christ.

To introduce online communion, for me, seems to be dismembering the body of Christ. If God, through Christ, came into the world physically, how can the church think that we can have a sacrament with no face-to-face encounter? Paul makes it very clear in I Corinthians about the nature of the church as the body of Christ. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1Cor. 12:12-13). This text, in the UMC context as a worldwide denomination, can resemble our many gifts and graces for ministry beyond the limits of a specific culture. We need to live up to it and not try to avoid each other because there are some areas we cannot agree on as a denomination.

Our denomination still struggles to realize its richness in connectionalism. While we live as a body in culturally mixed societies and talk about our commitment to caring, we have not yet lived what we say we are. Individualism still resides among us and congregations frequently operate on commonly shared assumptions relating to their worldview and forget our diverse cultures. Christian sacraments and rites are offered within this body called the United Methodist Church to strengthen each other and the relationship between God and God’s people. The spirit of individualism and racism, which are prominent in western societies, can also creep into the church because there may be groups of people who do not know how to behave in the presence of people who are different from them.

In the African community's day-to-day life, we usually eat and drink together. We belong to each other and so take our meals together. Families and friends, we celebrate events and important historic occasions physically together. Being together talking and laughing, eating and drinking are what we know best. Such experiences re-enforce our common identity and deepen our relationships. Meals both express and realize our unity and demonstrate that we belong to each other. Within the Christian worshipping community, the joy of family and friends, feasting together, face-to-face, during Holy Communion, becomes a powerful symbol of the joy-filled reunion of Christ and his followers. The hunger of our spirit is gratefully acknowledged and intensified through this sacrament, and it is through this celebration that our dependence on God, the source of life, is demonstrated. Singing together and embracing each other, after receiving Holy Communion, gives us a sense of community. As African Christians, liturgical times such as Holy Communion, the reverence is also demonstrated through people's dress codes and the way we celebrate the sacrament as a physically gathered community. So we all take seriously the bodily presence of the gathered community during the Holy Communion service.

As said earlier on, in life, we need to constantly remind ourselves that all prayer and sacrifice should come from first, the personal encounter with Christ, then deep devotion of the heart and self-surrender to God. When we have face-to-face Holy Communion, people need to be able to look each other in the face and honestly pronounce, "The Peace of Christ be with you" from the bottom of their hearts. That's true Christian love. This eye-to-eye contact can never be done online.

As Christians, the celebration of Holy Communion needs to bring the great event into living memory and not do it as a routine. The people gathered need to be confirmed of their

worthiness in the eyes of their communities and that of God. Holy Communion needs to gather people at the table and not dismember the body of Christ by avoiding looking at each other face to face. People should gather together to re-enact and re-experience God's power as they commune.

Conclusion

As a denomination, we have to be relevant to the people as we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We have to lead the world and not for the world to lead us. Holy Communion, within the physically gathered worshiping community, conveys a very powerful serving message. Kurewa points out that: "Often, worshipers have expectations as they prepare to attend a Sunday worship service... The pastor needs always to prepare for each part of the Order of Sunday Worship because each part conveys the serving grace as people come together to offer their worship to God."¹⁴ With the words "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19 and I Cor. 11:24-25), Jesus gave his church the assignment of commemorating his death and resurrection in order to perpetuate through the ages his revealing and redeeming death on the cross and the hope for new life through his resurrection. Kurewa goes on to give a very relevant example to the importance of a physically gathered community. "I recall my first worship service as pastor... It was a Holy Communion service. After delivering the message, I began receiving people at the altar kneeling rail. As the congregation sang, I found tears streaming down my cheeks. Surprisingly, as the communicants came forward, I discovered I was sharing the same emotional

¹⁴ Kurewa, 34.

response with the congregation...”¹⁵ This is just one example of the importance of being physically commune together.

People can uplift each other spiritually by sharing the ministry of the church and even evangelize virtually. But when it comes to the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ, people feel the presence of God among them when they are in a physical community where they can look each other in the eye and pass the peace. Although Jesus was the Word that created the universe, He took time to come to this world for our sake. The UMC as a worldwide church, in spite of our differences in many theological discourses, we can help each other create space to physically commune with one another at the Lord’s Table which is a place of mercy.

If Christ, who is God, was able to share the Last Supper with his disciples, how can the United Methodist Church depart from the face-to-face encounter with its diverse community at the Table? The Word became flesh to be among us, so we, as United Methodists, need to be physically together at the Table, despite our differences.

¹⁵ Ibid 35