

**Online Communion in the United Methodist Church:
A Pastoral and Missional Reflection**

Bishop Ken Carter
bishop@flumc.org
Florida Area, United Methodist Church

Communion is Personal and Ecclesial

Laura lived for most of her life in the mid-western United States, in small towns, where her father was a Methodist pastor, and then in Indianapolis, where she worked as a young adult, and later met her husband. They would raise a family, and in later years would come to spend a part of each winter on the southwest coast of Florida. She and her husband dreamed of retiring there, and in fact, this is what happened. Shortly after relocating to Sanibel Island, her husband died, and Laura found it difficult to return to the small church they had discovered. Instead, she began viewing the online worship service of one of the large regional (United Methodist) churches in that area. The one missing piece was the experience of Holy Communion, which had been a part of her formative years. In time, however, she would learn that the elements could be mailed to her, in a small package, and that she could partake, in her home, as she viewed the service each week. This struck her as both interesting and awkward. She was pleased that the church would think of persons in her situation, and yet she puzzled about what it meant to receive the elements by mail and in the solitude of her den.

Jacob had grown up in the church, and after becoming active in a campus ministry he attended seminary. This led to two assignments in pastoral ministry, the second being a new congregation, where he would serve for several years. In the new congregation Jacob developed a passion for reaching men and women who were outside the reach of most United Methodist churches, and so he deepened his interest

in the methods of innovative churches. One of these innovations was the way a number of churches were using digital technology to extend the message of the gospel to those who could not, or would not cross the threshold of a physical sanctuary. The more he explored this form of ministry, the more intrigued he became; indeed, in his mind the possibilities were limitless.

One of Jacob's close friends in seminary was named William. William had grown up in an evangelical church, but his studies and experiences in the chapel services of the seminary led him to embrace the more catholic traditions of United Methodism. William served as a student pastor in seminary, and found deep fulfillment in the authorization, as a local pastor, to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion with his small church. He sought out electives in liturgical studies, and upon completion of seminary, attended graduate school to pursue a doctorate in worship. After completing his PhD., William was asked to teach in one of the denominational seminaries. Like Jacob, he was discovering his passion, only William's was in teaching a new generation of clergy to value the centrality of Holy Communion within the context of worship, and as a formative and essential act in the mission of making disciples.

In a typical congregation, we approach the Lord's Table with our differing life experiences and aspirations. In the same manner, Laura, Jacob and William come to the Sacrament of Holy Communion from different perspectives: in the person who receives, and in light of a particular pastoral situation; in the desire to offer the means of grace to larger numbers of people, beyond the walls of the church; and in the calling to teach and value the sacramental practice in the midst of the worshipping community. Our present moment, as online communion is both a practice in some congregations

and at the same time a practice in question, is in some manner the encounter between Laura, Jacob and William. To make sense of their relationships, and what each might say to the other, it helps to get on the balcony (in the language of Ronald Heifetz) to gain a broader perspective.

Scripture and Tradition

Communion is at the heart of the ministry of Jesus in the gospels; he eats with sinners, breaks bread with his disciples, and feeds the five thousand. The eucharistic words—taken, blessed, broken, given—are spoken in open fields, at a passover meal, and both prior to and following his suffering, death and resurrection. If we are to become disciples of Jesus, and if we are to make disciples of Jesus, we will necessarily reflect on the centrality of this meal, in the formation of his followers and in the definition of community. And if we are to understand this meal in the ministry of Jesus, we will take seriously how he embodied the Passover tradition and how he extended the table in ways that elicited complaint and critique, gladness and joy.

Among the values inherent in the meals associated with Jesus in the gospels are the following: a preference for offering the meal to greater, rather than fewer numbers of people (Matthew 14. 13ff); a willingness to share table fellowship with outsiders (Luke 15. off); the element of surprise in revealing himself in the broken bread (Luke 24); the bread from heaven that provides for our human needs and yet is also a sign that points beyond itself (John 6; Exodus 16).

Our particular tradition—the United Methodist Church—has a rich foundation in understanding the act of communion, thanks to the early Methodist practices, the hymns of Charles Wesley, and, going farther back, to our lineage in the Anglican Church. John Wesley believed Holy Communion to be a converting ordinance, and thus located the means of grace in the order of salvation. The hymns of Charles Wesley convey the mystery of the divine gift and the real presence of Christ without speaking of it as transubstantiation or as a memorial. We also practice open communion; the table is ecumenical, and participation is for all who respond to the invitation to self-examination. The early Methodists discovered a strong connection between the doctrine of grace and the means of grace, leading to a body of work characterized as “practical divinity”.

Grounded in a particular tradition—the providence of an incarnate God in Jesus Christ who invites us into a mission of extending grace, the presence of a mysterious God who converts us within a community of sanctifying grace—we move now to the question of our present ecclesial moment: *What are the possibilities and problems inherent in the practice of online communion for United Methodists?*

Possibilities

A first possibility lies in the extension of the sacrament (i.e., grace) to a constituency beyond the walls of the church. This seems congruent with our original missional impulse as a people called Methodist, expressed more specifically in field preaching outside of cathedrals or chapels. The call upon the church (the Council of Bishops and/or or the Committee on Faith and Order) for clarity is precisely from congregations who are seeking to reach persons outside of the time and space now set aside for public worship each week.

A second possibility lies in the growing realization that digital media is a “third place” (in the language of sociologist Ray Oldenburg). In a church culture, the first two places were home and work, and the most prominent third place was the church building. In a post-Christian culture, where much of our mission field now exists, third places are more likely to be coffee shops, athletic settings and/or, increasingly, digital media. Those pressing the church to reflect on communion as an online experience are connecting a significant context for ministry (internet culture) with a central act of ministry (Holy Communion); it is true that “United Methodists want our faith to be enlivened and made more relevant to our daily lives” (*This Holy Mystery*, 2).

Problems

The question of online communion, given its missional and perhaps even evangelical possibilities, does present problems, however, and here I will name two. A first problem lies in the tangible nature of Holy Communion itself—the bread and wine are physical substances that one eats and drinks, indeed that one receives in a setting led by an authorized representative of the church. Holy Communion is an embodied experience. To deny this embodied reality is the return toward the heresy of gnosticism, the separation of spirit and flesh and the privileging of one over the other.

A second problem relates to the absence of face to face accountability and support where there is no actual Christian community. The communion meal, especially in the letters of Paul, is linked to the integrity of physical community, indeed its flourishing, and its care for one another. And the liturgy of the United Methodist Church

includes both the confession of sin, the pronouncement of forgiveness and the sharing of the peace of the Lord. How these actions are in any sense real, in a purely digital framework, is one of the profound questions before us, and indeed a recurring theme in *This Holy Mystery* (2004) is the communal nature of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Seven Questions

Given this brief foundation in scripture and tradition, and a sketch of the problems and possibilities inherent in online communion, I will frame my reflection on the subject of online communion around seven questions. I think we will serve the church as we think constructively about the assumptions embedded in response to these questions, and the result can be a better conversation. Ultimately the conversation will occur among members of the Council of Bishops (collegially, and in their global contexts), delegates to the 2016 General Conference, liturgical scholars and pastors who serve congregations. Each of these constituents brings a needed voice to the conversation: bishops, who order the set-apart ministry of the church; delegates to the General Conference, who will amend our present statement (*This Holy Mystery*), or not; liturgical scholars, who carry the historical memory of doctrinal development; and pastors, who live at the intersection of the church's witness and human need.

1. What is the Christian relationship to culture: resistance, consumption or stewardship? Or some combination of the three?

The question of online communion can be understood as the presenting issue of a deeper question: what is the relationship between the church and culture. This question was explored most prominently in the last century in H. Richard Niebuhr's

Christ and Culture, in the form of five typologies: Christ against culture, Christ above culture, Christ of culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. More recently, Andy Crouch has suggested that Christians in the twenty-first century have a default perspective against culture, while not adequately acknowledging how we as people of faith shape culture ourselves.

Clearly, participation in the digital world (for economic, entertainment, communicative and educational purposes) has shaped our culture in the last decade; I note the last decade because the relevance of digital or online engagement has not emerged in the adoption and potential revision of *This Holy Mystery* since its acceptance by the church in 2004. Crouch is helpful in reminding us that we often uncritically or unconsciously reject culture, or consume it; instead, we might reflect in a more nuanced way on our creation of culture.

2. What is the meaning of embodiment and community?

So a woman moves from her home in Indianapolis to Southwest Florida. A nearby church, out of a genuine desire to connect with its community, offers communion via its televised service. The wafer and juice are distributed through the mail. The participant receives this package from the church, opens it, and at the appropriate time in the service, she communes. The question before us is simple: how is she a member, in this act, of the body of Christ? The question can be asked in a different way: How do we maintain the integrity of the church in reference to sacramental authority, and at the same time contextualize and offer the gospel in appropriate ways? We live in this tension.

In the Body of Christ, we confess and forgive. How is this best communicated? How do we most faithfully speak and hear these words? In personal and virtual relationships, we are not always truthful or honest. So how are we accountable to each other in communion? The experience of face to face accountability in giving and receiving cannot be present in a purely digital offering of Holy Communion.

3. How is social media analogous to field preaching?

We recall the words of John Wesley in Bristol: "*I decided to become more vile...*". Inherent in this phrase is a taking leave of a prior practice that was circumscribed in space and time: preaching in the chapel or cathedral at the appointed time. The decision "to become more vile" is a movement toward the needs of people with a word that converts. So what, then, of the sacrament that also converts?

This question is all the more important given the ecumenical movement's influence on United Methodism in the last half of the twentieth century, in the evolution toward a balance of Word and Table, which constitutes the wholeness of worship. The local preacher would become the local pastor, and the local pastor's license to preach inevitably led to questions around sacramental authority (or presidency). It seemed unnatural to offer the word without the sacrament. In this way United Methodist is in the process of living into its "evangelical catholic" identity, to recall the designation by Albert Outler.

Does it logically follow that we are to become more vile in offering communion in ways and forms that seemed unnatural to us? The conversation is at the heart of disagreements between new church developers, who want to extend the presence of

Christ, and liturgical theologians, who question the validity of the presence of Christ in an act that lacks dimensions of incarnate relationships and accountable discipleship.

4. What is essential in the act of Holy Communion?

We begin with definitions of materiality: bread is baked, broken, shared, tasted. Wine is cultivated, poured, tasted. In the beginning there is the harvest of grain and the cultivation of vineyards. Each context produces imagery that defines the gospel narratives: Jesus is the bread of heaven that gives life to the world (John 6); he is vine and we are the branches (John 15). The materiality of these narratives is consistent with the larger meta-narrative of the Triune God who inhabits time and space; in the Nicene Creed, “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven and was incarnate”. So how is it possible to enact Holy Communion—the intimate and real presence of God with us (Matthew 1) in the bread and cup, in the absence of human, flesh and blood relationships?

In the ecumenical statement Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Faith and Order, WCC), the relevant sections are “The Eucharist as Communion of the Faithful” (21) and “The Eucharist as Meal of the Kingdom” (24). The following is representative of the corporate character of Holy Communion:

“Reconciled in the eucharist, the members of the body of Christ are called to be servants of reconciliation among men and women and witnesses of the joy of resurrection. As Jesus went out to publicans and sinners and had table-fellowship with them during his earthly ministry, so Christians are called in the eucharist to be in solidarity with the outcast and to become signs of the love of Christ who lived and sacrificed himself for all and now gives himself in the eucharist.”

While such a statement is a challenge to many worshipping communities, it presents difficulties for the individual consumption of the elements apart from fellowship with other disciples.

5. Can (or should) we ignore digital media?

Churches (even a renewal movement like Methodism) can, in time, become fixed in its traditions. And yet Gil Rendle has reminded us that it is wise to be steady in purpose but flexible in strategy. **This leads to a question: is online communion more about purpose or strategy?** This arguing for the former would insist that an online expression of Holy Communion compromises the sacrament itself: how can one forgive or reconcile another person? Or how can one taste the bread or drink from the cup in communion with others? Others contend that online communion is simply the practice of offering the sacrament to persons via an innovative strategy.

For the latter perspective, the bias is toward increasing access of individuals to the sacrament, and the refusal to enter the digital world is a limiting factor. If the analogy is print media, one might ponder the experiences of newspapers, magazines and journals. A generation ago, news, features and essays were transmitted in paper documents that were accessed through subscriptions or purchased in newsstands. Today much of this content is conveyed online. So does this analogy hold for the church?

Again, the emergence of online worship services is a sign that the church may indeed follow in the path of media over the past years. Some publications have ceased to exist, and others offer content exclusively online; yet others have a hybrid strategy: there is a combination of print media and online access. Will the church follow suit, supplementing physical participation in worship with online experiences?

6. How does the medium change the message?

There are some who would insist that digital culture is incompatible with sacramental life. Among the most eloquent proponents here is the philosopher Albert Borgmann. In a series of works across a lifetime, and most recently in a collection of essays entitled *Power Failure* (Brazos Press), Borgmann makes explicit connections between Christianity and technology. He describes technology as an almost invisible culture, one that permeates our lives and one in which we participate uncritically: "It is in the dailiness of modern life that technology has been most powerful and consequential," he insists.

Technology, he suggests, constitutes our "modern rule of life," intentionally borrowing a term from the classical spiritual disciplines. We are shaped by technology with even knowing it. We have lived through a time of unprecedented technological innovation. Our lives have seemingly been made easier by the elimination of activities that require effort: preparing meals, reading to our children, walking through neighborhoods. Devices, in the beginning, provide real help, but in time they become ends in themselves. "They help us", Borgmann argues, "in ways that we do not need to be helped."

Borgmann calls for a "culture of word and table." A culture of the word includes practices of conversation and reading, listening, sharing and testimony. A culture of the table is the presence of a family, or a gathering of friends, around a dinner table, the bringing together of food and conversation, body and spirit. The connection with Holy Communion is obvious, as the meal which helps us to remember God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

7. Is the way forward either/or, or both/and?

We recognize finally that our calling is to make disciples in a digital world. This is the lesson of hybrid learning. We in fact will need to form (and inhabit) an online community and make disciples in the digital world. These are necessary but not sufficient expressions of church; ideally, online Christian communities will have some overlap with face-to-face Christian communities. Word seems to be more compatible to the digital world, Holy Communion less so. This is consistent with research around hybrid learning (digital and classroom) in the field of education. Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Darrell Rigby describes “digital-physical mashups”, and notes that customers “now weave their digital and physical worlds so tightly together that they can’t fathom why companies haven’t done the same”. This is the spirit in which our document, *This Holy Mystery*, was offered to the church:

“*This Holy Mystery* is characterized by the effort to avoid rigidity on the one hand and indifference on the other. Neither extreme is true to our heritage nor faithful to the Spirit who leads the church forward in the work of making disciples living toward the new creation” (3).

Recalling the language of “traditioned innovation” in the writings of Gregory Jones, our challenge is to find a way of offering communion to persons who engage the church digitally, while at the same time retaining the materiality of the experience. Perhaps worship is streamed online (word), but missional disciples are sent into communities (homes, third places) with the elements of bread and wine for the dispersed people of God.

A sketch of our foundational resources, and an exploration of seven critical questions prepares us to offer the guidance that the church is seeking. Therefore a modest (and admittedly interim) statement about where we are in our practice and reflection of Online Communion.

A Modest Proposal for an Addition to *This Holy Mystery*

***Principle**

There are a number of persons in the church who feel led to offer communion in the context of an online worship service, streamed (live or otherwise) through the internet. And there are a number of innovative churches who offer digital worship services that respond to contexts where participants are either mobile, isolated, employed during traditional worship hours or physically unable to be present in local church's sanctuary.

***Background**

The question is how to integrate Christian discipleship with the cultural forms that shape the lives of United Methodists, and how to do this while maintaining the integrity of the sacrament. We are called to a wise stewardship of the mysteries of God in a digital culture, discerning its appropriate use and critiquing its dangers and unintended consequences. We are seeking a way forward that is not either/or, but both/and.

***Proposal**

In churches that offer an online worship service, the sacrament of Holy Communion may be shared in the following ways: the word is preached in a digital form, but the response to the word occurs through the means of incarnate community: a member of the local church (or the nearest United Methodist Church) shares communion with in the home with the person who worships online, or in a established setting where small groups can meet to receive the sacrament together.