

This Holy Mystery

Gayle Carlton Felton

The 2000 General Conference continued the church's work of recovering the significance of the sacraments by authorizing a study of Holy Communion. A committee appointed by the General Board of Discipleship has met throughout the quadrennium to complete the task. Listening sessions were held in each jurisdiction to enable the committee to hear from the church. Several drafts of the document were posted on the gbod.org website where the final version is available.

"This Holy Mystery" is composed of two main parts. The first is entitled "There Is More to the Mystery." After an introduction looking at the results of a GBOD survey, there is consideration of the various names by which the sacrament is called and what particular meaning each has. A brief section deals with the understanding of Holy Communion in other denominational traditions. The United Methodist heritage from Wesley's sacramental revival movement through American Methodism and Evangelical United Brethren is summarized.

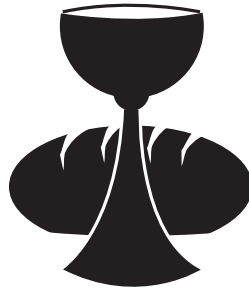
The latter portions of "There Is More to the Mystery" emphasize theological understandings. The richness and diversity of the workings of divine grace are explored. Description of the various means through which grace is conveyed leads to consideration of the sacraments as special means of grace. What sacraments are and what they do is explored. The six major meanings of Holy Communion in the New Testament are explained. A section called "Toward a Richer Sacramental Life" considers the spiritual benefits received.

The other main part of the paper is entitled "Christ Is Here: Experiencing the Mystery." This part is organized by principles dealing with various aspects of the subject. The statement of each principle is followed by background material explaining the principle, and by guidelines for putting it into practice. This format is designed to make the paper easily accessible.

The real, living, and active presence of Christ in the sacrament is asserted. Invitation to the Lord's Table is examined, clarifying the importance of the invitation and to whom it is addressed. Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 illumines the issue of feelings of unworthiness which sometimes keep faithful Christians from the Table.

One of the earliest decisions made by the committee was to affirm the wholeness of Word and Table as the basic pattern of worship. Congregations are encouraged to celebrate the Lord's Supper at their services of worship on every Lord's Day.

A section on the gathered community stresses that all who are baptized are ministers and servants in the church and active participants in the sacramental service. The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving, led by the pastor, prayed by the whole congregation. The composition and themes of the Prayer are highlighted.



Clergy or laity are urged to carry the consecrated elements to share with members of the congregation who are unable to attend. **"Self-service" and "drop-in" practices are deemed contrary to the communal nature of the sacrament.**

The section on the ritual of the church asserts that "pastors have a responsibility to uphold and use" the official texts for Word and Table. This does not mean that other resources are excluded. "Servants at the Table" include presiding ministers –

elders and others authorized – and assisting ministers – deacons and laity. The roles and responsibilities of each are delineated. Attention is given to the position of licensed local pastors.

The section entitled "Setting the Table" deals with the location of the Table, the communion elements, and matters of hygiene. The use of bread which looks and tastes like bread, preferably a whole loaf, is affirmed. The use of wine by most Christians, now and in the past, is noted, along with the United Methodist tradition of unfermented juice. The single cup as a sign of unity of the body of Christ is affirmed. Consideration is given to the use and disposal of consecrated elements which are left over. Because of concerns about contamination, it is recommended that all who serve the elements wash their hands, in a simple way which is not distracting to worshippers.

Holy Communion is related to evangelism, as grace given in the sacrament forms the congregation into a community of evangelists who reach out intentionally to those who are absent from the Table. The Lord's Supper is identified as a basis of United Methodism's historic concern for social justice.

The concluding section makes clear that United Methodist positions on the Lord's Supper are largely in accord with the ecumenical consensus. All Christians are invited to commune with United Methodist congregations and United Methodists are encouraged to commune with others. Holy Communion exemplifies the unity of the church under the Lordship of Christ. □



Gayle Carlton Felton is an elder in the North Carolina Annual Conference. She is the principal author of *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* and *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*.

To Learn More

Go to www.gbod.org. Under "quicklinks" select Holy Communion Study.