

Richer, More Frequent Holy Communion?

Come to the Feast

Daniel T. Benedict Jr.

Contrary to easy assumptions we make that United Methodists are indifferent to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, research done prior to General Conference authorization for study of Holy Communion in 2000 revealed that they are hungry for the grace enacted in the Eucharist and for tools and practices that enable them to more richly feast at Christ's table. Indeed, the research revealed that United Methodists have a strong sense of the importance of Holy Communion and an "equally strong sense of the absence of any meaningful understanding of Eucharistic theology and practice."¹ They see that grace and spiritual power are available in the Meal, but don't feel enabled to receive them. Further, the research revealed, "[m]any lay people complain of sloppy practice, questionable theology, and lack of teaching and guidance."² *THM* summarizes what this hunger means for the episcopal and pastoral leadership:

Both clergy and laity recognize the *crucial need for better education of pastors in sacramental theology and practice*. The

concern for improved education is coupled with a call for accountability. Bishops, district superintendents, and other annual conference and general church authorities are urged to prepare their pastors better and to hold them accountable for their sacramental theology, practice, and teaching. Many of the people surveyed are plainly resentful of the lack of leadership they believe they are receiving in these areas. *These results are troubling and must provoke the church to reexamination and recommitment.*³

To focus it more closely, this is the conundrum we face: how will United Methodists be motivated to celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently if we do not celebrate it more richly? And, how will we ever celebrate it more richly if we do not practice it more frequently?

This reexamination and recommitment must be more than a casual read of *This Holy Mystery* followed by shelving it in our pastoral libraries. It will mean engaging in Christian conferencing and mutual accountability at every level of the church and its institutions and agencies. In this holy conferencing and accountability, we can expect the Spirit to examine our assumptions, prejudices, and practices with respect to Christ's feasting with the church.

One early and unanimous convergence in the committee that prepared *This Holy Mystery* was to urge congregations "to move toward a richer sacramental life, including weekly celebration of

the Lord's Supper at services on the Lord's Day."⁴ Many, if not most, of us clergy have made our peace with the Sacrament and have settled for infrequent and routine celebrations, often honestly recognizing that the surface response of members is that monthly or quarterly is enough. The members of the congregation have either bought the package of the status quo or sit in silent yearning for richer celebration, concluding that a feast will not be forthcoming any time soon. When we hear people say, "If we practiced weekly celebration, it would lose its sacredness," we accept that as confirmation that they don't want it more often. Perhaps we have not probed deeply enough to find out that what they may be unwittingly saying is this: "If the boring, indifferent ways we celebrate the Lord's Supper is all there is, I can't imagine it more often!"

I want to be careful here and avoid a blanket judgment that United Methodist celebrations of the Lord's Supper are boring, deadly, and empty experiences for the people. God's grace is active, even when our teaching and presiding may not be effective. In the context of the Donatist controversy, Augustine said that gold in the pocket of a thief is still gold, meaning that when the sacraments were presided over by a schismatic priest, the grace of God was still present and available for those communing. The question is not who of us is worthy or faithful enough to preside at Holy Communion. Rather it is how will we celebrate the grace of the One who said "Do this" in ways that make it a richer and more grace-filled experience for the assembly. How will sacramental worship be enacted in ways that will transmit the DNA of the gospel to those who commune and then go out to live it in daily life?

To focus it more closely, this is the conundrum we face: *how will United Methodists be motivated to celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently if we do not celebrate it more richly? And, how will we ever celebrate it more richly if we do not practice it more frequently?* The adage is that practice makes perfect. We need not be fixed on perfection here so much as fixed on finding ways to change the maps in our brains, neurons, and muscles. Practice unleashes us to freer and more centered practice as the Body of Christ.

So, what are some practical steps we could take toward richer, more frequent celebrations?

1. Repent of our indifference to the sacrament as central to ecclesial and evangelical life. In commenting on the evangelical revival that surrounded the Wesleys and the Methodist preachers, J. Ernest Rattenbury asserts that Holy Communion was the central devotion of the revival. He writes, "Fervid Evangelists as they were, they knew where to seek the power of their Evangelism."⁵ As examination of our General Rules makes clear, the Lord's Supper is an ordinary and regular means of grace along with public worship, reading and expounding of the Word, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, fasting, and abstinence.⁶ Rather than a forswearing of our missional mandate to make disciples, robust recovery of richer, more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper forms the Body of Christ in encounter with the triune God (*ecclesia*) and for embodying the hope and saving grace available in Christ (*euangelion*).

2. Reclaim presiding at the Eucharist as a primary role and responsibility for pastors. At ordination, elders are charged to "take authority as an elder in the

church to preach the word *and* to administer the Holy Sacraments."⁷ There is no elevation of one role over the other. This is clearly reflected in the teaching of *THM*:

The complete pattern of Christian worship for the Lord's Day is Word and Table—the gospel is proclaimed in both Word and sacrament. Word and Table are not in competition; rather they complement each other. . . . Their separation diminishes the fullness of life in Spirit offered to us through faith in Jesus Christ.⁸

I responded to one pastor who asked if it was true that the Holy Communion committee was recommending weekly communion, "If you preach Christ every Sunday, why would you not invite the people to feast with him every week?!"

3. Study and conference with colleagues to the end that we together find the heart beat of the sacramental life and its enactment in worship. *THM* was adopted by General Conference as a teaching resource. The document is not intended to be a juridical anvil on which to hammer clergy and laity into conformity. Rather it serves as an outline around which United Methodists can revise and deepen our understandings and improve our practice. Imagine the Order of Elders, the Order of Deacons, and associations of licensed local pastors engaging in dialogue around *THM*. What if bishops, district superintendents, and other church authorities engaged pastors in such study and held them accountable "for their sacramental theology, practice and teaching."⁹ What astonishing richness might come from it?

4. Teach sacramental theology and practice in the congregation. A crucial part of pastoral ministry is ordering the life of the congregation around the means of grace, including teaching. This ordering must be both formal and informal. Sometimes it will mean teaching a class using *THM* or some similar resource.¹⁰ More often it will mean exploiting any reference to food, meals, water, bread, wine, and tables as they occur in the Scripture readings used in worship and in stories gleaned from daily life.¹¹ Make the connections memorable and playful. Sermons should point to and interpret the Table just as the Table should enact and interpret the Word read and preached.

5. Plan and preside as if Holy Communion matters. Last fall I worshiped in a large midwestern church the Sunday after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. The pastor's gestures and presence to the people in the sermon were animated and served to embody his message. It was as if he were dancing with the assembly. Then, when he moved to preside at the Table, the dance stopped. He made no use of his hands or body except to gesture toward the elements. He disappeared in comparison to his manner in the sermon. I wanted to ask, "Shouldn't presiding at the Table be as good as the preaching in the pulpit?"

Here is what I meant earlier about the conundrum. We preach every week and so we are more free, animated, and present. Wouldn't it be liberating for our people if we moved beyond self-consciousness awkwardness to be present and graceful in our leading at the Table? Might more frequent celebration open the door to richer enactment of the Eucharist? *THM* asserts:

Pastors need to be trained and formed (in seminary, course of study, licensing school, and continuing education) in the theology, spirituality, history, and tradition of the sacraments *and in how to most effectively utilize proclamation, ritual, gestures, postures, and material signs in order to convey their full meaning.*¹²

6. Signal that you are changing lanes. This courtesy on the road is essential to pastoral leadership as well. As we grow in our understandings and ordering of the life of the congregation around Word and Table, consultation, teaching, and shared decision making ensure that pastor and people change together. High-handed and unilateral changes undermine moving to richer, more frequent celebration and contradict our prayer to be one with Christ and one with each other.

7. Recognize the spiritual hunger and thirst of those who come to worship. People are hungry to experience God, and Holy Communion is a central means to satisfy this hunger. It is a multisensory, multifaceted event that embraces all who yearn for honesty, forgiveness, inclusion, transformation, nourishment, and realization of God's abundance in place of their experience of scarcity. Contrary to the perception that the Lord's Supper is a pinched, penitential, and heavy ritual, services of Word and Table are feasts where there is enough to feed the whole world. Richer celebrations enact that abundance.

8. Find ways to engage and affirm the assembly as the celebrant of Holy Communion. One of the bewitching and misdirected questions related to presiding is who gets to stand at the table as if it were a place of singular privilege. Indeed, it is humbling to preside and a privilege, but not something to be coveted if we recognize "the whole assembly actively celebrates Holy Communion."¹³ All in the congregation are baptized into "Christ's royal priesthood." How might deepened understanding of being a priestly people, enlivened posture and body language, greater proximity to the action, increased participation in the Great Thanksgiving,¹⁴ and singing integral to the flow of the service enhance the sense of being active celebrants?

9. End unintended excommunication by employing members in extending the Table. Involuntarily absent church members are excommunicated unless they, too, share the Table. When laity and clergy bring Word, bread, and cup to them they, too, share the meal with the church, and the Body of Christ is more fully discerned (1 Cor. 11:29). This extension of the Table becomes another way for the assembly to enact their priestly ministry, especially when the persons who will be visited are named and lifted in prayer. THM clearly endorses this ministry and points to disciplinary provisions for it.¹⁵

10. Confront the issue of real or imagined additional time that it takes for Word and Table. This may be one of the stickiest practical issues we face. Internal clocks, church schedules (particularly in large churches and in circuit churches), and cultural expectations, particularly in

"white" congregations present formidable challenges to more frequent celebration. If the sensibilities and practicalities of time won't or can't bend, then find ways to adjust time at other points in the service. Do sermons have to be twenty minutes long? If we must have "children's moment" (do we?), could these times be integrated with one of the readings of Scripture or some other part of the liturgy? Could announcements or the sharing of prayer concerns be tightened? Do services need to be so "wordy," eating up minutes and withering our spirits? Could times of silence combined with judicious use of visuals and digital media enable people to make connections and internalize a sense of God's presence more directly than reliance upon verbalization? "Do this" may call for *not doing* peripheral things.

Your pastoral leadership is crucial to United Methodists experiencing richer, more frequent celebrations of the Eucharist and their being nourished for living the good news. □

1. Gayle C. Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion [THM]* (Discipleship Resources, 2005), 7. This is the study edition of the paper adopted by the 2004 General Conference. The text without commentary and teaching aids is also available on line at <http://www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery/default.html>.

2. THM, 7.

3. THM, 7-8. Emphasis added.

4. THM, 23.

5. J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (Cleveland: OSL Publications, 1990), 4.

6. 2004 *The Book of Discipline* (The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶103, 74.

7. *Services for the Ordering of Ministry in The United Methodist Church* (The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004.), 27. Available online at <http://www.gbod.org/worship/2004 RevisedOrdinal.doc>.

8. THM, 23.

9. THM, 7-8.

10. See Mark Stamm's *Sacraments & Discipleship*, E. Byron Anderson's *The Meaning of Holy Communion for United Methodists*, Hoyt Hickman's *Worshipping with United Methodists*, and Gayle C. Felton's *By Water and the Spirit*.

11. See *Creative Preaching on the Sacraments* by Lester Ruth and Craig A. Satterlee (Discipleship Resources, 2001) for an excellent and practical approach to using biblical, cultural, and natural images in preaching the sacraments.

12. THM, 25. Emphasis added. Three highly recommended books germane to presiding: William Willimon's *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Abingdon, 1979), Barbara Day Miller's *The New Pastor's Guide to Leading Worship* (Abingdon, 2006), and Robert Hovda's *Strong, Loving and Wise* (Liturgical Press, 1976).

13. THM, 35.

14. THM, see pp. 35-37 for some specific possibilities.

15. THM, 37-38. For excellent and additional guidance for extending the table, see Appendix I in Lawrence Stookey's *Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church* (Abingdon, 1993).

Daniel Benedict served as director of Worship Resources at the General Board of Discipleship from 1993 to 2005 and was a member of the Holy Communion Study Committee. He is a retired elder in the California Pacific Annual Conference and continues to teach, travel, and write in areas of worship and liturgy.

