



# *Freedom, Order, and Connection*

## A Call for Recovery

Karen B. Westerfield Tucker

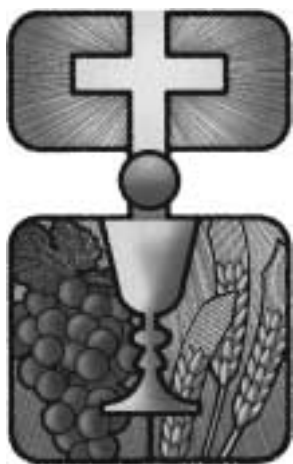
Many pastors and church secretaries have had the experience of typing the words “United Methodist” and finding that what is actually on the page or screen is “Untied Methodist.” The slip in reversing the two letters is a common one and may, in truth, say more than we want to admit about the state of our “connection.” Such is certainly the case regarding the practices of worship across our churches—not only the shape and content of the service of the word or preaching service, but also the service of Word and Table and even the rite of baptism. By perhaps overemphasizing freedom of expression, local liberty, and diversity, we have, in effect, become more congregational than connectional in our worship. What takes place for Holy Communion in one United Methodist congregation may be vastly different from the practice in another United Methodist congregation across town. And both of these services may bear little or no resemblance to what is found in *The United Methodist Hymnal* or *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. What does it mean to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as United Methodists?

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Variation in Communion practices was also known within our predecessor denominations. For example, at the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1824, it was observed that “in the administration of the ordinances some use the form in the Discipline, some mutilate it, and others wholly neglect it.”<sup>1</sup> In response, legislation was approved for the 1824 Discipline requiring that “in administering the ordinances” the “form of discipline invariably be used.” This ruling spelled out the content of the denomination’s twenty-second Article of Religion “Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches”: “Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the Church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant to the word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly” (this has been handed down to us and by ¶17 of our Constitution remains one of our doctrinal standards today). Yet a scant two years after the provision’s initial approval, Methodist Episcopal leader Freeborn Garrettson lamented in 1826 that he was astonished to see persons laying aside the official texts and

even administering the Lord's Supper extemporaneously. Garrettson insisted that "to be a lovely people, a prosperous people, a united people . . . we must be a holy, inoffensive people, following all the usages of the church."<sup>22</sup> The instruction to use the approved rites for the sacraments remained in the Methodist Episcopal Discipline throughout the nineteenth century. The Episcopal Address in the Discipline of 1900 accentuated the need to use the appointed liturgies, echoing Garrettson's sentiment that a common liturgical practice would serve as a "token and bond of unity throughout our widespread communion."<sup>23</sup>

Garrettson's words in 1826 and the comments of the bishops in 1900 signal why, despite our tradition's unyielding inclination toward liturgical innovation, there must in our day be some boundaries in Eucharistic practice: for the sake of unity—both that experienced by our members and that perceived by those outside our denomination. The assumption of unity is undoubtedly what stands behind the



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question posed at the ordination of deacons and elders and the commissioning of probationary members that asks, "Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline?" The supposition of unity may also be found in the examination question at episcopal consecrations that asks whether bishops will "guard" the liturgy "against all that is contrary to God's Word."<sup>24</sup> Yet it is unclear what "acceptance" truly means or what the bishops may find "contrary." Our varied practices certainly do not help us to exegete these words.

As a teacher of worship for almost twenty years, I am (sadly) no longer shocked by what often passes for a Communion service in our congregations. Wordless "clown" or "mime" communion led by youth with no episcopally-approved administrator in sight. "Come and go" communion—found often on Good Friday—where, after a brief Communion service by a pastor (with or without congregation present), the bread and the wine remain on the altar-table throughout the day for individuals and families to receive when convenient. An offering of only the Words of Institution or a prayer for the Holy Spirit ("epiclesis") prior to the distribution of communion. An improvised prayer that bears no relation in structure or content to the authorized prayers of Great Thanksgiving—and is addressed more to the human community than to God.

The General Conference-approved document, *This Holy Mystery*, attempts to tie up our untied practices by sounding an appeal that harkens back to the 1824 Discipline. In the section of the document entitled, "The Ritual of the Church," the subsection on "Practice" notes: "Bishops, pastors, and congregations are expected to use the services of Word and Table in the official United 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." This statement reiterates one already in *The Book of Worship* (16) which places freedom and the need for order side by side and also provides an interpretation of how "acceptance" and "guard" in the ordinal may be understood. *This Holy Mystery* in this section and throughout the document calls as well for "knowledgeable use" of our authorized resources. Ordained elders and specially-appointed pastors are to use the materials in *The Book of Worship* and to understand how the Basic Pattern of Worship set forth therein—and in particular the sequencing of offertory, prayer, breaking of bread, and distribution—works theologically, liturgically, and practically.

The type of Eucharistic prayer that United Methodists have utilized unofficially and officially since 1972 is not unique. Indeed, evidence of this style of prayer may be found certainly by the fourth century, and because

of this, Christians in the twentieth century saw its adoption not only as a recovery of primitive practice but also as a means toward achieving greater Christian unity. The convergence document approved by the World Council of Churches, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982)<sup>25</sup>—that was favorably received by the United Methodist bishops in the United States<sup>26</sup>—offers in section E27 a sequence of components for celebration of the Eucharist that looks quite similar to the components in the broad United Methodist Basic Pattern and in the more narrow Eucharistic prayer. The "Principle" in the section on "The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving" in *This Holy Mystery* provides a rationale for this style of praying:

The prayer of Great Thanksgiving is addressed to God, is prayed by the whole people, and is led by the presiding minister. The prayer is shaped by our Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God. It includes an 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 of the present work of the Holy Spirit, and concluding praise to the Trinity. The prayer recognizes the fullness of God's triune nature, expresses the offering of ourselves in response, and looks toward the joy of sharing in God's eventual victory over sin and death.

Specific points from the rationale (each of which is elaborated more fully in the various sections of *This Holy Mystery*) may help us to reconnect some of our Eucharistic practice. The Great Thanksgiving is led by *one presider* who gives voice to the *gathered assembly* that at times also gives utterance to *their* prayer. The Eucharistic prayer is foremost a *prayer* that takes into account *the work of the triune God*. It is addressed to the *Father* and offers

thanksgiving for all the mercies and blessings that have been bestowed on creation and especially for the salvation offered through *Jesus Christ*. The *institution of the Supper* is narrated not as magical words but as one component of an offering of thanksgiving for God's mighty deeds. The *Holy Spirit* is invoked, who dynamically makes the presence of the triune God known in the community's midst and who moves those gathered to offer themselves in praise and in witness. At the same time the assembly remembers all that God has done, it also anticipates what God will do until that time when those from many tribes and nations feast at the Lamb's table.

By following the structure and general content of the prayers present in *The Book of Worship*, even when those specific prayers are not used, and by giving more attention to the role of the single communion celebrant in the company of the gathered assembly, United Methodists have the opportunity to be connected in a fashion not currently evident by our range of practices around Holy Communion.<sup>7</sup> Pastors and communities can speak to God from their own local and cultural contexts—particularly in the “Word” section of “Word and Table,” as, for example, in the prayers of intercession and the selection of music—while offering a Eucharistic prayer in a shape that is shared across the denomination, to say nothing of the wider ecumenical church. Freedom and liturgical form must coexist in order to bear witness to the United Methodism that we claim. □

1. *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1796-1836* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 298.

2. Freeborn Garretson, *Substance of the Semi-Centennial Sermon, Before the New-York Annual Conference, at Its Session, May, 1826* (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1827), 26.

3. “Episcopal Address,” *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1900* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1900), 5.

4. The language of “accepting” and “guarding” is found both in the 1992 *Book of Worship* and in the Ordinal approved by the General Conference in 2004.

5. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982); available online at: <http://www.wccoe.org/wcc/what/faith/bem1.html>.

6. See *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, ed. Max Thurian, vol. 2 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986) 177-99. Other bodies within United Methodism also made responses; see elsewhere in vol. 2 and also vol. 4 (1987).


7. Additional lectionary-based prayers, *Lift Up Your Heart for Years A, B and C*, that correspond to the authorized prayers of Great Thanksgiving may be obtained through the United Methodist-affiliated Order of Saint. Luke's OSL Publications (<http://www.saint-luke.org/>) or from Cokesbury.

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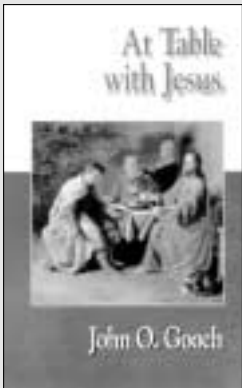


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