

## Online Communion and the COVID-19 Crisis Problems and Alternatives

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(for UMC Discipleship Ministries)

As the COVID-19 crisis has intensified, with worship services canceled and/or moved online, United Methodists have begun to grapple with disruptions in Communion schedules. We can view services online, during which we can sing, hear scriptures and sermons, and participate in prayers, but the Lord's Supper doesn't work very well, and probably not at all. We have here a sacramental dilemma. Eucharistic participation and devotion have increased over the last several generations, a dynamic that many of us have both experienced and encouraged. That dynamic is epitomized by a line in the opening paragraph of *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*--"We want more."<sup>1</sup> Given the COVID-19 crisis and our inability to gather together, what shall we do now?

In the face of this challenge, some have begun to raise questions about celebrating Holy Communion online. Should we do it? This is not a new question, by the way, having been discussed in 2013 and before, leading the Council of Bishops to declare a moratorium on the practice that spring.<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge, that moratorium remains in place, and I affirm its wisdom. Nevertheless, I present myself here neither simply as defender of the Council, nor as member of some mythical "liturgical police" force. Indeed, I am convinced of the general pastoral goodwill of those who advocate for Communion online and hope to remain in collegial relationship with you, regardless of what you do. Church trials and threats to the same don't solve much, if anything at all.

However, in my role as scholar-teacher and as fellow pastor, I urge churches and pastors not to offer Communion online and to explore better theological and spiritual alternatives. In this short article, I offer some reasons to avoid the practice and then follow that with a description of alternative possibilities. Although I have not previously written about the issue of online Communion, those familiar with my work may recognize the reframing of themes that I have engaged over the past twenty years or so.

### Toward Avoiding Online Communion

The most compelling reason to avoid online Communion resides within the very nature of the Lord's Supper itself. Here's a question that I often ask: When we hear Jesus say, "Do this for the remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24) what is the "this" in the "do this?"

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<sup>1</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Resolutions*, 2016 (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 727.

<sup>2</sup> Note the following from UM News: "Moratorium, study, urged on online communion." By Heather Hahn, October 4, 2013. <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/moratorium-study-urged-on-online-communion>

Understandably, many will focus on receiving the consecrated bread and wine/juice. But, consider that the “this” in “do this” points to something much wider than the receiving of the bread and cup. I have long argued that we should keep the whole action in mind, from gathering together through confession and reconciliation, from offering the bread and wine through Great Thanksgiving to, yes, our taking of the bread and cup, and even to the dismissal that sends us forth in mission. “Do this” involves all of that, which is one reason why St. Paul admonished the Corinthians Christians to “wait for one another” (I Corinthians 11:33). Doing the work together matters.<sup>3</sup>

Granted, we may insist that we can approximate the dynamics of a gathered community within an online service, and perhaps there is an argument to be engaged here. Still, I have difficulty moving past the image of a person at home holding up bread and juice in front of the pastor on the screen. Be that as it may, let’s think forward to the time beyond the COVID-19 crisis. If, during the crisis, we decide to create an exception to the long-standing norm that requires gathering for Holy Communion, then down the line, we may have to live with the precedent that we had set. Here, I am admittedly invoking the proverbial “Law of Unintended Consequences,” urging us to remember that the directives requiring the church to gather for its eucharistic celebrations reflect deep wisdom, and, indeed, they are as old as the church itself.

So then, we shouldn’t allow online Communion now if we’re not willing to do so after the COVID-19 crisis is over. In a sense, all of us are the unwillingly absent member of the church that I reference in my book *Extending the Table: A Guide for a Ministry of Home Communion Serving*.<sup>4</sup> As to serving our more routinely homebound members, we have extended table practices, and we can (and should) return to them when the crisis is past. But, remember the embodied character of those visits. Church members represent the embodied prayer and presence of the faith community, and they bring that to our absent members, along with the consecrated Communion elements. They should do so even if that involves significant time and effort. Before the current crisis, it has appeared to me that at least some of the arguments for online communing of the unwillingly absent were veiled appeals to the inconvenience of in-person visitation. Yes, arranging visitations can be quite inconvenient, but remember that every ordained United Methodist must answer the historic questions, one of which asks, “Will you visit from house to house?”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the parable of the sheep and the goats addresses the whole church on this matter, reminding us that the faithful are called to visit Christ in the person of the unwillingly absent prisoner or sick one (Matthew 25: 36, 43).

What about using extended table practices during the crisis? One might argue for some version of extended table with a small group of persons in a congregation gathering with their pastor for a Service of Word and Table and then carrying the consecrated bread and wine to those sheltering at home. While it would represent a significant stretching of the practice, it would

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<sup>3</sup> Mark W. Stamm, “Constant Communion in Sacramentally Underserved Places: A Solution from Below,” *Sacramental Life* (30:3, Ordinary Time 2018), 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> Stamm, *Extending the Table*, Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, 2016 (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), paragraph 330.5.d (15) and paragraph 336.15.

not, on the surface, contradict the directive in *This Holy Mystery* discouraging use of extended table permissions to serve Communion to churches without pastors.<sup>6</sup> Under the circumstances, however, the risks of such a large scale effort would be significant, both to those who would go (pastors and laypersons) and, yes, to those who would receive them. Could we do extensive visitation without violating “do no harm?”<sup>7</sup> Likely not. If the COVID-19 crisis persists for months on end, we may need to imagine ways to minister in the home to large numbers of people, and we could work on some of those. But I don’t think we’re to that point yet, and even then, I think we can do better than simply having persons hold a piece of bread and some wine or juice in front of a computer screen.

Indeed, at present we might assume that most of those who attend church regularly are, shall we say, fairly well-communed. Note that United Methodists whose churches observe a typical first Sunday of the month Eucharist have not yet missed a Communion, and wouldn’t do so until April 5. Speculation about the need for on-line communion may be a spiritual version of the panic buying that we have seen in our grocery stores, as in “Right now, I have eggs and (other necessary household items!), but what will happen to me if I don’t have them in several weeks?”

Generally speaking, at this point we do not yet have a sacramental crisis or a situation of severe sacramental deprivation. I’m not exactly sure what such deprivation would look like, but again, we’re not there yet.

### Thoughts Toward Alternatives

So then, what shall we do, and how shall we think about our current strange situation?

I’m reminded of a set of conversations that I had twenty-five years ago, during one of my first experiences in teaching a home Communion workshop to laypersons. I was discussing the limits and possibilities of various ordained and lay roles, their limits and possibilities, when a class member began pressing me, “What happens if someone asks me for Communion, and there has been no corporate service?” That person increased the intensity by asking, “What if a person in need calls me in the middle of the night and needs Communion? What should I do?” I responded that extended table is a fairly modest practice, and that it really doesn’t cover such a scenario. Further, I said that as an ordained elder in this church, it was not within my power to give such permission. Both of us seemed frustrated by the exchange.

I pondered it overnight and an insight came to me that I shared it with the group. That is, in such times of need, we should take seriously what I Corinthians 12:27 claims about us, that “(we) are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” As we engage that text, we should note the multivalent ways in which Paul uses that phrase “body of Christ” and

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<sup>6</sup> “This Holy Mystery,” *UMC Resolutions*, 2016, 764-65.

<sup>7</sup> “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies,” *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 2016 (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), para. 104, p. 78.

derivatives of “body” throughout I Corinthians chapters eleven through fifteen—in reference to the sacramental matter (I Cor. 11:24), for the church and its members (I Cor. 10:17, I Cor. 12 at numerous points), for our resurrection hope in resurrected bodies (I Cor. 15:35-41). All of the above. My response comes back to me in discussions such as the current one. It may not always be possible for us to give Holy Communion. Nevertheless, in and through our service to one another, we can always give the Body of Christ, indeed ourselves, even when we cannot give the sacramental body. I invite you to reflect on what this insight may mean for you today and in the days ahead.

Here’s another thought: While we’re all homebound, reflect on the sentiment expressed in Percy Dearmer’s hymn “Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether.” After discussing the Christ who is present whenever “two or three are met together” in his name, in the third stanza he wrote,

All our meals and all our living,  
make as sacraments of thee,  
that by caring, helping, giving,  
we may true disciples be.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
We will serve thee faithfully.<sup>8</sup>

When I sing Dearmer’s hymn, my thoughts often turn to the narrative in the second chapter of Acts. Note its claim that the first Christians “devoted themselves ... to the breaking of the bread” (Acts 2:42). I hear that text in all of its multivalent possibilities, along with the claim that “day by day ... they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” all the while taking care of each other (Acts 2:42-47). What were they doing? Were they engaged in an early version of the Lord’s Supper, perhaps some manner of fellowship meal, or perhaps one then the other? There is no answer to these questions, and in times such as these, the text interrogates us. Perhaps we’ve made too large of a distinction between the Eucharist and other meals. As Dearmer suggests, formed by the Lord’s Supper, we do well to sense Christ’s presence in “all of our meals.” More and more, I am convinced that the Risen One abides there. Right now, we should cherish every opportunity we have to share meals together, even in our own households. In like manner, those who insist that Christ wants to welcome all persons should resist the temptation to hoard.

And so we find ourselves in the midst of a eucharistic fast, but realize that this pandemic will pass. In all likelihood, we won’t be exactly the same communities on the other side. We may need to grieve, both for persons lost and for other losses, large and small, that cannot be recouped. Thus, we will have work to do, with and for one another.

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<sup>8</sup> Percy Dearmer, “Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether,” 1931, stanza 3. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1989), 632.

But, remember that Easter is coming. It's on the calendar for April 12, and we'll observe it even then, likely in somewhat muted form. But realize Easter faith is never merely a matter of the calendar, that every Sunday commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that the power of the Resurrection is at work in our midst. When the need for quarantine and social distancing come to an end, and it's appropriate for the church to celebrate together, I suggest several things:

1. That you have the most festive Eucharist that you can muster, even if it's sometime in the middle of July.
2. As Christians have always done, compensate for the fast that we have endured with a time of feasting. My biggest fans will expect a baseball reference, so here goes: Take a rain check on all of the Communion Sundays you have missed and then resolve to make them up. Who knows? If you end up celebrating Communion three, four, or five weeks in a row, you may wonder why you would ever want another Sunday without it.
3. If you are one of those churches that already has a weekly service of Holy Communion, and there are more of those than you may imagine, returning to the Table may cause you to rejoice even more deeply. But if that's the case, don't keep your joy to yourselves, but consider extending it by hosting a community meal. Invite all of your neighbors, just because that's the sort of thing that Christians do.
4. You may also want to consider expanding and strengthening your extended table ministry, with renewed commitment by asking "Who is missing?"<sup>9</sup>

Through it all, always remember that God's grace abounds.

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<sup>9</sup> Stamm, *Extending the Table*.