

The Online Communion Dilemma

BY CYNTHIA WILSON, DEREK WEBER, AND DIANA SANCHEZ-BUSHONG



In 2013, a group of United Methodist leaders demanded that our bishops call a moratorium on online Communion. They requested in-depth study of online Communion.

In 2015, Dr. Cynthia Wilson was part of one of those studies, led by **Bishop Ken Carter**. The bishop called about fifteen individuals together at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. The group was mostly made up of academicians. At the end of the two-day large- and small- group discussions, participants were charged with the task of reaching out to and then writing a paper based on those conversations, individual research, and personal thoughts about how the church should respond to the idea of online Communion. In the end, Bishop Carter gathered each person's paper and created a document that expressed the various opinions and observations. While he did not offer a definitive decision about whether the practice was theologically, biblically, or ecclesiological acceptable, he did share invaluable wisdom on the topic. The Council of Bishops also revisited the matter in 2015 in preparation for the 2016 General Conference.

Some people are tied to traditional ways of doing church. That would include the two primary rituals of the church. Are there drums or no drums? Pipe organ or Hammond? Traditional hymns, praise choruses, contemporary gospel, or Taizé? Choir or praise team? Passing the offering plate or walking to it? One-hour service, or two, or three? Which rite is right? We might argue that while this debate rages, the church is on life support. And in this current Coronavirus crisis, the debate has risen again with a new urgency.

The Worship Team at Discipleship Ministries has been contemplating the issue of online Communion in response to numerous requests for guidance from pastors and leaders in churches that are unable to meet together for what might become an extended period of time. There doesn't seem to be much clarity on the matter. We are in an unprecedented time, and the normal rules might not apply.

As you can see, The United Methodist church has been debating online Communion for years. Many have said it shouldn't happen because the embodiment of the sacrament and physical presence of the community of faith are essential elements. Others disagree and want the sacrament to be as open and accessible as possible. Remembering that Wesley preached that Communion is a saving sacrament and not simply a sustaining one, they argue that it should be offered in as many places and forms as possible.

We can't presume to give an answer for all time. But it seems that right now, since the body is prevented from meeting together, we need some sort of resolution. We at Discipleship Ministries are suggesting that we begin with [the Love Feast](#).

The Love Feast has historical precedence in the early church and was recaptured by the Wesleys from the Moravians and used frequently in the movement. The Love Feast often substituted for the sacrament where there were no clergy present as a way of experiencing the grace of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of community by sharing together. The Love Feast could easily be done virtually, as folks in their homes can find the elements (usually water and some bread, or crackers or wafers of some sort) and share them with those in the household at the same time as those in the wider online community. (See suggested Worship Order below.)

Some, however, will want to push further and actually offer the sacrament to their communities. This is particularly important as we begin to suspect we might still be prevented from gathering on Easter. The only response in such a difficult situation is, "Let's be thoughtful about what we are doing." If it is simply a way of fulfilling some obligation, then is it worth the

struggle? If there is a real desire to connect the community through the living presence of Christ in this ancient ritual, then what might be the boundaries we establish?

One consideration: Should this be a live event only? Dr. Weber writes, “The church I attend here in Nashville live-streams its services regularly. Last week, however, it live-streamed only the early service and then recorded it for later use. I tuned in at 11, my usual time for worship. Had it been a Communion Sunday, what would I have done in that moment?” Is there a substantial difference between a live, spoken Great Thanksgiving and a recorded one? Is the consecration only “valid” the first time it is said and heard, or every time the recording is played?

This may seem like splitting hairs to you, because it certainly does to us! But we believe that in having the conversation as widely as possible before engaging in the sacrament, you enhance the experience of it when it does happen. A part of the sacrament has always been the response, whether that is movement to receive or prayers spoken after, or the act of serving one another; there is some sort of response built into the ritual. How can we create space for response online? And does it need to be immediate, or can it come later? Do Facebook comments, texting, and emails to the church count as part of the response?

Some might have clicked on this article hoping for something simple, a yes or no with options suggested. So, how about this: plan for the Love Feast for now. Then when the church can gather again, congregants might be hungrier for the grace of the sacrament. We are fasting from physical presence in this quarantine; maybe we could fast from that ritual as well. Perhaps we can surrender our observance for whatever purpose God might make of it in our lives and in the life of the community.

Yet, Easter without the sacrament seems unthinkable. If we were serving a local church and were faced with an Easter without gathering together, we might be inclined to stretch the point. In which case, we would suggest spending whatever time is available discussing some of the issues raised above with the congregation through whatever means fit your congregation. And then together decide how to celebrate.

Christ is the Host of the table, not us, not you, not the church. Christ can be present in ways we haven't even imagined yet.

We admit that there are considerations that we haven't raised in this brief article, and there may be further conversations that need to take place. Feel free to contact us at Discipleship Ministries directly if you want to engage, or check out the conversations on the Facebook

groups, UMC Worship Planning, UMC Music, Preaching in the UMC; or have conversations in your circle of colleagues. Our hearts are with you as you seek to serve God's people in an unusual situation. So, take thou authority.

Dr. Cynthia Wilson, Worship Resources Executive and Director of Liturgical Resources for Discipleship Ministries. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, and Dr. Diana Sanchez-Bushong, Director of Music Ministries.

ADDENDUM #1

Dr. Mark Stamm of Perkins School of Theology in Dallas Texas, also weighed in on the subject and provides a different view than the one presented above. Please see his paper on "[Online Communion and the Covid-19 Crisis.](#)"

ADDENDUM #2

As we were preparing this document, Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church invited the clergy of that district to join in an online Communion experience. Here is the statement the bishop provided:

Dear Clergy of the Great Plains Conference,

*Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. is inviting you to a special livestream event at 7 p.m. Monday, March 23. This livestream will feature a **time of online Communion**, so the bishop will lead this holy sacrament and will provide instruction on how you can do the same with your congregations, despite being separated physically because of precautions associated with COVID-19, also known as the Coronavirus.*

He asks that you have the following with you at 7 p.m. Monday:

- *Bread*
- *Some form of grape juice*

*Some of you may be aware that the 2004 General Conference adopted *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*. The document declared online Communion incompatible with our common understanding of the communal and incarnational nature of Holy Communion. The basis for the rejection of online Communion is the absence of the gathered community and the absence of the divine presence of Christ among a gathered community. The document argues that "self-service," "drive-by," "drop-in," and "at will"*

Communion contradict the communal nature of the sacrament and our oneness with Christ and one another.

However, Bishop Saenz has said: “Holy Communion is a vital means of God’s grace that cannot be prohibited to those that cannot gather for corporate worship much less come to the Table because local, state, and national leaders have imposed — for valid public health safety reasons — restrictions and bans on group gatherings of more than 10 to 50 people. Our present state of affairs at this time overrides the arguments against online Communion. I believe online Communion to be an indispensable means of grace for our faith communities and, as bishop, I fully support its practice at this time.”

After taking part in the sacrament together, the bishop will answer some of your questions via an email address that will be displayed on your screen during the livestream.

ADDENDUM #3

In a personal conversation with Dr. Heather Murray Elkins, Dr. Cynthia Wilson gleaned some further insights. Here is Dr. Wilson’s report of that conversation:

ONLINE COMMUNION:

Heather Murray Elkins

The Love Feast celebrated in early antiquity by first-century Christians is the earliest framing of Christians at Table. Those who possessed the gift of prayer offered the blessing over the meal. The legacy of prayer is not taken from an official book of worship. It is important to note here that while they broke bread, they offered testimonies about the goodness of Christ, and sang songs of praise and thanksgiving.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles (Acts 2: 42-43 NIV)

But we have yet another meal to consider. It is the Maundy Thursday meal, which harkens back to the Last Supper as well as to the Matthew 27:24 text where Pilate calls for a basin and water and washes his hands of the plot to kill Jesus!

In some contexts, in addition to preparation for Communion, the Maundy Thursday meal includes the placement of three basins and a clear pitcher of water in the back of the room. At the first basin, water is poured over the hands of participants and the following words are pronounced: “Remember, you cannot wash away your sins.”

At the second basin, the pitcher contains water with oil. It too is poured over participants’ hands with the words, “Remember, you are anointed.”

The third basin is referred to as the *Servant’s Basin*. The pitcher holds cold water and is usually served by a confirmand. As she/he pours the water over hands, the confirmand offers, “Remember, you are baptized.”

At the end of this ritual, a clergy person is waiting with an old, used, antique (but clean) dish towel and dries the hands of participants with this pronouncement: “Do this in the memory of the one who did this for you.”

Dr. Murray Elkins posits, “We’ve been here before.” The early Methodist missing priest, Wesley not being welcome at the Communion Table. There are so many other ways to celebrate at Table during this time of physical separation. Why can’t members of congregations with prior notice, knock on doors, deliver a hymnal in a protective covering, written prayers, a carefully wrapped fresh baked loaf of bread, sing a song (much like Christmas Caroling), offer a blessing, and depart.

Most of today’s value formations are shaped in front of a computer. The screen has become our stained glass. Songs come to us through myriad voices on the internet, so we do not have to sing alone. So, to those who would guard the Table, we say, “But we will still break bread.”

Verses marked NIV are from **New International Version** (NIV) Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by **Biblica, Inc.**® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

ADDENDUM #4

Marcia McFee has posted a free alternate liturgy for those who want to do something online around the sharing of a meal. It’s called “Comfort Food” and includes a free downloadable liturgy and an opportunity to sign up for a webinar on Tuesday, March 24. Check her out on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/marcia.mcfee>

Additional resources from the Order of Saint Luke:

[DOWNLOAD A Liturgy for When We Cannot Meet \(PDF\)](#)

We are always in conversation with practitioners and academics in the field and will most likely be updating this article as we get more information. So stay tuned. The discussion continues!

CAW, DCW, DS-B

[Communion Service](#)

[Online Worship](#)

[COVID-19](#)

[Crisis](#)

[Health](#)

Contact Us for Help

View staff by program area to ask for additional assistance.



[FIND STAFF](#)

Related

MARCH 31, 2020

Episcopal Voices during the COVID-19 Crisis

The Shelter-in-Place ruling has brought forth both anxiety and innovation. The church was not prepared to suspend public worship for an extended . . .

MARCH 25, 2020

The Love Feast

The United Methodist church has been debating online Communion for years. Many have said it shouldn't happen because the embodiment of the sacram. . .

ОCTOBER 17, 2017

Ариун Зоогийн Утга Учир

This booklet is designed to provide a brief introduction to the meanings and practices of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church in the Mo. . .