

Grace Upon Grace: United Methodism, Holy Communion & Social Isolation

Pastors and those who lead our communities must be commended for the ways in which they are maintaining community during this difficult time. Many of our pastors are finding ways to pray, preach, teach, and counsel the faithful as we, together yet physically separate face this pandemic. Others have been trying to find ways to extend the sacraments of the church to their communities and I would also commend their intentions. However, the idea of virtual or online communion is sacramentally impossible from a United Methodist perspective.

According to United Methodist doctrine and liturgy, we believe that the Real Presence of Christ is available by means of bread and wine within the gathered community, administered by ordained or licensed clergy. Every aspect of that sentence is necessary in order to have communion. Take a look at our liturgy, as found in Word and Table I. United Methodists have what is called a double-epiclesis (page 10 of UMH). The epiclesis reads:

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.

This double-epiclesis requires both the historic physical elements (bread and wine/grape juice) as Christ instituted them but also the physical gathering of the people of God. The physicality or tangible nature of our faith, that God called a tangible people to be his own, came in the person of Jesus Christ, died, and was resurrected physically, is extended to the sacraments, which themselves must also be physical and within a gathered physical community.

Some have argued that families can gather to celebrate communion on their own. This is only possible if a member of that family has been ordained or licensed by the conference to do so. It's not that clergy are better than laity, that's not true, it's that clergy – and specifically elders – have been ordained to have, as the Discipline states, “authority” and “responsibility” for the sacraments of the church. This authority comes from the bishop and the conference and within the ordering of the church, elders then have a responsibility to administer the sacraments “rightly” and “duly” as our Articles of Religion state.

The authority given to celebrate the sacraments, and in particular communion, does not mean that clergy are somehow able to celebrate communion without the gathering of others, and in particular the laity. Nor, in the case of “virtual” communion, does this mean that clergy voices are somehow able to transcend space and time to consecrate elements wherever their voice is heard. If that were so, it would be a very strange form of clericalism. No, the clergy need the people of God gathered just as much as they need bread and wine to rightly and duly administer the sacrament. Communion is more than just words spoken, it is a ritual act in which all the gathered are invited to participate fully, both visually, audibly, tangibly, together.

We encourage the use of one loaf because we partake of the one body. Likewise, we as Methodists encourage the use of one cup because the symbol is not just a symbol but a participation in that to which it points; in this case the blood of Christ. The responsibility of the clergy in this case extends to the proper use of the consecrated elements within the community gathered. If “virtual” communion was possible, the clergy would be incapable of having responsibility over the elements. We care so deeply about this responsibility because we believe communion to be a means by which Christ meets us.

Some have argued that virtual or online community is equivalent to the gathered community, but such arguments are theologically shallow. We all know from experience that virtual community cannot replace physical community. To hug your children, your spouse, your loved ones, rather than receive a text, is exponentially greater. So it was with the life of Jesus, who as God incarnate (tangible) placed such emphasis in his ministry on touch, on shared meals, and on gathered community. So it is with the church gathered. In this time when we cannot gather physically, we are given the opportunity to see just how vital community is to us as Christians.

As to Wesley himself, he has been used as a justification for innovation. But a thorough knowledge of his life and work shows that he was an amazingly deep thinker grounded in the tradition of the Church. He made that tradition alive in new ways without undermining it. He would never have argued for a practice that rejects the very nature of the sacrament itself. He would be using this time to preach and teach, and to organize the people of God in order to care for one another. I specifically commend those local churches that have divided their membership into small groups so that everyone is checked on, even without physical contact. Such an approach is authentically Wesleyan.

As to Holy Communion, now is the time to wait. That we are yearning for Communion is a sign that we have been shaped by the gospel and we will celebrate it with joy when we finally meet together again. For now, though, we have the opportunity to participate in the other means of grace. See Wesley’s sermon, “The Means of Grace,” to explore this concept. We live in a grace-drenched world where God is available to us in prayer, in meditating on the scriptures, in fasting, and in helping others (among so many other ways!). Now is the time to explore the means of grace and to teach our people about this aspect of our Methodist heritage.

Dr. Ryan N. Danker
Associate Professor of Church History and Methodist Studies
Wesley Theological Seminary
Washington, DC