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# **This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion**

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## **PART ONE: THERE IS MORE TO THE MYSTERY**

The story is told of a little girl whose parents had taken her forward to receive Holy Communion. Disappointed with the small piece of bread she was given to dip in the cup, the child cried loudly, “I want more! I want more!” While embarrassing to her parents and amusing to the pastor and congregation, this little girl’s cry accurately expresses the feelings of many contemporary United Methodist people. We want more! We want more than we are receiving from the sacrament of Holy Communion as it is practiced in our churches.

According to the results of a survey conducted by the General Board of Discipleship prior to the 2000 General Conference, there is a strong sense of the importance of Holy Communion in the life of individual Christians and of the church. Unfortunately, there is at least an equally strong sense of the absence of any meaningful understanding of Eucharistic theology and practice. United Methodists recognize that grace and spiritual power are available to them in the sacrament, but too often they do not feel enabled to receive these gifts and apply them in their lives. Many laypeople complain of sloppy practice, questionable theology, and lack of teaching and guidance. 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.

These results are also exciting and challenging! They reveal a deep hunger for the riches of divine grace made available to us through Holy Communion, for real communion with Jesus Christ and with Christian people. They show that United Methodists want our faith to be enlivened and made more relevant to our daily lives. How can our church best respond to the wonderful hunger of its people for “this holy mystery” (“A Service of Word and Table I,” *BOW*; page 39)?

United Methodists share with many other Christians an increased interest in the study and celebration of the sacraments. For the last several decades we have been actively seeking to recover and revitalize appreciation of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Our current services of the Baptismal Covenant and Word and Table are the fruit of a long process of development that began in the 1960’s and culminated in their adoption by the 1984 General Conference and publication in *The United Methodist Hymnal* approved in 1988. The change in location of these sacramental rituals from the back to the front of the *Hymnal* is an intentional expression of their significance in the life of the community of faith. In 1996 the General Conference approved *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* as an official interpretive and teaching document for

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the church. *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* is submitted to the 2004 General Conference with the same purpose. Both of these documents reflect United Methodism's efforts to reclaim its sacramental heritage and to be in accord with ecumenical movements in sacramental theology and practice.

*This Holy Mystery* is characterized by the effort to avoid rigidity on the one hand and indifference on the other. Neither extreme is true to our heritage nor faithful to the Spirit who leads the church forward in the work of making disciples living toward the new creation. The document is made up of two main parts. The expository introduction titled "Part One: There Is More to the Mystery" describes the document's development and provides grounding in historical tradition and sacramental theology. "Part Two: Christ Is Here: Experiencing the Mystery" is organized by principles. Under each principle, "Background" provides an explanation for the principle, while "Practice" provides guidelines for applying the principle. The principles make assertions that are truthful and doctrinally clear. They honor the historic and ecumenical center of the Christian church's theology and practice. The committee has endeavored to explain in the "Background" sections how the principles are rooted in the theology and practice of Christians past and present, particularly United Methodist Christians. In the "Practice" sections we have applied the principles to contemporary sacramental practices of the church in the various contexts of United Methodism.

The church is always universal and particular, catholic and local, united and diverse. United Methodists vary geographically, racially, and culturally. *This Holy Mystery* invites United Methodists to share common understandings while allowing for appropriate, faithful applications. Some United Methodist practices differ from those of other Christian traditions. Being truthful about these differences recognizes our ties and responsibility to the wider church while claiming God's work in leading us to affirm distinctive understandings and practices. Both within our own United Methodist community and in fellowship with other traditions, we reject cavalier or arrogant attitudes. We seek to strengthen the bond of unity by "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) as, with humility and openness, we acknowledge our principles, explain our backgrounds, and affirm our practices.

## **Names of the Sacrament**

Several terms naming the sacrament are used in past and present Christianity. In *This Holy Mystery* some are used more than others, but all are largely synonymous. *The Lord's Supper* reminds us that Jesus Christ is the host and that we participate at Christ's invitation. This title suggests the eating of a meal, sometimes called the Holy Meal, and makes us think of the meals that Jesus ate with various people both before his death and after his resurrection. The term *the Last Supper* is not appropriately used for the sacrament, but it does encourage us to remember the supper that Jesus ate with his disciples on the night when he was

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arrested. This emphasis is especially meaningful around Maundy Thursday. The early church appears to have referred to their celebrations as breaking bread (Acts 2:42).

The term *Holy Communion* invites us to focus on the self-giving of the Holy God, which makes the sacrament an occasion of grace, and on the holiness of our communion with God and one another. *Eucharist*, from the Greek word for thanksgiving, reminds us that the sacrament is thanksgiving to God for the gifts of creation and salvation. The term *Mass*, used by the Roman Catholic Church, derives from the Latin word *missio*, literally “sending forth,” and indicates that this celebration brings the worship service to a close by sending forth the congregation with God’s blessing to live as God’s people in the world. *The Divine Liturgy* is a name used mostly by churches in the tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. All of these names refer to the same practice: the eating and drinking of consecrated bread and wine in the worshiping community.

## **Background**

As early as the Emmaus experience on the day of Resurrection, recorded in Luke 24:13-35, Christians recognized the presence of Jesus Christ in the breaking of bread. The traditional Jewish practice of taking bread, blessing and thanking God, and breaking and sharing the bread took on new meaning for them. When followers of Christ gathered in Jesus’ name, the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup was a means of remembering his life, death, and resurrection and of encountering the living Christ. They experienced afresh the presence of their risen Lord and received sustenance for their lives as disciples. As the church organized itself, this custom of Eucharist became the characteristic ritual of the community and the central act of its worship.

Over the centuries, various understandings and practices of Holy Communion have developed. Roman Catholicism teaches that the substance of bread and wine are changed (although not visibly) into the actual body and blood of Christ (sometimes called transubstantiation). Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century rejected this teaching but had diverse ideas among themselves. Lutherans maintain that Christ’s body and blood are truly present in and with the elements of bread and wine in the celebration (sometimes erroneously called corporeal presence or consubstantiation). Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, taught that the Lord’s Supper is a memorial or reminder of Christ’s sacrifice, an affirmation of faith, and a sign of Christian fellowship. Although his name may be unfamiliar, Zwingli’s views are widely shared today, especially within evangelical churches. Denominations in the Reformed tradition, following John Calvin, maintain that although Christ’s body is in heaven, when Holy Communion is received with true faith, the power of the Holy Spirit nourishes those who partake. The Church of England affirmed a somewhat similar view in its Catechism and Articles of Religion. These understandings (stated here very simplistically) suggest the range of ideas that were available to John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists.

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## **United Methodist Heritage**

### **Early Methodism**

The Methodist movement in eighteenth-century England was an evangelical movement that included a revival of emphasis on the sacraments. The Wesleys recognized the power of God available in the Lord's Supper and urged their followers to draw on that power by frequent participation. The grace available in and through the sacrament was active in conviction, repentance and conversion, forgiveness, and sanctification. John Wesley described the Lord's Supper as "the grand channel whereby the grace of his Spirit was conveyed to the souls of all the children of God" ("Sermon on the Mount—Discourse Six," III.11). During the years in which Methodism was beginning and growing, Wesley himself communed an average of four to five times a week. His sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion" emphasizes the role of the sacrament in the lives of Christians in ways that are keenly meaningful today. The Wesley brothers wrote and published a collection of 166 *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, which was used for meditation as well as for singing. The Wesleys understood and taught the multifaceted nature of the Lord's Supper. They wrote about love, grace, sacrifice, forgiveness, the presence of Christ, mystery, healing, nourishment, holiness, and pledge of heaven. They knew that Holy Communion is a powerful means through which divine grace is given to God's people. Our sacramental understandings and practices today are grounded in this heritage.

### **Evangelical and United Brethren Roots**

The movements that developed into the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Church began in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century in America. From the beginning, relationships between these groups and the Methodists were close and cordial. The beliefs and practices of the three churches were similar. Francis Asbury and Philip William Otterbein were close friends, and Otterbein participated in Asbury's consecration as a Methodist Episcopal bishop. Conversations about possible union began at least as early as 1809 and continued intermittently until the churches finally merged in 1968 to form The United Methodist Church.

Unfortunately, Otterbein and Martin Boehm—founders of the United Brethren—left little written material. The same is true of Evangelical founder Jacob Albright. Therefore, we can make comparatively few references to their theology and practice of Holy Communion. The *Journal of Christian Newcomer* (d. 1830), third United Brethren bishop, records so many occasions of administering and participating in the sacrament that its significance in the life of the church is apparent.

### **American Methodism**

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The early American Methodists, who began arriving in the 1760's, were at first able to receive the sacraments from Anglican churches of which they were considered a part. But the situation soon changed, and Methodists began to reject the English church. As rising tensions between the colonies and England led to the Revolutionary War, most Anglican priests left the country. By the mid 1770's, most Methodists had no access to the sacraments. The missionary preachers sent by John Wesley were laymen, as were the Americans who became preachers. They had no authority to baptize or to offer Holy Communion. Methodists were longing for the sacraments, and it was this need that motivated Wesley to take actions to provide ordained elders for America. In 1784 the Methodist Episcopal Church was created and some preachers were ordained. Still, the number of elders was too small to offer the sacraments regularly to the rapidly increasing number of Methodists. During the decades of the circuit riders, most Methodists were able to receive the Lord's Supper quarterly, at best, when the ordained elder came to their community. The camp meetings of the period were also sacramental occasions where large numbers of people communed. By the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, many Methodist churches were served by ordained elders, but the habit of quarterly Holy Communion remained strong.

American Methodists considered Holy Communion a sacred and solemn event. The tone of the ritual was deeply penitential, calling upon people to repent and having less emphasis on celebration of God's grace. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the rich Wesleyan understandings of Eucharist were largely lost, and the sacrament became understood only as a memorial of the death of Christ. In many congregations attendance on Communion Sunday was low. Revitalization of the Lord's Supper in Methodism, and in the Evangelical and United Brethren churches, started in the mid-twentieth century when the churches began to reclaim their sacramental heritage and create new rituals to express it.

As Methodism spread to other parts of the world, ritual and practice established in America were followed. Over the years, however, there have been certain influences from surrounding Christian traditions. These are to some extent reflected in Holy Communion practice in the central conferences (those beyond the geographic area of the United States).

### **Grace and the Means of Grace**

Today Holy Communion must be viewed within the larger context of United Methodist theology. In accord with biblical and Christian teaching, we believe that we are sinners, constantly in need of divine grace. We believe that God is gracious and loving, always making available the grace we need. Grace is God's love toward us, God's free and undeserved gift. Several words describe how grace works in our lives. Prevenient grace is that which "comes before" anything we can do to help ourselves. Although we are all bound by our sinful nature, grace gives us enough freedom of will to be able to respond to God. In truth, all grace is prevenient—we cannot move toward God unless God has first moved toward us. God seeks us out, pursues us, calls us to come into the loving relationship that we

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were created to enjoy. Convicting grace makes us conscious of our sinfulness and urges us to repentance. Justifying grace forgives and puts us into right relationship with God. Sanctifying grace enables us to grow in holiness of life. Perfecting grace molds us into the image of Christ. The grace of God is made available to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and works in our lives through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

While divine grace reaches us any time and in any way that God chooses, God has designated certain means or channels through which grace is most surely and immediately available. John Wesley expressed it this way: “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men [and women], preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace” (“The Means of Grace,” II.1). In the General Rules, Wesley listed these means of grace as, “The public worship of God. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded. The Supper of the Lord. Family and private prayer. Searching the Scriptures. Fasting or abstinence” (*BOD*, ¶ 103; page 74). Elsewhere Wesley added Christian conferencing, by which he meant edifying conversation and meeting together in groups for nurture and accountability. These means are not to be understood as ways of earning salvation, for that is an unmerited gift. They are, rather, ways to receive, live in, and grow in divine grace. The Wesleyan tradition has continued to emphasize the practice of these means of grace throughout our salvation process.

## **The Theology of Sacraments**

The Greek word used in the early church for sacrament is *mysterion*, usually translated mystery. It indicates that through sacraments, God discloses things that are beyond human capacity to know through reason alone. In Latin the word used is *sacramentum*, which means a vow or promise. The sacraments were instituted by Christ and given to the church. Jesus Christ is himself the ultimate manifestation of a sacrament. In the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, God’s nature and purpose were revealed and active through a human body. The Christian church is also sacramental. It was instituted to continue the work of Christ in redeeming the world. The church is Christ’s body—the visible, material instrument through which Christ continues to be made known and the divine plan is fulfilled. Holy Baptism and Holy Communion have been chosen and designated by God as special means through which divine grace comes to us. Holy Baptism is the sacrament that initiates us into the body of Christ “through water and the Spirit” (“The Baptismal Covenant I,” *UMH*; page 37). In baptism we receive our identity and mission as Christians. Holy Communion is the sacrament that sustains and nourishes us in our journey of salvation. In a sacrament, God uses tangible, material things as vehicles or instruments of grace. Wesley defines a sacrament, in accord with his Anglican tradition, as “an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same” (“Means of Grace,” II.1).

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Sacraments are sign-acts, which include words, actions, and physical elements. They both express and convey the gracious love of God. They make God's love both visible and effective. We might even say that sacraments are God's "show and tell," communicating with us in a way that we, in all our brokenness and limitations, can receive and experience God's grace.

## **The Meaning of Holy Communion**

In the New Testament, at least six major ideas about Holy Communion are present: thanksgiving, fellowship, remembrance, sacrifice, action of the Holy Spirit, and eschatology. A brief look at each of these will help us better comprehend the meaning of the sacrament.

Holy Communion is Eucharist, an act of thanksgiving. The early Christians "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47a, *NIV*). As we commune, we express joyful thanks for God's mighty acts throughout history—for creation, covenant, redemption, sanctification. The Great Thanksgiving ("A Service of Word and Table I," *UMH*; pages 9–10) is a recitation of this salvation history, culminating in the work of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. It conveys our gratitude for the goodness of God and God's unconditional love for us.

Holy Communion is the communion of the church—the gathered community of the faithful, both local and universal. While deeply meaningful to the individuals participating, the sacrament is much more than a personal event. The first person pronouns throughout the ritual are consistently plural—*we, us, our*. First Corinthians 10:17 explains that "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." "A Service of Word and Table I" uses this text as an explicit statement of Christian unity in the body of Christ (*UMH*; page 11). The sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be.

Holy Communion is remembrance, commemoration, and memorial, but this remembrance is much more than simply intellectual recalling. "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25) is *anamnesis* (the biblical Greek word). This dynamic action becomes re-presentation of past gracious acts of God in the present, so powerfully as to make them truly present now. Christ is risen and is alive here and now, not just remembered for what was done in the past.

Holy Communion is a type of sacrifice. It is a re-presentation, not a repetition, of the sacrifice of Christ. Hebrews 9:26 makes clear that "he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself." Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection make divine grace available to us. We also present ourselves as sacrifice in union with Christ (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5) to be used by God in the work of redemption, reconciliation, and justice. In the Great Thanksgiving, the church prays: "We offer ourselves in praise and



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thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us . . ." (*UMH*; page 10).

Holy Communion is a vehicle of God's grace through the action of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), whose work is described in John 14:26: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The epiclesis (biblical Greek meaning calling upon) is the part of the Great Thanksgiving that calls the Spirit: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine." The church asks God to "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. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world . . ." (*UMH*; page 10).

Holy Communion is eschatological, meaning that it has to do with the end of history, the outcome of God's purpose for the world—"Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again" (*UMH*; page 10). We commune not only with the faithful who are physically present but with the saints of the past who join us in the sacrament. To participate is to receive a foretaste of the future, a pledge of heaven "until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet" (*UMH*; page 10). Christ himself looked forward to this occasion and promised the disciples, "I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). When we eat and drink at the Table, we become partakers of the divine nature in this life and for life eternal (John 6:47-58; Revelation 3:20). We are anticipating the heavenly banquet celebrating God's victory over sin, evil, and death (Matthew 22:1-14; Revelation 19:9; 21:1-7). In the midst of the personal and systemic brokenness in which we live, we yearn for everlasting fellowship with Christ and ultimate fulfillment of the divine plan. Nourished by sacramental grace, we strive to be formed into the image of Christ and to be made instruments for transformation in the world.

## **Toward a Richer Sacramental Life**

Like the little girl who was disappointed with what she received, United Methodist people are looking and hoping for something more in their Eucharistic experience. As we move toward a richer sacramental life, including weekly celebration of Holy Communion, we ask what spiritual benefits we receive from it. What do divine love and power do in and for us through our participation in the sacrament? The answers to this question involve forgiveness, nourishment, healing, transformation, ministry and mission, and eternal life.

We respond to the invitation to the Table by immediately confessing our personal and corporate sin, trusting that, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Our expression of repentance is answered by the absolution in which forgiveness is proclaimed: "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!"

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(*UMH*; page 8). This assurance is God’s gift to sinners, enabling us to continue striving to live faithfully. Wesley wrote, “The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them” (“The Duty of Constant Communion,” I.3).

We receive spiritual nourishment through Holy Communion. The Christian life is a journey, one that is challenging and arduous. To continue living faithfully and growing in holiness requires constant sustenance. Wesley wrote that, “This is the food of our souls: This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection” (“The Duty of Constant Communion,” I.3). God makes such sustenance available through the sacrament of Eucharist. In John 6:35, Jesus tells the crowd: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” As we return to the Table again and again, we are strengthened repeatedly. We go out empowered to live as disciples, reconcilers, and witnesses. In the words of the prayer after Communion, “Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others . . .” (*UMH*; page 11).

As we encounter Christ in Holy Communion and are repeatedly touched by divine grace, we are progressively shaped into Christ’s image. All of this work is not done in a moment, no matter how dramatic an experience we may enjoy. It is, instead, a lifelong process through which God intends to shape us into people motivated by love, empowered and impassioned to do Christ’s work in the world. The identity and ministry that God bestows on us in our baptism are fulfilled as we continue to be transformed into disciples who can respond to God’s love by loving God and others (Romans 12:1-2).

Through Eucharist, we receive healing and are enabled to aid in the healing of others. *Sozo*, the root of the Greek word used in the New Testament for healing, is also translated as salvation and wholeness. Much of this healing is spiritual, but it also includes the healing of our thoughts and emotions, of our minds and bodies, of our attitudes and relationships. The grace received at the Table of the Lord can make us whole. As those who are being saved, we seek to bring healing to a broken world. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* describes this well: “Spiritual healing is God’s work of offering persons balance, harmony, and wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships through confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Through such healing, God works to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity, among individuals and communities, within each person, and between humanity and the rest of creation” (page 613). Holy Communion can be a powerful aspect of the services of healing provided in the *Book of Worship* (pages 615–623).

The grace we receive at the Lord’s Table enables us to perform our ministry and mission, to continue his work in the world—the work of redemption, reconciliation, peace, and justice (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). As we commune, we become aware of the worth and the needs of other people and are reminded of our responsibility. We express the compassion of Christ through acts of caring and kindness toward those we encounter in our daily lives. In our baptism, we have

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vowed to “accept the freedom and power God gives [us] to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves” (*UMH*; page 34). But, in the words of the prayer of confession, we acknowledge our failures: “We have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy” (*UMH*; page 8). Remembering the revolutionary Jesus, we are impelled to challenge unjust practices and systems that perpetuate political, economic, and social inequity and discrimination (Matthew 23; Luke 4:16-21; 14:7-11).

The loving God who meets us at the Table gives us the gift of eternal life. Jesus’ presentation of himself as the spiritual bread of life in John’s Eucharistic account (6:25-58) makes clear the connection: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (6:54). This life in union with Christ is life eternal. It is not only the promise of our being with Christ after physical death. It is also our being in dynamic loving relationship with Christ here and now. It is life that never ends because it is grounded in the everlasting love of God who comes to us in the sacraments.

O Thou who this mysterious bread  
didst in Emmaus break,  
return, herewith our souls to feed,  
and to thy followers speak.

Charles Wesley

*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 613

## **PART TWO: CHRIST IS HERE: EXPERIENCING THE MYSTERY**

### **The Presence of Christ**

#### ***Principle:***

Jesus Christ, who “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3), is truly present in Holy Communion. Through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God meets us at the Table. God, who has given the sacraments to the church, acts in and through Holy Communion. Christ is present through the community gathered in Jesus’ name (Matthew 18:20), through the Word proclaimed and enacted, and through the elements of bread and wine shared (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The divine presence is a living reality and can be experienced by participants; it is not a remembrance of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion only.

#### ***Background:***

Christ’s presence in the sacrament is a promise to the church and is not dependent upon recognition of this presence by individual members of the congregation. Holy Communion always offers grace. We are reminded of what

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God has done for us in the past, experience what God is doing now as we partake, and anticipate what God will do in the future work of salvation. “We await the final moment of grace, when Christ comes in victory at the end of the age to bring all who are in Christ into the glory of that victory” (*By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism*, in *BOR*; page 816), and we join in feasting at the heavenly banquet table (Luke 22:14-18; Revelation 19:9).

The Christian church has struggled through the centuries to understand just how Christ is present in the Eucharist. Arguments and divisions have occurred over the matter. The Wesleyan tradition affirms the reality of Christ’s presence, although it does not claim to be able to explain it fully. John and Charles Wesley’s 166 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* are our richest resource for study in order to appreciate the Wesleyan understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. One of these hymns expresses well both the reality and the mystery: “O the Depth of Love Divine,” stanzas 1 and 4 (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 627):

O the depth of love divine,  
the unfathomable grace!  
Who shall say how bread and wine  
God into us conveys!  
How the bread his flesh imparts,  
how the wine transmits his blood,  
fills his faithful people’s hearts  
with all the life of God!

Sure and real is the grace,  
the manner be unknown;  
only meet us in thy ways  
and perfect us in one.  
Let us taste the heavenly powers,  
Lord, we ask for nothing more.  
Thine to bless, ’tis only ours  
to wonder and adore.

Article XVI of The Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church describes the sacraments as “certain signs of grace, and God’s good will toward us, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm, our faith in him” (*BOD*; page 63).

Article XVIII describes the Lord’s Supper as “a sacrament of our redemption by Christ’s death; insomuch that, to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ” (*BOD*; page 64). (See section “The Communion Elements” in this paper for related material.)

Article VI of The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church speaks similarly of the sacraments: “They are means of grace by which God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening and confirming our faith in

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him. . . . Those who rightly, worthily and in faith eat the broken bread and drink the blessed cup partake of the body and blood of Christ in a spiritual manner until he comes” (*BOD*; page 68).

United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ’s presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord’s Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God’s saving gift for the whole world.

***Practice:***

Because Jesus Christ has promised to meet us there (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), Christians approach the Communion Table with desire and expectation, with awe and humility, and with celebration and gratitude.

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.

## **Christ Is Calling You**

### **Invitation to the Lord’s Table**

***Principle:***

The invitation to the Table comes from the risen and present Christ. Christ invites to his Table those who love him, repent of sin, and seek to live as Christian disciples. Holy Communion is a gift of God to the church and an act of the community of faith. By responding to this invitation we affirm and deepen our personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ and our commitment to membership and mission in the body of Christ.

***Background:***

The Invitation to Holy Communion in “A Service of Word and Table I” and “A Service of Word and Table II” proclaims, “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another” (*UMH*; pages 7, 12). The more traditional wording in “A Service of Word and Table IV” invites, “Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life,

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following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith . . .” (*UMH*; page 26). “A Service of Word and Table V,” for use with people who are sick or homebound, says that Christ invites “all who love him and seek to grow into his likeness” (*BOW*; page 51).

***Practice:***

When Holy Communion is celebrated, it is important to always begin with the words of Invitation, including Confession and Pardon. If these are omitted, all those present may not understand either the openness of the Table of the Lord or the expectation of repentance, forgiveness, healing, and entrance into new life in Christ.

The church community has a responsibility to provide ongoing age-appropriate nurture and education about the sacrament of Holy Communion to all its people. Those who are baptized as infants need continual teaching as they mature in faith. Those who come into membership later in life also need ongoing instruction about the significance of the sacrament in their personal faith journey and in the life of the congregation and larger Christian community. All who seek to live as Christian disciples need formation in sacramental spirituality.

Bishops, elders, deacons, pastors, Sunday school teachers, parents and guardians, seminary professors, and others have responsibility for faithfully teaching understandings and practices of Holy Communion. Teaching about the sacraments should emphasize United Methodist positions and practices but should also encourage knowledge of and respect for those of other Christian traditions.

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***Principle:***

All who respond in faith to the invitation are to be welcomed. Holy Baptism normally precedes partaking of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a meal of the community who are in covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people, baptism is the sign of the new covenant (Genesis 17:9-14; Exodus 24:1-12; Jeremiah 31:31; Romans 6:1-11; Hebrews 9:15).

***Background:***

Baptism is the non-repeatable rite of initiation into the body of Christ, while the Lord’s Supper is the regularly repeated celebration of communion of the body of Christ.

Beginning early in its history, the Christian church divided its worship services into the Liturgy of the Word, in which all participated, and the Liturgy of the Faithful, which was the celebration of Holy Communion. Those who were not yet baptized were dismissed before the celebration of the sacrament (*Didache* 9; Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 66; *The Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VIII; *The Liturgy of St. Basil*).

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John Wesley stressed that baptism is only a step in the salvation process and must be followed by justifying faith and personal commitment to Christ when one reaches an age of accountability. He referred to Holy Communion as “a converting ordinance” (Journal from November 1, 1739, to September 3, 1741; Friday, June 27, 1740). In eighteenth-century England, Wesley was addressing people who, for the most part, although baptized as infants and possessing some degree of faith had not yet experienced spiritual rebirth. Therefore, the conversion Wesley spoke of was transformation of lives and assurance of salvation.

Soon after the merger of The Evangelical Church and the United Brethren in Christ, the Evangelical United Brethren *Discipline* of 1947, reads, “We invite to [the Lord’s Supper] all disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ who have confessed him before men and desire to serve him with sincere hearts” (page 447).

*The United Methodist Book of Worship* says, “All who intend to lead a Christian life, together with their children, are invited to receive the bread and cup. We have no tradition of refusing any who present themselves desiring to receive” (page 29). This statement means that in practice there are few, if any, circumstances in which a United Methodist pastor would refuse to serve the elements of Holy Communion to a person who comes forward to receive.

*By Water and the Spirit* affirms: “Because the table at which we gather belongs to the Lord, it should be open to all who respond to Christ’s love, regardless of age or church membership. The Wesleyan tradition has always recognized that Holy Communion may be an occasion for the reception of converting, justifying, and sanctifying grace” (*BOR*; page 814).

### ***Practice:***

Invitation to partake of Holy Communion offers an evangelical opportunity to bring people into a fuller living relationship with the body of Christ. As means of God’s unmerited grace, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are to be seen not as barriers but as pathways. Pastors and congregations must strive for a balance of welcome that is open and gracious and teaching that is clear and faithful to the fullness of discipleship.

Nonbaptized people who respond in faith to the invitation in our liturgy will be welcomed to the Table. They should receive teaching about Holy Baptism as the sacrament of entrance into the community of faith—needed only once by each individual—and Holy Communion as the sacrament of sustenance for the journey of faith and growth in holiness—needed and received frequently. “Unbaptized persons who receive communion should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism as soon as possible” (*By Water and the Spirit*, in *BOR*; page 814).

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### ***Principle:***

No one will be turned away from the Table because of age or “mental, physical, developmental, and/or psychological” capacity (*BOD*, ¶ 162.G) or

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because of any other condition that might limit his or her understanding or hinder his or her reception of the sacrament.

***Background:***

According to *By Water and the Spirit*,

The services of the baptismal covenant appropriately conclude with Holy Communion, through which the union of the new member with the body of Christ is most fully expressed. Holy Communion is a sacred meal in which the community of faith, in the simple act of eating bread and drinking wine, proclaims and participates in all that God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us in Christ. In celebrating the Eucharist, we remember the grace given to us in our baptism and partake of the spiritual food necessary for sustaining and fulfilling the promises of salvation. (*BOR*; page 814)

The concluding rubrics of the services make clear that this applies to people of all ages.

The theological basis for baptism of infants and people of varying abilities applies as well to their participation in Holy Communion:

Through the church, God claims infants as well as adults to be participants in the gracious covenant of which baptism is the sign. This understanding of the workings of divine grace also applies to persons who for reasons of disabilities or other limitations are unable to answer for themselves the questions of the baptismal ritual. While we may not be able to comprehend how God works in their lives, our faith teaches us that God's grace is sufficient for their needs and, thus, they are appropriate recipients of baptism. (*By Water and the Spirit*, in *BOR*; page 809)

Likewise, the grace given through Holy Communion is offered to the entire church, including those who are unable to respond for themselves. Children are members of the covenant community and participants in the Lord's Supper.

***Practice:***

Young children and people with handicapping or incapacitating conditions may need special consideration as the elements are served. Pastors and congregations should develop plans for providing assistance that maintains the dignity and affirms the worth of those receiving.

Children of all ages are welcome to the Table and are to be taught and led to interpret, appreciate, and participate in Holy Communion. Adults need training to help them explain the sacrament to children.

When worship spaces are constructed or renovated, attention needs to be given to providing physical access to the Communion Table for all.



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***Principle:***

The Lord's Supper in a United Methodist congregation is open to members of other United Methodist congregations and to Christians from other traditions.

***Background:***

"A member of any local United Methodist church is a member of the denomination and the catholic (universal) church" (*BOD*; ¶ 215).

The United Methodist Church recognizes that it is only one of the bodies that constitute the community of Christians. Despite our differences, all Christians are welcome at the Table of the Lord.

***Practice:***

As a part of the directions before the invitation, it is customary to announce that all Christians are welcome to participate in the sacrament in United Methodist congregations.

Response to the invitation is always voluntary, and care needs to be taken to ensure that no one feels pressured to participate or conspicuous for not doing so.

When Holy Communion is served as part of a service of Christian marriage or a service of death and resurrection, "It is our tradition to invite all Christians to the Lord's table, and the invitation should be extended to everyone present; but there should be no pressure that would embarrass those who for whatever reason do not choose to receive Holy Communion" (*BOW*; page 152). It is not appropriate for only the couple or family to commune.

## **The Issue of "Unworthiness"**

***Principle:***

Any person who answers in faith the invitation "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another" (*UMH*; page 7) is worthy through Christ to partake of Holy Communion. Christians come to the Lord's Table in gratitude for Christ's mercy toward sinners. We do not share in Communion because of our worthiness; no one is truly worthy. We come to the Eucharist out of our hunger to receive God's gracious love, to receive forgiveness and healing.

***Background:***

Some deeply committed United Methodist people who hesitate or even refuse to partake of Holy Communion do so because of their sense that they are unworthy. This problem is largely based upon misinterpretation and false fears. Within the United Methodist tradition, people who participate in the sacrament are assured of the forgiveness of their sins and of pardon through their participation in the Invitation and the Confession and Pardon.

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Paul’s words of warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 have long been a source of confusion and concern. Some people are fearful of communing “in an unworthy manner” and, sometimes out of genuine Christian humility, believe that their participation would be improper. John Wesley addressed this problem in his sermon “The Duty of Constant Communion”: “God offers you one of the greatest mercies on this side heaven, and commands you to accept it. . . . You are unworthy to receive any mercy from God. But is that a reason for refusing all mercy? . . . Why do you not obey God’s command? . . . What! unworthy to obey God?” (II.7-8)

Wesley went on to explain that unworthiness does not apply to the people who are to commune, but to the manner in which the consecrated elements are consumed: “Here is not a word said of being unworthy to eat and drink. Indeed he [Paul] does speak of eating and drinking unworthily; but that is quite a different thing. . . . In this very chapter we are told that by eating and drinking unworthily is meant, taking the holy Sacrament in such a rude and disorderly way, that one was ‘hungry, and another drunken’ [1 Cor. 11:21]” (II.9).

First Corinthians 11:29 is a word of judgment against “all who eat and drink without discerning the body.” A footnote to this passage in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (NRSV) explains that this is a reference to “the community, one’s relation to other Christians” (page 242). Paul is speaking against those who fail to recognize the church—the body of Christ—as a community of faith within which Christians relate to each other in love.

***Practice:***

Pastors and other leaders can alleviate most of these concerns about worthiness through patient counseling, faithful teaching, and prayers for healing. These efforts can be focused on study of the cited passage in 1 Corinthians, with clear explanation of what it meant in its first-century context and what it means today.

**The Basic Pattern of Worship: A Service of Word and Table**

***Principle:***

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 so as to constitute a whole service of worship. Their separation diminishes the fullness of life in the Spirit offered to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

***Background:***

In *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (pages 13–14), the Basic Pattern of Worship is traced to its Jewish roots:

The Entrance and the Proclamation and Response—often called the Service of the Word or the Preaching Service—are a Christian adaptation of the ancient

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synagogue service. The Thanksgiving and Communion, commonly called the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, is a Christian adaptation of Jewish worship at family meal tables. . . . Christians held an adapted synagogue service and broke bread when they gathered on the first day of the week. (Acts 20:7)

The practice of the Christian church from its earliest years was weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day. The *Didache*, a source from the late first century or early second century says, "On every Lord's Day—his special day—come together and break bread and give thanks . . ." (14). Justin Martyr, writing around A.D. 150, relates, "And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting . . . bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings . . ." (Chapter 67) Most Christian traditions have continued this pattern.

John Wesley was highly critical of the infrequency of Holy Communion in the Church of England of his day. He exhorted his followers to practice "constant communion" because Christ had so commanded and because the spiritual benefits are so great ("The Duty of Constant Communion"). In his 1784 letter to American Methodists, Wesley counseled, "I also advise the elders to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord's day" ("Letter to Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and Our Brethren in North America").

For decades the scarcity of ordained pastors made it difficult if not impossible for churches in the Wesleyan tradition to observe the Lord's Supper as a part of regular Sunday worship. The custom of celebrating the sacrament at least quarterly, when an ordained elder was present, ensured the opportunity for regular if infrequent participation. With the introduction of new liturgical texts for the Lord's Supper in 1972, United Methodism has been recovering the fullness of Word and Table as the pattern for weekly worship on the Lord's Day.

The *Journal of Christian Newcomer*, third bishop of the United Brethren in Christ, is filled with references to frequent celebrations of Holy Communion. He rejoiced in the "sacramental festivals" that he led and in which he participated.

Recent theology and practice of worship stress both the proclamation of the Gospel enacted through Holy Communion and the sacramental power of Christ's presence through preaching. Partaking of Holy Communion is a response to and continued participation in the Word that has been proclaimed. Those seeking to live as Christian disciples have constant need of the nourishment and sustenance made available through both the Word and the sacrament of Holy Communion.

### ***Practice:***

Congregations of The United Methodist Church are encouraged to move toward a richer sacramental life, including weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper at the services on the Lord's Day, as advocated by the general orders of Sunday worship in *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. The sacrament can also be celebrated appropriately on other occasions in the life of the church from the congregational to the denominational

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level. However, occasions of worship that might not always include Communion are revivals, services of daily praise and prayer, love feasts, and services on days other than Sunday.

Attention should be given to the special needs of churches whose pastoral leadership is neither ordained nor licensed. Cooperative parishes and ecumenical shared ministries (*BOD*; ¶¶ 206.2 and 207) may offer patterns through which such congregations could receive regular sacramental ministry.

## **The Gathered Community**

### **The Whole Assembly**

#### ***Principle:***

The whole assembly actively celebrates Holy Communion. All who are baptized into the body of Christ Jesus become servants and ministers within that body, which is the church. The members are claimed by God as a royal priesthood, God's own people (1 Peter 2:9). The one Body, drawn together by the one Spirit, is fully realized when all its many parts eat together in love and offer their lives in service at the Table of the Lord.

#### ***Background:***

Those baptized are called "Christ's royal priesthood" in the United Methodist services of the Baptismal Covenant ("The Baptismal Covenant I," *BOW*; page 92). We are "royal" because we belong to Christ, the sovereign. As priests, each of us can have access to God without any human intermediary. This priesthood means, especially, that we are to be priests to each other as together we seek to live as Christians. The exchange of words of forgiveness between pastor and congregation is an example in the ritual of this role (*UMH*; page 8).

All Christians share in the ministry of the church. Our diverse abilities and callings are gifts from God that together form the unity of the body of Christ and carry out its mission (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-30; Ephesians 4:1-16). There is no more powerful expression of this reality than the participation of the whole gathered community in the celebration of Eucharist.

#### ***Practice:***

All in the congregation are participants in the ministry of offering praise and worship to God and in the servant work of mutual ministry. The terms *presiding minister* and *assisting minister* describe the work of those who lead and assist the congregation.

## **The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving**

#### ***Principle:***

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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.

***Background:***

The Trinitarian structure is evident in the Great Thanksgiving in the Word and Table services of *The United Methodist Hymnal* (pages 6–16). Following the introductory exchange between presiding minister and people in the Great Thanksgiving, prayer is addressed to “Father [God] Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Following the Sanctus (“Holy, holy, holy . . .”), the work of the second person of the Trinity is proclaimed: “. . . and blessed is your Son [Child] Jesus Christ.” The presence and work of the Holy Spirit are invoked in the portion beginning “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here and on these gifts . . .,” words historically known as the epiclesis. Throughout the Great Thanksgiving the congregation prays actively but silently and speaks its responses aloud at designated points in the service.

In their *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, John and Charles Wesley make clear that divine presence and power come into the Eucharistic experience through the action of the Holy Spirit. Hymn 72 in that collection is a good example:

Come, Holy Ghost, Thine influence shed,  
And realize [make real] the sign;  
Thy life infuse into the bread,  
Thy power into the wine.

Effectual let the tokens prove,  
And made, by heavenly art,  
Fit channels to convey Thy love  
To every faithful heart.

Biblical worship was expressed in gestures and bodily movements, including bowing (Micah 6:6), lifting the cup of salvation (Psalm 116:13), lifting hands (Psalm 141:2), clapping (Psalm 47:1), and dancing (Psalm 149:3). The gospels tell of Jesus’ characteristic actions at meals that include taking bread, blessing or giving thanks, breaking the bread, and giving the bread. In Luke, the disciples who walked with Jesus on the way to Emmaus without recognizing him had their eyes opened “when he was at the table with them” and “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30).

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***Practice:***

The prayer of Great Thanksgiving includes the voices of both the presiding minister and the people. The congregation's responses, which may be spoken or sung, include adoration, acclamation, and affirmation.

The whole assembly might join in parts of the Great Thanksgiving that speak for them: (a) the memorial acclamation, beginning, "And so, in remembrance . . ."; (b) an expression of intention to serve the world, beginning, "Make them be for us . . ."; (c) the concluding doxology, beginning, "Through your Son Jesus Christ . . ." Congregational responses of "Amen" are the affirmation by the people of what has been prayed.

Presiding at Holy Communion involves bodily action as well as verbal communication. Gestures evoke and lead physical and visual participation by the congregation and aid worshipers in recognizing that the action at the Lord's Table is more than reading a script. For the presiding ministers, such gestures may include making welcoming gestures with arms or hands during the Invitation, raising arms or hands to God in praise or supplication, opening arms and hands to indicate including the entire body of Christ, and holding arms and hands over the elements as blessing.

Different postures are appropriate at different points in the ritual. The presiding minister and those in the whole assembly who are physically able appropriately stand throughout the Great Thanksgiving (*BOW*; page 28). Those unable to stand might participate with other gestures of praise as they desire. Standing communicates an attitude of respect and reverence; kneeling and bowing signify humility and confession; hands raised and open express praise and receptivity. The sign of the cross affirms our baptismal identity and the centrality of the cross to our faith. The ancient biblical use of hands and arms in expressing prayer and thanksgiving to God (arms uplifted, called *orans*; see 1 Timothy 2:8) and other gestures are recommended in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, pages 36–39 and 46–79.

## **The Community Extends Itself**

***Principle:***

The Communion elements are consecrated and consumed in the context of the gathered congregation. The Table may be extended, in a timely manner, to include those unable to attend because of age, illness, or similar conditions. Laypeople may distribute the consecrated elements in the congregation and extend them to members who are unavoidably absent (*BOD*; ¶¶ 331.1.b and 1115.9). An elder or deacon should offer appropriate training, preparation, and supervision for this important task (¶ 331.1.b).

***Background:***

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In his description of worship practices of the early church, second-century writer Justin Martyr noted that consecrated bread and wine were carried to Christians who were unable to attend the service (*First Apology*; 67).

“Since the earliest Christian times, Communion has been brought as an extension of the congregation’s worship to sick or homebound persons unable to attend congregational worship” (*BOW*; page 51).

***Practice:***

When Holy Communion is extended to those unable to attend, the liturgy should include the reading of the Scripture Lesson(s), the Invitation, Confession and Pardon, the Peace, the Lord’s Prayer, distribution, and post-Communion prayer. Elders, deacons, and laity may use this liturgy. A prayer of Great Thanksgiving should not be repeated, since this service is an extension of the Communion service held earlier (*BOW*; page 51).

If Holy Communion is to be celebrated with people who are homebound on a day when the congregation has not gathered at Table, “A Service of Word and Table V” (*BOW*; pages 51–53), which includes the Great Thanksgiving, should be used by an elder or another who is authorized to preside.

The Lord’s Supper is to be made available to people who are in hospitals and hospices; nursing, convalescent, and rehabilitation facilities; correctional and custodial institutions; or other situations that make it impossible for them to gather with the community of faith. If a person is unable to eat or drink, one or both of the elements may be touched to his or her lips.

Both “self-service” Communion, where people help themselves, and “drop-in” Communion, where the elements are available over a period of time, are contrary to the communal nature of the sacrament, which is the celebration of the gathered community of faith.

## **The Ritual of the Church**

***Principle:***

As stewards of the gifts given by God to the church, pastors have a responsibility to uphold and use the texts for Word and Table of The United Methodist Church found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*; *Mil Voces Para Celebrar: Himnario Metodista*; *Come, Let Us Worship: The Korean-English United Methodist Hymnal*; *The United Methodist Book of Worship*; and other liturgical material approved by central conferences in accordance with the *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 537.17. These liturgies, arising from biblical, historical, and ecumenical sources, are expressions of the Christian faith and the worship of God.

***Background:***

Article XXII of The Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church affirms some diversity of “rites and ceremonies” but rebukes “whosoever, through his

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private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church” (*BOD*; page 65).

The *Book of Discipline* specifies in ¶ 1112.3 that “the ritual of the Church is that contained in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (1992), *Mil Voces Para Celebrar: Himnario Metodista* (1996), and *Come, Let Us Worship: The Korean-English United Methodist Hymnal* (2000).”

In the Order for the Ordination of Elders, candidates promise to “be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline” (*BOW*; page 676).

The preface to “An Order of Sunday Worship Using the Basic Pattern” in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (page 16) states,

While the freedom and diversity of United Methodist worship are greater than can be represented by any single order of worship, United Methodists also affirm a heritage of order and the importance of the specific guidance and modeling that an order of worship provides. . . . Acts of worship that reflect racial, ethnic, regional, and local customs and heritages may be used appropriately throughout this order.

The ritual officially approved by The United Methodist Church represents the decisions of the church about the theology and practice of Holy Communion. This ritual expresses the unity of the universal church of Jesus Christ and exemplifies our connection within The United Methodist Church. It had its origin in the early Christian community and has evolved in the practice of the church through the centuries. Our ritual is in accord with those currently used in most Christian bodies.

At its best, United Methodist liturgy combines the order and beauty of established ritual with the vitality and freshness of creative expression. The richness of tradition developed through two thousand years of Christian history can be faithfully adapted for present times and situations.

### ***Practice:***

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.

“An Order of Sunday Worship Using the Basic Pattern” (*UMH*; pages 3–5) offers flexibility for response to the activity of the Holy Spirit as well as the specifics of events and settings. In attending to the season, day, or occasion, presiders may insert words of their own composition or selections taken from fuller ritual texts as indicated in “A Service of Word and Table II” and “A Service of Word and Table III.” (See *UMH*, “A Service of Word and Table II,” pages 12–15; “A Service of Word and Table III,” pages 15–16; musical settings, pages



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17–25.) Pastors using *Mil Voces Para Celebrar* or *Come, Let Us Worship* may apply these directions to the use of the respective rituals in those books. Material from different regions and cultures may also enrich our celebrations.

Pastors and congregations in ecumenical shared-ministry settings will necessarily need to incorporate and use the rituals of the denominations comprising those parishes in ways that are responsible and respectful, both of United Methodist understandings and practices and of those of the other traditions represented.

In accord with our commitments to the pursuit of Christian unity and seeking shared Communion, bishops, pastors, and congregations are encouraged to use the Word and Table ritual from other denominations. Such use is to be compatible with our Basic Pattern of Worship and with United Methodist liturgical and theological commitments.

## **Servants at the Table**

### **Presiding Ministers: Elders and Licensed Local Pastors**

#### ***Principle:***

An ordained elder or a person authorized under the provisions of the *Book of Discipline* presides at all celebrations of Holy Communion.

#### ***Background:***

In accord with the practice of the church throughout Christian history, God calls and the church sets apart certain people for leadership within the body of Christians. We believe that the Holy Spirit gives to such people the grace and gifts they need for leadership in obedience to their call. The meaning and purpose of ordination are described in ¶¶ 301–303 in the *Book of Discipline*.

Elders are ordained to a lifetime ministry of service, word, sacrament, and order (*BOD*; ¶ 323) and charged to “administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and all the other means of grace” (*BOD*; ¶ 331).

John Wesley drew a sharp distinction between the preaching ministry, which was open to lay men and women, and the priestly ministry of administering the sacraments, which was to be exercised only by those ordained as elders. Recounting the 1744 preachers’ conference, Wesley wrote, “None of them dreamed, that the being called to preach gave them any right to administer sacraments. . . . ‘You are to do that part of the work which we appoint.’ But what work was this? Did we ever appoint you to administer sacraments; to exercise the priestly office? Such a design never entered into our mind; it was the farthest from our thoughts” (“The Ministerial Office”). Wesley insisted that there could be no sacramental ministry without ordination as elder. This conviction ultimately determined his decision to perform “extraordinary” ordinations himself.

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“The authority of the ordained minister,” according to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (World Council of Churches, 1982), “is rooted in Jesus Christ who has received it from the Father (Matt.28:18), and who confers it by the Holy Spirit through the act of ordination. This act takes place within a community which accords public recognition to a particular person” (page 22). Elders administer the sacraments as authorized representatives of the church.

Under the terms of the *Book of Discipline*, several groups of people are authorized to preside at Eucharist in the charges to which they are appointed. These include associate member deacons, deacons ordained under the provisions of the 1992 *Book of Discipline*, licensed local pastors, and commissioned ministers licensed for pastoral ministry (*BOD*; ¶¶ 330, 331, 340, 341). Some of these provisions have been in effect since 1976 in order to enable the sacraments to be served regularly in many small congregations that do not have elders as their pastors. The church continues to seek the best ways to meet this need and still uphold the historic linkage of ordination and administration of the sacraments.

***Practice:***

Bishops and district superintendents are elders who are assigned and appointed to exercise the ministry of superintending (*BOD*; ¶¶ 403 and 404) as an expression of the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church. To embody the connectional nature of the church and its sacramental life, a bishop or district superintendent who is present may be invited to preside at Holy Communion.

An elder or a person authorized under the provisions of the *Book of Discipline* presides at all celebrations of Holy Communion. While some portions of the order of worship may be led by others, an elder or authorized pastor leads the congregation in praying the Great Thanksgiving, in which the whole assembly takes an active role. (See the Sanctus, the memorial acclamation, and the Amen, all printed in bold type, in *UMH*, pages 9–10.)

Elders who are in extension ministries and retired elders may be asked to preside when they are needed in local churches or on other sacramental occasions. “All conference members who are elders in full connection, including those in extension ministries, shall be available and on call to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as required by the *Discipline* (¶ 331.1*b*) and requested by the district superintendent of the district in which the appointment is held” (*BOD*; ¶ 335.3.a). Those in the Order of Elders are encouraged to make every effort to be available for presiding when Holy Communion is needed or desired.

All elders or deacons who are present may be invited to participate in leadership of the service, stand with the presider at the table, and assist in distributing the elements.

All who lead Holy Communion should be knowledgeable and prepared in Eucharistic theology, spirituality, and practice, including the roles of those

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assisting. This ministry is under the supervision of district superintendents and pastoral mentors (*BOD*; ¶ 341.4).

## **Assisting Ministers: Deacons and Laity**

### ***Principle:***

Deacons are ordained to the ministry of word and service (*BOD*; ¶ 320) and charged to “give leadership in the Church’s life” in, among other ways, “assisting the elders in the administration of the sacraments” and “in the congregation’s mission to the world” (¶ 319).

### ***Background:***

“Within the church community, there are persons whose gifts, evidence of God’s grace, and promise of future usefulness are affirmed by the community, and who respond to God’s call by offering themselves in leadership as ordained ministers” (*BOD*; ¶ 301.2). Deacons, as well as elders, are ordained to the ministry of leadership in The United Methodist Church.

This ordination of a deacon is to a life of linking the church’s worship to Christ’s service in the world. In worship it is appropriate for deacons to lead, or recruit and support others to lead, those parts of the liturgy that manifest the connection between our worship and Christian witness in daily life.

### ***Practice:***

In continuity with historic and ecumenical practice (*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*), the role of deacon in services of Word and Table appropriately includes reading the Gospel lesson; leading the concerns and prayers for the world, the church, and the needy; receiving the elements and preparing the table before the Great Thanksgiving; assisting the elder in serving the Communion elements; setting the table in order; and dismissing the people to serve before the elder offers God’s blessing. Further, deacons have a significant role in preparing for the service by organizing, assembling the necessary elements and containers, and making assignments for other participants, including those taking the meal to those unable to attend. Deacons are designated to serve as links between the church and the world. Their ministry appropriately includes taking the consecrated elements from their congregations and serving them in their places of ministry.

Deacons need training and preparation for their diverse roles in Eucharistic ministry.

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### ***Principle:***

All members of Christ’s universal church are, through their baptism, called to share in the Eucharistic ministry that is committed to the whole church (*BOD*; ¶

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219). Lay people assist the presider in leading the whole congregation to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

***Background:***

In the section titled “The Ministry of All Christians,” *The Book of Discipline* says, “All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment” (§ 125).

In depicting the church as a body of many parts, Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 12:7: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” This diversity of ministry requires cooperation within the body of Christ, since it is only through such cooperation that the Body is complete (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). It is important for liturgical celebrations to embody the active participation of all those gathered, as a demonstration of the full ministry of the body of Christ in the world.

As each layperson fulfills his or her vital ministry in worship, some will be called to exercise various leadership roles. “The United Methodist tradition has recognized that laypersons as well as ordained persons are gifted and called by God to lead the Church. The servant leadership of these persons is essential to the mission and ministry of congregations” (§ 132). The whole of Part III of the *Book of Discipline* elaborates on this idea.

***Practice:***

Pastors and other leaders facilitate the full and active engagement of the ministry of all laity in celebrations of Holy Communion. As part of this general liturgical ministry of all Christians, laypeople exercise leadership of worship by reading Scripture, leading prayers, preparing the table, providing and preparing the elements, distributing the elements, and helping with other parts of the service.

At the appropriate point in the service, laity representing the whole congregation may bring the elements forward to the table as a part of the offering. The entire congregation responds in unison as indicated throughout the ritual. Laypeople may take the consecrated elements to members who are unable to attend the congregational celebration.

Laypeople need instruction and training for this leadership, under the supervision of pastors and deacons.

## **Setting the Table**

### **The Holy Communion Table**

***Principle:***

The people and leaders gather around the elements for Holy Communion. The place where the elements are set is the Holy Communion table.

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***Background:***

In the Old Testament, sacrifice was offered on an altar. In the Gospel narratives of the Last Supper, Jesus “took his place at the table, and the apostles with him” (Luke 22:14). Through time, the church increasingly understood the Eucharist as a repetition of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, and the table came to be seen as an altar of sacrifice. It was moved against the wall of the sanctuary and priests stood before the altar, with their backs to the congregation, to offer sacrifice to God.

The more radical Protestant reformers abandoned altars, preferring simple tables and reenactment of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. Others, including the Church of England, of which John Wesley was a priest, retained the altar against a wall.

A twentieth-century international liturgical renewal movement, expressed in the changes of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, made major reforms in worship. These reforms included moving the table into an open space so that the priest could stand behind it, giving the assembly a sense of meeting around it. The United Methodist Church, along with many other mainline churches, adopted revised rituals that call for the presiding minister to stand behind the Lord’s table, facing the people, from the offertory through the breaking of the bread (*BOW*; page 36).

In a church building, the place where the elements are set is sometimes called the altar, but the terms *altar-table* and *Lord’s Table* are preferable.

The rail that in some churches is located between the congregation and the chancel area, while not properly called the altar, is a sacred area for kneeling to receive Communion. People may also come to one or more stations where the elements are served and receive them standing, with an option of kneeling at the rail for prayer.

***Practice:***

In our churches, the Communion table is to be placed in such a way that the presider is able to stand behind it, facing the people, and the people can visually if not physically gather around it. The table should be high enough so that the presider does not need to stoop to handle the bread and cup. Adaptations may be necessary to facilitate gracious leadership.

While architectural integrity should be respected, it is important for churches to carefully adapt or renovate their worship spaces more fully to invite the people to participate in the Holy Meal. If “altars” are for all practical purposes immovable, then congregations should make provisions for creating a table suitable to the space so that the presiding minister may face the people and be closer to them.

**The Communion Elements**

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***Principle:***

In accordance with the words of Christ and Christian tradition, the church uses bread in celebrations of Holy Communion.

***Background:***

Bread is used in both the Old and New Testaments to signify God's sustenance of human beings and the importance of our eating together. When God liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, they carried their bread with them. The Jews have celebrated this exodus throughout the centuries as Passover. The provision of manna and the showbread (bread of the Presence) kept in the Tabernacle are examples of God's sustenance from the time of Israel's wandering in the wilderness (Exodus 16, 25:23-30). In the New Testament, Jesus shared meals frequently with his disciples and with others (Matthew 9:9-11 and similar passages). He fed the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21 and parallels) and used bread to signify his identity and mission (John 6). On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus ate the Last Supper with his disciples (Matthew 26:26-29 and parallels). After his resurrection, he broke bread with the travelers to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and with his disciples on the seashore (John 21:9-14).

***Practice:***

It is appropriate that the bread eaten in Holy Communion both look and taste like bread. The use of a whole loaf best signifies the unity of the church as the body of Christ and, when it is broken and shared, our fellowship in that body (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Historical continuity with the practice of the universal church is important; however, worship planners should be sensitive to local situations. Bread may be made from any grain according to availability. In ecumenical and other settings, wafers may be an appropriate choice.

The loaf should be plain bread (no frostings, nuts, raisins, artificial coloring, or other additions). Leavened or unleavened bread is equally acceptable. In congregations where there are people with gluten allergies, gluten-free bread may be offered. The loaf broken at the table is to be the bread distributed to the people. As appropriate to the dignity of the occasion, care should be taken to avoid excessive crumbling of the bread and to remove large pieces that fall to the floor.

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***Principle:***

In accordance with Scripture and Christian tradition, the historic and ecumenical church uses wine in celebrations of Holy Communion.

***Background:***

Throughout the Old Testament story of God's relationship with the Hebrew people, blood was the sign of covenant ratification (Exodus 12:12-28; 24:1-8). At

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his last meal with the disciples, Jesus spoke of the wine as his blood—the blood of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) between God and God’s people, made possible through Christ’s death and resurrection (Revelation 5:9). Jesus also spoke of the wine as a sign of the heavenly banquet that he will celebrate with the church in the future (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Matthew 26:26-29).

The juice of the red grape in a common cup represents the church’s covenant with Christ, established through his atoning death (Hebrews 9:15-28; 13:20-21), and fulfills Christ’s commands at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:27-29; Mark 14:23-24; Luke 22:19-20).

Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and many Protestant denominations have always used wine in the Eucharist. During the movement against beverage alcohol in the late nineteenth century, the predecessor bodies of The United Methodist Church turned to the use of unfermented grape juice. This continues to be the position of the denomination (*BOR*; page 838). (The term *wine* is used in this document because of its biblical and historical antecedents, although United Methodists customarily serve unfermented grape juice in Holy Communion.)

The use of a common cup dates back to the Last Supper where Jesus takes a single cup of wine, blesses it, and gives it to the disciples. It is a powerful symbol of the unity of the body of Christ gathered at the Lord’s Table.

***Practice:***

Variations may be necessary in cultural contexts where the juice of the grape is unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

A single cup or chalice may be used for intinction—dipping the bread into the wine—or for drinking. The use of a common chalice best represents Christian unity, but individual cups are used in many congregations. In these situations, unity can be effectively symbolized if each person’s cup is filled from a pouring chalice.

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***Principle:***

The consecrated elements are to be treated with reverent respect and appreciation as gifts of God’s creation that have, in the words of the Great Thanksgiving, become “for us the body and blood of Christ” (*UMH*; page 10).

***Background:***

We do not worship the consecrated elements nor reserve them for adoration. We respect the elements because God is using them for holy purposes—reconstituting the assembly as the body of Christ, conveying grace, forgiving sin, foreshadowing heaven, and strengthening the faithful for the journey of salvation. Although they have undergone no substantive (physical) change, the elements have been consecrated—set apart for sacred use.

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While, in the history of the church, reverence for the consecrated elements has sometimes led to superstition, proper respect for the elements helps Christians grow in authentic sacramental piety.

As Article XVIII of The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church makes clear, United Methodism rejects any suggestion that the bread and wine used in Communion are transformed or transubstantiated into other substances:

Transubstantiation, or the change of the substance of bread and wine in the Supper of our Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions. The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper, only after a heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is faith. (*BOD*; page 64)

(The United Methodist Church notes that the anti-Roman Catholic tone of Article XVIII reflects the “bitterly polemical” relationships of past centuries and “rejoice[s] in the positive contemporary relationships that are being developed . . . at levels both official and unofficial” [*BOR*; pages 237-238].)

*The Book of Worship* directs, “What is done with the remaining bread and wine should express our stewardship of God’s gifts and our respect for the holy purpose they have served” (page 30).

### ***Practice:***

The practice of consecrating elements ahead of time for the convenience of the pastor not having to go to small or remote congregations, weekend camps, or other such occasions is inappropriate and contrary to our historic doctrine and understanding of how God’s grace is made available in the sacrament (Article XVIII, The Articles of Religion, *BOD*; page 64). If authorized leadership is not available for celebrating the Lord’s Supper, other worship services such as love feasts, agape meals, or baptismal reaffirmations are valid alternatives that avoid the misuse of Communion elements.

The consecrated elements of bread and wine are used for distribution to the sick and others who wish to commune but are unable to attend congregational worship. If any bread and wine remain, they should always be disposed of by (1) the pastor and/or others at the pastor’s direction consuming them in a reverent manner following the service; (2) returning them to the earth by pouring (2 Samuel 23:16), burying, scattering, or burning.

## **Hygiene and Table Setting**

### ***Principle:***

Those who prepare the elements and give them to the people are to demonstrate care that the bread and cup are administered so as to minimize contamination.



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***Background:***

In administering the elements to the people, both perception and reality of hygiene are important. The people have justifiable health concerns that the signs of the body and blood of Christ given to them at the holy meal are handled carefully and with concern for hygiene.

This need for care and hygiene should be considered along with scientific studies that make it clear that those who partake in Holy Communion have no higher incidence of illness than those who do not.

Concern and planning are necessary in situations of serious illness and for accommodating at the Table those whose immune systems are compromised. The counsel of Romans 14 and 15 can guide our practice.

***Practice:***

Those who will prepare and serve the elements should wash their hands. This can be done simply and without creating an additional layer of ceremony in the service.

The piece of bread given should be sizeable enough to be a generous sign and to be able to be dipped in the cup without the fingers of the recipient dipping into the liquid.

## **Extending the Table**

### **Holy Communion and Evangelism**

***Principle:***

The Lord's Supper forms the church into a community of evangelism that reaches out to preach, teach, baptize, and make new disciples of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20).

***Background:***

Immediately after his account of the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11–12, Paul moves into an extended discussion of the body of Christ composed of many members whose gifts for ministry are diverse. Paul understood the sacrament of Holy Communion to form and shape the church for its mission of redeeming the world. In 2 Corinthians 5:16–6:10, he describes more fully “the ministry of reconciliation” that is the work of the church as “ambassadors for Christ.”

United Methodists have inherited a tradition that emphasizes that spiritual benefits are not received for ourselves alone but also to prepare and propel us for the work of evangelism. In our prayer after Communion, we give thanks for what we have received and ask God to “grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others” (*UMH*; page 11).

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*The Book of Discipline* emphasizes the imperative of evangelism: “The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility; the church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world” (§ 128).

***Practice:***

Through the grace received in continual participation in the Lord’s Supper, the community of faith reaches beyond itself to proclaim and exemplify the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In Christian education and congregational life, we teach about the significance and meaning of the sacraments so that the faithful appreciate their own spiritual journey and are empowered to be knowledgeable and hospitable guides to those who seek Christ.

As members of the congregation partake of the Lord’s Supper, the bonds of love within are strengthened and the worshiping community is empowered to reach out in dynamic and meaningful ways to evangelize and to work for peace and justice.

---

***Principle:***

As followers of Jesus, who ate with sinners and reached out to the marginalized, the church must intentionally concern itself about those who are absent from Christ’s Table—those who feel unworthy, the poor, the unconverted, victims of prejudice, and others who are oppressed or neglected.

***Background:***

One of the themes of the Gospels, most prominent in Luke, is Jesus’ ongoing efforts to teach the disciples that God’s love and favor are extended to all people, not just those of a certain ethnicity, status, economic or political standing, or gender. The Book of Acts records some of the attempts of the early Christian community to define its limits, and God’s continued efforts to broaden its inclusiveness. Peter’s vision in Acts 10 is a particularly dramatic example.

Early English Methodists were typically (with some notable exceptions) from the socio-economic groups that we might today speak of as the working poor. Wesley realized that a community of people who lived according to his General Rules (*BOD*; pages 71–74) were inevitably going to rise in status. He preached fervently against the dangers of money and the spiritual weakness that often accompanies prosperity.

In “The Ministry of All Christians,” *The Book of Discipline* asserts: “We are called to be faithful to the example of Jesus’ ministry to all persons. Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in

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the life of the Church, the community, and the world. Thus, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination” (§ 138).

***Practice:***

The church is to consciously identify and seek out those who feel unwelcome, even excluded, from its congregations, and to invite them to become part of the body of Christ and join in its celebrations of Holy Communion.

## **Holy Communion and Ethical Christian Discipleship**

***Principle:***

The sacraments are God’s gifts to the gathered body of believers to form the church into Christ’s body in ministry to the world. Through Holy Communion, the Holy Spirit works to shape our moral and ethical lives. In the ongoing process of conversion, we grow in personal and social holiness and are empowered to work for healing, compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace.

***Background:***

The Old Testament prophets denounced the injustice and oppression that they saw around them. They proclaimed a God who acts in favor of the poor and powerless and calls God’s people so to act. (Isaiah 1:16-17; 58:6-9; Amos 2:6-8; 5:11-15, 21-24; and Micah 6:6-8 are among a multitude of such passages.) When Jesus began his public ministry, he announced his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:16-21). He associated with those who were stigmatized and despised. Much of his teaching addressed economic and social inequality. Following his example, the early Christian community tried to care for the needs of all people (Acts 4:32-35; James 1:27; 2:14-17).

The United Methodist Church has a heritage from John Wesley in which ethical discipleship was inextricably related to sacramental worship. From concern by the Holy Club for the imprisoned, through care of the sick by the societies, to Wesley’s own lifelong giving away of most of his money, the early Wesleyan movement sought to ease the suffering of the needy. Wesley made the linkage explicit when he wrote, “The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness, but social holiness” (Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*). Collection at the Lord’s Supper of alms to be given to the poor is a historic practice that many congregations in our tradition continue.

By the early twentieth century, Methodists had begun to realize that holy living meant even more than acts of charity. Beginning with the Social Creed, American Methodists started to point out injustices caused by economic, social, and political structures and to call for the reform of such structures. The Social Principles in

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*The Book of Discipline* and the General Conference positions recorded in *The Book of Resolutions* show ongoing response to these concerns.

In carrying out our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, the *Book of Discipline* stipulates that the church is to “send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel” (§ 122).

Those who partake of Holy Communion are sent from the Table to be in ministry as Christ’s presence in the world. God’s people are sent to work compassionately for healing, reconciliation, justice, and peace. Such work requires prophetic, subversive actions: “renounc[ing] the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject[ing] the evil powers of this world, . . . accept[ing] the freedom and power God gives . . . to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves” (vows from the services of the Baptismal Covenant, *BOW*; for example page 88), claiming and making real the victory of the risen Christ over all evil, sin, and death. Such faithful living in the power of the Holy Spirit answers the prayer in the Great Thanksgiving “that we may be for the world the body of Christ” and the petition “your kingdom come, your will be done” in the Lord’s Prayer (*UMH*; page 10). Celebrations of Holy Communion are, therefore, a foretaste of the realm of God, when God’s future breaks into our present world. Here the church enacts the words of Jesus, “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29).

***Practice:***

Holy Communion is to be conducted in ways that make apparent the inherent link between the Table and holy living, both individual and corporate. Participation in the Eucharist bears fruit in the world in attitudes and actions of personal and social holiness.

Communing with others in our congregations is a sign of community and mutual love between Christians throughout the church universal. The church must offer to the world a model of genuine community grounded in God’s deep love for every person. As we eat and drink, we are motivated to act compassionately for those whose physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are unmet.

Receiving the bread and wine as products of divine creation reminds us of our duties of stewardship of the natural environment in a time when destruction and pollution imperil the earth, and unjust distribution of the planet’s resources destroys the hopes and lives of millions.

As we gratefully receive God’s abundant grace, we are challenged to accept fully our responsibility and accountability for renewal of the social order, liberation for the oppressed, and the coming of the realm of God.

**Holy Communion and the Unity of the Church**

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***Principle:***

Holy Communion expresses our oneness in the body of Christ, anticipates Jesus' invitation to feast at the heavenly banquet, and calls us to strive for the visible unity of the church.

***Background:***

In its Constitution, The United Methodist Church affirms its ecumenical commitment: "As part of the church universal, The United Methodist Church believes that the Lord of the church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity; and therefore it will seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life" (*BOD*; ¶ 5).

In "Our Doctrinal Heritage" in the *Book of Discipline* (pages 41–43), the church affirms:

United Methodists share a common heritage with Christians of every age and nation. This heritage is grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching. . . . With Christians of other communions we confess belief in the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This confession embraces the biblical witness to God's activity in creation, encompasses God's gracious self-involvement in the dramas of history, and anticipates the consummation of God's reign.

In the quest for greater visible unity, United Methodism has undertaken numerous concrete actions that express its commitment and promote ecumenical sharing:

1. Since the 1960's, the church has been involved with partners through Churches Uniting in Christ, formerly called the Consultation on Church Union. Throughout most of that history United Methodists have joined the partner churches in Holy Communion using liturgy approved by those churches for celebration together.
2. United Methodists across the world have entered into ecumenical agreements enhancing the unity of the church through recognition and reconciliation of ministries and sacraments.
3. Ecumenical representatives have been invited and encouraged to participate in United Methodist services of Holy Communion.
4. United Methodists have participated in the Eucharist services of other traditions when invited to do so, as an affirmation and reflection of our commitment to the church universal.

*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* affirms the significance of the sacrament for all Christians:

It is in the Eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested. Eucharistic celebrations always have to do with the whole Church, and the whole Church is involved in each local eucharistic celebration. In so far as a

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church claims to be a manifestation of the whole Church, it will take care to order its own life in ways that take seriously the interests and concerns of other churches. (Page 14)

For churches such as the Orthodox and Roman Catholic, sharing the Eucharist between churches that are not in full agreement with one another is unacceptable because the Eucharist is itself a sign that unity and full agreement have been achieved. For other churches, including The United Methodist Church, the Eucharist can be a means to express the unity in Christ that already exists as a gift from God in spite of our failure to manifest it.

***Practice:***

United Methodists are encouraged to continue participating in ecumenical services that include Holy Communion. Special care is to be given to the use of commonly approved texts or the development of liturgy that reflects the beliefs and practices of the different traditions. If bishops or superintendents are present, it is appropriate for them to be invited to preside.

Church members can practice hospitality by participating in each other's liturgies with attitudes of respect and openness to learning. United Methodists are encouraged to receive Communion in other churches when they are invited to do so.

Churches need to address, within official dialogues, the theological barriers to full Eucharistic sharing. Materials already available from the official dialogues shall be part of the study resources of the denomination.

United Methodists need to study and work to answer questions that are critical to ecumenical conversation and sensitive to ecumenical concerns—the presence of Christ (“real presence”), frequency of celebration, who presides at the Table, use of grape juice, and baptism in relation to Eucharist, among others.

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***Principle:***

United Methodists enter into the ecumenical conversation about Eucharist grounded in several historic sources of authority and relate most authentically to other Christian bodies as we remain faithful to these sources.

***Background:***

Most prominent among United Methodism's sources of authority are the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; the hymns and writings of John and Charles Wesley (especially the Standard Sermons, the General Rules, and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*); the Constitution, Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, and other doctrinal standards; the writings and traditions emerging from the evangelical experience, through the Wesleyan, Evangelical, and United Brethren movements; and current ecumenical

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developments and statements that have had United Methodist involvement, especially multilateral and bilateral agreements, some of which have been approved by the World Methodist Council and/or the General Conference.

“Our Doctrinal Heritage” points out some distinctive aspects of the United Methodist tradition:

Although Wesley shared with many other Christians a belief in grace, justification, assurance, and sanctification, he combined them in a powerful manner to create distinctive emphases for living the full Christian life. The Evangelical United Brethren tradition, particularly as expressed by Phillip William Otterbein from a Reformed background, gave similar distinctive emphases.

Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. While the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as “prevenient grace,” continues in “justifying grace,” and is brought to fruition in “sanctifying grace.” (*BOD*; pages 45–46)

These distinctive emphases of United Methodists provide the basis for “practical divinity,” the experiential realization of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of Christian people. These emphases have been preserved not so much through formal doctrinal declarations as through the vital movement of faith and practice as seen in converted lives and within the disciplined life of the Church.

Devising formal definitions of doctrine has been less pressing for United Methodists than summoning people to faith and nurturing them in the knowledge and love of God. The core of Wesleyan doctrine that informed our past rightly belongs to our common heritage as Christians and remains a prime component within our continuing theological task. (*BOD*; pages 49–50)

The General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns spearheads the ecumenical work of the denomination by fulfilling its purpose: “To advocate and work toward the full reception of the gift of Christian unity in every aspect of the Church’s life and to foster approaches to ministry and mission that more fully reflect the oneness of Christ’s church in the human community” (*BOD*; ¶ 1902.1).

In “Resolution of Intent—With a View to Unity,” the 2000 General Conference declared it “our official intent henceforth to interpret all our Articles, Confession, and other ‘standards of doctrine’ in consonance with our best ecumenical insights and judgment” (*BOR*; page 238).

### ***Practice:***

Within all discussions of Holy Communion, United Methodism must remain firmly anchored in its traditional sources of authority. We recognize and respect authorities that other church traditions hold dear. United Methodists remain open to greater Christian unity through the work of the Holy Spirit in response to Jesus’ prayer that “they may all be one” (John 17:21).

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## **Notes About This Document**

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*BOD, Discipline, and Book of Discipline* refer to *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2000*, copyright © 2000 The United Methodist Publishing House.

*UMH* refers to *The United Methodist Hymnal*, copyright © 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House.

*BOW* refers to *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, copyright © 1992 The United Methodist Publishing House.

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Quotations from John Wesley are from the Jackson edition of *The Works of John Wesley*.

Petition No. 40879

**WHEREAS, the 2000 General Conference directed the General Board of Discipleship in collaboration with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, and the Council of Bishops, to develop a comprehensive interpretive document on the theology and practice of Holy Communion in United Methodism and report their findings and recommendations to the 2004 General Conference; and**

**WHEREAS, The United Methodist Church needs an authoritative contemporary statement of its understanding of Holy Communion, both for strengthening its interpretation and practice of the Lord's Supper in its churches and for clarity in its ecumenical conversations with other denominations; and**

**WHEREAS, in developing its report the Holy Communion Study Committee took intentional steps to heed our United Methodist heritage and history, remain sensitive to the ecumenical church, and hear the voices of United Methodists in the United States as well as in central conferences in the Philippines, Africa, and Europe;**

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***Therefore, be it resolved that the 2004 General Conference approve *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* as an official interpretive statement of theology and practice in The United Methodist Church; and***

***Be it further resolved that *This Holy Mystery* be used by the Council of Bishops, Church School Publications of The United Methodist Publishing House, The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, and the General Board of Discipleship as a guide for teaching and formation of both clergy and laity in relation to Holy Communion; and***

***Be it further resolved that *This Holy Mystery* be used by The General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns and the Council of Bishops in interpreting United Methodist understandings and practices in ecumenical dialogue; and***

***Be it further resolved that the 2004 General Conference commend to the church the principles, background, and practices in *This Holy Mystery* for the interpretation and use of the services of Word and Table in our hymnals and *The United Methodist Book of Worship*; and***

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***Be it further resolved that This Holy Mystery be published in The Book of Resolutions, and that the General Board of Discipleship offer it in study editions with a leader's guide.***

Signed 

President, General Board of Discipleship

Signed 

General Secretary, General Board of Discipleship

*This Holy Mystery Was* adopted by The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, Thursday, May 6, 2004.