

Frequently Asked Questions about The Meaning of Holy Communion in the UMC

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WHO Questions:

1. Who may preside at services of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church?

THM clearly states, “An ordained elder or a person authorized under the provision of *The Book of Discipline* presides at all celebrations of Holy Communion” (*THM*, “Presiding Ministers: Elders and Licensed Local Pastors,” 25-26; *Book of Discipline 2012* ¶ 316.1, 332, 340.2.b).

2. Who may not preside?

Persons who are neither ordained nor otherwise authorized for sacramental ministry under the provisions of *The Book of Discipline 2012* (¶316.1, 332, 340.2.b) may not preside at services of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church.

3. We have two elders appointed to our congregation. How many authorized presiders may “share” the Great Thanksgiving, and how should they divide it up to share it?

Our authorized documents do not provide an explicit answer to this question, but *THM* does give us some hints.

First, we need to remember that the Great Thanksgiving is a *single* dialogical prayer (rather than a “collection” of sacred words) shared between the presiding minister and the congregation. Therefore any sharing of the prayer needs to respect this character as communal prayer. Sharing of the prayer also needs to preserve the sense of the prayer as a single prayer. Also, there is no portion of this prayer that may be delegated to deacon or lay ministers. As *THM* notes, “an elder or authorized pastor leads the congregation in praying the Great Thanksgiving, in which the whole assembly takes an active role.” (*THM* “The Great Thanksgiving,” 22 and “Presiding Ministers,” 26)

Second, as *THM* indicates, “All elders or deacons who are present may be invited to...stand with the presider at the table, and assist in distributing the elements.” (*THM* “Presiding Ministers,” 26) *THM* seems to suggest, then, that even when there are multiple elders present, a single elder normally presides at the table.

A first answer, then, is to suggest that the two elders alternate presiding responsibility each time the congregation celebrates Holy Communion. This has the advantage of making clear to the congregation that all elders, regardless of their status as “senior” or “associate” pastors, male or female, are equally authorized for sacramental ministry in the church. It also provides an opportunity for the congregation to experience the different voices and ways of embodying the prayer represented by the two different elders.

A second answer requires that the two elders be attentive to the theological shape of the Great Thanksgiving as a *single* prayer and to divide it in such a way that reflects that theological shape. It should also be well rehearsed to avoid any awkwardness in praying. Using the Great Thanksgiving in Word and Table I (*UMH* 9-10, *BOW* 36-38) as an example, the following respects such a division:

E1: Opening Dialogue through “the breath of life.”

E2: “When we turned away...through the prophets.

E1 and E2 together: “As so, with your people on earth...”

All: “Holy, holy, holy...”

E1: “Holy are you...when you would save your people.”

E2: “He healed the sick...your Word and Holy Spirit.”

E1: “On the night...in remembrance of me.”

E2: “When the supper was over...in remembrance of me.”

E1: And so, in remembrance...the mystery of faith.”

All: “Christ has died...”

E1: Pour out your Holy Spirit...by his blood.”

E2: By your Spirit...at his heavenly banquet.”

E1 and E2 together: “Through your Son Jesus Christ...”

All: “Amen.”

Such a division will require that the two elders rehearse carefully so as to make the transitions and gestures that accompany the prayer as smooth and as prayerful as possible.

4. Who is authorized to bless elements people prepare at home or that may have been mailed to them for use in an online, televised or radio broadcast service of Holy Communion? Would this be limited only to elders, or may a licensed local pastor do so as well?

THM clearly states, “An ordained elder or a person authorized under the provision of *The Book of Discipline* presides at all celebrations of Holy Communion” (*THM*, “Presiding Ministers: Elders and Licensed Local Pastors,” 25-26; *Book of Discipline 2012* ¶ 316.1, 332, 340.2.b).

However, what we are sharing in Holy Communion is not only the bread and wine, but also the sense of communion we have with one another in Christ. It is this communion we celebrated with one another in the gathered community around the Lord’s Table that we now “extend” to those unwillingly absent. Therefore, online celebrations of Holy Communion as well as participation through televised and radio broadcasts are inappropriate. Likewise, preparation of the elements for such use is also inappropriate.

5. How does a deacon normally participate in services of Holy Communion?

There continues to be some confusion and disagreement within the church about the sacramental ministry of deacons. However, the *Book of Discipline* (¶ 320) states that deacons are to assist “the elders in the administration of the sacraments.”

THM develops this further, stating “In continuity with historic and ecumenical practice...the role of the deacons 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.” (*THM* “Assisting Ministers: Deacons and laity,” 27) *Living into the Mystery* expands on this description of the deacon’s work at the Lord’s Table: “The deacon may receive the bread and flagon, and place them in appropriate places on the Lord’s Table. The deacon may also pour the wine into the chalice, and then ensure that all things and all people are in their proper places for the beginning of the Great Thanksgiving. If the gifts are already placed on the Lord’s Table and covered, the deacon may lead or work with others, such as communion stewards, to unveil the gifts in an appropriately simple, gracious, and powerful way, and place the cloth in an appropriate place on a side table.” (*LitM*, 29-30)

6. How may a deacon obtain approval to preside?

The deacon’s ministry at Holy Communion is not normally that of administering or presiding at the sacraments, but rather “assisting in the administration of the sacraments.” The current United Methodist *Book of Discipline* ¶328 makes limited provision for bishops to authorize deacons to preside at the sacraments in the context of their appointments “for the sake of extending the mission and ministry of the church.” It goes on to say, “a pastor-in-charge or district superintendent may request that the bishop grant local sacramental authority to the deacon... in the absence of an elder, within a deacon’s primary appointment.”

7. Who may assist in preparing the table or serving communion, and what training (if any) is required or recommended to do so?

THM states “All members of Christ’s universal church are, through baptism, called to share in the Eucharistic ministry that is committed to the whole church (*BOD*; ¶219). Lay people assist the presider in leading the whole congregation to celebrate the Lord’s Supper” (27-28).

In practice, this means that 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.” “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.”

8. How old do you have to be in order to serve communion? Do you have to be baptized first? Must you be a professing member?

A starting point for this answer is that The United Methodist Church places no age or

membership restriction on participation in Holy Communion. As *THM* makes clear, “Children of all ages are welcome to the Table and are to be taught and led to interpret, appreciate, and participate in Holy Communion” (*THM*, “Invitation to the Lord’s Table,” 16). It seems appropriate, then, that all baptized Christians, regardless of age, may play a role in the celebration of Holy Communion—whether in preparing the table and the elements, bringing the elements to the table as part of the offering, or serving the bread and cup.

It also seems appropriate that, while we welcome to the Lord’s Table non-baptized persons who respond in faith to the invitation, those persons who are to participate in the ministry of the Lord’s Table should be baptized members of the covenant community that is the Church.

HOW Questions:

1. We are in a congregation not served by someone authorized to preside. How can we make provision to celebrate Holy Communion? May a DS or other pastor “phone” or “Skype” a prayer of consecration over elements ahead of time? What if they do it in “real time”? Why?

THM is explicit in addressing this question: Regardless of how it might be done (telephone, Skype, FaceTime, or other electronic media), “the practice of consecrating elements ahead of time...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; *THM* “The communion elements,” 32) The Great Thanksgiving is not primarily about “consecration” but about the gathering of the church around the Lord’s Table in thanks and praise to God. “The Communion elements are *consecrated and consumed* in the context of the gathered congregation” (*THM* “The community extends itself,” 22, emphasis added).

2. How can we offer communion in a sanitary way without making it look like we believe more in the presence of germs than in the presence of Christ?

THM offers minimal guidance for us on this question. It acknowledges “both perception and reality of hygiene are important” and that “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.” At the same time, it acknowledges “scientific studies...make it clear that those who partake in Holy Communion have no higher incidence of illness than those who do not” (*THM*, “Hygiene and Table Setting,” 33).

THM recommends two basic principles: First, “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.” Second, “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” (*THM*, “Hygiene and Table Setting,” 33).

As many now acknowledge, hands are more often likely to be a source of infection than our lips. So we suggest the following practices: The bread should always be broken and served/given to the individual. This minimizes the number of hands that

come in direct contact with the bread. When persons are drinking from a common cup, those who are assisting should wipe inside and outside the rim and rotate the chalice between communicants. In the case of intinction (dipping the bread in the cup), those who are sick might be encouraged to receive the bread only.

3. How should we serve the bread? Is it better to pass through the pews, have people tear off their own piece, or have servers break and give the bread? Why?

Living into the Mystery acknowledges, “United Methodists receive Holy Communion in a variety of ways. In some congregations people come forward to stations or to a rail where they may stand or kneel to receive a piece of bread from one server and then dip it in a cup held by another. This method is called intinction. In others, people may first receive and eat the bread and then drink from a common cup. In others, persons may receive bread from one server, eat it, then receive an individual small cup from another, and drink it, returning the small cup to a rail equipped with cup holders. In still others, trays of bread and small cups of wine may be passed through the pews by ushers or communion stewards, with each person receiving from one person and serving the next in the pew” (*Living into the Mystery*, 45).

There is one primary principle reflected in these various practices: we *receive* or are *served* the bread (and the cup); we do not take them for ourselves. Receiving the bread (and cup) from another “reflects continuity with ancient practice extending to the biblical accounts of the Last Supper itself...recalling that Jesus ‘took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples and said, Take, eat.’ In both texts, ‘take’ means first to receive the bread broken and given by the server, and then to place it in one’s mouth” (*Living into the Mystery*, 46).

An important theological principle also undergirds our sharing the bread and cup: we share from one loaf and one cup. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, and as we repeat after the Great Thanksgiving as we break the bread and lift the cup, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10.16-17). This sharing of the one bread and one cup is part of what *communion* means for Christian people. As *THM* states, the common loaf and common cup are powerful symbols “of the unity of the body of Christ gathered at the Lord’s Table” (*THM*, “The Communion Elements,” 31).

4. How should we serve the cup?

As was noted concerning the serving of the bread, “United Methodists receive Holy Communion in a variety of ways. In some congregations people come forward to stations or to a rail where they may stand or kneel to receive a piece of bread from one server and then dip it in a cup held by another. This method is called intinction. In others, people may first receive and eat the bread and then drink from a common cup. In others, persons may receive bread from one server, eat it, then receive an individual small cup from another, and drink it, returning the small cup to a rail equipped with cup holders. In still others, trays of bread and small cups of wine may be passed through the pews by ushers or communion stewards, with each person receiving from one person and serving the next

in the pew” (*Living into the Mystery*, 45).

The principle that applies to the bread also applies to the cup: we *receive* or are *served* the cup (and the bread); we do not take them for ourselves. Receiving the cup (and bread) from another “reflects continuity with ancient practice extending to the biblical accounts of the Last Supper itself,” here recalling that Jesus “took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples saying, Drink from it, all of you” (Matthew 26.27).

An important theological principle also undergirds our sharing the cup and bread: we share from one cup and one loaf. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, and as we repeat after the Great Thanksgiving as we break the bread and lift the cup, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10.16-17). This sharing of the one bread and one cup is part of what *communion* means for Christian people. As *THM* states, the common loaf and common cup are powerful symbols “of the unity of the body of Christ gathered at the Lord’s Table” (*THM*, “The Communion Elements,” 31).

5. How can we reverently dispose of what is left over after all have received?

THM sets out a basic principle for the disposal of leftover bread and juice: “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*, 10; *THM*, “The Communion elements,” 31). It further notes these instructions provided in *The Book of Worship* (page 30): “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.”

In practice this means the following, in order of priority: First, the remaining bread and wine should be returned to the sacristy to be prepared by the deacon or communion stewards for distribution to the sick and to those unwillingly absent from the service.

Second, since these are gifts of food, “the pastor and/or others at the pastor’s direction” should “consume them in a reverent manner following the service.” (*THM* “The Communion elements,” 32)

Finally, they may be “returned to the earth by pouring...burying, scattering, or burning.” (*THM* “The Communion elements,” 32). They should not be poured down the drain or placed in the trash. *Living into the Mystery* provides a helpful caution: “Directly returning some elements to the ground can make an important ecological witness. At the same time, we would recommend that any unconsumed elements be returned to the earth in relatively small amounts. The sight of large pieces of bread sitting on the church lawn or flowerbeds can be unattractive or a sign of wastefulness. This may be avoided when only the amount of bread needed for a given service is prepared.” (*LitM*, 51)

6. Are “disposable cups” okay? Why or why not? How about disposable “all-in-one” packs with the wafer on the top and the juice in the bottom?

There are several principles that shape answers to these questions. First, *THM* reminds us that “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)" (*THM*, "The communion elements," 31). The use of disposable cups or all-in-one packages makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ensure reverent and respectful disposal of the remaining elements of Holy Communion. In both cases, without substantial effort to collect and carefully wash all cups before disposing of them, there will inescapably be some juice or wine remaining in the cups, resulting in placing what has become for us the blood of Christ into the trash.

Second, both the manufacture and disposal of such cups or all-in-packages creates additional environmental impacts that other means of distribution, including the use of small non-disposable cups, do not. *THM* reminds us of the link between Holy Communion and ethical Christian discipleship: "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" (*THM*, "Holy Communion and Ethical Christian Discipleship," 36).

Finally, all-in-one packages are designed for individualized self-service of the elements. Such self-service, as noted in our discussion about receiving the bread, is contrary to our understanding that we *receive* or are *served* the bread and the cup from one another; we do not take them for ourselves.

7. How is the Lord's Table supposed to be set?

THM provides limited guidance to this question: "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" (*THM*, "The Holy Communion Table," 29).

The supplemental document *Living into the Mystery*, which attends to more practical issues in our celebration of Holy Communion, provides additional guidance: The Lord's Table should be set with "a plain white linen to cover the table, a chalice for the wine, and a paten (plate) for the bread. Some traditions in our church would add a plain white cloth to cover the chalice and paten as well." If the congregation uses trays of small cups, these are also placed on the table. "Candles, flowers, crosses, and other items not necessary for offering of the Great Thanksgiving [including a Bible] do not need to be on the Lord's Table, and may get in the way of using it well in worship" (*Living into the Mystery*, 22).

8. How should we handle celebrating communion at weddings and funerals? May only the couple being married and the wedding party, or only the family of the deceased, receive?

Holy Communion involves the entirety of the gathered community offering themselves to God in praise and thanksgiving and praying for the Holy Spirit to make all who offer and receive one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. "The whole assembly actively celebrates Holy Communion" (*THM*, 20). This is why *The United Methodist Book of Worship* states, "Not only the husband and wife but the

whole congregation are to be invited to receive communion. It is our tradition to invite all Christians to the Lord's table" (*UMBOW*, 115).

The same principles apply for the celebration of Holy Communion at Services of Death and Resurrection. The entire assembly is led to offer the Great Thanksgiving, and all who respond in faith to the Invitation to the Table are invited to receive (*THM*, 14).

Is there no place, then, for a celebration of the sacrament with only the immediate family? The rubrics of the Services of Death and Resurrection in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* indicate "If the [funeral] service itself does not include Holy Communion, it is sometimes helpful for the pastor to take communion to the family, perhaps at the first visit following the service" (*UMBOW* 140, #7). Such extension of the Lord's table represents a sign of the community's continued care for the family and may help the family's re-entry into the community.

The United Methodist Book of Worship does suggest that a service of Holy Communion may be offered as a part of a blessing of a home (*UMBOW*, 610), perhaps the home of the newly married. It also presumes this service includes a gathering of family and friends, not the couple (or homeowners) by themselves.

In either case, all who are present at the time of the pastoral visit are invited to receive.

WHEN Questions:

1. When should the pastor first break the bread—at the words of Jesus about the bread, or later? Why?

The rubrics regarding the presider's actions at the institution narrative in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (p. 11) and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (pp. 37 and 39) indicate that the bread is broken *after* the Great Thanksgiving and Lord's Prayer.

This position is both biblical and practical. It is biblical because it honors the four-fold pattern provided by the various institution and meal narratives in the gospels and 1 Corinthians: take, bless, break, and give (*THM* "The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving," 21; *BOW* 27-29). In preparing the table for the service—whether simply uncovering the bread and wine already on the table or bringing it to the table as part of the offertory—we are "taking" the bread and cup. We then bless and give God thanks for these gifts in the Great Thanksgiving. We break the bread after giving thanks in order that it may be given to the gathered community. We take to bless; we break to give.

This position after the Great Thanksgiving is practical because it helps keep our attention on praying the Great Thanksgiving rather than watching the presider's actions.

2. When should we take the blessed elements to those who could not attend when we celebrate Holy Communion? Is later that week okay? Later that month? May we freeze the elements to help them keep longer?

While *THM* does not explicitly answer this question, it does set out as a basic principle that “the Table may be extended, *in a timely manner*, to include those unable to attend because of age, illness, or similar conditions” (*THM*, “The Community Extends Itself,” 22, and “The Communion Elements,” 32).

Implicit in this principle is that taking the bread and wine to those unable to attend is an *extension* of a particular celebration by the gathered community. It is neither a form of “reserving” the sacrament nor a kind of Eucharistic “leftover.” What we are sharing is not only the bread and wine, but also the sense of communion we have with one another in Christ. It is this communion we celebrated with one another in the gathered community around the Lord’s Table that we now “extend” to those unwillingly absent.

In practice, we should bring communion to those absent that day or, at the latest the next day given that the bread will spoil and the juice ferment. Any further delay obscures the sense of extended communion that we are intending to share. When such a timely visit is not possible, the pastor should arrange a separate visit for the purpose of celebrating Holy Communion with the person. [See [*Extending the Table*](#) by Mark Stamm (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009) for a comprehensive discussion of this ministry.]

3. When may authorized presiders pre-consecrate elements for later use by a) other local churches who may not have an authorized presider; b) church groups who may not be present for worship because they have chosen to go somewhere else, such as mission teams, small groups, or camps; c) college students and others who are away from the church, mailing them in a care package with instructions for later personal use?

The short answer is “Never.” As *THM* makes explicit, regardless of how it might be done (telephone, Skype, FaceTime, or other electronic media), “the practice of consecrating elements ahead of time...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; *THM* “The communion elements,” 32) A primary concern in this claim is that the Great Thanksgiving is not primarily about “consecration” but about the gathering of the church around the Lord’s Table in thanks and praise to God. “The Communion elements are *consecrated and consumed* in the context of the gathered congregation.” (*THM* “The community extends itself,” 22, emphasis added).

4. Some people in our congregation choose not to come when we celebrate Holy Communion. This drives our numbers down. How often are we required to celebrate Holy Communion? Do we have to do it every month? Or could we limit it to more special occasions?

There are two levels of response to this question, the first requires learning why your church members skip Holy Communion Sundays. If it is a concern about how they understand or do not understand Holy Communion, then you have an opportunity for education with your congregation. *THM* points both to the benefits of a richer

sacramental life (*THM* “Grace and the Means of Grace,” 6-7, and “Toward a richer sacramental life,” 9-11) and of the opportunities Holy Communion provides for inviting people “into a fuller living relationship with the body of Christ.” (*THM* “Invitation to the Lord’s Table,” 15)

If the concern expressed is more about your church’s practice of Holy Communion—the length of time the service takes, the lack of care for the service itself—you might review some of your basic assumptions about the shape, content, and performance of the service. A companion to *THM* is *Living into the Mystery*. There it suggests some basic principles: “Be real. Take time. Focus on action. Conduct the people’s worship. Offer the best you can. And thereby show in your leadership and participation in worship that together you are the body of Christ redeemed by his blood in the power of the Holy Spirit.” (*LitM*, 11)

The second response is to the question of less frequent celebration. *THM* notes that “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.” Therefore, in practice, congregations are encouraged to move toward “weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper at the services of the Lord’s Day” and on “other occasions in the life of the church.” (*THM* “The basic pattern of worship,” 19) In other words, celebrating Holy Communion the first Sunday of each month is a kind of minimum, calling us toward more frequent celebration.

WHAT Questions:

1. We don’t have enough time in our service to use the entire liturgy for Holy Communion. What is the shortest version of The Great Thanksgiving that will “get the job done?”

On the one hand, there is always enough time to pray! The question, then, is how we set our priorities in worship. As *Living into the Mystery* suggests, “in no case or culture should time matter more than the gracious and generous celebration of Holy Communion in the context of Sunday worship. Pastors in every culture are often under pressure to abridge the communion ritual with the excuse that ‘saying the whole prayer takes too long.’ In fact, a full experience of the Great Thanksgiving, with no rushing and including singing all the responses, can take as little as four minutes, about the amount of time it takes to sing an average hymn or praise song...It may seem longer when it is offered in a lifeless, monotonous way, when the congregation does not know it or is not invited to participate fully in it, or when Holy Communion is treated as an extra rather than integrated into the flow of worship with scriptures, prayers, sermon and song.” (*LitM*, 8)

To ask “What will get the job done?” ignores the fact that it is the whole of the Great Thanksgiving prayer that is required. It is shaped by and reflects our “Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God;” it “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 of sin over death.” (*THM* “The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving,” 21)

The Service of Word and Table III in *The United Methodist Hymnal* provides the option of a prayer composed by the pastor. (Word and Table III is not the “short version.”

Rather, it provides the outline for the prayer along with the “cue lines” that prompt the congregation’s responses.) This prayer could be somewhat shorter in length. However, it must still include the “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 the present work of the Holy Spirit, and concluding praise to the Trinity.” (*THM* “The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving,” 21) Yet, as Hoyt Hickman suggests in *The Worship Resources of The United Methodist Hymnal*, pastors who choose to use Word and Table III should “carefully consider and prepare the content of the Great Thanksgiving” as it “puts into the words of the Church’s understanding both of God’s mighty acts in Jesus Christ and the meaning of Holy Communion.” (*WR*, 74) Finally, “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.” (*THM* “The ritual of the church,” 24)

2. What liturgy should we use for our Christmas Eve “Come and Go” Communion service? Does one of the pastors have to stay there the whole time, or can we just leave the consecrated elements on the altar for people to serve themselves?

There are several points at which *THM* explicitly addresses these two questions. In the principles concerning the communion elements, it states, “The practice of consecrating elements ahead of time...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).” (*THM* “The communion elements,” 32)

This principle builds, in part, on the principle that the Communion elements “are *consecrated and consumed* [my emphasis] in the context of the gathered congregation.” (*THM* “The community extends itself,” 22) That is, our celebration of Holy Communion is never simply about our individual communion with God; it is a way in which we practice our communion with each other before our Triune God. “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 sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be.” (*THM* “The Meaning of Holy Communion,” 8)

These principles concerning the gathered congregation leads *THM* to clearly state that “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.” (*THM* “The community extends itself,” 23)

3. We livestream our worship for those members who prefer to attend church online. What is the proper way for them to join us in celebrating Holy Communion?

The answer to this question, though more complicated than that of “drop-in” communion, builds on similar principles. But first, it is important to note that a 2013 consultation convened by the General Board of Discipleship and the General Board of Higher

Education and Ministry concluded that, while we encourage churches to explore new ways in which share the gospel, the on-line celebrations of Holy Communion are inappropriate and, where they have been initiated, must be discontinued. The Council of Bishops has concurred with this recommendation and issued a moratorium on all online sacramental practice. The Council of Bishops reaffirmed the moratorium in its 2014 meetings. A fuller answer is available through the papers prepared for that consultation.

While *THM* did not anticipate this question, its principles and practices do provide some guidance. A foundational claim is the principle that the Communion elements “are consecrated and consumed in the context of the gathered congregation.” (*THM* “The community extends itself,” 22) This principle builds on a statement made earlier in the document: “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 sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be.” (*THM* “The Meaning of Holy Communion,” 8) A similar principle appears near the conclusion to *THM*: “Holy Communion is to be conducted in ways that make apparent the inherent link between the Table and holy living, both individual and corporate.... Communing with others in our congregations is a sign of community and mutual love between Christians throughout the church universal.” (*THM* “Holy Communion and ethical Christian discipleship,” 36)

There are two tangible signs of such communion: The first is that, as a gathered community, we share from the same bread and cup. As our communion liturgy reminds us, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10.17). The second sign is that we do not serve ourselves but receive the bread and cup, set apart by the community’s prayer for sacred use, from the hands of another.

These principles and claims suggest that, while we may “attend” church online and experience some sense of connection to a congregation through this experience, our physical separation from the congregation prevents us from participating in Holy Communion through the same media.

What, then, is the proper way for persons attending church online to participate in Holy Communion? The same way as all others who “wish to commune but are unable to [physically] attend congregational worship.” The bread and wine that has been used in the community’s celebration should be brought to them by the pastor or representatives of the congregation. (*THM* “The community extends itself,” 22; “Assisting Ministers,” 28; “The Communion elements,” 32) Those who are at such physical distance from the congregation that such visitation from the pastor or other church members is impractical should be encouraged to connect to a local church community.

4. What kind of bread should we use for Holy Communion?

Regarding the bread, *THM* states, “In accordance with the words of Christ and Christian tradition, the church uses bread in celebrations of Holy Communion.” In practice this means that, while the loaf “may be made from any grain according to availability,” it should “both look and taste like bread.” It may be leavened or unleavened, but it should be “plain bread (no frosting, nuts, raisins, artificial coloring, or other additions).” In some

settings, “wafers may be an acceptable choice.” (See *THM*, “The Communion Elements,” 30.)

5. What kinds of things should we NOT use as the bread for Holy Communion?

One of the basic principles in *THM* is that what we use should “both look and taste like bread,” so should not use anything that does not look or taste like bread. *THM* also specifies that we should not use any bread that includes “frosting, nuts, raisins, artificial coloring, or other additions.” (See *THM*, “The Communion Elements,” 30.) Therefore, things such as crackers, pretzels, pizza, and fruit breads should not be used.

6. What kind of drink should we provide for Holy Communion? Can we use “regular” wine?

THM principle regarding wine is similar to that for the bread: “In accordance with Scripture and Christian tradition, the historic and ecumenical church uses wine in celebrations of Holy Communion.” As *THM* notes, “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).

Many churches, Protestant and Catholic have always used wine, but United Methodists, at least since the late nineteenth century, have customarily served unfermented grape juice. However, there is no prohibition against the use of “regular” or non-alcoholic red wine. In those cultural contexts where “the juice of the grape is unavailable or prohibitively expensive” some variation may be required, for example rice wine (*THM* “The Communion Elements,” 30-31).

7. What kinds of drinks should we NOT use in the cup for Holy Communion?

The basic principles established for the use of wine at Holy Communion include “accordance with Scripture and Christian tradition,” attention to the practices of the “historic and ecumenical church,” representation of “the church’s covenant with Christ, established through his atoning death, and Christ’s commands at the Last Supper” (*THM* “The Communion Elements,” 31). Beverages such as fruit-flavored drinks or sodas of any kind are not in accordance with these principles and should *not* be used.