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## COMMUNION

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### Focus

In MCC, Communion is considered one of two Sacraments, gifts from God. Communion is understood and practiced in a variety of ways both in local congregations and our larger MCC movement. One constant characteristic of our celebration of communion in MCCs around the world is our “open” Communion table. This means that all may come and participate in the Celebration feast, with no prerequisites or exceptions. This may be one of the most common links between MCC churches in various contexts. It is also one of the primary things that distinguishes us from other churches. The focus of this discussion presents an opportunity for participants to grow in their awareness of how this Sacrament has and continues to impact the spiritual journeys of our brothers and sisters.

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### Testimonies About Communion

#### Transformed at the Table

Contributed by Catherine Alexander

I grew up with hints of southern roots in the black Baptist church where receiving Communion was closely tied with being baptized. There were a great deal of ritual acts performed when it came to important milestones on the Christian journey, like baptism, church membership, and receiving Holy Communion. At what was considered to be an appropriate age of understanding and consent to follow God (usually between 11-14 years of age), a child or young adult was invited into fellowship, into church membership, and to receive Holy Communion. It was a very special event that took place nearly exclusively on the first Sunday of each month.

Each first Sunday the Pastor would come down from the pulpit and stand behind a long table that was dressed up by the women of the “Altar Guild”. The colors meant something and were (as I was to later find out) in keeping with the seasons of the liturgical calendar (green, white, red, etc). The Pastor was usually surrounded by Deacons who were donned with white gloves (to go along with the white suits in the summer and black suits during the rest of the year). The Pastor would then proceed to tell *the* story: the account of Jesus’ last supper as recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. We were told primarily of Christ’s death on the cross for us and the significance of performing this ritual as a way to fulfill Christ’s commandment to “do this in memory of me”. The emphasis was placed on remembering his life and death, and on making the significance of those actions personal. As the Pastor blessed the bread and cup (wafers and Concord grape juice), the congregation typically started singing in beautiful, melancholy tones the hymn “Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees”. I think it was there at the table surrounded by beautiful yet haunting

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strains of choruses filling the sanctuary, that I developed my absolute love for the actions, attitudes, stories, and music of Holy Communion.

Everyone who was baptized and made a profession of faith in God and Jesus—in the particular way the church understood it and decreed it—could obey the command to “do this in memory of me” and participate in Communion. Everyone else could sit and watch, or sit, watch, and then respond to the call for baptism after Holy Communion was concluded.

I attended Catholic school from Kindergarten to High School graduation and even played guitar for mass on special occasions. I could not understand why the Catholic students could receive Holy Communion and we Protestants could not. Certainly this added to the mystery and mystique of the bread and the wine, and it got me thinking, even at an early age, about not only the significance of this meal, but the mechanics of it. To start with, I pondered these questions: Why did some use wine and some used grape juice? When was it appropriate to use a real loaf of bread versus the little paper-thin wafer or the hard dough-pellet? And perhaps more importantly, why were some invited to the table while others were not? This final point was particularly difficult to reconcile with my understanding (albeit fledgling) that Jesus invited *everyone* to the table.

Over time, as I questioned, spoke to learned individuals, studied, and grew through personal experiences, I came to understand more about some significant aspects of the “rest of the story”. I had walked away from God for a while after the death of my brother (a gay man who succumbed to AIDS). In my journey back, God brought me close in a very tangible way through the celebration of Communion. When I came to MCC of the Spirit in Harrisburg, PA, I was not exactly sure what I would find along the lines of theology, race, class, gender identity, etc. I entered worship with a great deal of trepidation; it was a real journey into the unknown. I can remember the two moments that everything came together for me and I realized that I was home. First was the very warm, heartfelt welcome I received from Susan, and second was the celebration of Holy Communion. It was there that I encountered the very real presence of God in community. It was at the open table celebrated each week that I came to connect more deeply to God and to community. For me, the weekly celebration of Communion at MCC is something I look forward to with anticipation. I connect with the personal prayer and am sent forth with a blessing and strength for what faces me in the week ahead.

As I became more involved in MCC ministries, I was eventually asked to be the Communion celebrant. I was both honored to be asked and fearful that I’d mess up this really important part of the worship service. The times I have participated in Communion as a celebrant have been some of the most encouraging, challenging, exciting and awe inspiring moments of worship and ministry for me. The more I discover about the physical and spiritual power of sharing in and being the community that the open table of Christ represents, the more I want to come back and celebrate.

### **Our Experience of Communion: Being Changed, Changing Others From Rev. Elder Troy Perry, with Thomas L. P. Swicegood**

Excerpted from *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and The Metropolitan Community Churches*

[The following account describes what took place when the National Council of Churches Governing Board Members were invited to worship with MCC during their deliberations about our application for membership (the vote about which was inevitably postponed).]

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Most of us were unaware as we approached Holy Communion that the National Council of the Churches of Christ did not, and had never been able to, offer the Blessed Sacrament. Although in their thirty years of existence they had managed to bring members of their various communions together in worship, Council services had always been abbreviated and noncommittal because, among other things, they could not agree upon what constitutes the Eucharist.

Metropolitan Community Churches, on the contrary, needing to be truly ecumenical with so many different denominational wellsprings, never had any difficulty celebrating Holy Communion, which we have served since our very first service in 1968.

We believe in a communion open to all who will partake. Since we never try to keep anybody away, it is not part of our consciousness that there are those people who are determined to prevent others from receiving the Holy Sacrament.

On May 11, 1983, at our services in San Francisco, two lesbian ministers, Reverend Freda Smith and Reverend Nancy Wilson consecrated communion with faith, grace, and devotion – but being women, their role in the proceedings was as foreign to some representatives of the National Council as was the ecumenical communion itself. Many of the Council's denominations had never permitted women to have any active participation at the altar, and certainly not in the celebration of the holiest of all rituals of faith. Yet our presentation was so free from self-consciousness that the leaders of many churches quickly recovered from shock and joined with our gay and lesbian community at the Table of the Lord.

People streamed forward toward the altar. We welcomed people from mainline churches, black churches, and Orthodox churches. Many were the highest-ranking officials in the National Council. Important leaders from America's churches stood in line to receive Holy Communion from Metropolitan Community Church. At separate stations, eight of us – the Reverends Nancy Wilson, Freda Smith, Sandmire, England, and Evans, and myself, and two lay participants, Michael Mank and Adam DeBaugh – were honored to serve.

Adam felt a surge of excitement when, during communion service, he saw an Episcopal bishop walking in his direction. Because of early conditioning, Adam admitted afterward that he wanted to say, "Oh no, Your Grace, you serve me!" Meanwhile, Nancy received numerous gay members of the National Council coming to the altar side by side with their lovers. Nongay members of their Governing Board were able to adjust to what was happening.

The moment was historic! Gay people were ecstatic!

I saw a fellow who works for one of the wire services standing some distance from me in the line to the altar. His reporter's notepad was protruding from a coat pocket, forgotten as he waited, inconspicuously crying. He just stood, patiently waiting in line for his turn to move forward, not trying to reach for a handkerchief to wipe away the wetness. I think that writer was not gay, but merely overwhelmed by the service.

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## Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Communion

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* What is your first memory of Communion? In what ways were you invited or not invited to participate? How did you originally understand the significance of what was happening? What did it mean for you?

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* What was your first experience of Communion in an MCC (if different than above)? What did you understand it to mean? What questions did you have? In what ways (if any) has your understanding of Communion changed during the course of your life?

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* What insights did you gain from reflecting on your own experience of Communion and sharing with others? What did you hear from others that struck you in a particular way (affirming or disturbing)?

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## Additional Thoughts About Communion

### **MCC Stories, Our Stories**

As a blended denomination and congregations, MCC is able to bring together a wide variety and mixture of Communion styles and ritual practices. Because we are not tied to a specific liturgy, MCC Communion celebrants have a great deal of freedom in the conduct of Holy Communion. Along with that freedom comes the responsibility to celebrate the ritual in a way that strengthens the faith of participants and brings honor to God. In some denominations, one may encounter restrictions surrounding who can participate in Communion, what one must do to be “worthy” of taking Communion, to whom one must confess before taking Communion, and how one must receive Communion (e.g., touch the bread, only the minister touches the bread and cup, etc.). In MCC, we practice an Open Communion, which means that anyone can come and participate fully. Also, based on our belief in the priesthood of all believers, both ordained ministers and laity may consecrate Communion in MCC churches. It is often (though not always) the case in MCC congregations that each person has the opportunity to receive a personal prayer or blessing along with the communion elements.

In the global fellowship of the Christian community, Communion and its place in worship is understood and conducted in a variety of ways that are meaningful for the community of faith. Communion is both physically experiencing the past through our actions of remembrance, and looking forward expectantly to the future. The celebration of Communion involves remembering Jesus, and re-membering (calling back together as One) the mystical Body of Christ, consisting of all the members of the Christian church around the world and throughout time.

Symbolically, the breaking of bread signifies hospitality, unity, a sense of communal sharing, and involvement in each other’s lives. What is Communion, why is it holy and what makes it a celebration? What are our stories of being in communion with God and God’s people? How are we transformed by being fed at the open table?

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### Some Quotes About Communion

“The Eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> In the Eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God himself [*sic*] acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. ... The Eucharist, which always includes both word and sacrament, is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God. It is the great thanksgiving to the God for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, for everything accomplished by God now in the Church and in the world in spite of the sins of human beings, and for everything that God will accomplish in bringing the Reign of God to fulfillment. Thus the Eucharist is the benediction (*berakah*) by which the Church expresses its thankfulness for all God’s benefits.”

(*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. World Council of Churches.)

“Personal communion with God is possible only in and through God’s own generous initiative in coming to meet us in grace. The sacraments are a way encounter God and are a means of grace.”

(Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 4-6.)

“At a moment when right-wing American Christianity is ascendant, when religion worldwide is rife with fundamental and exclusionary ideological crusades, I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centered on sacraments and action. What I found wasn’t about angels or going to church or trying to be ‘good’ in a pious, idealized way. It wasn’t about arguing a doctrine – the Virgin birth, predestination, the sinfulness of homosexuality and divorce – or pledging blind allegiance to a denomination. I was, as the prophet said, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.”

(Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*, xiii).

“Throughout history, the desire to be in each others’ presence and share the activity of eating and drinking seems to be a universal human characteristic. The practice of Communion, instituted in some way by Jesus and celebrated by the Christian Church throughout the ages, is known by a variety of names, including Communion, Holy Communion, Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, the breaking of bread, the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, and The Love Feast. Communion [*is*] used in this conversation.”

(Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church*)

“We see in the biblical accounts of Holy Communion in the first century, that in the institution of a Communion meal, there was already a great deal of diversity in the local church. We see an important characteristic of Christian worship in that there were regional variances within substantial unity of practice. In the New Testament churches Holy Communion was celebrated in the context of a meal but later the ritual of the “Love Feast” or Communion, became separate events. ... As these services continued over time, a single pattern with many possible expressions of the pattern firmly lodged itself in the Christian consciousness of how to celebrate this Communion known as the Eucharist. ... This term suggests the *giving of thanks* and is a central dimension of the feast, inherited from Judaism which characteristically approached God with a thankful recital of God’s acts.”

(James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*)

“What is crucial is that every Christian community in the New Testament seems to have practiced and found deep meaning in a meal centered on Jesus’ habit of eating and drinking with his followers. ... Across that wide spectrum of the meals of Jesus we can see enacted illustrations of the scope of God’s care and concern. Jesus’ table fellowship is a manifestation of the new creation, which embraces all who are

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discriminated against in the course of human activity. ... In the New Testament tradition then, eating and drinking with Jesus in enactment: the Eucharist is a feast in which we, with the risen Christ, incarnate the hope we have of a righteous realm in which Christ's sacrificial love destroys barriers among human beings and between humanity and God. To this feast, all are invited by God on equal terms."  
(Laurence Hull Stookey)

Today, the celebration of Communion "continues the meals of Jesus during his earthly life and after his resurrection, always as a sign of the Reign of God. In his last meal, the fellowship of God was connected with the nearness of Jesus' suffering. After his resurrection, he made his presence known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. ... Christians see the Eucharist prefigured in the Passover memorial of Israel's deliverance from the land of bondage and in the meal of the Covenant on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24). It is the new paschal meal of the Church, the meal of the New Covenant, which Christ gave to his disciples. Christ commanded his disciples thus to remember and encounter him in this sacramental meal, as the continuing people of God, until his return. The last meal celebrated by Jesus was a liturgical meal employing symbolic words and actions. Consequently the Eucharist is a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicate to us God's love in Jesus Christ, the love by which Jesus loved his own "to the end" (John 13:1)." *(Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches)*

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### Biblical Passages About Communion

1 Corinthians 11:23-35  
Exodus 24  
Luke 22:14-20  
Luke 5:1-11

Mark 14:22-25  
Matthew 14:13-21  
Matthew 26:26-29  
Revelation 19:9

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### Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* What do you think is "sacred" or "sacramental" about Communion? What aspects of the celebration of Communion in your local church are most meaningful? Is anything missing from your common experience that you wish were included?

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* Is there anything that should be required in order for someone to receive Communion? If so, what? Is there any part of the Communion ritual that you believe is essential?

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* How can we best bring together and value our various experiences and understandings of Communion without attempting to reconcile them into one "right" answer? What can be said about how "MCC" (as a collective group) understands and/or practices Communion?

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* What do you think MCC's testimony is about Communion – and about how God is present with us at the table? What does MCC have to offer the broader church and/or world that comes out of our Communion experience?

## Pulling it All Together: Expanding the Guest List

Luke 14:15-24 recounts Jesus telling a story of a great banquet. In the story, the householder sends a servant with the instruction to go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the homeless, the jobless, the lonely, those in need who may not have anyone to care for them, the hurting, anyone who is searching, so that my banquet table can be filled. Unfortunately everyone who was approached began to beg off, one after another, making excuses. The first said, 'I bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.' Another said, 'I just bought five teams of oxen, and I really need to check them out. Send my regrets.' And yet another said, 'I just got married and need to get home to my spouse.' The servant reported back, 'Sir, I did what you commanded— and there's still room.' The householder then told the servants to go to the country roads. Whoever you find, bring them in. I want my house full!

As a group, write an “invitation” to the communion table that you believe honors this type of inclusive call to the banquet. How will you word your e-vite? What type of RSVP will you request? How do you want the invitation to be passed on by others?

As a closing ritual, we suggest that you celebrate communion together as a group: breaking bread, sharing the cup, serving one another, offering prayers as you see fit. At the point in the ritual when you offer the invitation to the table, speak the invitation you have written together in unison.

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## Additional Resources

- Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper No. 111. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.
- Churches, The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community. "Bylaws." As revised at General Conference XXIII, Scottsdale, Arizona (USA), 7 Effective 3 July 2007; Re-issued 7 December 2007.
- Miles, Sara. *Take this Bread: The Spiritual Memoir of a Twenty-first Century Christian*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2007.
- Schillebeeckx, Edward. *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*. New York,: Sheed and Ward, 1963.
- Stookey, Laurence Hull. *Eucharist : Christ's Feast with the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- White, James F. *A Brief History of Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
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