

Serving Holy Communion

Revised by the Worship Working Group in April 2015

(A paper prepared by the Assembly Commission on Liturgy in April 1984 and updated in 1999.)

In the two Uniting Church *Services of the Lord's Day*, the rubric says the distribution of the bread and wine shall be 'according to local custom' (*UIW 2*, p.182, 221). But how many local customs are there? What is involved in each custom? And what is the devotional significance of each custom?

This paper is an attempt to list the most common practices in Uniting Church congregations today, to describe them and to make a brief comment about their significance. Some people long for an acceptable way of distributing Holy Communion as long as the one custom that emerges is the traditional practice of their former denomination or the practice of a particular congregation!

The view of the Worship Working Group is that we should all rejoice in this rich diversity of local custom, that we should all be familiar with the various ways in which other congregations serve Holy Communion, and that every congregation should have some diversity of practice within its own sacramental life.

General guidelines for all methods of distribution

1. The Church Council should determine the type of bread and wine used at the Lord's Supper and the manner of the distribution. It is to be hoped that such decisions will not be made or established practices changed without appropriate consultation with the meeting of the Congregation. The Eucharist is the central act of worship in the congregation. Whenever it is celebrated, it should be in a spirit of joy, wonder and reverence. The way in which a communicant has been accustomed to coming to the Lord's Table is an important part of that person's devotional and spiritual experience. If people feel that strange new customs are being imposed upon them, it will not promote a spirit of joy and wonder. Unless proposed new ways of conducting the distribution are explained and illustrated, a spirit of reverence will be over-shadowed by an atmosphere of confusion. Most people are willing to embrace new customs if they can contribute to decision-making processes within the congregation and if devotional and liturgical explanations are given. It can also be very helpful to actually illustrate the proposed new method. This could be done at a Meeting of the Congregation or at an after-church meeting on the Sunday prior to the congregation's next celebration of Holy Communion.

2. It is recommended that each congregation should practise more than one method of distribution, and there should be at least one method from both Group A and Group B (see below). Many congregations that are the union of two or more former congregations resolved this matter at the time of their coming together; the decision to use more than one custom was symbolic of their commitment to grow together. Other congregations, unaffected in their local community by the Inauguration of the Uniting Church, have voluntarily chosen to embrace another custom that was not a part of their former denominational tradition. The Working Group encourages all congregations to follow this example.

3. Some congregations with a dual practice alternate on a monthly basis between one custom and the other, referring to one custom as 'Served today around the table'; and to the other custom as 'Served today in the pews'. This may be the best plan for many congregations. However, it does rather suggest an attempt to keep an even-handed balance between 'the Methodist way' and 'the Presbyterian and Congregational way'. Another possibility is to take up a practice in the early church of adopting a different posture for the varying seasons of the Christian year: e.g., kneeling for Advent and Lent (the penitential seasons); standing for Christmas, Easter and Pentecost (the festival seasons); and remaining seated for Maundy Thursday and the remainder of the Christian

year (the Sundays after Epiphany and Pentecost being the seasons for nurture in faith and growth in Christ).

4. Lay people should assist the minister on all occasions when the congregation celebrates the Eucharist. It is Christ who presides at his table, and he acts and speaks through everything that the congregation does in obedience to his commandment. While the minister and the elders may participate and lead the worship in special ways, it is Christ's celebration of his presence in the whole congregation. Lay people should share in the liturgy of the whole service, and not just in the distribution of Holy Communion. It is appropriate for the presiding minister to begin and conclude the service, and to lead the worship for the 'Confession' and 'The Great Thanksgiving'. Some parts of the service are considerably enhanced by the participation of lay people; e.g., a lay person reads 'The Institution of the Lord's Supper', when this is not included in the "Great Prayer of Thanksgiving", and the minister in this case continues with the words beginning, "And so according to our Saviour's command, we set this bread and this cup apart..." (*UIW 2*, p.164, 211) All Christians share in the one ministry of Christ. However, in most congregations, it is the Church Council which shares with the minister the responsibility of ordering worship and inviting people to participate in its leadership. The minister and the Council should exercise sensitivity in asking particular people to lead in particular ways. For example, it is not appropriate to invite a person who is not a confirmed member and communicant to lead in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper or to distribute Holy Communion. In the following descriptions of the various methods of distributing Holy Communion, the word 'elder' is to be understood as meaning 'elders and other lay people'.

Group A - Coming forward to the table

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS FOR METHODS IN THIS GROUP

- Coming forward is a re-enactment of the day of our confirmation or adult baptism, when we pledged our allegiance to Christ.
- We are a pilgrim people, on the way to our promised inheritance; and on our pilgrim journey Christ feeds his baptised people.
- Our coming forward to be fed by Christ at his table foreshadows our going out to live for Christ in the world. Faithful discipleship involves a willingness to 'stand up and be counted'.

METHOD 1: KNEELING OR STANDING IN GROUPS

After the words of the 'Invitation', the minister receives Holy Communion at his/her own hands. The minister then serves those assisting with the distribution (elders, stewards and organist). The stewards usher controlled numbers of people in groups to the communion rails or other convenient standing place. Usually, the minister serves the bread, saying - if he or she wishes - 'JOHN or JANE, the body of Christ keep you in eternal life'. The communicant should hold out the flat palm of a hand to receive the bread - "Make of your left hand a kind of throne by placing it under your right hand, which is about to receive the King, and in the hollow of your hand receive the body of Christ, replying 'Amen'." (a 4th century Bishop of Jerusalem.) The elders serve the individual cup or chalice. If there is no provision for placing individual cups on the rails after use, other elders or stewards may collect them in separate trays. If there are no communion rails, the glasses will always need to be collected.

The people eat and drink as they are served. Those who want to come forward but are unable to kneel may either stand at the rails or sit in the front pew. After all have communicated, the minister dismisses the group with a Scripture sentence and/or a blessing; e.g., 'Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life". Go in peace to

serve the Lord'. The people return together to their seats while the second group is ushered forward by the stewards. After all the groups have come forward, the minister and an elder take the bread and wine to those who are physically unable to gather at the table.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

- (for the minister) It is Christ, not me, who is presiding at the table. First I am served by Christ before I serve others.
- (for the elders and stewards) First we are served by Christ through the hands of the minister, then we serve others in the name of Christ.
- (for the people) Christ is serving us through brothers and sisters who with us are Christ's body in this congregation. We must now go out and stand in the front-line of this congregation's service for Christ to the world.
- Kneeling - a sign of our humility before God and our dependence on Christ.
- Standing -our pilgrim journey will take us along the road of a new week of challenges and opportunities for service and witness.

METHOD 2: CONTINUOUS LINE

The same steps as in Method 1, except that the people rise from the communion rails or move off from their stationary position individually, and not as a group. Consequently, there is no dismissal by the minister. The stewards usher controlled numbers of people forward into the aisles, and the people wait at the sanctuary end of the aisle until there is an empty space at the rails or in the standing line.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

- We belong to God's family and we are all gathering at the one table and sharing in the one bread. But individually we are all members of the one body and individually we must make our personal response to Christ, sometimes being prepared to stand alone in the world for him.

METHOD 3: CONTINUOUS MOVEMENT

The same steps as in Methods 1 and 2, except that the minister and elders stand at appropriate locations in the sanctuary and the people move from the place at which the minister is serving the bread to the place where the elders are offering the cup. This method is recommended on occasions when there are hundreds of communicants. There should be a reasonable walking distance between the place where the bread is served and the place where the cup is offered. As a general rule, there should be two or three elders offering the cup for every one minister offering the bread. Another advantage of this method is that a choice of chalice and individual cup can be offered. With several areas offering both bread and cup at each location, it is possible to serve a large crowd of people with order and dignity in a short period of time.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

- As in Method 2.

METHOD 4: INTINCTION

The same steps as in Method 3, except that the minister and an elder stand only a few feet apart. The minister gives the communicant a wafer, or breaks off a piece of bread from the common loaf or a slice of bread, and says the appropriate words of distribution. The communicant then moves to the elder who is holding the chalice and the Communicant himself/herself dips the bread into the wine while the elder says the words of distribution. There are advantages and disadvantages with this method. The advantages are that large numbers of people can be served in a short time; that because the chalice or cup is not put to the lips, there can be no grounds for the fear of spreading infection; and that because less wine is required, there is less of a problem of reverently disposing of what remains of the consecrated elements. There is also much less washing up for the stewards. The disadvantage is with the suitability of ordinary table bread. In churches that use intinction, the bread used is invariably the unleavened wafer or unleavened Jewish matzo. Even though our Lord instituted the sacrament during the Week of Unleavened Bread - and would therefore have used unleavened bread, many of our people feel that the bread used at Holy Communion should be what is for us today the normal bread of our meal table. If leavened bread is used, it is important that it be of a firm texture.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

- Christ's death and resurrection are inseparably united in the one act in salvation history.

METHOD 5: SITTING OR STANDING AROUND THE TABLE

This method requires adequate room around a free-standing table and/or a sufficiently large table. Sitting at table involves a slower movement but is a helpful method for small groups or house communions, celebrations of the Eucharist during a camp or conference, or on an occasion such as Maundy Thursday night. This method has some similarities with other methods listed in Group A, in that people come forward to the table in groups and are dismissed in groups. It also has much in common with these methods listed in Group B, in that the people serve one another. No elders are required for this method, but stewards will be needed to usher people forward in groups.

SITTING: The minister sits with the first group. The minister serves the person on the right. The minister then passes the plate to the person on the left, who then serves the minister. Serving one another then continues right around the table in a clock-wise direction. When the plate has been returned to the minister, it is returned to the table and the chalice or cup is taken. When all have communicated, the minister dismisses the 'table' with a blessing, as in Method 1. For the next and subsequent 'sittings', the minister serves the person on the right, then passes the plate and chalice to the second person on the left, who then serves the first person on the minister's left.

STANDING: The minister receives Holy Communion in both kinds. The minister then moves into the circle and enables the plate and chalice to be shared with all in the circle. First, the minister serves the person on the right, then passes the plate to the second person on the left. When several people have received the bread, the

minister takes the chalice from the table and enables the cup to be shared, even though others further around in the circle are still communicating in the bread. Each group is dismissed with a blessing when all have communicated. For both sitting and standing in this method, the stewards join the last group at table. It is appropriate for words of distribution, such as, 'The body of Christ' to be said by members of the circle as they serve one another.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

- Those set out below in Group B.

Group B - Remaining seated in the pews or seats

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS FOR METHODS IN THIS GROUP

- We believe in the priesthood of all believers. Serving one another is a symbolic expression of our corporate sharing in the priesthood of Christ, mediated through his church.
- In the act of serving one another, we are offering Christ to our neighbour.
- We serve our neighbour before we are served by our neighbour. It is because Christ has come to us as the servant Lord that we are enabled to put the needs of our neighbour before our own self-interest.

METHOD 6: PEOPLE SERVING ONE ANOTHER IN REVERENT SILENCE

After 'Lamb of God', the minister communicates in both kinds at his/her own hands. The minister serves the elders who are seated if possible behind and around the table and facing the people. Normally, the elders would be seated at the table from the beginning of 'The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper'. The minister then gives the 'Invitation' as in 22 (*UIW* 2, p.182, 221) or says appropriate words, such as: 'Take and eat: the body of Christ which is broken for you: do this in remembrance of him'. And then: 'This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins; drink from it, all of you.' The elders then serve the people by taking the bread and wine to the pews or seats. The elders do not serve the people individually, other than perhaps the first or last person in a pew or row of seats. If the congregation is large and there are a sufficient number of elders and servers, it is customary for half the group to take the plates to all the pews and the other half of the elders to distribute the cup. The distribution of the cup may follow a minute or so after the bread has been served. In smaller congregations, it is usual for all the serving elders to take the plates to all the pews before they all share in the distribution of the cup; in this case, the minister does not say: 'This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ...' until the elders have returned to the table after distributing the bread. For the sake of good order at the Lord's Table, it is customary for the elders to stand in their place as a group after they have all communicated. The minister then takes the plates from the table and hands them to the elders. When all elders who are distributing the bread have received a plate(s), they move together into the congregation. When all the people have communicated, the elders move as a group from the back of the church and return to the table where the minister receives back the plates and places them on the table. The same procedure is followed with the distribution of the cup. While the elders are distributing Holy Communion to the people, the minister may be seated behind the table. The elder takes the plate or tray to the first pew and hands it

to the second person from the aisle. That person then serves the person in the aisle seat, by offering the plate of bread or tray of cups. The second person passes it to the third person who then offers it to the second person. This method is recommended only where there is an aisle at the other end of the pew and another elder in that aisle to serve the last person in the pew. If the pew ends at the wall, the plate is passed straight to the second last person. That person serves the last person. The second person then passes the plate or tray to the third person from the wall, who serves the second person. When the elder receives the plate or tray back, the elder serves the person on the aisle seat.

The procedures outlined above may need some variations to suit the arrangement of seating in some churches. However, two important guidelines should be observed on all occasions: first, people do not serve themselves; we serve our neighbours then we are served by another neighbour. Second, in no circumstance should the plate or tray of cups be passed backwards from one pew or row of seats to another. It is impossible for people to serve those sitting behind them in a meaningful and dignified way, and such a practice invites the risk of an accident with the consecrated elements.

METHOD 7: ELDERS SERVING THE PEOPLE IN REVERENT SILENCE

This method is possible only if it is convenient for the people to be seated in alternate pews or rows. The movement of people into alternate rows should take place at the beginning of 'The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper' possibly immediately before or after the singing of the communion or offertory hymn, and not just prior to the Distribution. The minister says the words that are appropriate for receiving the body of Christ. Alternatively, if it is desirable for there to be no other spoken words during the whole of the distribution, the minister says words that are appropriate for receiving Christ in both the bread and wine (as outlined in Method 6). Everyone receives in reverent silence. The minister receives Holy Communion in one or both kinds at his/her own hands. The minister serves the elders in one or both kinds. The elders then serve the people by moving along the vacant pew or row. At no time do they put the plate or tray of cups into the hands of the people.

An alternative practice with this method is that the minister does not say the appropriate words about receiving Christ before the Distribution begins. Instead, the Minister says the words of distribution to the elders individually as the minister serves them. The elders follow this example as they serve the people individually in the pew.

METHOD 8: PEOPLE COMMUNICATING SIMULTANEOUSLY

After the 'Lamb of God' (*UIW* 2, p.181-220) the elders rise from their seats, arranged behind and around the table. The minister takes the plates from the table and gives them into the elders' hands. The elders serve the people by taking the bread to the people in the pews or rows of seats. As in Method 6, the people serve one another; they do not serve themselves. Unlike Method 6, they take the bread into their hands but do not communicate by receiving it into their mouth. When all the people have received the bread into their hands, the elders move as a group from the back of the church and return to the table, where the minister receives back and places all but the last plate on the table. The elders sit down together and the minister receives them. The minister sits down and one elder stands, takes a plate from table and serves the minister. All having received the bread into their hands in reverent silence, the minister stands and says appropriate words for receiving the body of Christ. The whole congregation - minister, elders and people - then communicate simultaneously. After a short period of silence, the elders stand and the minister gives the trays of cups into their hands. The same procedure as above is followed with the distribution of the wine and the drinking simultaneously.