Pastoral Resources for Administering *Communion* during the Coronavirus Pandemic
Selected Online and Video Resources

**Online Communion in the UMC: A Pastoral and Missional Reflection (2014) by Bishop Ken Carter**

Reflection on the subject of online communion around seven essential questions. Find it at FLUMC.org.

[Click here to read now](#)

**West Ohio Conference In Extremis Statement (2020)**

The position of the West Ohio Conference of the UMC on administration of Holy Communion via social media and other digital outlets. Find it at westohioumc.org.

[Click here to read now](#)

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

Adopted by the 2004 General Conference, This Holy Mystery is the official interpretive statement of theology and practice. Find it at umcdiscipleship.org.

[Click here to read now](#)

**Video Message from Bishop Sue Haupert-Johnson, North Georgia Conference**

Bishop Sue Haupert-Johnson shares an update with North Georgia Methodists. The segment on Communion begins at 17:15.

[Click here to watch now](#)
LEADER: How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God's people to live together in harmony! Welcome to this meal, in the name of Christ. We come to share in God's love.

PEOPLE: We come to share our food and our lives.

LEADER: We come to break bread together, and open ourselves to each other.

PEOPLE: We come to express our faith and our thanks.

LEADER: May God bless this food and this fellowship.

PEOPLE: As we share our food, we give thanks for this abundance, and we remember those who do not have enough.

LEADER: May God give food to those who are hungry.

PEOPLE: May God give us a hunger for justice, and a determination to serve those who hunger for food.

LEADER: Around these tables, together in community, Christ is present among us, to remind us of his promises to us.

ALL: God, we welcome your presence with us. May the food and companionship we share nourish our bodies, hearts, and minds. May our spirits be refreshed as we live in the light of your presence with us now, and at all times and places. Amen.

Food is served, and stories are shared.

When the meal is finished, these words of peace are offered:

LEADER: Behold, the fragments of our feast. Our meal is ended, but God's banquet continues as we go from this place.

PEOPLE: Let us take the banquet into the world and never give up until all people are fed.

LEADER: May the peace of Christ be upon you, and may you be channels of peace and justice.

ALL: Amen.
Worship in “The Great Adaptation”

by Paul W. Chilcote, PhD

I recently heard a new description for these unprecedented times in which we are living: “The Great Adaptation.” That label emerges from one of the central questions for a time such as this: What within each of us must adapt for the good of all? If we are fighting a battle against a virus as a human family, we are also fighting a more ancient battle against inherent selfishness. Without question, the living of these days has pushed us to think deeply about our understanding of God, faith, relationships, and worship. What does God say to us about our worship during this time of “sheltering in place?” Moreover, given the fact that worship is both God’s revelation to us and our response to God, how does our response honor the God we worship? In the midst of this great adaptation, we have an opportunity to bear witness, in unprecedented ways, to the way of Jesus.

This is not the first time, of course, that people of faith have been called to respond to desperate circumstances. Two stories that have some parallels to our own time come immediately to my mind. In the summer of 1987 my family and I visited “Anne Frank’s House” in Amsterdam. It was a particularly chilling experience to make our way into the “secret annex” in which Anne’s family sheltered in place, hiding from the Nazis for fear of their lives. In subsequent reflections on that whole experience, and as a pastor, I asked myself, “How did they worship?” Despite the fact that they were separated physically from other Jewish families and their rabbi, they experienced God’s presence in that place. They lifted up their hearts in prayer. They quietly sang the Psalms. They worshiped God in the context of their family, small in numbers, but powerful in terms of intimacy, solidarity, and effect.

Similarly, a Methodist pastor in Latin America and some of his parishioners found themselves in prison on an Easter Sunday morning during a period of horrendous oppression. Many within their community had been killed and many of them feared for their own lives. Despite the fact that they had no provisions for a celebration of Holy Communion, they sang resurrection hymns together, prayed, and the pastor led them through the liturgy. When it came time to consecrate the elements, he elevated his empty hands and said: “The bread which we do not have today is a reminder of those who are hungry, for those who are oppressed, and for those who yearn for the provision that only God can give.” Likewise, he took a virtual cup in his hands, and said: “The wine which we do not have today is a reminder of those who, with Jesus, have shed their blood for the sake of righteousness. Through their sacrifice, they join with Jesus in witness to the triumph of God’s love over all those forces that seek to destroy life.”

I believe we can carry two important lessons away from these stories of adaptation in which the defense of life was paramount. First, worship gathers together the family of God, but the intimacy of our own families can lead to profound encounters with God. “Worship gathers together the family of God, but the intimacy of our own families can lead to profound encounters with God.”
can lead to profound encounters with God. Under duress, the family becomes that place potentially in which God’s presence, provision, and protection become real. Secondly, the “absences” we experience in life teach us important lessons about what really matters. How appropriate, for the Christian community, that this great adaptation has come in the midst of the Lenten season. Just as that Latin American celebrant found it necessary to say, “the elements we do not have...,” we can now say, “the fellowship, the face-to-face connections, the physical presence we do not have today...” We are given the opportunity to more deeply appreciate what our relationalism really means, how important our relationships with one another are, and even the significance of unity-in-diversity in a world polarized by less significant concerns.

In addition to these two stories, engaging three questions can help us navigate this adaptive time. What is authentic worship? How do we avoid “testing God” in this moment? Where can we best model agape – genuine, selfless love for others?

**Authencty.** Perhaps no text comes more directly to the central point of authentic worship than John 4:24: “God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” Here the apostle describes the “integrity of worship” at its most profound and simple level. The great adaptation teaches us anew that worship is not about style, worship space, or even direct human contact with others (as significant as this is); rather, it is about encountering God in spirit and truth. In the present moment—in the safety and security of our homes, like Anne Frank—we bring the totality of our lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the God of love.

**Faithfulness.** I grew up in a family that believed truths never conflict with the Truth. I developed a profound appreciation, therefore, for the truths of science and the amazing benefits all people derive from them. To pit faith against science, particularly in a situation like ours today, can lead to disastrous consequences. In South Korea, a secretive Christian sect in Daegu became the epicenter of the virus because this fringe group refused to cooperate in efforts to eradicate COVID19. Closer to home, some businesses and even some United Methodist churches have continued to conduct business as usual and to meet for corporate worship against the instructions of church and civic leaders. In the case of one defiant congregation, several members are now in local ICU units fighting for their lives. For us to “pack the churches on Easter” would not be a beautiful thing; it would be an unhealthy and irresponsible act putting innocent people at risk unnecessarily. It would signal our having succumbed to the temptation of putting God to the test (see Exod 17 and Luke 4).

**Discipleship.** This leads directly to the third question related to where we can model genuine, selfless love under the circumstances. Jesus calls us to pay special attention to and care for the vulnerable, the elderly, and those who are particularly compromised by the virus. While the vast majority of us will suffer little from the Coronavirus, others will lose their lives. In light of this, bravado with regard to our faith (God’s protection) and positing the false choice between life and economic security (human avarice) do not reflect the way of Jesus. Worshiping God entails our commitment to a life of selfless love and God’s vision of beloved community for all.

It feels very counterintuitive, therefore, but to separate ourselves from one another temporarily is our most profound act of worship. To worship God in spirit and in truth means to worship with those closest to us as we shelter in place during the great adaptation. We will come through this. God is not punishing us, nor will God ever abandon us. “We know that all things work together for good,” St. Paul reminds us, “for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Think about all our precautions as acts of love and true worship. To paraphrase James, “Religion or worship that is pure and undefiled is this: to care for the most vulnerable and protect oneself and others from the virus” (James 1:27). To adapt the United Methodist Morning Prayer of Thanksgiving accordingly:

> New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors – by complying with social distancing and by worshipping safely in the security of our own homes—and to devote each day to your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

Paul W. Chilcote, PhD is a retired elder and member of The Florida Annual Conference strategic leadership team. He has served as a professor at Africa University, Asbury Theological Seminary, and Duke Divinity School.
As we have moved into a protracted period of physical distancing in our efforts to stem the tide of the Coronavirus, questions have arisen with regard to how we worship as communities of faith and, more particularly, how or if we should celebrate Eucharist. This raises a whole host of questions, of course, about our theology and practice of Holy Communion. In this brief article, I want to explore some of those questions, not in an effort to answer them all, but in hopes of helping us better understand what we do and why.

The first thing to be said is that as United Methodists we already have a document that lays out a theology of the Lord’s Supper in our tradition, namely, *This Holy Mystery*. At the very outset of this statement of our beliefs, the church establishes a principle that I believe applies equally and generally to the unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves now: “avoid rigidity on the one hand and indifference on the other.” Not only in normal circumstances, but particularly in extraordinary times, we need to guard ourselves against practices leaning in the direction of extremes. The challenges of the present moment amplify the extremes and clarify them rather blatantly.

On the one hand, some maintain that Eucharistic practice must be suspended. There are no means by which an ordained Elder can consecrate the elements which are then shared in the context of a gathered community of worshipers. Neither can lay people “extend the Sacrament” safely to those unable to attend, unless they engage in practices that are potentially dangerous or prohibited given our circumstances. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some argue that families should simply celebrate Communion in their homes. In these extraordinary circumstances, any lay
person has temporary authority to lead in the Service of Word and Table. Under normal circumstances a duly ordained pastor presides, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and lay administration in such cases is proper.

I believe that these two positions fall into the dangers raised in This Holy Mystery, namely, rigidity on the part of those who are concerned about following the rules and indifference on the part of those who are willing to discard them. So, under the circumstances, what is one to do? First, in times such as these, I hope that grace will reign and that all of us will avoid a spirit of judgmentalism. We are attempting to navigate unprecedented waters. As United Methodists we do not have explicit direction with regard to this unanticipated turn of events. While some traditions are fine-tuned around these issues and others are wide open, as in many other areas of faith and practice, we find ourselves somewhere in the middle. Under these circumstances, I believe God will neither judge those who abstain from any form of Communion at this time nor those who conduct lay-led services of the Lord’s Supper for their families. But secondly, in the midst of adaptation, we might want to consider other options that are true to our heritage as United Methodists. Even one practice, in particular, that has fallen into neglect.

The Love Feast. In early Methodism in Britain, John Wesley adapted an ancient practice known as the Agapé Meal or Love Feast for use in his communities. This non-sacramental meal can be led by any person, and while not sacramental, it has the feel of Communion. This practice spread rapidly on the American frontier among Methodists who had so infrequent visits from ordained clergy. Bread and coffee (or water) are exchanged for the sacramental elements of bread and wine (grape juice). A helpful introduction to this practice and a simple order of service for the Love Feast can be reviewed at umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-love-feast. Consider incorporating this into your devotional life in your homes as you shelter in place.

Dry Eucharist. When I was a graduate student at Duke University, working on my PhD in Wesley studies, I was anxious to develop more fully what I would call a “Eucharistic spirituality.” I wanted to deepen my love for God by meeting Jesus at the Table and opening myself to the grace he offered me so freely there through the Holy Spirit. I discovered that, in the Roman Catholic tradition, some faithful disciples of Jesus practiced daily Communion and this was extremely attractive to me. At the same time, a friend informed me that one of my favorite professors, Father Roland Murphy, celebrated daily Eucharist at Duke University Medical Center. For quite a number of weeks I practiced daily Communion there, with his blessing, but without receiving the elements. This was a loose adaptation of a medieval practice known as Missa sicca (dry Mass). Even though I did not receive bread and cup, I can’t tell you how meaningful this was to me. Years later I heard a powerful story in a very different situation.

A Methodist pastor in Latin America and some of his parishioners found themselves in prison on
“God will bring us through this time of imposed separation. We will again see one another face-to-face and gather as God’s family in houses of worship.”

Consider using the Service of Word and Table devotionally, but without receiving the elements. You can find the liturgy at umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/a-service-of-word-and-table-i-and-introductions-to-the-other-forms. Eucharist means thanksgiving, and this practice can help cultivate a spirit of gratitude in this unprecedented situation. John and Charles Wesley believed that God comes to us through means – like Eucharist, prayer, and Christian fellowship – but we also receive God’s love, grace, and peace immediately (i.e., without any means at all). One of the important things to remember in the living of these days is the simple fact that this is temporary. In some ways we may never return to the “old normal.” But God will bring us through this time of imposed separation. We will again see one another face-to-face and gather as God’s family in houses of worship. Regardless, God tabernacles among us, no matter where we are and what the circumstances may be. God offers us an opportunity in the present moment to experience love, grow in grace, and serve with gladness. Even under the circumstances, we can pray with deeper understanding:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Paul W. Chilcote, PhD is a retired elder and member of The Florida Annual Conference strategic leadership team. He is an award-winning author who served as a professor at Africa University, Duke Divinity School, and has recently published Living Hope with Steve Harper.