

Communion by Extension
The Rationale, Training, and Implementation
Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast

RATIONALE

Perhaps you have heard those who talk about church bodies moving to communion by extension, a liturgy and action led by an authorized lay person. This is a very new concept in some places because the norm in our church has been that only an ordained priest can preside at a communion service.

Now, however, at least one-half of the churches in our Diocese do not have a full-time priest. The logic goes, therefore, that if consecrated bread and wine can be taken from one venue to another by a lay person and then distributed by them, perhaps this can help us imagine greater ways to administer communion by extension, a true 'extension' of grace and hospitality in *eucharistia*.

The 2015 General Convention also provided this resolution: 201-A044

Resolved, That the 78th General Convention direct the Bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority in each Diocese to discern and implement ways in which small congregations within their Diocese who are without benefit of clergy may receive Communion on a regular basis.

Communion by extension is one way forward for our diocesan commitment to mission in smaller congregations. It is a reasonable answer to the General Convention resolution as well as this question: "How can we maintain the present system, with its patterns of services, congregational expectations and church structure while opening ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit in lay persons with a specialized call to liturgical leadership?" There are other solutions we have tried and continue to support- diaconal and priestly formation for local leaders (The School for Ministry) and the solicitation of additional supply clergy.

Inherent to the challenges and opportunities we face are some important questions in this consideration:

1. What does the church need to look like in order to develop and grow communities that can transform both individuals and neighborhoods with the love of God? 2. How does this vision include providing Holy Communion in smaller communities who are without the benefit of clergy?

If we are going to do more than maintain the status quo, we need to have a bigger picture in our imagination of how Holy Communion can be shared and nourish communities on our margins. We must move away from thinking of Holy Communion as a commodity, but rather as a gift we appreciate and share across the bounds of our bonds in Christ. We can no longer afford to be strictly parochial in our vision but imagine and encourage other forms of worship where lay people can be trained to lead and share in this ministry and others.

THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

We can draw upon the witness of scripture to help further understand the assumptions and proclamation we are making about the nature of Holy Communion and sacraments in general.

The Eucharist is a memorial of the Christ event, of what is narrated in the Gospels as his Pasch, in which there is a divine self-manifestation and self-gift. The celebration brings this event to the present of the community embodied in that body which is the living body of Christ (*koinonia*). The ultimate referent of interpretation is always the Christ event, even when through different biblical texts the event continues to be reinterpreted. The sacramental action, as an action of God's grace, is guaranteed by the presence of the Holy Spirit working in the Church.

Sacraments have to be interpreted as liturgical celebrations, and this includes word, blessing, and ritual action. This approach is a heuristic rather than a model. That is, it attends to operations, to word, blessing, and rite as actions and seeks insight from their interaction into what it is to keep the memorial of Christ's Pasch and to enter communion with him through such celebration.

It is also the proclamation of Word and the memory of the gift expressed in prayer which leads the community from the baptismal font to the eucharistic table. Presence at the table, at the font, shapes the being of community in relation to its environment, earthly, human, and social. Hence the interpretation of Word and sacrament belong together and need to be understood in their interaction.

Interpretations of the sacraments have to face the diverse character of the scriptural texts. They cannot reduce the texts to a single grand narrative or overarching symbolism. Interpretation respects the plurality of faith in Christ already evident in the New Testament, as well as respecting Hebrew and wisdom literature as stories of salvation in their own right, not to be reduced to typologies of Christ and Church. It respects the relation between rites and peoples, between rites and cultures, and attends to the diversity to which this may give rise.

All interpretation is contextual and intertextual. When new liturgical practices are employed, or placed in new situations and thus a different sort of intertextual play, this can give rise to new meanings. All interpretation is anticipatory, open to whatever possible meanings and actions the interpretation of Word and the sacrament make possible and open to whatever "comes from the future," anticipated in the passing present of the memory of the past.

The act of assembling, where people bring the gifts of their lives and receive the eucharistic gift and blessing, echoes the activity of the earliest liturgical witness: gathering in assembly, bringing the richness of our shared life as well as the multitudes of our needs. We brings gifts that express the expanse of our lives and we encounter the same in others. Through gathering to receive from God, we continue to obey this urge to bring everything of our lives and to have it transformed in the divine encounter.

STEWARDSHIP

As evidenced in the earliest communities, gifts were put in a basket, one alongside another, confiding them to the care of the greater Church. What was brought was blessed, shared, and increased by God's own giving. In the blessing of the gifts, it is life itself that is given increase. An exchange, an economy is opened up in which God's initiative outstrips humanity's and brings about a new order.

This new order is deeply tied to our stewardship of our spiritual and material gifts. The term "gift" itself is the pivot of the sacramental action and ensuing catechesis. Our catechesis will naturally highlight the nature of the Church as the place and the assembly in which God's gift is received and its presence recognized in life and in the things of earth. At the end of each sacramental liturgy, the congregation is sent forth in Christ's peace with a mission to witness to him, to the power of his Spirit, and to the gift of God's love.

Our stewardship catechesis is grounded here. Good celebration and good catechesis open hearts to the dynamism of our giving to and receiving from God that remains at the core of every eucharistic celebration. Bread and wine always relate to social, economic, and cultural realities. Their production in and of itself belongs to an intersubjective and organized human society. The needs of the many are met only if there is social cohesion and an orientation of generous living. This stewardship belongs to and shapes the bonding of believers in common identity, in mutual service, and in hope.

Depending on one's upbringing or spiritual preferences, churches and leaders will react differently to some of these ideas. It is necessary that we think and experiment with these things now before the desire for expediency or desperation takes over and we acquire habits and practices which we might not have chosen if we had followed established guidelines for expanding eucharistic expression and hospitality for all.

After all, the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* BCP ensures the centrality of the Eucharist and this affirmation has led to "unintended" effects on smaller congregations in a cultural context that is vastly different today than in 1970s. In some sense, seen through these lenses, we can better appreciate the ancient Celtic eucharistic invitation:

This is the table, not of the church, but of the Lord. It is made ready for those who love him and for those who want to love him more. So, come, you who have much faith and you who have little; Come, not because it is I who invites you - it is the invitation of the Lord. It is his will that those who want to should meet him here.

REFLECTION

Communion by Extension will never fulfill the fullness of a four-fold celebration of the Eucharist. Yet, it provides an opportunity, in the absence of a priest, to bring worshippers into the communal act of thanksgiving. The reception of the blessed bread and wine connects people across time and geography and with God and those who celebrated the Eucharist earlier in the day/week. It offers to many an opportunity

to receive God's grace, present and embodied in the sacramental elements, and to achieve connection and communion with those able to celebrate the Eucharist in a different locale.

Communion by Extension encourages worshippers in both congregations to manifest more fully what it means to be the Body of Christ, united with one another across parochial contexts.

Thus, we have steadfastly affirmed that isolation is contrary to Christian faith. Regardless of a congregation's size, we are part of something larger than ourselves and our witness to God's presence and love is strengthened by our connection to and collaboration with one another. This liturgical offering provides congregations with an additional opportunity to be drawn into a new and deeper spiritual relationship with Christians in a neighboring congregation.

Communion by Extension is not intended as a solitary response to the diminished priestly presence in congregations. Rather, it is offered in conjunction with an intentional process of ongoing Christian Education with particular attention to the role of the priesthood in Episcopal ecclesiology and the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian spiritual practice. It is expected that participating congregations will commit to an appropriate education process supported by the Bishop and appointed Diocesan Staff.

ACTION

Goals:

1. Develop a fuller understanding in the congregation about the Eucharist and the difference between celebrating Eucharist and receiving Communion.
2. Deepen a congregation's link to and understanding of the priesthood and the priesthood of all believers with a special emphasis on our Baptismal Covenantal promise: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?"
3. Engage a conversation about other aspects of priesthood (besides sacramental) that are missing from the life of a congregation that does not have a priest in residence or visiting on a regular basis.
4. Train leaders in the practice of liturgical planning, the lectionary, special seasons, and eucharistic theology.
5. Analyze and study the form of service published by the diocese: *An Order for the Administration of Communion from the Reserved Sacrament*.
6. Understand basic principles of homiletics: commentaries, research, exegesis/eisegesis, and proclamation. Understand and potentially employ a structured conversational approach with sermons.

IMPLEMENTATION

Any exercise or administration of Holy Communion by Extension will have the approval of the Bishop. Adequate teaching will take place before Holy Communion by Extension is introduced with special care being taken to explain the relationship between the Holy Eucharist and Holy Communion by Extension. In view of the public liturgical nature of the Order for Holy Communion outside the Eucharist, special importance will be attached to the manner in which the rite is used. The pattern, structure and intention of this liturgy will be noted with care and everything necessary to make clear that it is not a Celebration of the Eucharist. For example, lay ministers will conduct the service from the Prayer Desk or Lectern, and proceed to the altar only for the purpose of the administration of the Holy Communion. The Service will be led only by a Deacon or licensed Lay Eucharist Minister as appointed by the Bishop and appropriate vesture will be worn.

As always, reverent care will be taken in handling the consecrated elements. The vessels used will be appropriate for the task – seemly, secure and dignified, and, where possible, specifically designed for the task. The consecrated Bread and Wine that is not required for Communion will be reverently consumed and the vessels cleaned in the customary way.

The Bishop and Missioner for Discipleship will be available to provide assistance, training, consultation and to answer questions as needed.
