

SUNDAY DINNER WITH JESUS:
TOWARD A MORE SACRAMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

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To Don Boyd who by his living and teaching demonstrated the sacramental life

ABSTRACT

SUNDAY DINNER WITH JESUS: TOWARD A MORE SACRAMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

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The celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion is an important part of the Methodist tradition. However, the role the Sacrament plays in the life of United Methodists today is diverse. For some, Holy Communion is valued as a subjective and private moment with Jesus Christ. For others, the Sacrament holds objective value as a means of grace outside of one's personal experience. Often, the way that Communion is meaningful affects one's opinion of how often it should be celebrated. My own spiritual journey has indicated that it is possible to have one's understanding of the Sacrament broadened and for the role Communion plays in one's spiritual life changed. In this paper, I develop a distinction between the ways that Holy Communion is meaningful to individual Christians and draw connections between the understanding of Communion and one's sacramental practice. This paper tells the story of my project that was modeled on three aspects of my own sacramental transformation: broadened understanding, increased frequency of reception and peer reflection. The goal was to observe whether transformation might occur to the ways that Holy Communion was understood and experienced by the participants. During the Season of Lent 2013, the people of Perry First United Methodist Church in Perry, NY were invited to receive Holy Communion weekly and to hear a series of principally narrative sermons on the Sacrament. A representative group of seven individuals was recruited to participate in a weekly

reflection on the experience. The results showed that many participants, from the congregation and the Study Group, exhibited a transformation in the ways that Holy Communion was experienced especially in regards to the corporate nature of the Sacrament and the objective meaning attributed to its celebration.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

ONE	THE TABLE IS PREPARED FOR THE FEAST..... 1
	The Title
	The Context
	The Names for the Sacrament
TWO	CHRIST THE LORD INVITES TO HIS TABLE..... 7
	The Eucharist in the Methodist Tradition
	Important Stories from Perry First UMC
	My Own Journey to the Table
THREE	WE LIFT UP OUR HEARTS TO THE LORD.....23
	The Convergence of Stories
	My Journey as a Model
FOUR	JESUS TOOK BREAD, BLESSED IT, BROKE IT AND GAVE IT.....30
	The Lay Advisory Team
	The Preaching Phase
	The Experiential Phase
	The Group Reflection Phase
	The Study Group
	Initial Data Collection
	The First Interview
	Week One – Remembrance
	Week Two – Real Presence
	Week Three – The Body of Christ
	Week Four – The Sacramental Life
	Week Five – The Eucharist as Our Sacrifice
	Week Six – The Eucharist as Christ’s Sacrifice
	Week Seven – The Joy of Meeting the Risen Lord
	Follow-Up Surveys
	Post-Project Interviews
FIVE	POUR OUT YOUR HOLY SPIRIT..... 63
	Signs of Transformation
	A New Narrative
	Did the Reflection Group Phase Matter?
SIX	GRANT THAT WE MAY GO INTO THE WORLD IN THE STRENGTH OF YOUR SPIRIT TO GIVE OURSELVES FOR OTHERS..... 74
	Where Do We Go From Here?

APPENDIX

A	THE DUTY OF CONSTANT COMMUNION.....	79
B	LAY ADVISORY TEAM MATERIALS.....	85
C	SURVEYS AND INTERVIEW FORMS.....	88
D	SERMONS.....	96
E	GROUP REFLECTION SESSION PLANS.....	110
F	SURVEY RESULTS.....	117
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	120

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CHAPTER ONE

THE TABLE IS PREPARED FOR THE FEAST¹

The Title

I was taught in my seminary preaching class that a title should be descriptive enough to let people know what the preacher was going to say and inviting enough that people would want to hear what was being said. I hope I accomplish that with this title. I chose those words carefully because they reflect the role that Holy Communion has played throughout the centuries in the life of the Church. “The Lord’s Supper is the normal Sunday dinner of the family of God which we call the church.”²

“Sunday dinner”– that time of bygone years for many families - when the clan would gather, the pot roast which had simmered all morning would be sliced and served in all of its juicy glory, the potatoes would have just enough lumps so you knew they were homemade, granddad would offer up a prayer of thanksgiving and everyone from youngest to oldest would “dig in.” Laughter, stories, the occasional tiff were all a part of the sacred bonds that seemed to be strengthened by the food and the fellowship. It was as

¹ The chapter titles I have chosen are my own expressions of various parts of the liturgy from a *Service of Word and Table I* in the United Methodist Book of Worship. I have attempted to find titles that reflect the meaning of each chapter. My aim is to present this project as a sacramental act of its own – a material means through which those involved experienced the presence of Christ.

² William H. Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Upper Room, 1981), 10.

much a regular part of one's weekly existence as going to church. It was because of these times together that we knew we were more than just blood relations. We were family.

“Sunday Dinner With Jesus” – like those family gatherings, a time of nourishment and bonding. Except that this table belongs to the Lord. And Jesus is here, and if you will allow me the license, he is slicing the pot roast and scooping up the mashed potatoes. And as we are made one with Him once again, we are once again made one with each other. And it can be said that it is at this table where we come to know that we are more than friends sharing some time together. It is at this table that we come to know we are family.

While the title points to my vision for what the Sacrament can be in the life of the church, the sub-title points to my hope for this project. “Toward” because one's spiritual journey is never complete. We never arrive. And “Toward” because I don't expect that this project should, or could, seek to be an end unto itself. But I am hoping that those who were to become a part of this project would experience a nudge or a pull towards something that is new for many of them – “A Sacramental Spirituality.” While it would be easy to infer that any spirituality with the word “sacramental” attached to it would imply that the receiving of the Sacrament often would be required, that is not necessarily true. I do see sacramental spirituality as blossoming forth from one's experience of the Eucharist but it doesn't end there. The experience of Christ in the Eucharist becomes foundational for experiencing Christ everywhere. Donald Baille refers to this as a “sacramental universe” in which “the idea that the sacraments in the specific sense are but concentrations of something very much more widespread, so that nothing could be in the special sense a sacrament unless everything were in a basic and general sense

sacramental.”³ I also see this sort of spirituality as arising out of Wesley’s understanding of the Real Presence being grounded in the Incarnation (an idea I will explore in more depth in Chapter Two).

For the purpose of my project, a sacramental spirituality is one in which a person accepting and experiencing the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist opens the door for accepting and experiencing Christ’s presence in the rest of one’s daily life. The ultimate goal of my project is not to just deepen one’s experience and understanding of Holy Communion. My ultimate hope is that this deepening of the sacramental experience will have implications for the spiritual lives of those who participate – specifically, that participants will come to see Jesus vividly present and at work throughout their everyday existence.

The Context

Perry First United Methodist Church (PFUMC) is located in Perry, Wyoming County, New York. The population of the Perry zip code (14530) was 5575 as of the 2010 US Census with 3673 of those residing in the Village of Perry.⁴ Perry, like many towns in rural western New York, is declining in population as comparing data from the

³ Donald Baille, *The Theology of the Sacraments* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 42 quoted in Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1991), 82-3.

⁴ “American Fact Finder,” United States Census Bureau, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml#none (accessed January 10, 2014).

2000 US Census shows a decrease of 205 or 3.5%.⁵ The area is rather homogenous with 96.5% of the population being white and an additional 3.2% being Hispanic or Latino.⁶ Outside of the village, the area is largely rural with farming being the primary use of land. Several large dairy farms (herds of 1000 or more cows) are located within a few minutes of Main Street.

The PFUMC is a congregation with 313 Professing Members and an average worship attendance of 71.⁷ The church traces its roots to 1816 when Bishop Francis Asbury sent the Reverend Robert Minchell to serve a group of six Methodists who had begun to meet in a local log cabin home. The First Methodist Episcopal Church of Perry was organized in 1819 with 36 members. The group erected its first Church building in 1824. Construction on the present church building began in 1906. The congregation is very proud of its building, especially the Akron style sanctuary. An extensive remodeling project was completed in 2006. At that time, the structure was also placed on both the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places.

The congregation is actively involved in mission and outreach. The Perry Area Food Pantry and Clothes Closet was started by PFUMC members and housed for many years in the basement of the church. It has grown to occupy a 2000-square foot storefront

⁵ “American Fact Finder,” United States Census Bureau, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_00_SF1_DP1 (accessed January 10, 2014).

⁶ “American Fact Finder,” United States Census Bureau, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1 (accessed January 10, 2014).

⁷ These figures are from the Statistical Report for the Year 2012 filed with the General Commission on Finance and Administration of the United Methodist Church.

on Main Street and is now an independent entity with its own Board of Directors.

Although the ministry is very ecumenical in nature, PFUMC has a very large presence on the board and among the volunteer force. The church also runs the Noah's Ark Pre-School which began operation in the fall of 2008 and provides a church based start to the educational journey of 10-16 children each year. Many community groups use the church building including Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Alcoholics Anonymous and a local women's club. During my tenure at PFUMC (November 2009 through July 2013), many local families rented out the fellowship hall for various functions. And each year the Community Band, led in part by members of PFUMC, holds a concert with more than 30 musicians participating.

The Names for the Sacrament

One of the issues to deal with when the subject of your project is Holy Communion is to decide how you are going to refer to the Sacrament. In some traditions the various names used in conjunction with the celebration of the Sacrament seem to refer to distinct actions. Communion, in the Roman Catholic Church, means "the actual reception of the Sacrament of the Eucharist."⁸ The Roman devotion known as the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament seems to indicate that the elements and the Sacrament are synonymous. Typically, there are no such distinctions present in the United Methodist tradition. It is my understanding that the liturgy, the elements and the act of receiving function together to become the Sacrament. The various parts of the

⁸ Patrick Morrisroe, "Holy Communion." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07402a.htm> (accessed January 6, 2014).

ritual action are a sacramental unit. Holy Communion is not Holy Communion without those three aspects being present.

The official United Methodist document on the Sacrament uses the various names to illustrate the diversity of meanings present in celebrating Holy Communion. However, each is used to refer to the totality of the experience and they are largely synonymous.⁹ The Eucharist, from the Greek *ευχαριστειν*, captures the idea of thanksgiving.¹⁰ Holy Communion helps to emphasize the bond that we experience with God and with other Christians. The Lord's Supper evokes the image that Jesus Christ is our host and invites us to come to his table.¹¹ I use them interchangeably in this paper. I have also taken to the habit of referring to this sacrament as "the Sacrament." In my usage, it does not refer to the consecrated host and wine as in the "Blessed Sacrament" of the Roman Catholic tradition. Neither does it imply that somehow the sacrament of Baptism is any less a sacrament. It may be a bastardized, shortened usage the Blessed Sacrament terminology, but I used it in a broader sense.

There is also an ambiguity of usage in the Methodist tradition regarding the term "Communion" and what is meant by it. This abbreviated form of Holy Communion can refer to the entire liturgical experience – as in "celebrating Communion." The term is also used, however, to refer to the part of the rite in which a communicant partakes of the bread and the cup –as in "receiving Communion." For the purpose of this paper, the context will dictate the meaning.

⁹ Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2005), 9.

¹⁰ Willimon, 10.

¹¹ Felton, 9.

CHAPTER TWO

CHRIST THE LORD INVITES TO HIS TABLE....

When faced with having to choose a topic for a Doctor of Ministry project, the choice of topic was a natural one: the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Since seminary, and particularly since my own liturgical and sacramental awakening at Christ's Church Episcopal Cathedral in Lexington, KY, the Sacrament has been a vital part of my own faith journey. I have read about it, written about it, preached about it, taught about it. In each parish that I have served, I have endeavored to deepen the sacramental understanding and experience of the people in the congregation with the hope that the transformative power of the Sacrament would become real to them as it had become real to me. Yes, I know that I cannot control the grace of the Sacrament any more than I can control my 3-iron and I am aware that others will not experience Christ in the Eucharist as I have. However, my own experiences have driven me to become a Sacramental Evangelist of sorts. God used the Sacrament to transform my relationship with Jesus Christ and I long to give others the opportunity to experience the same transformation.

While the topic was a natural fit for this researcher, I knew that it was too large to be a viable project. Questions loomed regarding how this topic might be relevant, or not, to the faith community I was serving. While I was enthusiastic about the topic, the project needed to connect with the congregation. As I reflected upon the narratives present, three particular strands converged to birth my project. The first was the role of

Holy Communion in the Methodist tradition, both historically and today. The second was the faith stories, including experiences of Holy Communion, of the people at the PFUMC in Perry, NY. The third was my own Sacramental journey. It is at the intersection of those three narratives that my project found life.¹ I will explore each of those strands.

The Eucharist in the Methodist Tradition

The question of the role of Holy Communion in the Methodist tradition is one that is at the heart of the Methodist identity. John Wesley was an ardent proponent of frequent Communion. His sermon on “The Duty of Constant Communion” responds critically to the common practice in the 18th Century Church of England of infrequent Communion. In a letter to the early Methodist bishops, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, Wesley wrote, “I advise the elders to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord’s day.”²

For Wesley, the matter of how often Christians should receive Communion was rooted in his theology of the Eucharist. When Christians gathered at the table, there was more happening than just a memorial meal – a mental recalling of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Taking Communion was to avail oneself of God’s grace. In the beginning of his book *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Wesley included “A Treatise on the Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice” by the 17th century Anglican divine, Daniel Brevint.

¹ Carl E. Savage, William B. Presnell, Leonard I. Sweet and Michael J. Christensen, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 51.

² Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, 18.

Brevint wrote,³ “Christ ordained outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.”⁴ In his sermon “Means of Grace” Wesley quotes the *39 Articles of the Church of England* when he defines a sacrament as “an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.”⁵ This makes explicit Wesley’s belief in the connection between the sign (signum) and the thing signified (res). The sign is our guarantee of the grace. Just as certainly as one feeds on the bread and the wine, one is sure to receive God’s grace.⁶ For Wesley, if the bread and the wine are truly spiritual food, then it follows that you should partake of this food as often as possible.

A similar line of reasoning arises from Wesley’s understanding of the Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. For Wesley, the ideal of the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament was not a “substantial” presence as in the Roman Catholic or Lutheran doctrines but was more than the “spiritual presence” found in Calvin. There was an incarnational aspect to Wesley’s understanding. Just as Christ came to earth in the material form of humanity to make possible our redemption through his Passion, Christ comes to us once again through the material elements of the bread and the wine to renew in us the benefits of that same Passion. This means that the idea of Presence was that the

³ While I believe Hooker is credited with originating the phrase “outward signs of invisible grace”, I could not locate that source credibly.

⁴ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, 11th ed. (London: J. Kershaw, 1825), 10.

⁵ John Wesley and Nathanael Burwash, *Wesley's Doctrinal Standards: Part I: The Sermons* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Pub. Co., 1988), 152.

⁶ Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, 10.

communicant encountered a Person who was active.⁷ If Holy Communion is truly an encounter with the risen Lord, then that is not something to be sought after only occasionally.

However, the practice in the early days of American Methodism was for Communion to be served quarterly. It is my understanding that this level of frequency was, in part, the result of a shortage of Methodist clergy. Because Methodist churches far outnumbered ordained clergy, early “circuit riders” were frequently responsible for many churches over very large areas often on or near the frontier of American expansion. In order to prevent churches from being neglected sacramentally, the policy was that each circuit rider needed to visit each church on the circuit at least once per quarter to administer Holy Communion (and to conduct necessary business). While I am unclear as to what the common practice was in early urban Methodism, it is the practice of the frontier Methodism that became the norm throughout the Methodist movement.

As is often the case, however, a practice that begins for one reason becomes imbedded in the narrative and becomes the norm without thought as to how or why things are done like they are. I believe this is what happened with quarterly Communion. It appears that receiving Communion quarterly was originally intended to be the minimum frequency with which a Methodist received Communion. Over time, it became not only the norm but still viewed by some Methodists as the most often Communion should be received.

Many Methodists over 65 years of age remember when receiving Communion once a quarter was the standard. While it varies from congregation to congregation, the

⁷ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1994), 204.

move to more frequent celebrations generally began in earnest after the new United Methodist liturgical texts were published in 1972.⁸ But the movement was incremental. Monthly Communion replaced quarterly Communion. And while the move to monthly Communion seems to have taken hold, the move to weekly Communion is meeting with more resistance. Hoyt Hickman, in conjunction with the release of the United Methodist Book of Worship in 1992, polled United Methodist congregations across the country and could identify only 17 that were celebrating the Sacrament weekly.⁹

In 2004, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted the report of a denominational task force on the sacrament of Holy Communion as the official document regarding theology and practice. The document, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*,² explores a United Methodist theology of the Sacrament and the corresponding practices that should arise out of that understanding. Survey work done by the General Board of Discipleship prior to 2000 indicated that many United Methodists believed that Communion was important in the Christian life but also complained “of sloppy practice, questionable theology and lack of teaching or guidance.”¹⁰ A wide range of different practices among United Methodist churches gives evidence to the truth of that assessment.

The document makes it clear that part of the move toward a richer sacramental life is the practice of weekly Communion.¹¹ For those in more liturgical traditions, having

⁸ Felton, 34.

⁹ Taylor Burton-Edwards, emailed to author, December 5, 2012.

¹⁰ Felton, 7.

¹¹ Felton, 19.

to encourage weekly Communion may seem odd. As with Wesley, it is odd to me that there is so much resistance to this move but the problem seems to be a lack of understanding about (or disagreement with) the Methodist doctrine of Holy Communion. A strictly symbolic (Zwinglian) understanding of Communion has become the default in Methodist pews in America. Unless specifically taught otherwise, the prevailing Evangelical/Baptist understanding becomes assumed even by those who would never want to be identified as Evangelical or Baptist. The response I often encounter when teaching about a doctrine of Real Presence is, “Isn’t that Catholic?”

While *This Holy Mystery* is the first official endorsement of weekly Communion in the United Methodist Church, The Order of Saint Luke has been encouraging this practice since the 1940s.¹² And, according to a study performed by the General Board of Discipleship and the United Methodist Publishing House, the percentage of Methodist Churches celebrating Communion weekly is on the rise.¹³ However, this move is seldom a smooth ride. In many of the United Methodist Churches of which I am aware, the move to more frequent Communion has been laced with Machiavellian maneuvering on the part of some congregants, autocratic edicts on the part of some clergy and raised levels of anxiety in nearly everyone. The days in which weekly Eucharist is common in United Methodist Churches seem very far away.

¹² “About Us,” The Order of Saint Luke, http://saint-luke.net/?page_id=19 (accessed January 28, 2014).

¹³ *Report of the 2004-2007 Joint Worship and Music Study Committee* (General Board of Discipleship and the United Methodist Publishing House, 2007), <http://www.gbod.org/lead-your-church/music-research/resource/complete-music-study> (accessed October 21, 2013).

Important Stories from Perry First UMC

The sacrament of Holy Communion has been, and is, important in the congregational life of Perry First United Methodist Church. Members of the Lay Advisory Team told me that Quarterly Communion was the norm at some point in the past, possibly as late as 1980.¹⁴ However, monthly Communion has been the practice long enough that it is a part of the identity of the congregation. Since my appointment to PFUMC in 2009, the Sacrament has been added to several services throughout the year including Easter, Pentecost and Christmas Eve. A group began meeting weekly for Holy Communion during Lent 2010. This group of people decided to keep meeting every other week throughout the rest of the year as well. These increases in the number of times Communion was available sparked reaction from many individuals. Informal conversations revealed objections over the increased number of services that included the Sacrament. These concerns included questions about whether we were becoming more Catholic than Methodist as well as concerns about the conflict that these changes were creating. There was, however, one concern that seemed to be more deeply rooted: the fear that having Holy Communion more often than once a month would lessen its meaningfulness in the life of the congregation. At the same time, not everyone shared those fears.

A brief survey about Holy Communion was made available to the congregation in the winter of 2012. I received 24 responses. When asked what was the biggest concern about the UMC encouraging churches to have Communion weekly, 40% said they were

¹⁴ This information was gleaned from a discussion with the Lay Advisory Team at the first meeting on September 18, 2012.

afraid the Sacrament would become less meaningful. When asked how they felt about the UMC encouraging this practice, 40% were opposed to the idea, 40% were in favor of it and 20% didn't care one way or the other. Those responses tell me two things: First, there were a surprising number of people who were already open to the idea of having Communion each Sunday. Second, the most prevalent reason people were opposed to weekly Communion was the fear that it would lose its meaning. When it comes to more frequent Communion, I liken some of the people at PFUMC to the Israelites after having wandered in the desert for years. Here they are within sight of the Promised Land, but the fear of what that promise holds prevents them from seizing it.¹⁵ Like the Israelites who were wondering how in the world they would ever overcome the giants that inhabited the land, many people at PFUMC seem afraid of the unknown. Or more accurately, they are afraid of what they think will happen (Communion losing its meaning) if weekly Communion becomes the normal practice.

I interpreted the data to indicate that at least 80% of those who took the survey viewed Holy Communion as being a very important part of their faith experience. For the 40% who wanted it every week, Communion is important in a way that means it should be a regular part of our worship life together. For the 40% who are afraid it would lose its meaning, Communion is too important to risk making it unimportant. Whether one was in favor of or opposed to the idea of celebrating the Lord's Supper more often, it was a meaningful part of a person's spiritual life.

There are other strands of narrative that I have encountered during my time at PFUMC that I believe are important to my project. The people value the experience of

¹⁵ Numbers 13 (New Revised Standard Version). Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical references will be from the NRSV.

God being close at hand. When someone would request that a particular song be sung in worship (or complain that we didn't sing one of his or her favorites often enough), I would inquire as to why that song was special. In response I would regularly hear stories of a particular time in which God's presence was palpable during the singing of that song. While engaged in a conversation with a man in his 40's during which he was expressing some concern over the long term future of the church, I heard about how this particular church building was important to him because of those times when he could feel God's presence there. When the contemporary pianist was unable to assist in worship, it became almost inevitable that at least one parishioner would comment on the way out of the sanctuary how much Eric's playing was missed because "he makes God seem so close" or something to that effect. The subjective experience of God being near in worship is a highly valued part of life together.

Another important part of PFUMC's narrative is that it strives to be a friendly and welcoming church. On their church profile, they identified their "greatest strengths and capabilities" as "caring, willingness to serve, supportive."¹⁶ Not only do they see themselves as friendly (after all, most churches do see themselves this way) but I hear stories of their friendliness from first time guests, my family visiting from out of town and clergy colleagues who attend worship from time to time. Being friendly is a part of how PFUMC lives out its desire to be a family. And not just a family, but a family that welcomes outsiders. They indicated on their profile that they strive to be "open to everyone." Greeters are posted each Sunday by both exterior doors to the church. Ushers stand outside of each entrance to the sanctuary. A coffee hour is held once a

¹⁶ This quote is from the 2013 Church Profile submitted to the Bishop of the Upper New York Annual Conference.

month to provide a setting in which regular attendees and visitors alike can make connections. While these efforts at hospitality are typical in many churches, PFUMC utilizes other laypersons who make an intentional effort to locate visitors in the worship service and to introduce themselves. If children are present, these “hospitality people” will inform the visiting family about the presence of the nursery, invite the children to come forward for the Children’s Time with the Pastor and explain the Sunday School program. Other questions are answered and the visitor is invited to complete an information card if they desire. As I spend the time before worship connecting with people, I see others in the congregation taking the initiative to make contact with those whose faces are unfamiliar. The goal is to communicate to a visitor that they have happened upon a family into which they are welcomed. This sense of being a welcoming community opens the door for this congregation to embrace the potential for The Lord’s Supper to build a deeper sense of communion with each other.

The current importance of Communion in the life of the church, the desire to experience God in real ways, and the desire to be a welcoming family are all prominent aspects to the story of PFUMC. These elements all provided the potential points of contact between my topic and the congregation.

My Own Journey to the Table

My own personal experience of having my spiritual life transformed through the Sacrament is in large part responsible for my interest in helping others experience the same kind of transformation. My journey from one particular understanding and practice of Holy Communion to another has led me to believe that there are others out there who

are longing for a deeper understanding and practice than is now available to them. And my own experience in trying to move others into this deeper sacramental life is a large factor that helped to birth this project. Having led one congregation from a monthly to a weekly pattern of receiving Communion, I know first-hand how difficult this process can be. I also know just how hard it is to bring about this change in a way that it becomes a part of the narrative of a congregation as opposed to an appendage which can easily be lopped off when a pastoral change is made. Therefore, my own story has two important parts – personal and professional.

I was raised mostly in Baptist churches that celebrated Communion on the first Sunday of the month. And I was raised to be suspect of those traditions that offered Communion more frequently. The moment was *too* holy, *too* solemn, *too* special to be entered into *too* often. And besides, there was no way that those who took Communion weekly could possibly do it with the intent and the focus necessary. They had to be just going through the motions. And to be honest, I did not want to be that close to God too often because to do so meant I had to experience anew the guilt I bore for Jesus' death. My understanding of Communion was that it was a time for me to be sorry for my sins and feel thankful (and guilty) that Jesus died for those sins. By assuming this posture before God, I experienced God in very close and intimate ways. God's presence was confirmed by the feeling that God was near. However, if I did not feel God close to me, I must not have been sorry enough for my sins. There were times when I remember being so overwhelmed with those feelings of guilt and unworthiness that I refrained from taking the bread and the cup as it passed by me in the pew.

Yes, there were times where grace would break through, but Communion

primarily served as a reminder that I was guilty of putting Jesus on the cross. In fact, I am left with the impression that the intense feeling of guilt was necessary in order for God to be close to me during those times. Communion was a special time with God but its special nature depended upon my preparing myself and getting right with God by admitting that I was a sinner guilty of Jesus' death. The onus for getting something out of Communion was mine.

Early on in my seminary experience at Asbury Theological Seminary, I began to understand that there were other ways of looking at the sacrament of Holy Communion. There was an objective reality to Christ's presence at the table that was real apart from the way I felt. I was introduced to the idea of seeing this rite as being more about God's grace freely given than about my own sin and unworthiness. I was introduced to the Wesleyan idea of Real Presence without it being presented as being "too Catholic." I learned from reading Wesley's sermon, "The Duty of Constant Communion," that no amount of preparation could make me worthy of taking the bread and the cup.

It was about this time that I was given a copy of *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail* by Robert E. Webber. The book is a spiritual autobiography about the author's journey of moving from a low worship, non-sacramental expression of the faith to a liturgical, sacramental expression. Webber expressed that the move for him was precipitated by a desire to move away from "rational Christianity" and to discover the mystery of the Sacrament.¹⁷ Webber also shared his struggle with deciding whether he

¹⁷ Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1985) 22-30.

“had prepared himself...to make (him)self worthy” to receive communion.¹⁸ His search for an understanding and experience of worship and the sacraments resonated with what I was experiencing in my own life. And being from an evangelical tradition, I felt like I had been given permission to feel the way I was feeling about Holy Communion.

But more important than learning something new about the Sacrament was that I began to experience Communion on a more frequent basis. Communion was offered in chapel a few times a month, during Morning Prayer four days a week and during a lunch time service on Wednesdays. As I began to *have* Communion more often, I found something strange happening: I began to *want* Communion more often. Instead of the increase in frequency leading to Communion becoming less important and special, it became more important and special. This shocked me because it was so contrary to what I had been told, and what I feared, would happen. My attitude changed from not wanting Communion often *because* it was so special to wanting Communion all the time because it *was* so special. In fact, my wife and I eventually started attending an Episcopal Church in part so that we could receive Communion weekly.

I have to admit that initially I moved toward this change in frequency because I came to see an objective, although mysterious, reality to Communion that did not depend upon my own initiative. This was intriguing and freeing. I could be confident that I could encounter Jesus and receive God’s grace in spite of not feeling a certain way or having to get into the right frame of mind. However, there was a subjective deepening that took place as well. Through this newly found objective understanding, my experience of Communion also changed. What I learned changed the way I experienced

¹⁸ Webber, 51.

Communion and together this transformed my relationship with God through Jesus Christ. By receiving Communion often, it became a very meaningful part of my walk with Jesus. While I was raised to value its infrequency, Communion became so important in my life of faith that I wanted it every chance I could get because it was a means of grace in ways it had never been before. Sometimes I now feel close to Jesus during Communion and sometimes I don't. And oddly, it is those times when I don't feel especially close to Jesus that have become more important. Because it is when I don't feel close to Jesus that partaking of the bread and the cup assures me that Jesus is close anyway – and that is when I really need that assurance.

In searching for a metaphor to describe this change, I can use my own relationship with my wife, Alyson. I cherish those special occasions when we can be together – our anniversary, infrequent date nights, etc. But my two weeks away in the summer of 2012 to study at Drew University reinforced the importance of those regular encounters with my spouse – hearing “I love you” at least daily, the kiss on the way out of the door to work, the hand holding during a walk. There is an objective reality to our love for each other that is expressed in those sometimes rote actions and conveyed in a way that is real whether I get all warm and fuzzy each time we kiss or not. There are those special times when I do feel all tingly inside. But I have come to value those times when my wife reminds me of the reality of her love even in the absence of some special feeling or my own conscious thoughts.

I have also found a biblical expression for the new way I found to experience Communion. The Apostle Paul captures very well the guilt and hopelessness my early Communion experiences had brought to me: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue

me from this body of death?”¹⁹ In my earliest experiences of the Lord’s Supper, there seemed to be little hope of anything other than forgiveness for my sins at the expense of feeling guilty. However, the fact of my sin was unchangeable. There was nothing particularly transforming in my understanding or experience. Communion could provide me some measure of comfort in that it reminded me that Jesus died for my sins and that through his death I was forgiven. But my early experiences never brought me to verse 25: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”²⁰ And that is what changed. Because once I moved beyond a symbolic view to an idea of Real Presence, Communion was not just a mental exercise that enabled me to recall God’s forgiveness in spite of my sin or an opportunity to feel close to God (if I tried hard enough). Communion now became a way for me to receive that forgiveness. I could touch, taste, smell and see God’s love for me. Communion not only proclaimed God’s mercy but it imparted to me the grace I needed to become more like Jesus. Maybe this change is why I prefer to call this sacrament the Eucharist – meaning “thanksgiving.”

When I graduated from seminary and began serving churches, my personal sacramental journey led to the desire to deepen the sacramental life of the congregations I served. Depending on the setting, how my leadership was perceived and the openness of the people to change, I have done as little as teach studies regarding the sacrament and as much as move one congregation into a pattern of weekly celebration. It is on this experience that I want to reflect now.

The Tonawanda United Methodist Church provided me with my first opportunity

¹⁹ Romans 7:24

²⁰ Romans 7:25

to implement a plan to increase the frequency of Communion. And although we celebrated Communion weekly for the last two years of my ministry there, the next pastor immediately went back to monthly Communion. And while that was disappointing, I was even more troubled by the fact that the congregation put up no real argument. My efforts to integrate this practice into the congregation's story did not work. While I had been successful at bringing about a change in practice, I cannot say that I was able to deepen the sacramental life of the congregation in any lasting way. I believe that if I had really been successful at changing the way the people understood and experienced Communion, going back to the former pattern would not have been so easily accepted. This experience is part of what drove me to use my project as a means of exploring ways to deepen the sacramental life of a congregation.

CHAPTER THREE

WE LIFT UP OUR HEARTS TO THE LORD

The Convergence of Stories

As I reflected on the narratives expressed in the last chapter and how they intersected, I identified both a point of convergence and a point of tension. The stories converged around the importance of the Sacrament. Methodist theology and tradition supported the notion that Holy Communion was an important part of the Christian life, theologically as a very real means of grace and practically as a rite to be celebrated with great frequency. The people of PFUMC, through their support of or their resistance to more frequent communion, expressed the importance of the Lord's Supper in their spiritual lives. My own experience of the Sacrament had brought it to a place of significant importance in my own life as a transformative encounter with the Lord and as an objective reception of grace. Communion was important to all the narratives.

At first glance, the point of opportunity appeared to be around the frequency of a congregation's celebrations of Holy Communion. The tradition was calling for more frequent communion, the researcher desired more frequent celebrations and a segment of the congregation desired or, at the least, was open to having Communion more than once per month. There was a significant group of people, however, who were resistant, and even openly hostile, to that change in practice. The necessity for a denominational document urging more frequent communion indicated that resistance was not an isolated

problem. And also present were my own experiences of meeting resistance to weekly Communion in other contexts and of having my own efforts to make this change not take root beyond my ministry in that setting. I was tempted to see this project as an opportunity to explore ways to overcome this resistance.

But as I reflected on the narratives, waiting and hoping for the project to emerge, I realized that the frequency with which Holy Communion was celebrated was a secondary concern. There existed, I believed, a more substantial opportunity. Somewhere in between the shared belief in the meaningfulness of Communion and the disagreement over how often it should be celebrated was a distinction in the way that the Lord's Supper was meaningful. It seemed from my own journey and from my own experience in dealing with resistance that the difference might be explained as the difference between primarily valuing the subjective, affective experience of Communion over the objective, spiritual reality of Communion. This distinction might be able to be further expressed in this way: for some, the meaning of Communion was derived from the fact that it was not celebrated too often. It was special due to the infrequency with which one participated and from how one felt during participation; for others, the meaning of communion was derived from the fact that it was celebrated frequently and from what one believed was happening during Communion.

This notion was rooted partly in Wesley's sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion" and his identification of a very similar distinction. The fear of some that their reverence for the Sacrament might abate if they received Communion too often led Wesley to identify two kinds of reverence: the kind that is "owing purely to the newness

of the thing” and the kind that is “owing to our faith, or to the love or fear of God.”¹

In my conversations with parishioners, it seemed that those who favored weekly Communion see the Sacrament as important to their daily walk with Jesus – like food is important to our survival. I refer to this as an “objective importance.” The “special-ness” comes from the reality that Communion is an encounter with Jesus through which the communicant receives grace. The nature of the event makes it special. Those who are used to less frequent Communion see the Sacrament as important in an occasional way – like anniversaries are important. This could be termed a “subjective importance.” The “special-ness” comes from one’s own experience of Communion which is heightened by having it less frequently and from the time of personal reflection on one’s own sinfulness and God’s forgiveness purchased at a great price. It is one’s own feelings and existential experience that makes it special. This does not mean that those who prefer Communion monthly don’t believe something spiritually significant is happening. Rather, the difference is one of focus – what makes the experience special? Is it what one feels or is it what one believes is occurring? Do I think the subjective experience is unimportant? No. In fact, my own experience tells me that emphasizing the objective reality can lead to deeper and more regular subjective moments.

It was in the distinction between the ways that Holy Communion was important that I saw the opportunity for the project. The focus of the project would not be exploring a way to introduce weekly communion into a congregation. Rather, I wanted to explore the possibilities of expanding people’s ideas of special from the subjective

¹ John Wesley and John Beecham, *Sermons for Various Occasions with a Life of the Author* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1866), 147-8.

realm to the objective realm. In this way, my hope would be that the Lord's Supper would take on a new significance in the spiritual lives of those involved in the project. Might this lead some day to the practice of weekly Communion being the norm at PFUMC? Yes. However, the disappointment at Tonawanda UMC taught me that what I was really wanting for my parishioners was not a more frequent pattern of celebration but a deepening of the importance of Holy Communion in the Christian life.

I also learned two important lessons from dealing with the resistance to weekly Communion that informed my project. First, the reasons people at Tonawanda UMC voiced for not wanting Communion more often than monthly were not unique to this congregation. In fact, the same objections regarding the length of service, the practice being too Roman Catholic and the fear of the sacrament losing its meaningfulness would also later be expressed at PFUMC. And, to be honest, I had voiced many of them at earlier times in my life. The first Sunday that we began our weekly celebrations at TUMC, I preached a version of John Wesley's "The Duty of Constant Communion" in which I had updated the language but kept the content the same.² After the sermon, in which Wesley names and then refutes many of the arguments he heard against frequent Communion, my wife asked if the reasons people gave against the practice were ones I had heard or a part of Wesley's original sermon. It was then that I realized that more than 200 years after Wesley wrote his sermon many of the complaints were similar: people felt unworthy, it might stop being special, the Bible doesn't specifically say to do it weekly, etc.³

² See Appendix A for the text of my sermon.

³ Wesley and Beecham, 144-149.

In remembering this, I cannot help but think of Ecclesiastes 1:9: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” While I think that this rather pessimistic idea is countered in the New Testament doctrine of regeneration, I understand the sentiment of this author. I have tired of hearing the same arguments and fighting the same battles while trying to do something that I feel is important. But then I also remember that my feelings are not new either. Jesus repeatedly had to scold the disciples for not grasping what he was saying. Whether it was the “you of little faith” comment we hear Jesus use four times in Matthew (6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8) or Jesus having to reprimand James and John (and their mother) for worrying about who was going to sit on his right hand, our Lord showed that even the best spiritual leader is not able to overcome much of human nature.

Second, I realized I had been misinterpreting the people’s resistance as proof that taking Holy Communion was not as important to them as it was to me. I came to see the response evoked by changing our practice as a sign that Holy Communion was actually very important to the people. If how and how often we took Communion wasn’t important to them, I would not have encountered so much resistance. I have expressed my own change in perspective as being a move from communion being *too* special to have too often to one in which it was *so* special that I wanted to have it as often as possible. I came to understand that “too special” and “so special” were not speaking of differences in degrees but rather difference in substance.

Unfortunately, I didn’t come to fully understand this until near the end of my time in Tonawanda. I believe that had I functioned from a place where my sacramental narrative and the congregation’s intersected, rather than from where they differed, I might

have been more successful at truly deepening the sacramental life of the people. Because postmodern narrative research teaches one to look for the intersections of narratives,⁴ I have hope that doing this might help me to find a more effective way of transforming this aspect of a congregation's life.

My Journey as a Model

How, then, to go about facilitating this transformation? Writing a theological reflection paper for Dr. Carl Savage's Theological Methods and Practice class at Drew University forced me to consider my own journey in regards to Holy Communion. As I reflected on the influences that were at work, I realized that my own journey could serve as a model for my project.

My transformation into a deeper sacramental life was driven by learning about Communion *and* by experiencing Communion more often in light of that learning. The two went hand in hand. My project, then, would include opportunities for the people to learn more about the Methodist understanding of the Sacrament as a real means of grace and an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ *and* to experience it in ways informed by that learning. In Romans 12:2, Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul sees transformation as being directly related to the renewing of the mind and my experience bears witness to this. This does not mean knowledge must come first and then experience. My own transformation was the result of the dialogue between knowledge and experience, both

⁴ Savage, 78.

helping to strengthen and make sense of the other.

A third element in my own journey facilitated that dialogue. I had significant opportunities to interact with other Christians who were at a similar place on their journey or for whom the Sacrament was a frequent and significant part of their spirituality. Whether it was questioning a new learning with a professor, sharing new experiences with classmates or listening to others speak of their Eucharistic experience, the opportunity to share my story and hear the stories of others helped me through the process of integrating my knowledge and experience into my spiritual life.

In light of my own journey, this project was designed to focus on providing an opportunity for participants to be introduced to ways in which Holy Communion might find new, or re-newed, meaning in their spiritual lives through learning, experience and group reflection. I would seek to integrate themes regarding Holy Communion in ways that instruct the participants regarding those themes, enable them to experience those themes in the course of worship and to reflect upon their own stories in light of those themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS TOOK BREAD, BLESSED IT, BROKE IT AND GAVE IT

With my own experience as a model and the goal of exploring how one might facilitate a movement from one form of meaning to another, I designed the project with three specific phases: a Preaching Phase, an Experiential Phase and a Group Reflection phase. Each of the phases would run concurrently through out the length of the project. The Preaching Phase and the Experiential Phase occurred on Sunday mornings during PFUMC's regular worship service. The Group Reflection Phase occurred during a mid-week meeting with the Study Group. Each week focused around a theological theme that provided unity to all three phases. A Study Group of seven people formed the core of the project while the worshipping congregation at-large was invited to participate in the Preaching and Experiential Phases. A Lay Advisory Team was recruited to assist with the planning and implementation of the project.

The project was implemented during the Season of Lent 2013. Lent provided a defined period of time during which PFUMC had become accustomed to being introduced to spiritual disciplines during worship with which many in the congregation were not familiar. For my project, the celebration of Holy Communion on a weekly basis served as the Lenten discipline for the season. PFUMC had also developed the practice of having a mid-week Contemplative Communion service each week during Lent. The Study Group chose to meet immediately after that service concluded. The Preaching and

Experiential Phases began with the First Sunday in Lent and concluded with Easter Sunday. The Group Reflection Phase began on the Wednesday after Ash Wednesday and continued weekly through the Wednesday of Holy Week.

The Lay Advisory Team

The first task in developing this project was assembling a Lay Advisory Team. The LAT included six individuals who were all active participants in the life of PFUMC. The four women and two men were recruited through a combination of asking for volunteers and me personally approaching people. Each potential member was provided with a detailed description of the purpose and role of the Lay Advisory Team. The goal was to assemble a diverse group of people who represented the congregation at large. While the group was not as diverse as I would have liked, LAT members represented a wide variety of religious backgrounds, ages ranging from early 50's to late 70's, and association with the PFUMC ranging from two years to 43 years.

Beginning in September 2012, the LAT met monthly in order to assist me in the planning and implementation of the project. The group was very helpful in narrowing down the focus of the project and in working to find ways to increase the effectiveness of the project among the people of PFUMC. One of my early discussions with the LAT was instrumental in helping me to move the focus away from weekly Communion to an idea that would not be as easily dismissed by people in the congregation. The LAT provided significant input into issues pertinent to the project including the recruiting of the Study Group, the make up of the Study Group, collecting and recording data, maintaining anonymity and identifying pitfalls. Drafts of the prospectus were distributed to the

members at various points in the process so that feedback could be obtained.

In addition to the monthly meetings, a training session was held on December 15.¹ The purpose of the session was two-fold: 1) to provide a deeper understanding of the methodology of the project including ideas like Postmodern Narrative Research, Kenotic Listening, Savage's Question Matrix, and Appreciative Inquiry and 2) to write questions for data collection. By the end of the three-hour session, the group had produced a draft version of ten questions to be used during qualitative interviews with the Study Group as well as several suggested questions for the quantitative surveys to be distributed to the congregation. I would later refine these questions with the help of Dr. Jo Anne Brocklehurst, a United Methodist Colleague, who had past experience with qualitative research and an understanding of the topic.

In January 2013, the members of the LAT began approaching prospective Study Group members about participating in the project in an effort to have the Study Group represent the demographics of PFUMC. Once our list of names was exhausted, the group convened to expand the list and made the decision to announce a general invitation to anyone who wanted to participate. The observation was also made that the Study Group was lacking representation from those that were opposed to or skeptical of the practice of weekly Communion. The one member of the LAT who fit this description provided the names of individuals who might be willing to participate. As described in the Study Group section of this chapter, the LAT was successful in recruiting two individuals who self-identified as being skeptical regarding that element of the project.

The LAT had determined that its members would conduct the interviews

¹ See Appendix B for materials related to the Lay Advisory Team training session.

associated with the project in order to create a setting that might be more conducive to honesty and openness than if I had conducted the interviews. The major concern was that people might say what they thought their pastor wanted to hear or that they might not share something they did not want their pastor to know. Additional training was provided to the members of the LAT in the practice of kenotic listening and members were told that they would not be required to conduct interviews if they did not wish to. Every member did agree to participate except for one woman who winters in Florida and would not be available for either set of interviews. Two members of the LAT agreed to interview two individuals. The decision was also made that, if possible, each Study Group participant would be interviewed by the same LAT member for the initial and the follow-up interviews. This ideal was able to be met.

The Preaching Phase

The Preaching Phase of the project included a weekly sermon delivered during Sunday morning worship. The sermons were intended to communicate different theological ideas related to the Sacrament and sacramental living. However, I intentionally employed the use of inductive and narrative methods. My understanding of Family Systems Theory² helped me to know that the anxiety that the topic of Holy Communion created in some people would not allow those people to hear the content of a deductive, propositional sermon. I solicited stories of especially meaningful experiences of the Lord's Supper from friends and colleagues. I drew upon Eucharistic stories shared

² Specifically, the principals of MacLean's Triune Brain which indicate that when the reactive Reptilian Brain is functioning, the logical process of the Cerebral Neo-cortex will not. This was especially important in helping me design the project in ways that might lessen reactivity among participants.

by the Study Group during our weekly meetings and from the qualitative data gathered during pre-project interviews. While the sermons were intended to teach something about sacramental theology, they were crafted in a way that I hoped would connect the teaching with the previous experience of those in the congregation. By touching upon the existing narratives, I was attempting to create a response that recognized the truth of what I was saying because the hearers had already experienced that truth. By providing a new framework in which to consider existing narratives, each person might be more open to the theological content of the sermon.

I closed each sermon with an opportunity for those present to reflect upon their own sacramental experience in light of the theme. Congregants were encouraged to think back upon specific experiences that might connect with the theme for the day. Once those memories were recalled, the people were encouraged to talk to God regarding this experience, offering thanksgiving and asking for the grace with which to realize God's working in their lives.

The Experiential Phase

As previously shared, the opportunity to receive Holy Communion frequently played a part in expanding the way that I found it to be meaningful. While receiving Communion weekly was required of the Study Group participants, I communicated as best as I could that the Sacrament would be celebrated each week during Lent, plus Easter, but participation was completely optional for the congregation at large. Those who chose not to receive Communion were encouraged to reflect on the theme of the day and to experience the presence of God apart from the Sacrament.

In an effort to use the liturgy to support the connection between theme and experience, I edited the Great Thanksgiving³ for each week to incorporate the theme for the day, often drawing upon images from the Scriptures lessons and other Biblical passages that spoke to the theme. I hoped that doing this would increase the possibility that, by lending context along themes that may not often be expressed in the liturgy, people might experience new dimensions of the Sacrament.

The Group Reflection Phase

While the whole of the congregation was invited to participate in the Preaching and Experiential Phases, the Group Reflection Phase was open only to the Study Group. The group met each Wednesday during Lent 2013 for one hour. The primary purpose of each session was to provide a time for guided reflection and sharing around the previous Sunday's sacramental experience. The sacramental experience of each Sunday was a story unto itself. The activities were designed to help participants reflect on that story in light of the theme for the week. Each session included five elements – an opening activity, “Remembering the Story,” “Telling the Story,” “Reflecting on the Story” and “Preserving the Story.” During the course of each session, a balance was sought between individual and group reflection, between internal and external expression and between giving thought to content of the theme and one's own experience.

The opening activity was designed to focus the group on the theme by sharing a one-word or one-sentence response to a question. This served to break the ice and turn the thoughts toward the experience of the previous Sunday. For example, when the

³ The Great Thanksgiving is the Eucharistic prayer that accompanies the celebration of Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church.

theme was “The Body of Christ”, the opening activity asked each person to describe something about one other person they noticed during the celebration of Communion on that previous Sunday. Time was given for each person to capture his or her own answer before all answers were shared.

“Remembering the Story” utilized activities designed to enable the participants to mentally go back to the experience of Sunday and focus in on one or more aspects of what was experienced. The goal was not simply remembering but to be able to enter into that experience again by taking notice of what one was thinking, feeling, or doing at specific times. This segment closed by having the participants summarize the experience briefly in writing. During session #1, the theme was “Remembrance” as it is represented by the Greek word, *αναμνησις*. Participants were asked to mentally reenact their experience of the first Sunday of the project. They were invited to relive in their minds praying the liturgy, coming forward, receiving the bread and the wine and returning to their pews. They were encouraged to pay attention to the smells, sounds, sights and thoughts of those moments. Then they were asked to capture the experience using one to three words.

“Telling the Story” was an opportunity for each person to share about his or her own experience of the past week using the work of the “Remembering the Story” exercise as a basis. Using no more than 2-3 minutes each, the participants would share about their own experience of receiving the Sacrament during the previous Sunday’s worship service.

After sharing, “Reflecting on the Story” would provide a time for guided reflection on the experience of the past week with particular focus on the theme. This

reflection could include questions regarding how they felt about the experience or aspects of what they experienced. At other times, I might introduce additional material that would hone in on their experience in light of the theme. When the theme was to emphasize the celebratory nature of meeting the Risen Christ at the table, the group members were asked to reflect on their own experiences in light of the Emmaus Story. During this time of sharing, other participants in the group were invited to interact with each other's reflections in a non-judgmental way.

The final portion of each meeting, "Preserving the Story," was an opportunity for the participants to engage in an activity intended to help them apply what they had learned from their reflections. Often times the activity involved writing a note to Jesus or to another person. The group might be asked to individually list one or more ways that each person was hoping to apply what they had learned to their Christian walk or sacramental participation.

The Study Group

The individuals who made up the Study Group were recruited by personal invitation from me in consultation with the Lay Advisory Team. The goal was to create a group that reflected the diversity of the congregation in regards to gender, age, plurality of religious background, years at PFUMC and openness to the practice of weekly Communion. Those expressing interest were provided with an application that included biographical information, an indication of how the person felt about the notion of celebrating Holy Communion on a weekly basis and whether or not the individual was willing to have interviews recorded.

After the initial round of applications was received, there were two obvious holes in the demographic: a person under the age of 50 and a person who was opposed to weekly Communion. The Lay Advisory Team was consulted and additional names were gathered, specifically those who were younger than 50 and those for whom the LAT knew weekly Communion to be a problem. During this discussion, the issue arose as to whether members of the Lay Advisory Team could be eligible to participate in the study itself. This would have provided younger members and at least one person who was openly reticent about frequent Communion. Several members of the group, who by this time had intimate knowledge of the project, were enthusiastic about wanting to participate. After consulting with my advisor and my peer group, it was decided that knowledge of the methodology and involvement in writing the survey and interview questions might damage the integrity of the project.

Once the decision was made to not allow LAT members to participate, one member remarked, "If I had thought about that I wouldn't have volunteered to be on this committee." While said with some element of "tongue-in-cheek," I took that as affirmation that the project had piqued the interest of the LAT and would hopefully do the same for the congregation once people were made more familiar with the particulars of what was involved.

While this additional effort to find volunteers did not produce anyone younger than 50 years of age who was willing to participate, it did produce two individuals who were not in favor of weekly Communion. One was adamantly opposed and the other was admittedly resistant to the idea. The phone conversation with Julie⁴ was of special

⁴ All names used in the reporting of my project are pseudonyms.

interest to me. She had thought about volunteering to participate but could not imagine that I would want someone who was as opposed to the practice of weekly Communion as she was. I shared with her that my goal was not to drive the church toward weekly Communion as a practice but rather to use the practice of weekly Communion to explore how increasing the frequency of receiving the Sacrament might affect how a person experiences it. I shared that as long as she was willing to receive Holy Communion every week during the study her honest skepticism would not only be welcomed but would enhance the project.

While I had hoped to garner enough interest to allow some selectivity, I received only nine applications. My original intention was to have no fewer than six and no more than ten people in the Study Group. Each person was screened by phone or in person. Expectations were made clear: attend worship weekly from Ash Wednesday through Easter, receive Holy Communion each week and participate in a weekly Group Reflection meeting. This follow up screening revealed that two of the applicants would be traveling during Lent and would miss a significant number of Sunday worship experiences.

The final Study Group was composed of seven individuals: five females and two males. Four of the participants were older than 65 and two younger than 60. All were raised in the Methodist, Catholic or Presbyterian traditions while one had some exposure to the Baptist tradition. Four members had been Methodists for more than 50 years while no one had been attending a Methodist Church for fewer than 15 years. When asked to indicate their feelings toward having Communion every week during Lent, one was “opposed,” one was “cautious,” three were “open” and two were “enthusiastic.”

Initial Data Collection

My project utilized two different tools for data collection: one largely quantitative and one exclusively qualitative. Data was collected before the project began and after the final phase was completed. The data served multiple purposes for the project. First, the initial set of data helped me to better understand the current narrative surrounding Holy Communion. Second, it provided a means by which I might become aware of any changes that took place in the role that Holy Communion played in one's spiritual life when compared to the post-project data. Third, by collecting quantitative data from the congregation as well as from the study group, I would be able to examine how sacramental attitudes and understandings of the study group compared to the larger congregation and how changes among the study group participants compared with changes, if any, among the congregation at large.

The first tool distributed was a survey that was made available to all members of the congregation and was required of the study group.⁵ The congregational survey was anonymous.⁶ Participants were asked to provide some biographical data including the religious traditions of which the person had been a part. The purpose of this survey was to help me be able to identify current attitudes and understanding regarding the practice of Holy Communion. Fourteen individuals in addition to the study group completed the

⁵ Survey takers were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a statement indicating whether it was "true for you." The five possible responses ranged from "definitely not true" to "very true." See Appendix C for the survey.

⁶ Two LAT members distributed the survey after worship to those who volunteered. Each handout was numbered and a log of who received which survey was kept confidentially by the LAT members and destroyed after the follow-up surveys were collected.

survey which included ten quantitative questions and one request for an open-ended response to the question: “Communion is important to me because....” This tool sought to capture the role that Communion played in the spiritual life of the respondents, the way that it was meaningful and what type of subjective experiences were preferred by the participants.

Demographically, the study group participants did not reflect the congregational respondents to the degree I might have hoped. The study group contained a smaller percentage of males (25% to 42%) and of individuals under the age of 55 (14% to 50%). However, the study group was disproportionately composed of individuals between 56-70 years of age (57% to 21%).⁷ The smaller sampling was also less diverse as to religious traditions than the congregational group (three to seven) but both sets included more individuals raised in Methodist traditions than any other single group. I think it is also worth noting that the total number of people who completed the survey (21) represented about 1/3 of the average number of adults present on any given Sunday morning. While I would have been pleased with greater participation, this number indicated some degree of broad based interest in the project whether it was in support of or opposition to the practice of having weekly Communion during this particular season.

There were significant parallels in the attitudes and preferences represented by the two groups. My understanding of the importance and meaningfulness of Holy Communion to the people at PFUMC was confirmed. In response to the statement “Receiving Holy Communion is an essential part of my spiritual life,” both groups

⁷ Neither of these figures could be compared to the congregation as a whole as membership records do not accurately reflect those who are in attendance and no attempt was made to track the demographic of regular worship attendees during the project.

averaged slightly greater than “True.” Both groups leaned toward feeling that “Holy Communion is best experienced in a quiet setting” as well as leaning slightly toward receiving communion as often as it was offered whether or not the Sacrament had been recently received. The statement that the data indicated was the most true for the both sets of respondents was “Receiving Holy Communion made me feel closer to the Lord.”

There was also a divergence of attitudes and preferences between the congregation and the study group. While the congregation was unsure as to whether “Holy Communion is best experienced in a joyful atmosphere of celebration,” the study group average was between “true” and “definitely true.” But this question produced more “not sure” responses from each group than any other statement on the survey including more than ½ the study group. A significant difference also existed regarding whether or not Communion tended to lose its importance if received more than once a month. The congregational average indicated a leaning towards this being true with nearly one half of the respondents indicating “true.” The study group averaged “not true” with only one response indicating that the statement was true. Another point of difference was around the idea as to whether taking Communion makes one feel closer to the other worshippers present. The study group felt this was so with five of the seven responses being on the “true” side of the scale while only three of 14 congregational responses indicated that this was true for them.

There are a few interesting findings that I observed from the initial data. First, the idea of Holy Communion being a joyful celebration seemed to be a new concept to many of those who took the survey. The prevailing preference was indicated to be a quiet setting but nearly everyone was unwilling to oppose the notion of a joyful celebration. A

handful of survey takers indicated that both statements were true. This uncertainty of how to feel about an idea that contradicts one's normal preference indicated to me an openness to a change in tone and possibly even a desire to be offered an alternative to the funeral-like tenor of most Methodist Communion services.

Another intriguing revelation was that although a majority of the at-large responses felt that Holy Communion loses its meaning if received too often, most of these same people were willing to receive the Sacrament whenever it was offered. One possible explanation for this phenomenon would be an intuitive experiencing of the tension between the two different ways in which Holy Communion might be meaningful to Christians – subjective and objective. On one hand the Sacrament is meaningful in a way that would be jeopardized by partaking too frequently, but on the other hand it is meaningful in a way that provides resistance to refusing it when offered.

One other statement pointed toward another incongruity in the attitudes toward frequent Communion. A majority of people from each data group felt the following statement was false: "If I don't feel close to Jesus during Communion, I wonder if it was worth my time." This is not an issue for the study group since all but one participant did not feel frequently receiving Communion lessened its importance. But for the respondents from the congregation who leaned heavily toward feeling that the meaning was lessened with frequent celebration, I see this as representing a tension between the meaning of Communion coming from the subjective experience of the communicant and the meaning coming from the objective spiritual reality of Communion.

In summary, the initial survey indicated to me that Holy Communion was very important to the people at PFUMC. The data overwhelmingly indicated that Communion

was an essential part of one's spiritual life for both survey groups. This was true for those who were open to frequent Communion and to those who were not and was also true regardless of whether the significance of Communion was based on a subjective experience of feeling close to the Lord or a more objective understanding. The study group began the project with a more objective understanding of Communion's meaning, a greater openness to frequent reception and a greater sense of the corporate aspect of the Sacrament.

The First Interview

While the quantitative data provided a baseline by which to look for transformation among those who took the surveys, I wanted to be able to capture a more narrative understanding of how the Study Group understood and experienced the Lord's Supper. To this end, I used interviews based on open-ended qualitative questions. The progression of questions intentionally moved from those that dealt with the broad aspects of one's faith to a more narrow focus on Holy Communion and from objective to more evocative. A "Lay Advisory Team Training" was held to provide some understanding of post-modern narrative research, Carl Savage's Question Matrix⁸ and guidelines for conducting interviews with a special emphasis on kenotic listening.⁹ After the content portion of the training, time was spent brainstorming potential questions. The goal was to create questions that were qualitative and evocative in order to facilitate the telling of the

⁸ Carl Savage, "Theological Methods and Practice" (class lecture, Drew University, Madison, NJ, July 19, 2012).

⁹ Carl Savage, "Theological Methods and Practice" (class lecture, Drew University, Madison, NJ, July 18, 2012).

interviewee's Sacramental story.¹⁰ I took the work of the LAT and with the help of Dr. Jo Anne Brocklehurst, a United Methodist colleague, edited and organized the questions.¹¹ One task was to arrange the questions so that the interviewee moved from thinking about his or her spiritual journey in general to reflecting on the role that Holy Communion played in that journey. A second task was to use wording that would not sabotage the process of evoking the story. Having prior personal and professional experience with all of the study group participants, I knew some individuals responded more to "thinking" language while others would respond more to "feeling" language. Attention was paid to developing an instrument that asked individuals to think and to feel, to describe and to interpret, to remember and to envision. I also chose to intentionally not ask questions directly relating to one's opinion about how often Holy Communion is to be celebrated. The survey provided me with a picture of where the congregation and study group stood on this aspect of the Eucharist. As stated previously, although this project used the weekly celebration of Communion as a tool for potential transformation, the subject of the project was not frequent Communion but rather the way in which the Sacrament was meaningful to those who took it.

Members of the Lay Advisory Team conducted the interviews. No member of the LAT was compelled to conduct an interview but each chose to do so (with the exception of the one member who was travelling during Lent). Each of the study group participants had consented to having the interviews recorded and the interviews were transcribed in

¹⁰ Carl Savage, "Theological Methods and Practice" (class lecture, Drew University, Madison, NJ, July 18, 2012).

¹¹ Dr. Brocklehurst's own Doctor of Ministry project utilized a similar methodology and her experience helped me to shape the questions to achieve my goals.

order to facilitate the processing of the qualitative data.

These interviews also provided me with the opportunity to identify points of connection between my project themes and the Sacramental narratives of the participants. One memorable connection occurred when Julie responded to the question, “When has Holy Communion been the most meaningful to you?” She shared a story about having been an adult chaperone on a youth group canoe trip in the Adirondacks. Near the end of the journey, the youth asked if the group could celebrate Holy Communion. Although two pastors were present, neither had intended upon celebrating Communion. There was no bread left among the supplies and grape juice had not been on the menu. In Julie’s own words, “...all we had left was the water from the lake and Oreo cookies. And we had Communion.” In describing what made this experience meaningful, she explained, “The accepting of the fact that the substance that we had available at the time could be used in that fashion. That it didn't have to be bread & wine. That there were other elements that could be used, and you can have the same experience.” The theme for the fourth week of the project was “Sacramental Living: Learning to See Jesus in the Ordinary, and Not So Ordinary Experiences of Life.” The focus was on how encountering Jesus in an extraordinary way through the ordinary elements of bread and wine prepares us to encounter Jesus in surprisingly extra-ordinary ways through the living of our lives. I was able to use her story of meeting Jesus in some lake water and an Oreo cookie to illustrate this truth.

These interviews helped to thicken the narrative that emerged from the surveys.¹² I was able to hear how Steve, who on his survey was unsure about Communion being

¹² James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 3.

celebrated in a joyful atmosphere, identified the times that he felt closest to God as being when he has experienced the death of a loved one. Since he had also indicated that receiving Communion made him feel closer to the Lord, I received new insight into why imagining Holy Communion as a joyful experience might be difficult for him. His interview also provided new meaning as to why he might not feel close to other worshippers during Communion. Communion is a very personal time with the God who has seen him through the darkest times of his life. The context of his experience of God seems to have made Communion too personal to share with others.

The stories and reflections shared in the interviews also provided me with a better understanding of the context in which I would be preaching the sermons and leading the weekly group reflections. An element of this was having some assumptions that I held challenged. An important insight that I received was that people's thoughts around Communion were not always cohesive. One example illustrates both of these processes at work. Julie had responded on her survey that she did not agree with the statement: "Communion helps her to feel closer to other worshippers." This indicated to me that Julie valued the individual aspects of Communion. However, when asked to design the "perfect Communion service," she indicated she would structure the service so that everyone who was at the rail at the same time would be acting in unison and recalled the days when everyone "went down front, knelt, everyone got served the bread, and everyone partook together." This indicated a tension between the individual and corporate dimensions of the celebration.

As she continued sharing about her perfect service, a concern was expressed about the words that were said as the elements were distributed. She preferred the group

reception because that was during the time when the practice was for the pastor to recite a variety of Bible verses or devotional thoughts as Communion was being received. I was surprised that she would rather receive the elements as a group as opposed to receiving them individually. I strive hard to make the receiving of the bread and wine as personal as possible – using individual’s names, making eye contact and smiling as I say, “The Body of Christ broken for you.” This indicated to me not only that the subjective experience of Communion was the primary source of meaning for Julie but also challenged me to consider just how diverse and broad the factors were that affected that subjective experience. I had assumed, from my own preferences, that people appreciated the personal warmth of receiving Communion in the manner I had fostered. And some participants, like Marina, did express that sentiment. However, for Julie, the formula with which the elements were given was too “mundane.” This strengthened my conviction that while the subjective meaning of Holy Communion is important, it is the objective reality that holds the key to developing a sacramental spirituality.

Week One - Remembrance

The theme that I chose for week one was “Remembrance.” Specifically, I was hoping to help the participants understand how Holy Communion could serve as a means by which we experience the grace of our salvation anew – expressing the idea of *anamnesis* without using that word. I also chose to use the sermon as a means of kicking off the project and to provide some background to how the project came to be.¹³

¹³ The notes or transcript of the sermon for each week are attached in Appendix D and the plans for each Group Reflection Session are attached in Appendix E.

Knowing that there was anxiety around the issue of including Communion in each service during Lent, I was seeking to establish common ground. I sought to affirm my belief that Communion was meaningful to all of us and to share how I had come to understand those differences. By sharing my own story of Communion as a “remembrance,” a common frame of reference was established from which individuals could begin to build a bridge between their past experiences with Jesus and the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Group Reflection time for this week was designed to help the participants enter into the sensory experience of Communion and to grasp the power of *anamnesis*. They were asked to reflect upon the sacramental experience of the previous Sunday and to focus on the senses – what did they hear or smell or touch– as well as on what was thought or felt as the Communion service progressed. Applying the difference between “memory” and “remembrance” to this exercise was an effort to have the participants enter into the experience as opposed to just recalling what had happened. They were then asked to make a connection between the Communion experience of that Sunday and another event in their journey of faith. Each person then wrote a Thank You Note to Jesus as a means of capturing the connection they had made.

Week Two – Real Presence

The theme for week #2 was “Presence.” The sermon addressed the tension often experienced by United Methodist Christians around the words, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood...”¹⁴ The purpose was to lead those present to the point of seeing the

¹⁴ John 6:53

a connection between the Bread of Life and the presence of Jesus in the Communion bread. The sermon intentionally avoided any attempt to explain the Real Presence of Christ in Communion. In fact, the sermon was an appeal to one's heart, not one's mind. Using an excerpt from Flannery O'Connor's "The Violent Bear It Away," I made a connection between O'Connor's use of bread to express Tartwater's longing for something deeper, hoping the people would resonate with that longing. Then, sharing my own story of a weekly meal with my grandfather, I proclaimed the certainty that the Bread of Life was present in this breaking of the bread. I closed the sermon time by asking for each person to recall another person from his or her life that was always there for them, no matter what.

The Group Reflection for that week sought to "make a connection between the experiences of Jesus at the Lord's Supper with the experiences of Jesus at other times in life." I knew from the interviews that these people had experienced the Lord in powerful ways. What was missing for some was the understanding that the same Lord that had moved them in other times and places was present in a very real way in Communion with or without a powerful subjective experience. Reflection centered around John 6:56, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." I asked participants to share how they had experienced Jesus' presence on Sunday. My hope was that by identifying ways in which Christ's presence was known on that Sunday, the group would come to recognize the certainty of Christ's presence every time Communion was celebrated. In an effort to place this experience within the context of each person's spiritual journey, individuals shared occasions where they had experienced the presence of the Lord in similar ways to the past week. Another note was written to Jesus, thanking

him specifically for meeting each of us at His table that past Sunday.

Week Three – The Body of Christ

The theme for week three was “The Body of Christ” which was designed to turn the people’s attention toward the corporate aspects of Holy Communion. I believe that the corporate or horizontal nature of the Lord’s Supper is often overlooked or ignored and that this was true with the people at PFUMC. The initial survey indicated that the majority of individuals did not “feel closer to the other worshipers” during the celebration of Communion. Added to that was anecdotal evidence from my years in the ministry, and at PFUMC, in which individuals would express their personal concerns about how the way in which Communion was celebrated did not allow them enough time or the right atmosphere to “be alone with Jesus.”¹⁵ One notable exception was Study Group participant Mary who expressed, “I guess that's what I'm looking for. The togetherness and the oneness that we feel with one another, because we're all God's kids.” However, other people did not share Mary’s understanding and awareness of the Sacrament as a communal experience.

The sermon explored the power of the Sacrament to unite us together. The “communion” in Holy Communion has a horizontal and a vertical aspect. Christians are not only united with God as we receive but we are united with those around us (and with the larger Body of Christ). The idea of “table fellowship” was discussed as was the power of eating together evidenced by the criticism of Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. A powerful story shared with me by colleague and friend, Dr. David Meade,

¹⁵ This is not a direct quote from any single conversation but rather a representative quote summarizing what had been communicated to me.

served as the main narrative in the sermon. The story recounted an occasion where David and a group of archaeologists unexpectedly celebrated Holy Communion with a group of priests and nuns on Mt. Sinai. The guided response to the sermon asked the congregation to be aware of those around them during the Communion experience. To help illustrate the horizontal aspect of communion, the congregation came forward in pairs to receive the bread and wine.

The purpose of the Group Reflection Session was designed to take the focus off of one's personal experience of Jesus at Sunday's service and to focus instead on the community gathered at the table. Once individuals had reflected on the experience itself and shared about that experience, I read a piece I had written entitled, "Jesus Died For Them, Too."¹⁶ This fictional story about a young man named Tommy told the story about how he had come to understand that God's love as communicated through Communion was not only about his relationship with Jesus. The story included echoes of Matthew 5:24 and Jesus' teachings regarding anger as well as Matthew 5:44 regarding love for those that persecute us. By including these themes in the story, I was touching upon the ethical implications of Holy Communion as it relates to our relationship with one another. The closing exercises for this week included having each person write a letter to a person they took notice of during Communion that week and who they knew the least. The note was supposed to share something that each participant wanted this person to know in light of our reflections on Holy Communion. The session concluded by asking the group to share one thing each person had learned about being united around the Lord's Table and how that might be applied to his or her life.

¹⁶ Included in Appendix E.

Week Four – The Sacramental Life

The theme for week four was “The Sacramental Life.” The goal of this week was to help people connect the idea of a “sacrament” with their life outside of the church. This week was important in the overall scheme of the project because of my desire to not only foster a deeper understanding and experience of the sacraments as celebrated in worship but to also begin people on the journey of seeing their lives and the world from a sacramental perspective. The problem, as stated in my sermon, was the difficulty of believing that Jesus meets us everywhere AND that he meets us in some focused way in Holy Communion. I used a quote from Russian Orthodox Bishop Alexander Mileant on the idea of “the whole of Creation (being) in some degree a sacrament.”¹⁷ However, the primary homiletical device was a detailed telling of Julie’s experience of receiving Communion with lake water and Oreo cookies. The point being that it was Julie’s experience of Jesus in the bread and the cup of Holy Communion that prepared her to accept the reality of encountering Jesus in a real way through lake water and an Oreo cookie. One key sentence in my sermon was, “Because we know Jesus is here (at the Table), we can also know that Jesus is there (wherever “there” may be).” A final quote from Bishop Alexander brought the sermon to a close by stating the idea that the presence of Jesus in the Sacrament and in life is not an either/or dilemma, but rather a both/and reality.

¹⁷ Alexander Mileant, *The Sacramental Life* (La Canada, CA: Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission, 2001), http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/sacraments_e.htm (accessed March 1, 2013). While a strongly Orthodox idea, there is nothing in Wesleyan sacramental theology that would not allow for this understanding. In fact, Wesley’s explanation regarding the incarnational aspect of the Sacrament allows, through extension, for this type of belief.

The Group Reflection Session was designed to help the participants make a connection between their experience of Christ in that week's Communion service and their less-predictable experiences of Christ. Again, a quote from Bishop Alexander served as the theme for the session: "If we truly grasp the nature of the Sacraments, we shall see that the whole of human life is transformed by His grace."¹⁸ Each person was asked to complete the sentence: "Jesus made himself known to me through...." While the Communion liturgy makes it easy to see Jesus standing before us, inviting us to come and receive the grace of his Body and Blood, it is not always easy to see Jesus inviting us to encounter him in the same way outside of the liturgy. Through remembering a time when Jesus had been unpredictably present, the participants were able to re-imagine that encounter in the context of Jesus' invitation to the Table. The session moved into thinking about the role of the bread and wine in one's experience of Communion. In support of the aim of the session, ideas were shared about what Christians could do to live a more of a "sacramental life."

Week Five – The Eucharist as Our Sacrifice

The next theme was "The Eucharist as Our Sacrifice." Capturing one of Wesley's division headings in *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* that was entitled "Concerning the Sacrifice of our Persons,"¹⁹ the focus of this week was to help individuals consider the giving of ourselves to God in the celebration of Holy Communion. The United

¹⁸ Mileant, *The Sacramental Life*.

¹⁹ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1996), 192.

Methodist liturgy includes the words, “And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving, as a holy and living sacrifice....”²⁰ The purpose of introducing this theme was to expand the popular focus of Holy Communion being about the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf through his death on the cross. The only open-ended question on the initial survey asked, “Communion is important to me because....” Of the people who responded to that question, the vast majority indicated that Communion was important because it reminded them that Jesus died on a cross for their sins or the related theme of giving thanks to Jesus for dying on a cross. A similar phenomenon was evidenced in the interviews. None of the participants mentioned any aspect of self-giving as a part of their understanding or experience of the Sacrament.

This sermon was designed to move people from an admission of their own selfishness to an understanding of how Holy Communion is an opportunity to give themselves to God afresh and anew each time they participate. This is just one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith: “...it is in giving that we receive.”²¹ The primary narrative in the sermon was the story of my own Aldersgate experience.²² For me, the concept of remembrance is extended beyond the work of Christ. A part of that remembrance is bringing into the present my own commitment to Christ as fully as the

²⁰ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 38.

²¹ “The Prayer of Saint Francis” as quoted in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 481.

²² “Aldersgate experience” is a common phrase in the Wesleyan tradition referring to John Wesley’s experience of his heart being “strangely warmed” while attending a Moravian small group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738.

first time I made that commitment. I wanted those present to see and experience the Eucharist as a time of mutual self-giving. “Jesus invites us to come and to give ourselves to him as he gives himself to us – selfless love for selfless love.” After the sermon, I asked the congregation to recall a time in the past when they had made a commitment to Christ and to bring that event with them as they came forward to receive the bread and the wine.

The goal of the Group Reflection Session was for the participants to apply the giving nature of Communion to their own experience. In an effort to move our reflections to a deeper level, the “Remembering the Story” portion of the session included instructions for each person to be a “fly on the wall” during Communion that previous Sunday and to write down his or her observations. The intent of being a fly on the wall was to help the individual step outside of the subjective aspect of Holy Communion. Up until this point, group members had been asked to reflect by focusing on the sensory and affective elements of their experience. In part because of rising anxiety in a few members of the group, my goal was for participants to get outside of themselves and to view the Communion service as observer. Then I asked the group to reflect on what they thought an outside observer may have believed was happening. My logic was that I believed that it is easier to see others giving themselves to the Lord than it is to see ourselves doing so because we are so dependent upon the receiving aspect of Communion. While not explicitly mentioned, I was hoping this exercise might conjure up images of the Altar Call that was once popular in Methodist Churches and was a time when individuals would respond to an invitation to come and give themselves to the Lord.

Week Six – The Eucharist as Christ’s Sacrifice

Palm/Passion Sunday provided an opportunity to focus on the most common and popular understanding of the Lord’s Supper – the Eucharist as Christ’s Sacrifice. While the understanding of how the Eucharist is a sacrifice differs from tradition to tradition, the connection between the Passion of our Lord and Holy Communion is a common theme whenever the Sacrament is the subject. As mentioned previously, the death of Jesus provided the locus for meaning in the Sacrament for the large majority of congregational respondents and Study Group participants. While I had designed the first five weeks of the project to expand the dynamics of people’s understanding, this week the congregation would be returned to the Eucharistic motif most familiar to them. The Study Group, however, would be taken a step further.

In returning to the most treasured understanding of Communion, I wanted to take advantage of the liturgical celebration of the day to heighten the contrast between the Triumphal Entry and the Cross. But I wanted to find a way to make the contrast personal. I wanted those present to be able to be “present” at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem but also on the hill outside the city. While the Crucifixion of Jesus is already the focus for many when Communion is celebrated, I wanted that focus to take on a new intensity on this Sunday but without the guilt. The opening Procession with the children of the church shouting, “Hosanna!” and the congregation waving palms and the choir singing “Ride On!” created a joyous mood of celebration. As the liturgy shifted focus to the Liturgy of the Passion, the mood was high and light. PFUMC does not have a tradition of having the Passion presented in a certain way and I have used a variety of methods to proclaim the story – choral readings, video, and stories. On this Sunday, I used Lay

Readers to narrate the Passion story according to Luke. At points in the narrative, I broke in with my version of the story “The Ragman” by Walter Wangerin.²³ Told in the first person, the story helps the congregation become an observer of Jesus on his way to the cross without emphasizing a substitutionary view of the atonement. By merging the biblical story with Wangerin’s story, the two narratives were allowed to interpret each other.

The Group Reflection session for this week would be the last for the project. In light of that the theme brought together the Passion theme of the previous Sunday and the celebration of the Resurrection that would be celebrated on Easter Sunday. The goal was to help the group identify themes from their own experience that were outside of the traditional “Jesus died for me” motif. Specifically, I was hoping that the participants would begin to see Holy Communion as an encounter with our risen Lord as well as with our crucified Savior. I stated the theme as: “The Eucharist is a celebration of Jesus where we remember his death, celebrate his rising and anticipate his coming again.” The biblical account of the two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus²⁴ was used as a vehicle by which the group could encounter the risen Lord along with Cleopas and his companion. Reflecting on the Story included brainstorming about how PFUMC might be able to capture that sense of awe, wonder and surprise of the Emmaus Road account in our celebrations of Holy Communion.

²³ Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984), 3-6.

²⁴ Luke 24:13-35

Week Seven – The Joy of Meeting the Risen Lord

The project ended on Easter Sunday with the celebration of the Eucharist. The model of experience and then reflection was reversed for the Study Group who had reflected on the Emmaus narrative and their own personal experiences of the risen Christ but were now going to experience Holy Communion within the context of hearing that story again. The theme for the sermon was “The Joy of Meeting the Risen Lord” and my goal was to set aside, if even for one Sunday, the idea of Holy Communion being a celebration or reminder of Jesus’ sacrificial death. Based on previous conversations with parishioners and the data from the surveys²⁵ I knew that this might be the toughest theme for individuals to accept. The celebration of Communion at PFUMC, like many other churches I have served, did not include the joyful elements that would be commensurate with the idea of meeting a risen Jesus. The whole service was designed to keep the tone upbeat and joyful.

I began the sermon by creating a tension around how we can know when we have met the risen Lord, especially in light of the difficulty that Mary, those in the locked room and the disciples on their way to Emmaus had in recognizing him. The Emmaus narrative was used to provide a framework by which we could come to recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. As pointed out in *This Holy Mystery*,²⁶ it is when we break bread with Jesus that we truly come to recognize his presence among us. I pointed out

²⁵ The open ended question, “Communion is important because...” provided a broad range of answers but themes related to the death of Jesus (including sacrifice, suffering, blood) appeared more frequently than others.

²⁶ Felton, 10.

that each and every Sunday on which we celebrate Communion, we are re-enacting the Emmaus experience through hearing the Word and breaking the bread.

Follow-Up Surveys

In order to help measure if there had been any changes in the understanding or preferences regarding Holy Communion among the congregation, a second survey was distributed using the numbering system described earlier in order to track individual responses anonymously. As with the first survey, Study Group participants were asked to place their name on the tool. A few changes were made to the survey.²⁷ The biographical information was replaced with a question asking whether this experience was the first time that the person had received Holy Communion weekly. The respondents were also asked how often they had NOT been present during the 7 Sundays of Lent and Easter and whether they had taken Communion each time they were present. If they had not participated each time they were present, they were asked to indicate how many times Communion had not been received. An additional quantitative question was added which asked respondents their level of agreement with the statement: “The experience of receiving Holy Communion weekly was a positive one.” While I will share more details about what changes the surveys indicated later, the number of congregants who agreed with the statement outnumbered those who disagreed by seven to four with four individuals indicating they were not sure. The study group favored the experience by a five to two margin!

There were a few other interesting facts that the congregational survey revealed.

²⁷ See Appendix C

First, eight of the 14 respondents had never had the opportunity to take Communion weekly before this project. However, only one member of the Study Group had ever received Communion weekly before. The fact that this was a newer experience for the Study Group surprised me because the study group was significantly more open to the idea than the congregation at large. Second, only one person from the congregation indicated on the survey that he or she did not receive Communion every week they were present. And that individual indicated that he or she had received Communion for four consecutive weeks before deciding “it had started to feel less special.”

Post-Project Interviews

A second round of interviews were then conducted. After consulting with the Lay Advisory Team, the decision was made to have the participants interviewed by the same LAT member that had conducted the first interview. Some of the questions were modified in order to allow the participant to reflect on what changes, if any, might have occurred in them as a result of the project. I would compare the stories and information shared in this interview with each person’s initial interview. I was hoping that this would provide me with some indication of whether the way a person thought about, experienced or talked about Holy Communion might have changed through being involved in the project.

One new evocative question asked, “You have invited a new Christian to receive Holy Communion with you. What do you hope they will experience the first time he or she receives it?” I was surprised by the responses to this question because, although I had written it to be evocative, I expected the answers to add insight into what was

important to the interviewee about Communion. And I guess I expected the question to be taken as a tool to dig deeper into one's own thoughts, not necessarily as a literal question. One person responded, "I don't think I'd really invite someone to come to Communion here." Then this person went on to say that it should be up to the individual as to what they would feel. Another individual voiced concerns over whether or not this person would have had any instruction before hand about the meaning of what was happening. And yet one other participant was hesitant to suggest "what someone else needs, or how God should meet them."

CHAPTER FIVE
POUR OUT YOUR HOLY SPIRIT

During a lecture at Drew Theological Seminary, Dr. Carl Savage said that in Postmodern Narrative Research “we are not testing an hypothesis. We are doing something and observing the outcome.”¹ This is what could be referred to as “What if” research. *What* will happen *if* I do this? So what did happen as a result of my taking one Lenten season to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion weekly in worship, preach a series of sermons on the Sacrament and gather together a group of individuals who would meet weekly to reflect on the experience? I would be ecstatic if I could say that each person who took part experienced a life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ as a result of participating in the project. I would be pleased if all the participants came to value both the objective and subjective experiences of Holy Communion in deeper ways. And yes, I would be glad if everyone came to appreciate the weekly celebration of Communion even if that was not the goal of my project. Not surprisingly, none of those outcomes were evidenced. However, there was evidence of transformation in the ways people experienced, valued and thought about the Sacrament.

Measuring transformation can be a difficult task. The seeds of change that may be planted through any focused effort, like a Doctor of Ministry project, may not bear

¹ Carl Savage, “Theological Methods and Practice” (class lecture, Drew University, Madison, NJ, July 23, 2012).

fruit until much later. Congregational transformation begins at the individual level. As individuals are transformed, the culture of the congregation will be changed. Therefore, as I searched for signs of transformation, I explored trends across the participants as well as anecdotal evidence.

Signs of Transformation

The surveys indicated that the project produced some change in the way people thought about and experienced Holy Communion. By assigning a number value to the possible options, I was able to quantifiably track changes in the “average” response of the members of the congregation and the Study Group.² By noticing changes in the average response before the project compared to after the project, I was able to identify the themes around which change occurred within the groups. I also created a spreadsheet where each column represented one of the five possible responses and each row represented a question on the survey.³ By recording a tally mark for each response I was able to observe visually how responses differed between the two surveys and the two groups of respondents. This allowed me to identify any significant changes in the level of agreement or disagreement with each statement in ways that the average response data could not.

For instance, the average response from the Study Group for the statement: “I will

² See appendix F. The numbers from the survey instrument were used as values for each response. Therefore, an average of greater than three indicated some level of agreement with the statement and an average of less than three indicated some level of disagreement. Likewise, an increase in the value of the average response after the project indicated a greater degree of agreement with the statement just as a decrease indicated less agreement.

³ See appendix F

receive Communion as often as it is offered to me” changed from 3.57 to 4.14. This was the largest increase in average response of any statement. But what the average did not show was that there was no change in the person who disagreed strongly with that statement or the person who was not sure. The change was with those who agreed with the statement. While there were four “True” responses and one “Definitely True” responses before the project, there were zero “True” responses after the project and five “Definitely True” responses. So, yes, the average increased significantly. However, all of the change occurred among those who already agreed that they would “receive Communion as often as it is offered to me.” Only now these individuals were more committed to this idea. This indicated that the change around this statement was one of degree and not one of substance. This phenomenon also occurred with other statements.

One significant change among the congregational responses was in the level of agreement with the statement: “Communion helps me to feel closer to the other worshippers.” The average response before the project was 2.5 indicating that, generally, this statement was not true for the group. After the project, the average of the responses increased to 3.21.⁴ The difference of .71 between the two averages marked the greatest change in any statement among the congregational group and it represented one of the two instances where the average response moved across the True/Not True marker of 3. My review of the individual responses confirmed that many of the participants gained a heightened awareness of Holy Communion as a corporate as well as an individual experience of God’s grace. Before the survey, seven people had indicated that the statement was not true for them and only three indicated that it was true. After the

⁴ Among the Study Group there were some differences in responses among individuals. However, the average of the responses did not change (3.57).

survey, those numbers were reversed. And one participant wrote on the survey, “It is a new thought ‘one with each other,’ a bond, a unity as we share the body and blood together.”

Another instance of change among the congregational participants occurred in response to the statement: “If I receive Communion more than once a month, it tends to lose its importance.” This was the second instance where the change in average response indicated a change in agreement with the statement.⁵ In this instance, a pre-project average of 3.28 decreased .57 to 2.71 after the project. The chart of individual responses shows that while four people were not sure how they felt about the statement before the project, no one was unsure afterwards. All of these individuals changed from unsure to some level of it being not true for them. Responses to this statement were important to the project because it represented one of the differences in understanding that exists among those for whom Holy Communion has a subjective importance versus a more objective importance. And while there was one individual who changed from a true response to a not true response, the responses to this statement seem to confirm that the project was more successful in bringing about transformation in the undecided than in those with definite ideas. It does show, however, that transformation did result from participation in the project on the congregational level.

The Study Group also exhibited a pattern of change regarding this statement. And not surprisingly, the change was similar to that previously discussed regarding the statement on whether participants would receive communion whenever it was offered to them. While there was a slight decrease in agreement with the statement by average

⁵ There were no instances of this kind of change among the Study Group.

response (2 to 1.71), this was brought about by individuals moving from the “Not True” category to the “Definitely Not True” category. Among the Study Group there was no substantive change evident regarding the connection between frequency and meaning. But there was a increase in the level of commitment to the idea that the meaningfulness of Holy Communion did not wane when one received it more frequently.

Another significant change among the Study Group occurred in the responses to a related statement: “I would refrain from receiving Communion if I have just received it recently.” I expected that those for whom the meaning of Communion was found in its subjective meaning would refrain from receiving the elements if that action would increase the possibility of the meaning being lost. The average response to this statement changed .42. However, this did not represent a change in overall agreement with the statement among the group but, once again, the change was one of degrees as the average moved from 1.71 to 1.29. When I examined the individual responses, I was pleased with the fact that all but one of the Study Group participants found that statement to be “Definitely Not True.” This included two individuals who had indicated they were “Unsure” before the project. The one individual who held the dissenting view of the statement after the project, and who had found that statement to be “Definitely True” for them before the project, was now “Not Sure.”

A New Narrative

While the quantitative data showed signs of changing attitudes and understandings, I believe that those responses can sometimes be misleading. People are not only reluctant to accept change; they are sometimes reluctant to admit that they have

been changed. Someone who was staunchly opposed to weekly Communion at the start of the project might be unwilling to admit that the experience of receiving Communion weekly was in any way positive. I am reminded of my son, who upon looking at a new chicken dish my wife was preparing said, “That looks disgusting. I’m not eating that crap.” As is the practice in our household, he was required to try a small helping. As he was part way through devouring his second plateful, I asked him, “So Jake, how is it?” His response: “I guess its OK.” When one is attempting to bring about transformation regarding a practice as important to people at Holy Communion is, prescribed questions might not tell the whole story. So I was depending on the qualitative data to reveal more implicit signs of transformation. Ultimately, I was looking for how the language people used when talking about Holy Communion might have changed.

The bulk of the qualitative data for the project was gathered through the interviews conducted by the members of the Lay Advisory Team of the Study Group participants. However, each person who responded to the survey was given the opportunity to answer the open ended question: “Communion is important because....” Even the brief answers provided to that question revealed some new language and themes. Only one pre-project response included language relating to the Resurrection, Easter or joy. After the project, four responses included those themes and this did not include the response from the person who had used that language before the project began. The responses also supported the quantitative data about the corporate nature of the Sacrament. All of the pre-project responses focused on either the internal feelings Communion evoked or its importance in one’s relationship with God. Afterward, three responses included some element of how Communion affected one’s relationship with

other Christians. One participant captured the notion of the Sacrament being about more than just the communicant and the Lord by writing, “It restores my faith in God and makes me feel closer (to) him and my fellow church family.”

The data from the interviews proved helpful but also difficult. While I listened to each interview in its entirety, there were more than 6.5 hours of recordings. These were transcribed in order to make analyzing the data more effective and efficient. But with that, there was still an unseemly amount of data to deal with. In an effort to make sense of that volume of qualitative data, I identified questions from the interviews that were the most directly related to Holy Communion and most likely to produce insights into the participant’s understanding and experience of the Sacrament. I compiled each participant’s answer to each of those questions in a separate document. If questions from the first and second interviews were similar, I was able to search for signs of transformation more readily. This whole process enabled me to more efficiently explore signs of change in the language used by the interviewees before and after the project. It also enabled me to analyze trends across the whole of the Study Group’s answers to each question.

One trend that I noticed was a change in the use of language that indicated whether the participant was operating out of a subjective understanding or an objective understanding of Holy Communion. Words such as “feeling” would indicate a more subjective approach. Words such as “thinking” or “understanding” would indicate a more objective approach. I also noticed that there was often a change in the focus from what a communicant was experiencing to the meaning of the Sacrament (or vice-versa).

This trend was exemplified in the responses to the questions concerning whether

any changes had occurred to the role that Holy Communion played in one's relationship with Jesus. Of the five participants that indicated there was a change, four of them spoke of a greater or "deeper" understanding. Before the project, these four had characterized the role of Communion as producing a feeling or, in Julie's words, as a way of "renewing my relationship with the Holy Spirit." This type of change is one for which I had hoped. It should be noted that in response to other questions, the importance and desire for feelings was still very present but one's thinking had been expanded. And in fact, a more objective understanding of what was happening seemed to heighten the subjective experience. Marina indicated that the biggest change that occurred in her through the project was to "really think about what it means" which "gives you more meaning." I interpreted from context that "meaning" was referring to the subjective idea of "meaningfulness."

Also supporting the notion that change took place along these lines was Mary's response to the role of Communion. Mary's change, however, was in the opposite direction. Her pre-project interview answer was very objective in nature. She spoke of Communion's connection to the Last Supper and the fact that "God is there and he is sharing a part of...Jesus." After the project, her answer took on a much more subjective focus: "I feel more a part of it;" "I feel as though Jesus did come...for my sins;" "I just feel more whole." This indicates to me that I was successful in expanding the ways in which participants understood and experienced Holy Communion and that this was true whether the individual might have originally functioned out of an objective meaning or a subjective one.

The answers to the question, "What, if anything, might you miss about receiving

Communion weekly?” also provided some interesting insight. While the weekly pattern ended on Easter Sunday, a full week lapsed before interviews took place. Being sensitive to the anxiety weekly Communion produced in many congregants, I chose to not celebrate the Eucharist on the First Sunday after Easter even though it was the first Sunday of the month and the regular time when Communion would have been celebrated. The lapse in time, although not done for this reason, allowed each member of the Study Group to experience the contrast of what Sunday worship was like when Communion was a part of the service and when it wasn’t after having received it for several weeks in a row.

Those who indicated in the screening process that they were highly in favor of weekly Communion were able to speak of different aspects of Communion that they would miss: “being invited to His table and having dinner” or “celebrating the dying and resurrection.” This was somewhat expected and in fact, were the types of answers for which I was hoping. However, there was a sense of surprise among several of the participants, especially when they realized they would miss receiving the Sacrament weekly. Marina spoke of feeling “like there was something missing, which I didn’t know I would feel.” And even Julie, one of the two self-proclaimed opponents to weekly Communion, responded that it was “interesting to come and think you are going to have Communion, and not.” She had not been in church on Easter Sunday and therefore, did not know Communion would not be offered the following week. And it appears as if, after taking Communion every week for 6 weeks and then not receiving it on Easter, she was looking forward to it. The tone of unexpected disappointment was clearly evident on the recording. The idea of a new-found sense of expectancy regarding the Sacrament was

also expressed when two of the participants named “anticipation” as the one word they chose to sum up what they were thinking or feeling as they came forward.

There were also other indications that the project had made a difference in the participants in ways that I had hoped. Whether it was choosing “community” as the one word that summed up what one was thinking or the biggest change being the awareness of how others were feeling during Communion or the realization that Communion is appropriate on Easter Sunday as a celebration of the Resurrection, I believe that the project did plant seeds of transformation.

Did the Group Reflection Phase Matter?

Did the Group Reflection process make a difference? I find that question hard to answer from the data. The congregational responses to the survey questions show more quantifiable change than did the responses from the Study Group. However, using the first survey as a baseline, there was more change to be effected. As discussed earlier regarding the statement, “If I receive Communion more than once a month, it tends to lose its importance” neither the congregation nor the Study Group experienced any substantive change in agreement with the statement. While all the undecided people in the congregation came to disagree with the statement, there were no undecided participants among the study group to use in comparison. However, the responses from the statement, “I will receive Communion as often as it is offered to me” seem to indicate that the Group Reflection Phase did impact an individual’s commitment to that idea more often than for those who were not a part of Group Reflection process.

But to be concerned about whether or not those who were a part of the Group

Reflection Phase experienced greater change than those who were not might miss the value of that experience. Most of those that did participate seemed to appreciate the experience and found it worth the time. Marina spoke of how the group helped each other when one member might not have been sure about how they felt and thought it was helpful “with the people talking and you know how much God is there in their different lives and different ways and how they see it.” While this element of the project may or may not facilitate greater change in individuals, it was effective at allowing those who participated to delve deeper into the understanding and experience of Holy Communion and to be affirmed or challenged by others with whom they had shared a common experience.

CHAPTER SIX

GRANT THAT WE MAY GO INTO THE WORLD IN THE STRENGTH OF YOUR SPIRIT TO GIVE OURSELVES FOR OTHERS

I think it is clear from the previous chapter that the project did make a difference in the sacramental life of many of those individuals that participated. What is not clear is whether or not the congregation's sacramental life was changed; whether or not the congregation had been moved to a "newly anticipated future."¹ One of the drawbacks of a short-term project such as this is that one is not sure whether the seeds planted will take root and blossom into the type of long-term, significant transformation for which a Doctor of Ministry candidate hopes. While my own sacramental journey provided the methodological model for the project, that journey took a few years, not a few months, to produce significant change in me. While I tend to shoot for the stars, sometimes a more realistic goal is to simply get off the ground and, for a significant number of people at PFUMC, the flight has begun. The question of how high that journey goes (or whether it continues at all) will have to be for me a matter of faith as I was appointed to another charge on July 1, 2013 and will not be able to follow through on the themes presented throughout my project or observe whether there was any lasting change.

As I have said several times in this paper, the project was not about trying to convince people to accept the practice of weekly Communion. However, I was interested

¹ Carl Savage, "Theological Methods and Practice" (class lecture, Drew University, Madison, NJ, July 17, 2012).

in the responses to the statement, “The experience of receiving Communion weekly was a positive one.” One of my regrets with the survey was that I didn’t ask a question regarding weekly Communion on the initial survey. This omission was intentional, in part because I did not want the project to be about that practice. I do wish, however, that I had some way to measure any change in the participants’ attitudes toward the practice. What I do know is that the two members of the Study Group who began as opposed to the practice did not find the experience positive while the other five members did. The congregational responses were surprising in that one-half of the respondents found the experience enjoyable while only four did not (the remaining four were unsure). I found this encouraging. Had I remained as the pastor at PFUMC, I would have wanted to consider, in consultation with the leadership of the church, building upon the change wrought by the project by exploring the possibilities of weekly Communion as a practice to be implemented.

The project also challenged one of my early assumptions. I would have anticipated that individuals who indicated on the post-project survey that Communion did not lose its importance if celebrated more often than monthly might have been more likely to find the experience of taking Communion weekly a positive one (and vice versa). However, five of the fourteen surveys indicated a different reality. Some individuals who did not agree that Communion loses its importance if received more than monthly did not find weekly Communion positive. Others who felt that Communion did lose importance if celebrated more than monthly found the practice of weekly Communion positive. In light of this, I realize that I might be making the connection between how Communion was meaningful and how often it should be celebrated too

simplistic. Due to the proscribed nature of the survey, I don't know why each individual experienced weekly Communion during the project in a positive way or not but I am once again reminded that it is unwise to make assumptions especially when they are based too heavily upon one's own experience.

I also found a conversation I had with a woman from PFUMC important. During my last week as pastor, a long-standing member of the congregation approached me. She indicated to me that she and others felt like I had been intent upon taking the congregation where I wanted them to go whether they wanted to go there or not. When I asked her to explain, she mentioned the project and weekly Communion as two examples of where this was true. From experience, I knew that trying to have a rational conversation around those issues at that point was futile. However, the encounter did cause me to think back over the project, how it had been presented and how it been implemented. I feel confident that the Lay Advisory Team and I worked hard to make sure people knew that 1) the practice of weekly Communion would only last during Lent and 2) participation in the project on any level, including receiving Communion weekly, was completely optional. However, in spite of these efforts, there were those who did not hear what was being said or heard it but felt it was insincere. This reminded me of what a mentor once told me: "If someone is moving away from you emotionally, they won't hear what you are saying. They will only hear what they think you are saying." I wonder if it is possible, when dealing with something as meaningful as Holy Communion, to do so without evoking negative responses from some segment of the congregation.

Personally, I found the project both energizing and challenging. Energizing because this project fulfilled a desire that I had possessed to engage a congregation on

this level around the Sacrament for quite some time. I was also energized by the significance of the contribution I received from the LAT and from the stories, before and after the project, from those who participated. The project served as an instrument for growth as I was challenged to allow others significant input into a project that was, in many ways, my own prized possession. I found myself having to resist a temptation to make the focus of the project the weekly celebration of the Eucharist and found myself disappointed when some people in the congregation could not see past that point of tension themselves. But I also understand that, despite intentional efforts to the contrary, my own underlying desire to see weekly Communion become the norm most likely leaked through the efforts I made to suppress that desire. And the individuals who were the most opposed to that practice would have naturally been the most sensitive to those leaks.

The project reminded me of how my natural inclination is to take charge to do things on my own to avoid the risk of having others mess things up. But I was also affirmed in my ability to overcome that inclination and to develop a process that was in fact both consultative and effective. The support I received from the LAT and the large majority of participants helped to motivate me when I found myself distracted or out of energy for the planning. While during the writing of this paper, there were times when I regretted beginning this journey three years ago. However, reading the completed thesis has left me with a sense of gratitude for having had the opportunity to embark on the journey and accomplishment from having completed it effectively.

Where Do We Go From Here?

As I was planning my project, I had hopes my work might provide insight into the process of changing the sacramental story of a local congregation that would be useful to other churches and pastors. Amongst all the stories of change, there exists significant hope that a similar process might produce similar change (or, Lord willing, greater change) among others communities of faith desiring to explore the transformational possibilities that exist with the sacrament of Holy Communion. Throughout my project I have been in contact with Dr. Taylor Burton-Edwards, director of Worship Resources for the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship, who is interested in seeing me develop a study program that others might find useful. I am excited about the possibilities that my project might serve as an instrument for transformation beyond what the participants at PFUMC experienced.

APPENDIX A
THE DUTY OF CONSTANT COMMUNION

*Delivered on September 10, 2006 by the Rev. Wilson Jones
Tonawanda UMC, Tonawanda, NY*

This morning's sermon is called "The Duty of Constant Communion." It was written by John Wesley. Where possible, I have retained Wesley's language. Always, I have retained Wesley's meaning. When John published his sermons, they did not contain many illustrations. I have added some of my own but only a few for the sake of time. I offer this to you this morning in light of the official start of our church making Holy Communion a regular part of our weekly worship.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. All that is within me bless his holy name.

"Do this in remembrance of me."
—Luke 22:19

It is no wonder that men who do not fear God should never take notice of this statement. But it is strange that it should be neglected by anyone that does fear God, and desires to save his or her own soul; And this neglect is very common. One reason why many neglect it is, they are so afraid of "eating and drinking unworthily," that they never think how much greater the danger is when they do not eat or drink at all. That I might do what I can to bring these well-meaning people to a more proper way of thinking, I shall, first, show that it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he or she can; and, next I will answer some common objections to taking communion often.

Why is it the duty of every Christian to take communion as often as he or she can?

The first reason is that this is a plain command of Christ. Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me." These words obligated the Apostles to bless, break and give the bread to all who joined them. They also obligated all Christians to receive these signs of Christ's body and blood. These words of Christ command us to receive the bread and the cup, in remembrance of his death, until the end of the world. It is important, also, to notice that this command was given by Jesus just before he laid down his life for our sakes. "Do this in remembrance of me" are, therefore, the dying words of Jesus to his followers.

The second reason why it is the duty of every Christian to take communion as often as he or she can is because of the benefits it brings to us. These benefits include the forgiveness of past sins and the strengthening and refreshing of our souls in the present. We are never free from temptations. Wherever we are in life: whether sick or well, in trouble or at ease, the enemy is trying to lead us into sin and too often the enemy succeeds. Now, when we are convinced that we have sinned against God, what better

way do we have of obtaining pardon from him that holding up the body and blood of Jesus and asking him, for the sake of his Son's suffering, to blot out all of our sins.

The grace God offers to us in communion confirms our pardon by enabling us to leave our sins behind. Just as the bread and the cup are nourishment for our bodies, our soul is also strengthened. This is food for our souls which gives us the strength to perform our Christian duty and leads us on to Christian perfection. Therefore, if you have any regard for the commands of Christ, any desire to have your sins pardoned, if you wish to receive the strength to believe, to love and to obey God then you should not neglect any chance to receive the Lord's supper; then we should never turn our backs on the feast which the Lord has prepared for us. Here is a true rule: We are to receive Holy Communion as often as God gives us the opportunity to receive it. Anyone, therefore, who does not receive, but goes from the holy table, when all things are prepared, either does not understand his or her duty, or does not care for the dying command of our Saviour, the forgiveness of their sins, the strengthening of their soul, and the refreshing of their soul with the hope of glory.

The first Christians understood this when they made Communion a constant part of the Lord's Day service. For several centuries they received it nearly every day – at least 4 times a week. Those who gathered for prayer never failed to partake of this Blessed Sacrament. In fact, the opinion they held of those who were willing to turn their back on it can be heard in this ancient teaching: "If any believer joins in the prayers of the faithful, and goes away without receiving the Lord's Supper, let him be excommunicated, as bringing confusion into the church of God."

In order to understand the nature of the Lord's Supper, it would be useful for you to carefully read over those passages in the Gospel, and in 1 Cor. 11, which speak of the institution of it. Here, we learn that the design of this sacrament is the continual remembrance of the death of Christ, by eating bread and drinking the cup, which are the outward signs of the inward grace, the body and blood of Christ.

It is proper for those who wish to receive Communion to prepare themselves by self-examination and prayer. But this is not absolutely necessary. When we do not have time to prepare, we should see to it that we are in an habit of being constant preparation by examining ourselves daily and by praying constantly.

Receiving Holy Communion as often as possible shows both the desire to obey all of God's commandments and the desire to receive all of God's promises.

Now I will answer some objections against constantly receiving the Lord's Supper.

I say constantly because it is absurd to say frequently. If we can only prove that we are to receive communion frequently then we cannot prove that we are to receive it at all. If we are not obligated to receive it constantly, how can we prove that we are obligated to receive it frequently – or once a year, or once in 7 years or even once before we die. Every argument either proves that we are to partake as often as possible or it proves

nothing at all. Therefore, I don't speak of frequent communion but of constant communion.

In order to prove that our duty is to communicate constantly, we may observe that holy communion is both a command from God and a gift of grace to God's people.

God says to us that all who obey his commands shall be eternally happy and that all who do not shall be eternally miserable. One of these commands is "Do this in remembrance of me." So I ask you why do you not do this, because if you want to you can? When the opportunity is there, why do you not obey the command of God?

You might respond by saying "God does not command me to do this as often as I can. That is, you might point out that the text does not say, "as often as you can." So what? Aren't we to obey all of God's commands as often as we can? Our power is the basis for our duty. Whatever we can do, we ought to do. In regards to this or any other command of Christ, the person who can obey and chooses not to, will have no place in the kingdom of Heaven.

The fact that we are to obey every command of God as often as we can is proved by the fact that to say otherwise is ridiculous. If we are not to obey every command of God as often as we can, we cannot prove that we are to obey any command of God at all. Here is an example- If I were to ask a man why he does not help his parents, he might answer – I will not do it now but I will some other time. When that time comes, you can remind him of God's command and he will say again, I will obey it some other time. How can we prove to him that he must obey God's command now unless we prove that he ought to obey it as often as he can because he is able to obey it if he wants to.

But the Lord's supper is not only a command of God but it is a gift from God. God, in his great wisdom, knows that the only way we can be truly happy is to be holy, to be like Jesus. God also knows that we cannot do this on our own, so he has given us certain means of obtaining his help. One of these means is the Lord's Supper.

I ask you "Why do you not accept this gift from God as often as you can? God offers you this blessing – why do you refuse it? You have an opportunity to receive God's mercy – Why do you not receive it? You are weak, why do you not take every chance to increase your strength?"

To make it plain: if you consider constant communion as a command from God and don't do it, you have no piety. If you consider constant communion as a gift toward humankind and don't do it, you have no wisdom.

And even if you could prove that there are no benefits from receiving communion as often as you can, the fact that it is a command from God is enough.

I want to now move on to some particular excuses people commonly make for not obeying this command.

The most common is: I am not worthy and the bible says he that eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgement unto himself.

God offers you one of the greatest gifts this side of heaven and you say, "I am not worthy to receive it." I say, "So what?" The fact is you are not worthy to receive any gift from God but is that a reason to refuse God's gift. God offers you pardon for all your sins. And you are right, you are not worthy of it. God knows that but since he is happy to offer it to you just the same, shouldn't you receive it? He offers to deliver your soul from death. You are unworthy to live but will you refuse life? You are unworthy of God's strength but will stay weak just because of it?

But lets suppose that communion doesn't do us any good. Suppose I would ask you, "Why do you not obey God's commands," and you say, "I am unworthy." What??? Unworthy to obey God??

You might point out the verse in 1 Corinthians 11 that speaks of eating and drinking unworthily. But the unworthiness Paul is speaking about there is a different kind of unworthiness. From the context we can see that by eating and drinking unworthily Paul is referring to partaking of Holy Communion in such a rude and disorderly way that one person was left hungry while another was drunk. Therefore it is just as ridiculous to say "I dare not communicate for fear the church will fall in" as it is to say "I dare not communicate for fear I might eat and drink unworthily."

You should not be afraid of judgement from eating and drinking unworthily. What you should fear is judgement caused by not eating and drinking at all, for not obeying your Maker and Redeemer, for disobeying his plain command and for rejecting both his gift and his authority. Instead of pointing out I Corinthians 11 you should be reminded of James 2:10 - "Whoever keeps the all the laws of God except one is just as guilty as the person who has broken all of God's laws."

Along these lines you might also say I dare not receive because I have fallen into sin. But this only means that you should repent before receiving not that you should not receive at all. Where in the bible can you argue that because you have broken one command of God that this gives you an excuse to break another? What kind of absurd teaching is this - "Commit a new act of disobedience and God will more easily forgive you past sins."

Another sense in which people think they are unworthy is that they feel they cannot "live up to it." That is, they cannot live up to the profession that is made by coming forward to receive the body and blood of Christ. To this I answer, does it make sense to say you should not receive communion constantly because you cannot live up to the profession you must make when you receive it? If it does, then it makes sense that you should never receive communion for it is no more lawful to promise once what you know you cannot live up to than to promise it a thousand times. The promise that you make by receiving communion is no greater than the promise you make at baptism or the promise you make

by calling yourself a Christian. If you cannot live up to receiving communion then you might as well renounce your faith altogether.

The second common objection is “I don’t have time to prepare.” My answer is that all that is absolutely necessary is contained in the words of our invitation – that you love God, that you repent of your sins and that you seek to live in peace with one another. Now, how can you be too busy to love God or to repent of your sins or to seek to live in peace with one another. If you desire and truly wish to follow Christ you are fit to approach the Lord’s table. And if you don’t desire this, then you have bigger problems.

What kind of excuse is it for disobeying God that you don’t have time to prepare? To borrow an idea from the Old Testament, to have time to prepare in prayer and self-examination is good but to obey is better than self-examination.

A third objection is that it lessens your reverence for the sacrament. Or as some might put it “It loses its meaning if I do it too often” or “it becomes less special.” Suppose this is true. Suppose God says, “do this” and you are able to do it but do not because you say, “If I do this now, then I will not be able to do it as reverently as I might otherwise.” So what? Has God ever told you that if obeying his commands lessens your reverence for them then it is OK to disobey them? If he has, then OK. But if he hasn’t, then this argument doesn’t hold water.

The truth is that reverence can come from two things: one is that something is new. This kind of reverence people have for anything they are not used to or anything they do rarely, like celebrating an anniversary. It is special. But another kind of reverence comes based on our faith and our love or fear of God. Now the first type is not a religious reverence but a natural one. And in regards to the Lord’s supper this must lessen but taking communion constantly will not lessen true religious reverence but instead it will confirm and increase it.

I know this to be true from my own experience. I, too, was concerned about Communion becoming mundane or less special if I took it too often. But as I started to participate in Communion on a regular basis, I found the opposite to be true. I discovered that constant communion brought me closer to God. I began to regularly experience the benefits of this gift from God and Holy Communion became more important.

The fourth objection is “I have communicated often and have not received the benefits I expected.” This is said by many well meaning people and deserves consideration. But I want you to consider this – first, whatever God commands us to do we are to do whether it benefits us or not. God says, “Do this” and we are to do it. The truth is you may benefit from it in ways you cannot sense.

I liken this to eating broccoli. Not only do I not like broccoli but I cannot see any reason for eating it. However, those that know about such things, tell me that eating broccoli is very good for you, so I eat it. I never once have felt better because I have eaten it but I

eat it just the same. I benefit from it, but I am never really aware of the good it is doing for me.

If a man does not receive the benefits he expected, it is not the sacraments fault or the eating or drinking of too often. It usually means that he is not prepared by being willing to obey all of God's commands and by being ready to receive all of God's promises or he does not trust that by receiving it God shall strengthen him.

The fifth common objection is that the church only requires it 4 times a year. Our book of Discipline requires every church to offer Holy Communion at least 4 times a year. My rebuttal is this: What if the church did not require it at all? Isn't it enough that God requires it? We obey the church for God's sake not the other way around. If you are willing to receive it 4 times a year because the church commands it, should you not be willing to receive it at every opportunity because God commands it.

It also important to point at that the church does not excuse those who only communicate the minimum number of times. In fact, the church encourages its pastors to offer communion whenever the people of God gather together and especially every Sunday and holiday.

Conclusion – I have shown that if we consider the Lord's Supper as a command of Christ, no one can pretend to be pious who does not receive it as often as he or she can. I have also shown that if we consider the institution of the Lord's supper as a gift to humankind, anyone who does not receive it as often as they can lacks good Christian sense. And I have shown that none of the objections usually made can be used as an excuse for not obeying God's command and accepting his gift.

Unworthiness is not an excuse because we all are unworthy.

Lack of preparation is not an excuse because there is no amount of busy-ness that can hinder us from being prepared unless it also hinders us from being saved.

A lessening of our reverence for communion is not an excuse because the one who commands us to DO THIS does not anywhere says "unless it lessens your reverence for it."

Not profiting from the experience is not an excuse because if we do not profit it is our own fault.

And finally, the church is not an excuse because the church is quite in favor of constant communion.

The Lord says, "Do this in remembrance of me." Let us do it together this morning.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

APPENDIX B LAY ADVISORY TEAM MATERIALS

LAY ADVISORY COMMITTEE TRAINING SESSION

"WHAT IN THE WORLD IS A POST-MODERN NARRATIVE?"

I. What is POSTMODERN NARRATIVE RESEARCH?

It is POSTMODERN:

- It assumes things are not always either/or
- No objective body of knowledge exists
- Such a knowledge cannot be possessed and is not neutral
- Pursuit of such knowledge does not benefit everyone
- the present is not an effect of the past but rather is "birthed"

by it, organic vs mechanical

- Perception – Pre-modern "I believe so I may understand.

Modern – I believe what I understand

Post-Modern – Understanding is not belief, "What will happen to my world if I believe this.

It is RESEARCH:

- Shift from "Is it true?" to "What does it mean?"
- We do not live in a world of mere facts. Facts have meaning – that is, in context, facts mean different things. Our story is not the facts of our lives, but rather the narrative that provides the story of what those facts mean in our lives.
- You don't measure the truth of something, you discern the meaning of the story - peeling away the layers to get the core
- Qualitative Research vs. Quantitative Research
 - Quantitative seeks to prove a hypothesis – However, quantitative methods will be used in order to "thicken" the narrative
 - Qualitative seeks to understand the culture/context of the situation with the hopes of finding a preferred future (as opposed to saying – This is what I think should be done. How do I test it out?)
- It uses pastoral listening to uncover layers of a story.

It is NARRATIVE:

- It assumes that all of life is "story" – To be humans, to be alive – vs living, is to have a story. We are our stories.
- Task then is to hear the stories so that we can grasp the present and how that present is defined by the past and how it might define the future.
- - Someone can tell me what the UMC says communion believes and may even articulate his or her own beliefs, but it is the stories told that communicate what it really means
- Stories vs Narrative – a Narrative is a guiding story – the big story all of our other stories tell – We are looking for the Narrative the stories will tell us.

-KEY EXAMPLE – to be baptized is not indoctrination (teaching someone to know the facts of the Christian faith), it is being absorbed into the story of the people of God.

GOAL – CS – “We are not comparing the ongoing discourses to a normative script that infers a prior plan or framework but we are trying to evoke the story so that we may hear its nuances and emergent meanings.” MT –We don’t discover the truth, the truth emerges from the story. “We do not expect something to happen, we are discovering what will happen.”

“IF I ASK A NASTY QUESTION NICELY, IS IT APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?”

III. Appreciative Inquiry (Philippians 4:8) (my project is steps 1-2)

- It is a contrast to problem solving (deficit model – what do we lack). It is appreciating strengths.

- Instead of focusing on the negative (the problems to be solved), AI engages people in a conversation about the positive that seeks to change the conversation – to stimulate the thinking and imagination.

- Process 1) Initiate 2) Inquire into life stories 3) Imagine through provocative proposals 4) Innovate new and creative ways to manifest the imagined futures.

- Branson – “By discovering the best and most valuable narrative ...participants can construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most helpful images of the future.” (Newly Anticipated Future)

- Assumptions of AI

- Some things work well, always.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Asking questions influences people
- People are more likely to move forward when they can carry part of the past. (the goal is to get them to take the ‘important’ parts of the past with them.”
- Carry the best parts forward
- We must value differences
- Language creates reality (how we talk about it)
- Heliotropic – leaning towards energy (healthy or not)
- Outcomes should be useful
- Collaboration is key

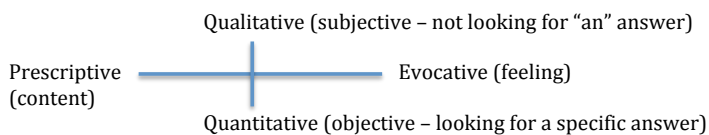
“WHEN IS BEING EVOCATIVE IN CHURCH NOT A BAD THING?”

IV. Evocative Questioning

- Key is Evocative Questions – gets behind content to emotion, vision, motivation – Hearing something about the context from the person’s perspective – not what they think as much as what they feel

- We are not looking for a “right” answer but for “their” answer
- Two types of questions – descriptive (open ended) and prescriptive (limited choices)

Carl's Question Matrix



“WHAT IN THE NAME OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS KENOTIC LISTENING?”

V. Interview protocol

- Be a Story Broker
- Use Kenotic Listening - Philippians 2:6-7 – you stop listening when...
- Be Self-Differentiated and Non-Reactive
- Acknowledge Your Bias
- State Questions Positively
- Delay and Limit “Why?” Questions
- Take Notes
 - listen for key ideas or words
 - listen for what you think the person finds the most meaningful
 - record emotions and body language
- Don't worry about being systematic
- Slow down and think about next question
- DO NOT STOP THE STORY IN ORDER TO FINISH THE QUESTIONS**

The task of the interviewer is to ask evocative questions AND to listen attentively, non-judgmentally and kenotically.

Acknowledge your bias, especially as you listen and as you ask follow up questions. Questions must be positively stated – Why are you driving away new people? Vs Do you like a big or a small church?
Delay and limit why questions

“OH, SO THIS IS WHY I HAD TO SIT THROUGH ALL OF THIS!”

VI. Writing Questions

APPENDIX C
SURVEYS AND INTERVIEW FORMS

Sunday Dinner with Jesus
Congregational Questionnaire

Thank you for taking time to fill out this questionnaire. The information you provide will become part of the data used in this project. That data will then be used in the write up of my Doctor of Ministry thesis and submitted to Drew University. It may also later be published or referred to in other publications. Any names provided will be replaced with pseudonyms should I want to reference your particular responses. Completing this questionnaire implies consent to your answers being used in the manner described above.

ID #

Age Bracket (circle one): 18-25 26-40 41-55 56-70 70+

Sex: Male Female

List those all Christian traditions or denominations in which you have participated regularly at any point in your life (ie. Methodist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, etc.) by length of time (longest to shortest):

What tradition or denomination did your family identify with when you were growing up?

How long have you been a United Methodist? Why are you a United Methodist?

*Please rate to what extent the following statements are **true for you** using the scale. Circle your answer:*

Definitely				
Not True	Not True	Not Sure	True	Very True
1	2	3	4	5

Receiving Holy Communion is an essential part of my spiritual life.

1 2 3 4 5

I miss receiving Holy Communion if it is served when I am not in attendance that Sunday.

1 2 3 4 5

Holy Communion is best experienced in a quiet setting.

1 2 3 4 5

If I receive communion more than once a month, it tends to lose its importance.

1 2 3 4 5

If I don't feel close to Jesus during Communion, I wonder if it is was worth my time.

1 2 3 4 5

I will receive Communion as often as it is offered to me.

1 2 3 4 5

Communion helps me feel closer to the other worshippers.

1 2 3 4 5

Receiving Holy Communion makes me feel closer to the Lord.

1 2 3 4 5

I would refrain from receiving Communion if I have just received it recently.

1 2 3 4 5

Holy Communion is best experienced in a joyful atmosphere of celebration.

1 2 3 4 5

Answer the following question in your own words. Please use as much or as little space as you need. Attach additional pages if necessary.

Communion is important to me because...

Sunday Dinner with Jesus
Follow Up Questionnaire

Thank you for taking time to fill out this questionnaire. The information you provide will become part of the data used in this project. That data will then be used in the write up of my Doctor of Ministry thesis and submitted to Drew University. It may also later be published or referred to in other publications. Any names provided will be replaced with pseudonyms should I want to reference your particular responses. Completing this questionnaire implies consent to your answers being used in the manner described above.

ID #

Was this the first time you ever had the opportunity to receive Holy Communion weekly during Sunday morning worship? Yes No

Of the 7 Sundays in Lent and Easter, how many times were you **NOT** present in worship? 0 1 2 3 4 5+

When you were present, did you always receive Holy Communion? Yes No

If not, how many times did you not take it? 1 2 3 4 5+

*Please rate to what extent the following statements are **true for you** using the scale. Circle your answer:*

Definitely Not True	Not True	Not Sure	True	Very True
1	2	3	4	5

Receiving Holy Communion is an essential part of my spiritual life.

1 2 3 4 5

I miss receiving Holy Communion if it is served when I am not in attendance that Sunday.

1 2 3 4 5

Holy Communion is best experienced in a quiet setting.

1 2 3 4 5

If I receive communion more than once a month, it tends to lose its importance.

1 2 3 4 5

If I don't feel close to Jesus during Communion, I wonder if it is worth my time.

1 2 3 4 5

I will receive Communion as often as it is offered to me.

1 2 3 4 5

Communion helps me feel closer to the other worshippers.

1 2 3 4 5

Receiving Holy Communion makes me feel closer to the Lord.

1 2 3 4 5

I would refrain from receiving Communion if I have just received it recently.

1 2 3 4 5

Holy Communion is best experienced in a joyful atmosphere of celebration.

1 2 3 4 5

The experience of receiving Holy Communion weekly was a positive one.

1 2 3 4 5

Answer the following question in your own words. Please use as much or as little space as you need. Attach additional pages if necessary.

Communion is important to me because...

Sunday Dinner with Jesus
Professional Project
Interview Form

Name of Person Being Interviewed _____

Date _____ Time _____

Location of Interview _____

Name of Interviewer _____

DO NOT FORGET TO START THE RECORDER!!!!

Tell me a little about why you chose to be a part of this process?

What motivates you to come to church on Sunday? Does this differ from other times in your life when you have attended church? How?

What spiritual disciplines do you engage in that you find the most helpful toward strengthening your faith?

Thinking back over your spiritual journey, remember a time when you believe God was closest to you. Describe the setting (ask for details). What was happening? What caused you pick this occasion over others? How did you know God was close?

What role does Holy Communion play in your faith relationship with the Lord?

Get a picture in your mind of the first time you remember receiving Communion. Where was it? Describe what happened? What lasting impressions are you left with?

When has Holy Communion been the most meaningful to you? What made it so?

Imagine you are coming forward for Communion. What are you thinking or feeling? Is there one word that best describes what you are experiencing?

What changes have you experienced in your life regarding your receiving of Holy Communion? Has there been one that has been the most meaningful/helpful?

If you were to design the perfect Communion experience, what would it include? What would you hope people would experience?

If you no longer were given the opportunity to receive Communion, what would you miss the most?

Sunday Dinner with Jesus
Post Project
Interview Form

Name of Person Being Interviewed _____

Date _____ Time _____

Location of Interview _____

Name of Interviewer _____

DO NOT FORGET TO START THE RECORDER!!!!

Thank you for participating in this project. How was the experience for you?

Describe ways in which your relationship with the Lord might be different now than before the project? Why do you think those changes occurred?

Did knowing that you would be receiving Communion weekly affect your motivation to attend church on Sunday? In what ways?

Has being a participant in the project changed the role Communion plays in your spiritual life? How?

Thinking back over your project, remember a time when you believe God was closest to you. (ask for details) What caused you to pick this occasion over others? How did you know God was close?

When, during the project, was Holy Communion the most meaningful to you? What made it so?

Imagine that it is this coming Sunday morning and the pastor has invited you to come forward to receive communion. As you rise from your pew and walk down the aisle, what are you thinking or feeling? Is there one word that best describes what you are experiencing?

Identify the biggest change that has taken place in the way you understand/experience/think about Holy Communion because of this project?

You have invited a new Christian to receive Holy Communion with you. What do you hope that they will experience the first time he or she receives it?

What, if anything, might you miss about receiving communion weekly?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you!

APPENDIX D SERMONS

These are detailed sermon notes not transcripts or manuscripts. The one exception is Sermon #6 which is presented in manuscript form.

Sermon #1 – “Remembrance”

Intro: One day I was stewing over another encounter with a church member who didn't like the fact that we had begun to do Communion more often. They just didn't get where I was coming from – how I felt about the Lord's Supper. As I mulled over what was going on, I thought -

A) This person was just being a jerk!

B) This person just didn't like change!

C) This person was prejudiced against Catholics and others who had communion more often.

D) Communion wasn't nearly as important to this person as it was to me.

OR Maybe, E) Communion was also really important to this person cause if it wasn't why was she getting so angry with me.

It was then that I began to realize that the way we experience Communion is not the same. For some it is a special visit from an infrequent guest. For others it is a regular encounter with someone who walks by there side each day. For others, it is that special date with someone special – you know, someone you see all the time but occasionally do something extra special with. But those are all “special” encounters with Jesus.

Before coming to appreciate, and even long for, more frequent communion, I used to make the same mistake in thinking about those who had communion weekly – it couldn't be as important to them as it is to me or they wouldn't want it so often. They must be just going through the motions. And I am sure some of you might think the same thing when I bring up the idea of weekly communion.

And so we have come to the start of our Lenten Journey – A Eucharist pilgrimage. An experience some have been anticipating, while others have been dreading. And I am not going to ask for a show of hands....

But I really do want this time to not be about me or my agenda or about you or your agenda. My goal, this Lent, is to set the table for new experiences (and for old experiences re-newed) with Jesus at the table. And the one thing we can be sure of is that each time we come, not matter our state of mind or the state of our spirit, is that Jesus is here – at His table.

Through listening to stories of Communion, I have learned that the ways we experience Jesus here are varied and many. And so each week, I will be hoping to bring one of those varied experiences into focus. And maybe the most prevalent experience of Communion is the remembrance that Jesus died for us and for our salvation. “This in remembrance of me.” And so I share one of my own stories of remembrance.

My story at Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral in Lexington, KY

So I came, time and again because each time I came, Jesus seemed to always say the right thing to me.

Sermon #2 – Real Presence

Bread – it is seen in our culture, and more so in other third world cultures, as the staple. One of the things that you need to live on – and in fact, if it is all you have, you can probably live – Bread and Water. (no coincidence that those two staples are what Jesus has given us as the Sacramental signs of our salvation – the water of baptism and the bread of Holy Communion.) And so it should not surprise us that Jesus speaks of himself as “The Bread of Life.”

I cannot preach a sermon series on the Eucharist and not touch on the uncomfortable words of Jesus – “I am the bread of life – my flesh – unless....”

Alexander Schmemmann – quote - “For the Life of the World – Jesus said, “This is my body and this is my blood.” And generations upon generations of theologians ask the same questions: How is this possible? How does this happen? And what exactly does happen in this transformation? “ (page 42)

While I often engage in conversations around those questions, I have come to find them counter productive in many ways.

The mistake of those who were with Jesus that day is that they could not imagine that Jesus was talking about anything else than his physical body and blood.

But I wonder if in the church, too often we don’t make the other mistake – we think Jesus was talking only about feeding on him in a spiritual sense. As if there was no connection between the BREAD OF LIFE and the bread of Holy Communion. When in reality, John, and very likely Jesus, was making a connection between the Lord’s Supper and the presence of Jesus.

Character from *The Violent Bear It Away* by Flannery O’Connor:

Frances Marion Tartwater – Had been raised in the woods by his uncle – Mason – who was a very devout Christian man – what some might even call a fanatic.

When Uncle Mason died, Tartwater went to live with another relative - Uncle Rayber – in the city. As much as Mason was fanatically religious, Rayber was fanatically unreligious. And although Tartwater had rejected the religion of the one uncle, he was just as unwilling to accept the non-religion of the other uncle. No matter what Rayber tried, he could not connect with the boy. Food was a big problem. Tartwater wouldn't eat what his uncle prepared at home nor would he eat if he took him out. One night, when he decided to run away, Rayber followed Tartwater.

Tartwater's face was strangely lit in the window he was standing before. Rayber watched curiously for a few minutes. It looked to him like the face of someone starving who sees a meal he can't reach laid out before him. At last, something he wants, he thoughts, and determined that tomorrow he would return and buy it. TW reached out and touched the glass and then drew his hand back slowly. He hung there as if he could not take his eyes off of what it was he wanted....Abruptly the boy broke away and moved on.

Rayber stepped out of the entrance and made for the window he had left. He stopped with a shock of disappointment. The place was only a bakery. The window was empty except for a loaf of bread pushed to the side the must have overlooked when the shelf was cleaned for the night. He stared, puzzled, at the empty window for a second before he started after the boy again.

Tartwater was longing for something he found in neither the religious fanaticism of his Uncle Mason or the fanatic anti-religiosity of his Uncle Rayber. He longed for the Bread of Life – He was reaching out, not to have his stomach filled but to have his soul filled. We, like Tartwater, long for Jesus. To experience his presence. To know he is here – here, right now and right here. To reach out and touch him.

And while Jesus meets us in many places and in many ways, this is one of the places where we can be assured to meet our Lord.

When I was younger, I used to walk from school to youth choir at the church. There was a period of time in between the end of school and the start of practice. And my grandfather lived just a few doors down from the church. And so, each Thursday, I would go to his house first. Because of his wife's work schedule, I would arrive at they were sitting down for dinner. Without fail, I would walk to the door, peer in and there he would be, sitting at the table. Being an Irish immigrant, bread was a part of the meal and as I sat to break bread, Mac was there. Without fail. It was a date that I knew would be kept. At that table, at the time, in the breaking of the bread, I would visit with my grandfather.

And it is the same at this table – each time we come – frequently or infrequently – understanding or ignorant – engaged or distracted - in breaking bread around this table, we encounter Jesus, the bread of life.

Rayber, making the same mistake as the Jews, mistook his physical hungering for a spiritual one. TW wanted bread, but not the bread in the window. And that is what Jesus offers us here – his very self. I am not a baker or a counter worker, doling out Jesus to those who come for bread. But it is Jesus here, offering you himself – Schmemmann – “What I have done alone, I give it to you now – take and eat.”

Come, Jesus is here to meet you and to feed you.

Sermon #3 – The Body of Christ

“That they may be one – just as you and I are one.” That was Jesus’ prayer for us. That we would be one Body – the body of Christ – the presence of Christ in this world. In our prayers, we pray for the Holy Spirit to make the gifts of wine and bread be for us the Body and Blood of Christ “that we may be the Body of Christ redeemed by his blood.”

Communion is not what I call a Tom T. Hall experience – you remember his song “Me and Jesus got our own thing going, me and Jesus got it all worked out.” It is not only about you and Jesus. Like all we do in worship it is 3 dimensional – what is happening, what is happening between us and God and what is happening between each other.

The Communion table has the same power – to unite us – with God, yes, but also with each other and with strangers. Jesus was criticized for “eating with tax collectors and sinners” because to come to table together is to be united, is to be one.

David Meade, a retired UM pastor, tells of the time he went to Egypt as a part of an archaeological dig. Part of that experience was travelling down to the tip of Sinai, in area owned by Egypt. The temps registered 114 degrees. One had to drink several gallons of water a day just to stay even with the sweat that evaporated so quickly you didn't even know you were sweating!

In order to cope with the heat, we camped at the base of what is known as the traditional Mt. Sinai (scholars disagree), and rose at 3am to climb the rocky path to the top of the mountain, in order to arrive by sunrise. Not for the faint of heart, my legs and lungs burned as we neared the top. All along the way, we could see small piles of stone made by fellow pilgrims, meant to mark their journey. Upon arriving at the top, the temperature was near freezing, and the wind chill well below that. It was a barren, rocky, totally bleak and unwelcoming place: hardly a place for a spiritual retreat. But as the sun came up, suddenly our vision changed from one of our narrow confines to an almost unlimited vista. The vast mountain ranges spread out in all directions, and below us, from the start of our pilgrim climb, we suddenly saw spreading out before us a vast plain, reported to be the place of Israel's encampment. One could imagine their fear and hopes as they looked up, unable to see the spot where Moses, and now we,

stood. One could also imagine the mix of fear and awe of Moses, as he realized that he literally stood between heaven and earth, between God and God's people. What power did he have to play his role? The Law, the Ten Commandments, I knew. But I also knew that those tablets were soon broken, as was the covenant they represented, time and time again. Even Moses did not enter the Promised Land.

As my mind and heart felt this contradiction of power and powerlessness, of beauty and barrenness, of word and disobedience, I walked to the other side of the peak, and there, hidden in cleft in the rock was gathered a group of priest and nuns who were about to celebrate the Mass. I was the only clergy in my group, and a number of my companions milled awkwardly around, not sure what to do. But as the group noticed us, the priest who must have been their leader came up to me, somehow sensing my spiritual leadership. His words were like whole new vision of the place where we stood, taking me forward rather than backward. He said, "I don't know if you and your group are inclined, and I certainly know that we are not permitted to offer...but would you all like to join us in celebrating the Eucharist? It somehow doesn't seem right that in this place we should let human divisions separate us from the presence and power of God."

I'm sure that had I not met that group of Catholic pilgrims, my mountaintop experience would still have been meaningful. But the vision would have been incomplete, even as it was for Moses and his people.

“As I experienced on the cold and barren top of Mt. Sinai, nowhere is the light and love and transforming power of God through Christ experienced more than when his people celebrate the Eucharist, "the new covenant, given in Christ's blood". It obliterates all human sin and division, all impediments to our transformation and creation into a new people, called after him, the Body of Christ. Though I would encourage many to make a pilgrimage to Sinai, it is important to remember that that moment of vision and transfiguration, that meeting of heaven and earth, can be found simply but profoundly in the miracle of every gathering at the Lord's table, and in the Word of God made flesh: this is my body and blood, given for you.”

It is here that all division ends – that all are equal – that all is as it should be. For this is one place where Jesus' prayer become reality.

As you come today, you do not come alone. You come as one. Joined together around this table. When you are served today, I will be serving you in two's.

Sermon #4 – Sacramental Living

Many people struggle with the reality of communion. Some struggle with the idea that we can meet Jesus everywhere but we meet him in some focused way in Holy Communion.

Father Alexander – A Bishop in the Orthodox Church - “Sacraments are indefinite in number, not restricted to an easily-identified, categorizable few. Neither are they of uniform intensity; there are varying degrees of universality and sharpness of focus of His presence. Fundamentally, the whole of Creation is in some degree a sacrament, for He is everywhere present and fills all things. But we must not fall into the trap of assuming a bland universality of that presence which recedes into a pointless vagueness. The eternal Christ came and dwelt among us as a man in a particular place and time. He continues to dwell among us in quite specific and identifiable ways, radiating His presence throughout the world in specific and orderly forms.

I would like to share a story. Judy was a Christian woman who loved God and loved to serve the church. Every year, a group of young people took a canoe trip up into the Adirondacks for about 10 days. Two men, both ministers, acted as counselors on the trip. On those years in which girls decided to go, Judy would be asked to go along as a counselor for the girls.

One particular year, the trip seemed to be full of trials and struggles. Injuries might have been a little more common than on other trips. The black flies seemed to be numerous, and let’s face it, one black fly is one too many. There was the plunge over the waterfalls in the canoe, stepping out into a stream full of bloodsuckers and of course the usual tip-overs and the lose of supplies that seems to be a part of any canoe trip – especially when young people are involved.

As this group of youth endured the struggles of the trip, they grew closer together. While a few of the kids had been from the same church, many had not known each other at all when the adventure began. Hardship has a way of binding people together. They began to work more as a group of brothers and sisters in Christ than as a group of strangers.

But there was something about being out amongst nature, among “God’s elements” as Judy shares, which drew them closer to God as well. They came to experience God in their own experiences on the trip: in the hardships, in the fun, in the lost items, and maybe even, if they thought about it, in the encounter with the bloodsuckers (although that might be a stretch).

Whether it was the closeness they had come to feel with each other, or maybe it was the closeness they grew to feel with God (because we all know hardships also bind us closer to God), as the trip drew to a close, this group of young Christian people asked if they might be able to have communion together. This was not a planned part of the trip. No bread had been set aside. There was no grape juice packed away. All that was left was a few Oreo cookies and the water from a nearby lake.

So somewhere up in the Adirondack Mountains, a group of Christians gathered together. And a pastor took a Oreo cookie, he blessed it, broke it and gave to those gathered with him, saying: This is the body of Christ broken for you. And then he

took some water from the lake, and when he had blessed it, he gave to those that were with him, saying: Drink from this all of you. For this is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me.

And, so, they did. And Judy and that group of friends with her, learned the power of the Sacrament. Because we understand that Jesus uses ordinary bread and ordinary wine to do something very extraordinary, it really wasn't a stretch to accept that God could take a very ordinary Oreo cookie and some rather ordinary lake water and make them be the very extraordinary means of grace. And while some theologians may want to argue over whether that was really communion or not, it was a sacramental moment for those that were present.

That is the Sacramental life. Learning to see Jesus in the ordinary and not so ordinary experiences of life. And I believe it is the sacrament that we share in on Sundays that trains us for experience. Because we know Jesus is here, we also know Jesus is there. It is through experiencing God's grace here and now, in the bread and the cup, that we come to learn to see God's transforming grace in the whole of our lives.

By Anna-Nicole Kyritsis – An person who writes teaching materials regarding the sacraments – “One year at a Lenten youth retreat, three teenagers attended a session entitled, “Living a Sacramental Life.” The facilitator's goal was to reveal that our Lord instructs us to live the Sacraments, rather than simply to partake of them.”

Life and the Sacraments are connected in many ways.

Going back to Bishop Alexander -

“The eternal Christ came and dwelt among us as a man in a particular place and time. He continues to dwell among us in quite specific and identifiable ways, radiating His presence throughout the world in specific and orderly forms.”

But he continues - This is not to say that He may not also manifest His presence in other, less predictable manners. . . .indeed, He does!”

Sermon #5 – The Eucharist as a Sacrifice of Ourselves

How many people here are selfish? Come on, raise your hands? OK.

How many people of you are liars? The rest of you need to have your hands up.

We don't like to admit that we are selfish – after all, isn't being a Christian all about being selfless not selfish. But there is a reason Jesus had to command us to deny ourselves – because we don't naturally function selflessly.

Human beings, when at our absolute best are loving, self-giving creatures. But we are never at our best all the time. Sometimes it seems like we are seldom at our best. And at times, we seem to never be at our best. We want what we want. We like things to

be the way we like things to be. A good part of my pastoral ministry is spent listening to what people like or don't like about what I or the church am doing.

In the surveys and interviews for my project, the two most common themes that emerge are the sacrifice of Jesus for us and our response of thanksgiving.

But there is more to being thankful in communion than a feeling of gratitude. At the Lord's Supper, Thanksgiving comes to fulfillment in Self-giving.

"In remembrance of these your mighty acts for us in Christ Jesus, we offer ourselves to you as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us."

If you recall, remembrance is not a mental activity. Remembrance is a making a past event real in the present. Jesus' offering becomes real for us, becomes alive in us, as we offer ourselves to Jesus. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

The broken bread is not only a sign of Christ being broken for us. The broken bread is also a sign of our being broken for Christ. In accepting the gift of grace offered to us in the bread, we offer the gift of ourselves to God.

The Christian faith is full of paradoxes:

- The first shall be last.
- The last shall be first
- If you love your life, you will lose it.
- If you hate your life in this world, you will live.
- If you wish to save your life, you must lose it.
- If you lose your life, you will save it.

The great paradox of the Eucharist is that in giving we receive. Giving and Receiving are not cause and effect. Rather, giving is the means through which we receive what is already ours – love and grace and forgiveness and new life.

Story – My story of being saved. Each time I come for communion, that event comes alive anew.

Jesus invites us to come and to give ourselves to him, to share in the grace of his offering for us. Jesus invites us to come, and to give ourselves to him as he gives himself to us – selfless love for selfless love.

Conclusion: (from St. Francis)

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Sermon #6 - The Eucharist as the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

The Passion of our Lord According to Luke and The Ragman by Walter Wangerin

The congregation remaining seated, the Passion Gospel is read in parts, led by a narrator who begins by saying: The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Saint Luke.

NARRATOR: Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying,

VOICES: "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."

NARRATOR: Then Pilate asked him,

VOICES: "Are you the king of the Jews?"

NARRATOR: He answered,

JESUS: "You say so."

NARRATOR: Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds,

VOICES: "I find no basis for an accusation against this man."

NARRATOR: But they were insistent and said,

VOICES: "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

NARRATOR: When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

WILSON: I saw a strange site. I stumbled upon a story that was most incredible, something that in all my years of street sense, could never have prepared me for.

Listen now as I tell it to you.

For early one Friday, even before dawn, I noticed a man walking the alleys of the city. Tall and handsome, strong. Pulling a cart behind him that was filled with clothes that were both shiny and new. And he was calling, in a clear tenor voice, "Rags! Rags!" His sweet voice cut through the foulness of that morning. "Rags!" he cried. "I'll take your old rags, tired rags. New rags for old."

'Now this is a wonder,' I thought. For the man stood 6 foot 4, with arms as thick as tree limbs. Muscular and strong. And from his eyes shone a brilliant intelligence.

And I thought to myself, 'Could this man find no other job in all of the city except to be a ragman?'

And so I followed him, my curiosity driving me. And I wasn't disappointed.

NARRATOR: Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them,

VOICES: "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

NARRATOR: Then they all shouted out together,

VOICES "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!"

NARRATOR: (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting,

VOICES: "Crucify, crucify him!"

NARRATOR: A third time he said to them,

VOICES: "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him."

NARRATOR: But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

WILSON: Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on a back porch, sobbing into a handkerchief. Crying uncontrollably, her shoulders shaking; her heart was breaking. Her knees on her elbows in the shape of a sad 'x.' Jesus, the ragman, stopped his cart. Quietly he walked up to the woman, stepping around the garbage and the broken toys and the dirty diapers in the alleyway. And he held out his hand and he said "Give me your rag, and I'll give you mine." And he gently took the rag from her hand, the handkerchief, and he laid across her palm a clean linen cloth, so bright and new that it shone. The only thing she could do was blink from the gift up to the giver. As the ragman started to pull his cart again, he did something most incredible. For he put the handkerchief to his own face, and he began to cry a thousand tears, and he began to shake uncontrollably and it seemed as if his heart was now the one that was breaking. This is a wonder, I thought to myself. And I followed the sobbing ragman, but like a child that can't walk away from a good mystery.

"Rags, rags. New rags for old," he cried.

NARRATOR: As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said,

JESUS: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

WILSON: In a little while when the sky started to turn grey above the rooftops and you could see curtains starting to blow out of blackened windows, the rag man came upon a girl with a bandage wrapped around her head and blood was soaking through it and a single line of blood ran down her cheek. He looked upon the girl with pity, and he reached into his cart and pulled a lovely yellow bonnet. And he walked up the girl and he said, "Give me your rag, and I'll give you another."

And with that, he took the bandage off of her head and placed it on his own, and on hers he set the bonnet. And I gasped at what I saw, for with the bandage went the wound. And now it was his head that was bleeding profusely and a line of blood ran down his cheek. But it was a darker, more substantial blood. And I realized it was his own. "Rags," he cried. "Rags. I take old rags for new," cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent ragman.

NARRATOR: Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Jesus. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said,

JESUS: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

NARRATOR: And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying,

VOICES: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

NARRATOR: The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying,

VOICES: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

NARRATOR: There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying,

VOICES: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

NARRATOR: But the other rebuked him, saying,

VOICES: "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

NARRATOR: Then he said,

VOICES: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

NARRATOR: Jesus replied,

JESUS: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

WILSON: The sun hurt my eyes now. "Are you going to work," Jesus asked the man, leaning against the pole. He just shook his head. "Don't you have a job?" the rag man pressed. "Are you crazy?" said the man as he stood up from the pole, and you could

see his jacket, flattened against his side, the ends stuffed into his pocket. He had no arm. "Oh," the ragman said. "Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine."

And with that, the ragman took off his jacket, and so did the one-armed man. And I gasped at what I saw, because with Jesus' jacket went the arm. And when the one-armed man put it on, he now had two arms - as strong and as thick as tree limbs. But Jesus had only one. "Go to work," the ragman said.

After that, he found a drunk lying unconscious beneath a blanket. He took the blanket and wrapped it around himself, and left for the man a pile of new clothes. "Rags," he cried. "New rags for old."

NARRATOR: It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,

JESUS: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

NARRATOR: Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said,

VOICES: "Certainly this man was innocent."

WILSON: I had to run now to keep up with the ragman. Pulling his cart with one arm, bleeding profusely from his head, sobbing uncontrollably, falling down again and again, sick and old and drunk; he continued at a terrible speed, like a spider skittering through the alleys of the city. First one mile, and then the next, until he came to the city limits and he pressed beyond, and I just needed to follow him. I needed to see what drove him. The little old ragman came to the garbage dump, to the pile of trash, and I wanted so much to help him with what he did next, but I hid back, hung back, hiding. He made his way to the top of a mound and cleared a little spot at the top. This ragman, the one that I sobbed to see the change that had taken place in him, the one that I had come to love so much. And after he had cleared a place, he laid down and he took the handkerchief and the jacket and he made a pillow, and he pulled the blanket up over his bones, and he died.

NARRATOR: And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

WILSON: Oh, how I cried, to witness that death. I slumped into a junk car, and I wailed and I mourned as one who had no hope, for I had come to deeply love this man. And every other face I had ever known, every other face I had ever seen, just paled in his wonder. And I cherished him. But he died. And I cried myself to sleep.

An extended time of silence follows.

Sermon #7 – Meeting the Risen Lord

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

I am perplexed when I think of how much trouble the disciples have recognizing Jesus after the Resurrection. Mary thinks he is a gardener. The disciples think he is a ghost. And the two people on the road to Emmaus think he is just some ignorant stranger, one that knows the Hebrew scriptures well, but ignorant still the same.

And then I am troubled. Because, I wonder, if the disciples who knew Jesus personally could not recognize him when he appeared in the flesh, what chance do I or you have of knowing Jesus – of experiencing the truth of the Resurrection – when Jesus cannot come to us in the flesh, when we can see or touch his wounds? What chance do we have of experiencing Easter?

There has been a lot of time spent trying to prove Jesus really did rise from the dead. People like journalist Lee Stroble, author of the Case for Christ, have spent a lot of time trying to argue from fact that the 1st century rabbi, known as Jesus of Nazareth really was brought back to life by the power of God. From the earliest times, Christians, including the gospel writers and saints like Paul, have written with the hope of convincing people that the tomb was empty for no other reason than Jesus had been resurrected. And yes, some people, like notable Christian thinker CS Lewis have thought their way to faith by considering whether the facts add up or not.

But what I have found to be often true is that the facts really all add up only after we have known Jesus – after we are convinced that the tomb is empty. Then the evidence seems convincing. And for some, that is not even true. Some believe in spite of not being convinced. For, they argue, that is the real nature of faith.

But even if we are convinced that Christ is risen (whether because of or in spite of the facts), there is a difference between believing the tomb is empty and meeting the risen Lord. It is hard to know the impossible. Let's look at scripture. Not testimony (some have found the tomb empty), not seeing (disciples went to verify what the woman said), not even scripture (he explained all the scriptures about himself) not even having some emotional response (were not our hearts burning within us).

Sometimes none of these things are enough. Something else is needed. Something more. We want to know that Jesus is raised.

Story of Kendra and Kelsea making cookies and missing an ingredient.

And hence the Table – He took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and their Lord was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Why celebrate Communion on Easter Sunday, or every Sunday, or any Sunday for that matter? Why take the extra time? Why run the risk of making people late for Sunday dinner? Why stir up the turmoil that comes from having communion more often in a church that is not used to it? Why possibly make our guests who are not regular churchgoers uncomfortable by celebrating a ritual that they may not understand? Why? That Jesus may be made known to us!

We can't go to the empty tomb, we can't have Jesus scare the bejeebes out of us by physically appearing before us, we can't put our hands into Jesus' wounds, but we can break bread with Jesus. We CAN come gather around the table that is set before us and have Sunday Dinner with Jesus. The bread can be taken and blessed and broken and given to you and to me and once again, like on that first Easter Day, we can recognize the presence of the risen Lord in our midst.

I chose the Emmaus story this morning because it is this story that we recreate every Sunday when we gather. It is the story of that first Easter, over and over and over again. It is the pattern that guides our worship. We come together; we talk about serious stuff and confess our need; Christ joins us and shares the Word (but it's not enough); at the table we recognize him and then we scatter to share the news.

And so today, this is our Emmaus Road experience. We have gathered, Christ has joined us, the Scriptures are shared and explained, Jesus will be made known to us in the breaking of the bread and then we will go to share the good news that Christ is risen!.....Not because others have told us, but because it has been made known to us.

APPENDIX E GROUP REFLECTION SESSION PLANS

Reflection Group Plan Session #1

INTRODUCTION (5 Mins)

Purpose – To provide a safe and fertile place for sharing and reflecting around one's experience of Holy Communion.

Outcome – To articulate how one has experienced the power of remembrance (anamnesis).

Opening Activity – Names, One Word to describe your faith,

Rules and Expectations

- + There are no "right" answers – be honest.
- + Everyone participates.
- + Listening is as important as talking – mutual learning.
- + Confidentiality is expected.
- + Common courtesy is exhibited at all times.
- + Dialogue vs. Discussion – Open ended questions – What about? (probing people's experience)

Remembering the Story (5 Mins) – Take a few moments and in your mind, reenact the sacramental experience of this past Sunday. Listen again to the sermon, the liturgy, the music. Relive coming forward, receiving, returning. Notice smells, sounds, sights, thoughts. Take mental notes or written ones. When you are done, capture how you felt about the experience in one to three words. Write those words down.

Telling the Story – (20 Mins) 3 minutes max each – Share your word(s) then tell us your story of this past week. (questions)

Reflecting on the Story – 15 Mins

- What did you like/dislike about this experience?
- Was there a challenging/difficult moment?
- Were you surprised by anything?
- What feelings or thoughts were strongest for you?

Preserving the Story – 10 Mins

- Did this experience remind you of any other events in your faith experience?
- Write a Thank you note to Jesus for this past week. (sharing??)
- What one thing did you learn from this experience that you want to take with you?

CLOSING (5 Mins)

Preparations for Next Week – Journal, Pay attention to times when it seems like time and space were transcended.

Prayer

Reflection Group Plan
Session #2
Presence

INTRODUCTION (5 Mins)

Purpose – To provide a safe and fertile place for sharing and reflecting around one's experience of Holy Communion.

Outcome – To be able to make a connection between the experiences of Jesus at the Lord's Supper with the experience of Jesus at other times in life.

Opening Activity – One word (and only one) that relates back to this past Sunday.

Rules and Expectations

- ✚ There are no "right" answers – be honest.
- ✚ Everyone participates.
- ✚ Listening is as important as talking – mutual learning.
- ✚ Confidentiality is expected.
- ✚ Common courtesy is exhibited at all times.
- ✚ Dialogue vs. Discussion – Open ended questions – What about? (probing people's experience)

Remembering the Story (5 Mins) – Review your notes if you took any. Remember the person you were asked to remember after the sermon or someone else you could trust to always be in a certain place – Write a note to them – Thanking them for always being there and why it was important to you.

Telling the Story – (20 Mins)

- What about this past week's Communion experience has stuck with you?
- Were there unexpected responses from you?
- Anyone use the Scripture prayers? Response.

Reflecting on the Story – 15 Mins

- Read Bible verse on Jesus presence – John 6:56 – abiding is a term of presence – to abide is to be with.
- How did you experience Jesus' presence this week?
- What was this week's experience most like for you? (in terms of another experience)

Preserving the Story – 10 Mins

- Write a Thank you note to Jesus for meeting you at the table this past week. (share)
- What one thing did you learn from this past week's experience that you want to take with you? How will you use it?

CLOSING (5 Mins)

Preparations for Next Week – Notes

Prayer

Reflection Group Plan
Session #3
Being One

INTRODUCTION (5 Mins)

Purpose – To provide a safe and fertile place for sharing and reflecting around one's experience of Holy Communion.

Outcome – For the participants to become more aware of how they are in communion with those around them and how this might make a difference in how they interact with others.

Opening Activity – Name one other person you took notice of during communion. What did you notice?

Remembering the Story (5 Mins) – As I read down through the actions of Holy Communion, (took bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it) be aware of what you were experiencing during each part. Name one positive thought and one negative thought (limit to one to three words).

Telling the Story – (20 Mins)

- Share what happened to you this past week during the communion part of the service.
- Did you experience anything unexpected?

Reflecting on the Story – 15 Mins

- Read the piece "Jesus died for them, too."
- Where does this story speak to you?
- What is most difficult about being united as one?
- What are ways you have seen unity expressed during communion services you have participated in?

Preserving the Story – 10 Mins

- Write a note to the person you remember from Sunday that you know the least. In the context of worship/communion, what do you want them to know? (share and then give it to them this week)
- Name at least one thing you learned about being united around God's table. How can you apply this to your life? In other words, "So what?"

CLOSING (5 Mins)

Preparations for Next Week – Notes

Prayer

Jesus Died for Them, Too!

Tommy had taken communion dozens of times before. It was one of his favorite parts of worship. He knew Jesus loved him but having that bread placed in his hands, dipping it into the cup and then tasting the goodness of the Lord made it so real. Even when he was distracted by his bratty sister or the baby crying, he knew Jesus loved him. He could always count on that being a special time with Jesus. There were other times when Jesus was near but this time just made all those less formal times more special. Walking up to the rail, he would say to himself, "Jesus really loves me" and when the pastor placed the bread in his hands, Tommy always uttered, "Thank You." He was sure the pastor thought he was talking to him, but Tommy was really talking to Jesus. Often times when walking back to his pew he would find himself singing Jesus Loves Me. Tommy loved Jesus and he knew that Jesus loved him.

Sometimes other people, besides his sisters, would distract Tommy. They wouldn't seem to be focused on what was happening. Sometimes they seemed too relaxed as if they didn't understand how sacred this moment was. Other times they seemed too somber as if they didn't realize how wonderful a moment this was. Sometimes others were an inconvenience. Like when Tommy was waiting for a place at the rail and no one seemed to want to get up. Sure they were praying but Tommy wanted to taste Jesus so badly, surely they could pray in their pews.

One particular Sunday, Tommy was not really feeling loved by Jesus or by anybody else for that matter. Joey Warner, a boy at school, had put worms in Beth Lerner's lunch box but had managed to get Tommy in trouble for it. No one believed that he had not done it. Principal Owen has given Tommy detention, for the first time ever and his parents had grounded him.

The time came in the service for the pastor to break the bread. He held the whole loaf up for all to see – one big, fluffy fresh loaf of bread. "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body." And with those words, 10 year-old Tommy had an epiphany.

Communion wasn't all about him, or even him and Jesus. Communion was also about those around him: his brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus died for them, too! For all of them, even Joey Warner. And because Jesus died for everyone there, they were joined together. When they came to receive communion, they came as one one family – joined in Jesus. Miss Cheryl who had taught him so much about Jesus. Grandma Alice (not his real grandma, but everyone called her that) who always complimented him and gave him candy. Mrs. Johnson whose perfume reminded him of his grandmother. But also Missy Jensen who he was convinced had the cooties. Old Mr. Faulkner who smelled funny. Mrs. Courtier who had yelled at him once for picking her flowers. All of them were one family just like that big loaf of bread. And Jesus' body had been broken for all of them.

And, that Sunday, when the pastor placed the bread in his hands, Tommy said, Thank you. But he wasn't thanking Jesus for saving him, he was thanking Jesus for saving all those around him, yes, even Joey Warner.

Reflection Group Plan
Session #4
Sacramental Presence

INTRODUCTION (5 Mins)

Purpose – To provide a safe and fertile place for sharing and reflecting around one's experience of Holy Communion.

Outcome – For participants to apply the sacramental principle to their life.

Opening Activity – From the time you stood up to come down until the time you sat back down, through what did you most experience the presence of Jesus – Do not explain. Complete the phrase: Jesus made himself known to me through....

State Theme: The sacramental idea – that God uses material means to accomplish spiritual ends is not meant to limit Christ's presence to the sacraments but rather for this sacramental encounter to transform the rest of our lives. "If we truly grasp the nature of the Sacraments, we shall see that **the whole of human life is transformed by His Grace**. Not the smallest niche of Creation escapes the possibility of divinization by the flow into it of sacramental Grace." - Bishop Alexander

Remembering the Story (5 Mins) – Read: One of the values of communion is that it is easy to see Jesus inviting us, feeding us, being with us. Imagine you are about to receive communion but it is not the server that is presenting the bread to you, it is Jesus. See, smell, hear, taste what is happening as Jesus gives himself, his grace to you. Now listen to this statement: (read from Bishop Alexander) *The eternal Christ came and dwelt among us as a man in a particular place and time. He continues to dwell among us in quite specific and identifiable ways, radiating His presence throughout the world in specific and orderly forms. This is not to say that He may not also manifest His presence in other, less predictable manners. . . .indeed, He does!"*

Now, try to remember one of those unpredictable times that Jesus made himself known to you in some material way – Not just a spiritual presence but a presence that was manifest through someone or something material.

Telling the Story – (20 Mins)

- Share the experience of above.

Reflecting on the Story – 15 Mins

- Is the bread and wine important to your experience of Holy Communion?
How?

Preserving the Story – 10 Mins

- What practical things can you do to live a more "sacramental life?"

CLOSING (5 Mins)

Prayer

Reflection Group Plan
Session #5
A Holy and Living Sacrifice

INTRODUCTION (5 Mins)

Purpose – To provide a safe and fertile place for sharing and reflecting around one's experience of Holy Communion.

Outcome – For participants to apply the “giving” nature of receiving communion.

Opening Activity – Change to share where people are at – challenges, gifts (unexpected positive surprises),

From the time you stood up to come down until the time you sat back down, through what did you most experience the presence of Jesus – Do not explain. Complete the phrase: Jesus made himself known to me through....

State Theme: In communion, we not only receive God's grace but we give ourselves to God.

Remembering the Story (5 Mins) – Be a fly on the wall. You witnessed the communion service. Describe what was happening, not as a participant but as an observer. Go beyond simple observations – describe what you think was happening. Write your observations.

Telling the Story – (20 Mins)

- Share what you have written.

Reflecting on the Story – 15 Mins

- Share how you feel about communion being the sacrifice of yourself to Jesus instead of the other way around.

Preserving the Story – 10 Mins

- Name at least one way that you can live out being a “holy and living sacrifice” in your life.

CLOSING (5 Mins)

Prayer

Reflection Group Plan
Session #6
From the Cross to the Empty Tomb

INTRODUCTION (5 Mins)

Purpose – To provide a safe and fertile place for sharing and reflecting around one's experience of Holy Communion.

Outcome – For participants to identify the previous experiences of Holy Communion outside the traditional "Jesus died for me" motif.

Opening Activity - From the time you stood up to come down until the time you sat back down, through what did you most experience the presence of Jesus – Do not explain. Complete the phrase: Jesus made himself known to me through....

State Theme: The Eucharist is a celebration of Jesus where we remember his death, celebrate his rising and anticipate his coming again.

Remembering the Story (5 Mins) – I want you to remember the best party you ever attended. What was it celebrating? Remember what you felt, heard, said, saw. Name ONE WORD that sums up the experience of that party. Share.

Telling the Story – (20 Mins)

- Read the Emmaus Account.
- Listen again. "The bible does not say it, but there was a fourth person present. It was you. Listen again. Now tell us about that experience."

Reflecting on the Story – 15 Mins

- Share how you feel about communion being the sacrifice of yourself to Jesus instead of the other way around.
- How can we bring that sense of awe, wonder and surprise into our Communion celebrations?

Preserving the Story – 10 Mins

- Name one thing that you (expect, hope, plan- need perfect word) to be different this week at Holy Communion because you were there on the Road to Emmaus.

CLOSING (5 Mins)

Prayer

APPENDIX F
SURVEY RESULTS

CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY RESPONSES

Question	Definitely Not True	Not True	Not Sure	True	Definitely True	Average
1A*				###		4.00
1B**				###	###	3.92
2A		###				3.00
2B		###				3.07
3A				###		3.85
3B				###		3.71
4A				###		3.28
4B		###		###		2.71
5A		###				2.07
5B	###					2.00
6A						3.64
6B					###	3.64
7A		###				2.5
7B				###		3.21
8A				###	###	4.21
8B				###	###	4.35
9A	###					2.21
9B	###					1.92
10A			###	###		3.14
10B			###			3.35
11B				###		3.33

*Pre-project responses are indicated by the letter “A” after the question number.

**Post-project responses are indicated by the letter “B” after the question number.

STUDY GROUP SURVEY RESPONSES

Question	Definitely Not True	Not True	Not Sure	True	Definitely True	Average
1A*						4.28
1B**						4.57
2A						3.85
2B						3.85
3A						3.71
3B						3.85
4A						2
4B						1.71
5A						2
5B						1.71
6A						3.57
6B						4.14
7A						3.57
7B						3.57
8A						4.42
8B						4.29
9A						1.71
9B						1.29
10A						3.71
10B						3.29
11B						4.14

*Pre-project responses are indicated by the letter "A" after the question number.

**Post-project responses are indicated by the letter "B" after the question number.

DIFFERENCE IN AVERAGE ANSWERS

QUESTION	CONGREGATION	STUDY GROUP
1	.08	.29
2	.07	--
3	.14	.14
4	.57	.29
5	.07	.29
6	--	.57
7	.71	--
8	.14	.13
9	.29	.42
10	.21	.42

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