

Holy Communion in the Methodist Church

Some introductory guidance for those receiving an authorisation to preside

I. ORIENTATION

It's a great privilege to be authorised to preside at Holy Communion in the life of the Church. It's also a significant responsibility: a moment at which it's important to understand something of what communion is, and what it means in different ways to different people. A little preparatory study, reflection and discussion is essential: this will help in orienting ourselves towards this work. For it is work which may at first feel both strange, as you experience a familiar service from a different perspective, and yet also full of God's presence. This resource aims simply to raise some of the central questions and challenges you'll face in fulfilling this ministry, and to encourage you to a continuing practice of prayerful, accompanied reflection as you undertake it. Along the way, you'll find tasks and questions in highlighted boxes, which you can use as a springboard to further learning, development, prayer and conversation.

Of course, the Methodist Church has already and produced a lot of theological and practical guidance about communion, and will continue to do so. This resource does not seek to reproduce all of that, but it does try to link to it, and summarise some of the key issues and themes. The most important of these documents is a Faith and Order Committee report to the Conference of 2003. It's called [*His Presence Makes the Feast: Holy Communion in the Methodist Church*](#). It may seem like a daunting read at first, but you're strongly encouraged to take some time, maybe in two or three sessions, and to read it carefully and thoughtfully.

Read the Conference report, *His Presence Makes the Feast*. As you go, identify the themes and questions that seem most important, or tricky, for you.

Which of the report's major themes seem most relevant in the congregations you know?

What further questions might you want raised if the report was being written today?

How might the snapshots of current practice be different?

II. COMMUNION IN METHODISM

Like all Christians, Methodists root their understanding of and approach to Communion in the Bible. This is not the place to offer a detailed study of all the biblical texts, but the reading list aims to offer some further material for those interested. We do remember that the Gospels record that Jesus ate a meal with his disciples, on the night before he died, and told them to eat this meal together as a way of remembering him. It was during the time of the Passover, and three of the gospels suggests that it was a Passover mealⁱ. John's Gospel has a slightly different understanding of what kind of meal it was, and focuses more attention on how Jesus washed his disciples' feet as part of that evening's eventsⁱⁱ. All the Gospel accounts do seem to agree on the absolute importance of this moment. After the Resurrection, Luke tells us that two of Jesus's followers recognised him again in the act of breaking bread togetherⁱⁱⁱ. The extended discourse of John 6 helps us to think what it means for Jesus to be the living bread and the true vine.

The New Testament also records some of the ways in which Holy Communion was being experienced and practiced in the early Church a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The book of Acts says in several places that it was a key part of the first Christians' life together to bless, break and share bread. In his letters to the Church in Corinth, Paul has to outline at length his teaching about Holy Communion as a space for the creation and expression of the Church's unity. In the process, we gain a picture of some of the ways in which what seems to have been essentially a communal meal was being used wrongly and selfishly by a few. It allows him also to offer a very early account of the institution of the Communion by Jesus himself: a tradition which Paul had obviously received already from other disciples^{iv}. It's in this context of division that he writes the great hymn to love in chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians: a passage more about Christian life together than married couples.

Read through some of the biblical passages about Communion.

eg 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Luke 24:13-35, John 6:35-40

What emphases or questions do you note?

As the years passed, the Church identified and gave particular emphasis to a number of special moments and services in which it felt God was especially present. It called these moments 'sacraments', from a Latin word meaning to make holy.^v At one level, a sacrament can be any act in which material, physical things become a channel of God's grace and love. They could be as simple as a beautiful sunrise or the embrace of a friend. In the understanding of the Protestant churches, however, we recognise two sacraments of paramount importance^{vi}, Baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism admits us to new life in Christ and the fellowship of the Church; Holy Communion is one key way in which we grow

in our faith and our devotion and unity. Clearly, Communion is the only one in which we participate on multiple occasions.

Moving across the centuries, John and Charles Wesley, the shapers of the Methodist movement in the 18th century, were priests in the Church of England, and their thinking about and practice of Holy Communion in some ways might feel quite different to what we are used to. That's to say, they had a strong belief in the 'real presence' of Jesus at Communion; they strongly believed that, for some people, Communion might be a place of 'conversion', through encountering God's love in Christ in a new or dynamic way; and they encouraged their followers to receive it, and to participate in communion services, as often as possible. Charles' communion hymns reflect their emphases and understanding well.

Read the following hymns by Charles Wesley:

StF 590 *Jesus, we thus obey*
StF 597 *O thou who this mysterious bread*
StF 600 *Victim divine, thy grace we claim*

What do they tell us about the Wesleys' understanding of communion? Which elements of that do you find most helpful: and most difficult?

There are, of course, other strands and themes within Methodism's contemporary understanding and practice of Communion, which reflect its development, and divisions, through the 19th and 20th centuries. Echoes of some of these can still be heard in our conversations today about Communion, which include questions like:

- Should children receive Communion?
- Do we practice an 'open table': and what does that mean?
- How often should we have a Communion service: monthly? More often? Less frequently?
- Why are our rules so strict about who can preside at Communion? Shouldn't anyone just be able to lead it?
- What should the minister wear when presiding at a Communion service?
- Where should the minister stand?

We'll return to some of these questions later. For now, it may be worth reminding ourselves of some key Methodist understandings about Holy Communion.

- It's a key part of the discipline of being a Methodist member to attend Communion frequently^{vii}.

- It's a place where we experience in a fuller and particular way the presence of Christ: we remember his life, death and resurrection, but also in some sense 'receive' his love, blessing, inspiration and wisdom in consuming the bread and wine.^{viii}
- It's a place of Thanksgiving: as reflected in the language of the prayers we use in Communion services. Indeed, one word for Holy Communion – 'Eucharist' – is simply the Greek for 'thanksgiving'. It's a place where we might learn to echo the prayer of George Herbert (1593 – 1633):

*Thou that hast giv'n so much to me,
Give one thing more, a grateful heart.^{ix}*

- Communion is also a key place where we 'become' the Church. It reminds us of the one we follow, and by whose Spirit we are empowered for mission, witness and service. It reminds us to live like Jesus, and gives us the ability to do that, by re-connecting us to his presence and strength.
- In that, Communion is also a place where the *unity* of the Church is nurtured. Whatever our differences, of whatever kind, we are one in Jesus. Communion reminds us of that, and draws us all closer to him. We often mark this ritually by sharing the peace.
- Communion reminds us, therefore, of the kind of world we are called, with Jesus, to bring into being: a world more like God's Kingdom, and more aware of, and responsive to, God's presence and love.
- This is why a key Conference statement, *Called to Love and Praise*, says that "Holy Communion strengthens and, in a sense, makes the Church."^x
- Communion also has what we call an 'eschatological' dimension. It reminds us that we are one with all God's people, on earth and in heaven, across the whole history of the Church. It also points us towards the completion of all God's purposes, when in Jesus everything is finally reconciled and all creation brought to its eventual fulfilment. The *Methodist Worship Book* reflects this when it speaks of Communion being "a foretaste of the heavenly banquet".

This is quite a lot! It may help to explain why Holy Communion, for Methodists as for all Christians, is a moment of such beauty, power, holiness and importance.

Reflect on the major theological themes outlined above.

- Which are prominent for you when you receive Communion?
- Which are less familiar to you?
- Would you add any others?

In Methodist thinking, also, our own experiences of Communion are helpful in shaping our approach to it and how we understand its place in our life, our worship, and our Christian discipleship. Many people have their own stories to tell about how Communion services

have been important to them, about how they have known the presence of Jesus in receiving Communion, and about the ways in which Communion informs their Christian faith.

Talk to three Christians you know about what Communion means to them. Do they talk about any of the emphases we've mentioned? Do they add others? How do they think about the presence of Jesus when they receive the bread and wine?

III. THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

As you begin to think about presiding at Communion services, the kinds of understanding outlined above will be important: they offer the beginnings of a Methodist approach to this most important act of worship. In this section, we'll look at a few of these questions in a little more detail.

i. An 'Open' Table?

As mentioned above, John Wesley's belief in the presence of Christ in the Communion meant that he sometimes sat light to the rules about who might receive, given that they might, in taking communion, be converted to, or further strengthened in, Christian faith. This has led some parts of the global Methodist family to speak of an 'open table', in contrast to those Christian traditions in which there are rather firmer guidelines about who can be permitted to receive communion. This is a very helpful Wesleyan piece of wisdom: but we should also remember that in Wesley's day far more people would have been baptised than is now the case. We may want to be clear that we would offer the sacrament to anyone who came forward to receive it: whilst also remembering that The Methodist Church also expects that regular communicants ought to be baptised as a mark of their commitment to Christ.

Have a conversation with some people who are experienced in leading Communion services. What has been their approach to the 'open table'?

How might attendance at Communion be an invitation to initiate a conversation with someone about their discipleship, or about baptism and Church membership?

In relation to admitting children to Holy Communion, *His Presence Makes the Feast* summarises Methodism's current position in paragraphs 133-136. The Conference has declared in 2000^{xi} it should now be considered normal practice for baptised children to receive communion, irrespective of age, but of course children themselves and their parents will want to think about this for themselves.

What is your approach to children receiving communion? What has been the practice in the churches you've known?

What sorts of conversations have taken place in the place(s) where you will preside at a Communion service?

ii. *How* is Christ present at and in the Communion?

Clearly, this is a question which we might spend a lifetime trying to answer! It's an issue at the heart of many of the debates of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, and it's something which still divides churches today. We've noted, both that the Wesleys had a particular (we call it 'high Church') view of this, and that within Methodism there has always been a variety of views on the subject. You can gather a sense of how this might still be felt today by some of the snapshots and discussion in *His Presence Makes the Feast*.

Perhaps for here and now it's enough to note that diversity within our churches, and to be sensitive to it, and to people's varied understandings of Communion. For some, Jesus might be felt to be tangibly and immediately present when they receive the bread and wine: something has 'happened' when the bread and wine were blessed which makes this a very sacred moment. For others, Communion might be more of a sort of jog for their memory, in thinking about what Jesus did and said, and asking God to help us better to follow him. For others again, the 'presence' might be just as real as for the first person, but a much more spiritual kind of thing: God meets us in the act of receiving the bread and wine, in a moment of particular devotion. Still others may find the gathering of the whole Church around one common table an enactment of the way Jesus brings us together across all our differences.

This is far from an exhaustive list. It is one of the wonders of Holy Communion that, in it, God meets us at our point of need and offers us again the love revealed in Jesus. Just as we are different, and just as we all come to Communion with differing needs, desires, hopes and intentions, so God in Christ shows up for us according to our need, and calls us closer to God and to one another. Those who preside at Communion need to attend to this diversity, to celebrate it, and to remember that what's going on will mean a variety of things for those present. This is the privilege, the joy, and the sacred responsibility of being authorised to lead such worship.

What might you – and those in your congregation – add to this description of the ways we understand how Jesus is present in Communion?

How will you work to embrace and support the variety of views about Communion as you lead worship for all God's people?

iii. *Who* should preside?

The Methodist Church maintains that it should *normally* be ordained presbyters who preside at Communion services. The reasons for this include the following convictions:

- Holy Communion is an expression, not only of the life of the local Christian congregation, but of the unity and mission of the universal Church in the living Jesus.

Therefore, ministers preside who are duly ordained as presbyters (elders, or leaders) in the universal Church, and who, in Methodist terms, are in 'Full Connexion' with the Church. In other words, their ministry and their leadership in worship, especially in Holy Communion, is an expression of the whole Church's life and purpose. It isn't about *them* – just as worship in the local church isn't only about that congregation, but about its life within the Church across the world.

- Methodist presbyters exercise a *representative* role in the life of the Church. They speak God's word to God's people, and they carry God's people on their hearts in prayer and loving service; they are often the 'face' of the local church in a variety of places and contexts; and they fulfil certain tasks as those set aside and ordained in leadership, pastoral care and oversight. One of those tasks is presiding at Holy Communion, where they are in some senses standing in Christ's place, offering God's love and life to God's people. However, being ordained is not simply about performing certain tasks, but about a calling to live the whole of life for these things.
- As part of this representative role, there's also an issue of Church order. Presbyters are to be signs and agents of the unity of the Church. Their presiding at Holy Communion embodies that. One snapshot we have of the early Church is of how quickly the local church can fragment, when a variety of people within it claim authority for themselves and then seek to cement that authority through leading worship, especially Communion. Paul, in Corinth and elsewhere, had to spend a lot of time struggling against this, and it could be very damaging to the Church's mission. We know of many similar stories in churches and Christian communities today, which often result in harm being done and people being hurt. By saying that its presbyters should normally preside, the Church is seeking to guarantee that the Communion cannot become a place of fragmentation, when it is supposed to be the place above all others where we express and experience our oneness in Christ^{xii}.
- In all this, presbyters act under constant and corporate oversight. They are accountable to one another and to the Conference. They are in regular supervision. They are bound by the discipline of the Church and the corporate life of the college of presbyters. Their ministry is therefore held within the boundaries this creates: including their ministry in worship and leading Communion appropriately and well.

In all this, however, the Methodist Church does not take the view of, for instance, the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church, that *only* its ordained clergy may *ever* preside at Communion. Authorisations like the one you have received, or may receive, are granted to persons other than presbyters, under particular circumstances, and according to particular processes. These are laid out in Standing Order 011, if you want to read them. Those receiving them are bound to act under the guidance and oversight of the Superintendent minister, and within the corporate ministry of the circuit team and leadership. Authorisations are granted by the Conference itself. An authorisation is therefore a *Connexional* reality: for as long as you hold one, and exercise the ministry of

presiding at Communion services, you are acting on behalf and in the name of the Methodist Church, and with the blessing of the Church. It's important to bear in mind that responsibility – and that joyous privilege! – as you proceed.

In conversation with your Superintendent, remind yourself about the factors in your circuit which have led to your authorisation to preside. You may consider the following questions together too:

- How will you ensure that you exercise this ministry collaboratively with others?
- What oversight and accountability structures are in place for you?
- How will your Communion ministry be supervised? What space will you create to reflect, prayerfully and theologically, upon it? How will you resource yourself for it?
- How will you seek to enable services of Holy Communion to connect the congregation to:
 - their oneness in Christ and their connection to one another?
 - their being a part of the global Church?
 - their identity and mission as God's people?

iv. The Shape of the Liturgy

You'll have probably participated in many Communion services before as a member of a congregation. That means you'll already be aware of the kind of shape they usually have, and how one element leads into another. This can sometimes feel a bit routine: but there is a proper sense of progression and development in that. You might find it helpful to remind yourself of this shape and 'flow' by reading pages 221-2 in *the Methodist Worship Book*, which describes them.

Following on from that, read and compare the three services for 'Ordinary Seasons' beginning on page 185.

- How would you describe the differences between these three services?
- How do they reflect the various component parts of the service?
- Which of them works best for you? Why?

A word on terms: 'Ordinary Seasons' or 'Ordinary Time' means those parts of the year when the Church is not observing a particular, special time of reflection, or a festival. You can read more about this on pp.519-20 of *the Methodist Worship Book*. These special seasons and days include Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. As you have time, you will find

it valuable also to read and reflect on the Communion services for these seasons too, noting the difference in language, emphasis and tone.

As you read through all the services for Communion in *the Methodist Worship Book*, where do you see echoes of the kinds of Methodist understandings of communion described above? Where you do find a reflection of any of the key elements listed in section II?

IV. PREPARING TO PRESIDE

What follows are some suggestions and points for reflection as you think about the ministry of presiding at Communion services. They are rooted in the theological reflection above, but aim to help you think through the finer details of what it will mean in your context, and for you, to do this. You might like to think of this as a sort of checklist before you begin.

i. Which form of service?

You have already familiarised yourself with the communion services in *the Methodist Worship Book*. As you begin to preside, it's a good idea to stick to those forms of Communion service authorised for use in Methodist churches. That will give you a good sense of their shape, and the way that they flow, and how they feel when you lead them. As services authorised by the Conference, they express our doctrine and theology so this is also a good way of helping to ground your own understanding.

They are not, however, the only services you're allowed to use: many people use liturgies from other sources: for example the Iona Community, from other denominations or books, or even extemporise the communion prayer. But, if you are going to do this, it's a good place to practice the kind of accountability mentioned earlier. Talk with someone you trust about how that act of worship might be received in that place, and about anything in the liturgy which you may have missed and which may be problematic. If you're going to try to do an extempore prayer, it may still be sensible to have before you an outline such as the one on p.222 of *the Methodist Worship Book* so that the basic elements are still included. Take it slowly and give yourself time to grow into the ministry. Don't forget also to talk to people in the congregations for whom you'll be doing this: they will always have helpful insights about what helps, or hinders, them.

ii. What (not) to wear?

This is a very personal decision and it will be important to make a choice you are comfortable with. If you are already a Local Preacher or Worship Leader it would be appropriate to wear what you normally wear when leading worship. It is not our custom for lay people to wear clerical collars or stoles. So, as you think about what you wear, just bear in mind what was said earlier: you're there to lead God's people towards God, and not 'get in the way'!

iii. Prepare yourself

Before you preside, especially for the first time, or when using a new form of service, it makes good sense to rehearse. Try it out for yourself – you might like to ask to someone to observe you and give feedback, or you could record yourself on video. Pay careful attention to how someone else presides and ask yourself what 'works' for you. It is, again a very personal thing. That said, there's always an element of what we might call 'theatre' to an act of worship, and a Communion service in particular must recount what is sometimes called the 'drama of salvation'. That's not to say that you should 'ham it up': but making sure that you convey conviction, passion and sincerity in leading a Communion service is important.

You might not be so used to leading spoken liturgy, and our communion liturgies have a greater degree of dialogue between the person leading and the people than a local preacher or worship leader might be used to. It may be helpful to bear these points in mind:

- It is important to *pray* the words, and to lead the congregation in praying them, not just to read them out.
- Even though the prayer may seem very long on the page, it's important to pace yourself carefully when leading it and not to rush through the words
- Communion liturgies tend to involve a good deal of spoken participation by the congregation. Careful thought about your vocal inflection can help to encourage confident participation in these aspects of the service.

There's also a question of what to do with your hands. Some like to offer a few gestures, which you may have observed elsewhere:

- Raising your hands during the first part of the prayer, and in the final doxology, can feel inclusive, generous and prayerful;
- Lifting the bread and cup when you are recounting the story of the Last Supper helps to focus attention on that part of the prayer;
- Some people hold their hands over the elements, and/or out towards the people, when praying for the Holy Spirit to come and be present in the Communion (this moment is called the 'epiclesis', from the Greek for 'invocation'), as a way of embodying that prayer;
- You will need to break a piece or loaf of bread after the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (in *the Methodist Worship Book*, it is noted when you should do this).

Everyone does it differently and there is no 'right' way. But it's something to think through, talk about, and practice, before you start to preside. How will you seek to lift the words of the service off the page, and into the hearts and imaginations of the congregation?

Reading through the guidance above, what are your instincts and preferences? Reflect on them with your Superintendent, or another minister.

How will you practice before you preside? Might you even video yourself and watch for things you might do differently? Is there someone you'd ask to watch and offer feedback too?

iv. Other expectations

Your authorisation is to a circuit, normally. Within the circuit, there may be hopes and expectations about your participating in other forms of sharing communion. One of these is 'extended communion', in which bread and wine previously set aside in a service of Holy Communion are taken to those unable to be in church. There are often lay people in local congregations trained in this ministry, but it may also be something in which you're asked to participate. There's guidance for this, and a short, simple service to use, on p.229 of *the*

Methodist Worship Book. It may be wise to check whether any service at which you preside will also include provision for extended. When this takes place, the bread and wine to be taken to those not present is on the communion table during the service, usually in suitable separate containers. In some churches, it is the custom for those who will be leading the service(s) in people's homes to come forward after the congregation have received communion so that the elements can be given to them.

Similarly, if you're going to be doing home communions as part of your ministry, you will find guidance and a simple form of service from page 223. Here again, you'd find it helpful to talk to someone with experience about how they approach this and what they've learned from doing it.^{xiii}

v. Other practicalities

Wherever you're presiding, whether you know the congregation or not, it's always essential to liaise carefully with them beforehand. The local stewards, ministers or communion stewards should be able to direct you around such questions as:

- Will the elements be on the table already, or brought up during the communion hymn or offertory?
- Will there be one loaf, or wafers, or sliced bread cut into cubes? What will there be for you to break?
- Will the wine be in chalices or little glasses?
- Will there be people assisting you in distributing communion? If so, what will they do, and what will you do?
- If so, when and how will you and they receive the bread and wine? In some churches, those distributing receive first, reminding us that we are not the host – Jesus is – and we cannot give what we have not received. In other churches, those distributing receive after the congregation, as a sign of humility and of the importance of service.
- Do people come freely to receive or do they kneel at the rail one group at a time? How will they be directed forward? How should you dismiss them?
- What are the arrangements for taking communion to those unable to come forward?
- What will happen to the remaining elements afterwards? Do you need to help?
- Are there ecumenical considerations? You may, for instance be in a Local Ecumenical Partnership with the United Reformed Church, in which different arrangements may pertain, especially for the distribution.

V. A FINAL WORD

Above all, as you exercise this ministry, we hope that it is a joy and a blessing to you, and that you're able to be a blessing to those with whom you work and worship. At the communion table, those who preside often experience God's love and grace in a new and powerful way. We may not be able fully to understand what Communion means and effects in the life of the Church: but we know that here we are met by the God who made us, and who loves us, unconditionally, immeasurably and eternally. God comes to us in very simple things, to convey this wonderful reality, as the poet Malcolm Guite describes in his poem 'Love's Choice':

This bread is light, dissolving, almost air,
A little visitation on my tongue,
A wafer-thin sensation, hardly there.
This taste of wine is brief in flavour, flung
A moment to the palate's roof and fled,
Even its aftertaste a memory.
Yet this is how He comes. Through wine and bread
Love chooses to be emptied into me.
He does not come in unimagined light
Too bright to be denied, too absolute
For consciousness, too strong for sight,
Leaving the seer blind, the poet mute;
Chooses instead to seep into each sense,
To dye himself into experience.

References

ⁱ Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14: 12-25; Luke 22: 7-23

ⁱⁱ John 13: 1-30

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 24: 13-35

^{iv} I Corinthians 11: 17-33

^v You might like to look up paragraph 140 of *His Presence makes the feast* for more about the word 'sacrament'.

^{vi} The Roman Catholic Church extends this to seven, adding also Penance, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination and Extreme Unction (sometimes called 'last rites' but involving anointing with oil for the sick and dying)

^{vii} See the Deed of Union, clause 10a

^{viii} See the Catechism, Question 49, e.g.

^{ix} From his poem, 'Gratefulness'

^x [The report](#) was adopted in 1999 as a major statement of 'ecclesiology': i.e., what The Methodist Church in Britain believes about the nature of the Church.

^{xi} See the report *Children and Holy Communion* <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-children-and-holy-communion-2000.pdf>

^{xii} You may be interested in reading what the Deed of Union has to say about this, especially in clause 4. It's contained in CPD: your minister will have a copy of this, and it's also available [online](#).

^{xiii} Remember that for services that aren't on the plan, you will need authorisation from the Superintendent (SO011(1)).