

How Open the Table? Current Discernment in Three Denominations

The scene is a Christian sanctuary on a Sunday morning. The congregation fills between 50%-70% of the available seating on the main floor. If there is a balcony, it is sparsely populated with a mixture of families with younger children and, on the very top row, perhaps a group of three or four teenagers whose parents may or may not be in attendance below. There are two or three persons present whom the pastor does not recognize, but that's nothing unusual in this congregation.

The hymns have been sung, the scriptures read, the sermon completed, the Creed and the prayers, confession, absolution, and peace shared with the congregation. Now it is time for the invitation to prepare for communion. The pastor moves toward the table with her acolytes, and invites the congregation to join in the Great Thanksgiving. Everyone rises as she intones the familiar opening lines. The congregation joins in the printed or projected responses, the pastor breaks the bread, pours the wine (perhaps mixed with water), and offers the epiclesis. The congregation joins in the Great Amen and the Lord's Prayer.

To this point, what I have described would be typical of many Protestant mainline congregations-- Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, and, except for the gender of the presider in my example, not unlike what many in the Roman Catholic Church may experience as well. But what happens next-- the spoken or printed words or unspoken traditions that identify who is invited to receive the sanctified elements-- may be very different indeed. In some traditions, only those who have been baptized and confirmed may receive. In others, all the baptized are invited to receive, while the non-baptized may

be invited to come to receive a blessing. And in still others, the table is opened to all who choose to come, regardless of baptismal, catechetical, or even believing status.

The diversity of answers to the question "How open the table?" among U.S. mainline Protestant denominations, and even within them, has been a fact of their existence for quite some time. Some Congregationalist (now United Church of Christ) traditions point back to Solomon Stoddard's conversion at communion in 1677 and his subsequent preaching that all persons attending worship should be invited to receive from the table. Some United Methodists have for many years interpreted John Wesley's passing statement about communion as a converting ordinance to be a warrant for inviting all who are seeking Christ to come to the table and receive, while others have reminded that when Wesley wrote those words, he was serving as a professor and Anglican priest in England where nearly everyone had been baptized in infancy. Presbyterian, Reformed, Episcopal and Lutheran communions, meanwhile, have continued in their canons and books of order to uphold the standard that the holy food and drink is intended only for the baptized, and in some instances, only the baptized and confirmed. But even among these bodies there is little doubt that in practical terms anyone who has presented oneself at the table, regardless of baptismal status, has a fair chance of being served unless one specifically indicated a desire for a blessing instead, or unless that pastor knew the person was not baptized or otherwise qualified to receive.

In practice, then, the mainline Protestant churches in the United States have lived with a Eucharistic table that is open to all who present themselves to receive, regardless of the degree to which that practice may be at variance with (or without agreement within) their official denominational standards. As one Episcopal priest who is not an advocate of such open communion confesses, "I, for one, have never turned

away, nor would I turn away, anyone from the communion rail. The altar is not the place to address the issue.”¹

Indeed, as John Wesley discovered in Georgia when he refused communion to Sophy Hopkey, and so found himself under charges for defamation of character (among other things), the altar is most definitely not the place to address the issue. But for at least three communions in the United States-- The United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church USA, and the Episcopal Church-- the tension between their official teaching (or the lack of clarity in that teaching) and the diverse practices in the congregations has led to a process of discussion, reflection, and study at a variety of levels toward aligning theology and practice more closely with each other. In this paper I will describe the journey toward such alignment in these three denominations with an eye toward discussing and unpacking the reasons given for moving to a more open table and the cautions raised by those who wish to maintain it for the baptized alone.

Convergence as the Beginning of Divergence: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry

Leaders in all three denominations would be quick to agree that the reflection now occurring about the divergence between official theology and pastoral practice of invitation to the table has been significantly influenced by the groundbreaking convergence achieved in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.² This was the 1982 consensus document on these three practices developed through many years of ecumenical dialog within the World Council of Churches. On our topic in particular, the question of

¹ The Rev. Andrew Waldo, “Baptism and Eucharist: Challenges,” *Open: Journal of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission* (46:2, Summer 2000), 3.

² The entire text of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* is now available on the Internet at <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/bem1.html>. All quotes from BEM in this essay are from the web version, and all quotes hereafter are cited by their location within the text.

whether the table is open to all the baptized, or the baptized and confirmed, or all persons in attendance who wish to receive, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* consistently argued for a table open to all baptized Christians, while more tacitly addressing the question of whether those not baptized may also receive. A few passages from BEM will illustrate the point:

The eucharistic communion with Christ who nourishes *the life of the Church* is at the same time *communion within the body of Christ* which is the Church (E.19)

Since the earliest days, baptism has been understood as the sacrament by which believers are incorporated into the body of Christ and are endowed with the Holy Spirit... There is discussion in many churches today about the inclusion of baptized children as communicants at the Lord's Supper. (Commentary on E.19).

The very celebration of the eucharist is an instance of *the Church's* participation in God's mission to the world (E.25).

As it is entirely the gift of God, the eucharist brings into the present age a new reality which transforms *Christians* into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses (E.26)³.

In every instance cited above, and, indeed, throughout the text of BEM, it is clear that baptism is the means by which a person enters into the body of Christ, the Church, and that it is the body of Christ which offers the Eucharist and receives the body and blood of Christ from the table. One may therefore reasonably conclude that the text as a whole assumes, if not suggests, that it is the baptized, and none other, who both offer and receive at the table.

There is one sentence in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, which might appear to offer some comfort to proponents of making communion available for all present: "As it becomes one people, sharing the meal of the one Lord, the eucharistic assembly must be concerned for gathering also those who are at present beyond its visible limits, because Christ invited to his feast all for whom he died" (E.26). Those who interpret the death of

³*Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

Christ being for all persons generally may see here a warrant to conclude that the Eucharist should thus be available to all persons present in any Christian assembly. But the very next sentence indicates that the intention of BEM is moving in a different direction. "Insofar as *Christians* cannot unite in full fellowship around the same table to eat the same loaf and drink from the same cup, their missionary witness is weakened at both the individual and the corporate levels." The stated concern for gathering all for whom Christ died around the table is thus really a call for Christians to open their tables to all the baptized, a feat that is still to be accomplished in many circles of the ecumenical church today.

What then of those not baptized? Where are they in the eucharist? Are they fenced off, left out, pushed away? BEM argues otherwise. Rather than being at the margins or left outside the eucharistic celebration of the church, the world is also a participant in and a recipient of its blessing.

The world, to which renewal is promised, is present in the whole eucharistic celebration. The world is present in the thanksgiving to the Father, where the Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation; in the memorial of Christ, where the Church, united with its great High Priest and Intercessor, prays for the world; in the prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, where the Church asks for sanctification and new creation. (E.23)

Though the world does not receive the bread and wine from the table, it does receive prayer for its sustenance, its deliverance, and its ultimate renewal. Non-baptized persons who attend a eucharistic service in the spirit of BEM are intended to know and feel that Jesus Christ, with the body of Christ, is in ministry for them and seeks to be in ministry with them. Through the Eucharistic prayer, the baptized are ever inviting the world to join with them in the life Christ makes available through baptism, eucharist and ministry in his name.

But as I indicated earlier, it was neither the design nor the intent of BEM, nor was it the result for Episcopalians, Presbyterians (USA) or United Methodists, that all would agree with such a perspective and move forward in lockstep succession. The process leading to BEM envisioned and enacted a process of response from the member communions of the World Council of Churches. The responses were collected from the official structures of the various churches and published in six volumes in 1986. In their responses, each of the churches indicated areas where they found the statement to be faithful, areas where they disagreed and would articulate other positions, and areas where they believed improvements could be made in the document as a whole. Episcopalians said nothing on our topic, presumably because their Canons were already clear on the matter that “[n]o unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.”⁴ The Church of England gave this affirmation: “[B]aptism itself can be thought *the* appropriate way in to eucharistic sharing.”⁵ The 198th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA wrote, “We acknowledge that the text on the eucharist contains the historic faith of the Church through the ages... The observance of the Supper is an occasion for the remembrance and renewal of baptismal vows.”⁶ The clearest interpretation of these words, and one in keeping with Presbyterian doctrine, is that the Lord's Supper (as Presbyterians prefer to call it) is for the baptized. While the United Methodist Church was hesitant to embrace this view, it was grateful for the way

⁴ Title I, Canon 17, Section 7 of *Canons of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church* as found at http://www.churchpublishing.org/general_convention/pdf_constitution/cpi_cc_canontitle1.pdf. It may fairly be noted that the parallel passage in *Canons of the Church of England* (B.15a, Sixth Edition), while more expansive, limits reception to the baptized, or, in the case of members of the Church of England, the baptized and confirmed (<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/legal/canonpdf/02B11-17.pdf>).

⁵ Max Thurian, Ed. *The Churches Respond to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Vol 2* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 50. Emphasis mine. The responses of the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Methodist Church may be found in volumes 2, 3, and 2, respectively.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 195, 197.

that BEM exposed the need of the Church to reflect more carefully on its theology and practice of the sacraments.

United Methodists are not of one mind concerning access to the Lord's table. Who should be invited? Only those baptized? Only the baptized and confirmed? Or any who sincerely desire to come?...

BEM challenges us to consider the pastoral and liturgical implications of the continuity and consistency of the two sacraments for the well-being of the church.⁷

Indeed, the succeeding years have seen the United Methodist Church engage in intensive study and a new implementation of its theology of baptism and the ordering of ministry. While its ministries have been re-ordered, and its baptismal theology has been adopted, the alignment of its structures to address the implications of its baptismal theology awaits action at its 2004 General Conference. During the past four years, a study committee has been hard at work to refine and provide guidance for that church's theology and practice of Holy Communion. The 2004 General Conference will also receive and vote upon the final version of the committee's study document and the recommendations issuing from it.

From Response to More Questions: The Ongoing Challenge to BEM

Neither *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, nor the churches' responses to its call for reception by the baptized, were the final word for Episcopalians, United Methodists, or Presbyterians in the USA. Each of these bodies has continued to explore, sometimes informally, at other times through official statements, whether baptism is a necessary prerequisite for one to receive the bread and cup from the Lords table.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol.2, p. 182.

The Episcopal Church: A Conversation on Faithfulness to Jesus and the Church

In the Episcopal Church, the conversation has occurred in writing and in practice. The Rev. Richard Fabian, founding Co-Rector of Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco in 1978, has argued passionately for offering the bread and cup to all who present themselves to receive it, and helped to design the architecture of the congregation's sanctuary to support that practice. The table at Saint Gregory's has two pedestals. On one is inscribed, in Greek, "THIS GUY WELCOMES SINNERS AND DINES WITH THEM!" (from Luke 15:2). On the other, in English, "DID NOT THE LORD SHARE THE TABLE OF TAX COLLECTORS AND HARLOTS? SO THEN—DO NOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE WORTHY AND THE UNWORTHY. ALL MUST BE EQUAL IN YOUR EYES TO LOVE AND SERVE" (from Isaac of Nineveh, 7th century mystic).⁸ For Fr. Fabian at St. Gregory's, and what is alleged to be a rapidly growing number of Episcopal clergy and congregations⁹, the table must be open to all for the church to be consistent in its worship practices with the Jesus it proclaims. But, in addition to being faithful to Jesus, Fabian believes that the practice of intentionally inviting all present to receive encourages more persons to become faithful Christians than the process of insisting on a commitment in baptism before the meal is shared. He notes that "whereas sinners once flocked to Jesus table, fifth-century Christians lingered in the catechumenate for a lifetime, dreading to be baptized and approach the sacred meal before they were ready."¹⁰ Fabian's welcome is not without reminder of the cost, the death of Jesus, which may also lead to the death of those who follow him, but neither

⁸ The Rev'd. Richard Fabian, "First the Table, Then the Font" in *The Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians* (February 2002), 8. Capitalization is as it appears in the text and on the table.

⁹ Andrew Waldo, "Baptism and Eucharist: Challenges" in *Open: Journal of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission* (46:2, Summer 2000), 1.

¹⁰ Fabian, p. 8.

does it demand that people who receive be baptized immediately or enroll in classes to prepare for same. Instead, as he writes, "unbaptized people who come regularly to Jesus table proceed to baptism almost without exception, and speedily enough."¹¹

Fr. Fabian has been perhaps the most outspoken, though by no means the only, spokesperson for this cause. Others have echoed his theological and pastoral position throughout the 1990s, and still others have noted that in effect, since little more than a bulletin announcement inviting all baptized Christians to receive is offered in the way of direction for the congregation, many tables in the Episcopal Church *are de facto*, if not *de jure*, open to all.¹² Paul Gibson adds yet another argument in favor of allowing the table to come before the font. Most of the people who became followers of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament, responded spontaneously. By programming the order in which a response to the sacraments may be accomplished, and by withholding one until another is first completed, or in the case of baptism, by requiring lengthy catechesis before baptism, the Church is at risk, he believes, of quenching the quickening work of the Holy Spirit.¹³

At first glance, defenders of the traditional (and canonical) perspective in the Episcopal Church may appear to be downplaying some of their most convincing arguments. Few are satisfied that simply restating the Canon forbidding the reception of communion by non-baptized persons is a sufficient argument. Nor does it seem sufficient to quote the many examples of the unanimous witness of early Christian writers (Didache, Justin Martyr, Didascalia, Apostolic Tradition, Apostolic Constitutions, the list goes on) to the ancient practice of requiring persons to be baptized before they could

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Among others, Andrew Waldo (*op. cit.*), and Paul Gibson, "Who May Eat and Drink," *Open: Journal of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission* (43:3), 6-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

receive eucharist, or even be present when eucharistic worship was offered. Nor is it any longer fashionable to quote the old "dogmatic theologies," such as the statement by Claude Beaufort Moss that "the communion of the unbaptized is invalid. In no conditions whatever may a person who is known to be unbaptized be admitted to communion. Even if he is dying, he must be baptized first."¹⁴

Proof-texting and dogmatic arguments are simply not the way of Episcopalians. Many who oppose a fundamental shift in the Canon, and would call for a tighter discipline in the Church to enforce it, are arguing *for* respect for the tradition and the ecumenical Church, and *against* what they see as a subtle temptation to accommodation to culture out of a concern for not being perceived as hospitable enough by newcomers. While hospitality is an important value of the Church, more important, in the eyes of the defenders of the current standards, is faithfulness to the pattern that has been and continues to be lived out in most of His Church.¹⁵ From another angle, The Rev'd. Andrew Waldo has reflected on statement from a 1992 lecture by Edwin Friedman: "The contemporary fashion of valuing empathy over responsibility locks us into a pathological orientation." Waldo wondered whether at some basic level, a table open to all, regardless of an intention to be responsible to Christ signified in baptism, was a symptom of an overly empathetic understanding of church, one that, in the final analysis, could act to block persons from experiencing the full liberation that Jesus intends.¹⁶

There was no legislation put forward for the 2003 General Convention, nor any proposals for future General Conventions, to change the official position of the Episcopal

¹⁴ Claude Beaufort Moss, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* (London: SPCK, 1943) p. 351.

¹⁵Articles in this vein, in addition to those cited, include: The Rev's Leonel L Mitchell, DD, "Should the Unbaptized Be Welcomed to the Lord's Table?" as reprinted in *The Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians* (February, 2002), 11-12; Linda Moeller, "Baptism: Rite of Inclusion or Exclusion?" in Paul Marshall and Lesley Northrup, eds., *Leaps and Boundaries* (Morehouse, 1997), 81-92.

¹⁶ Waldo, p. 3.

Church that communion is to be served only to the baptized. Instead, there is one resolution, which was referred back to the originating committee by the General Convention, to create a panel of theological, liturgical, and pastoral leaders to study the practice and report back to General Convention in 2006.¹⁷ The tenor of the resolution chides the church for permitting practices that are clearly at odds with its canons without due theological challenge or reflection. The conversation, and the variance in practice, continues for at least the next three years with no clear resolution in sight.

The United Methodist Church: Principles and the People

As described briefly above, the status of the conversation about the openness of the table in the United Methodist Church is on the verge of becoming official. The General Conference of 2000 called for the creation of a committee to study and articulate the theology and practice of Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church and make its report to the General Conference in 2004. While the final version of that report awaits approval and possible amendment from the denomination's General Board of Discipleship in August 2003, its author expects it may not be substantially changed from the final draft submitted by the Committee.¹⁸

The fundamental question the United Methodist Church asked in its 1986 response to BEM was, "Who should be invited?" The most current available draft of that report, "This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion," replies that the invitation already adopted as the liturgy of the Church and printed in the *United Methodist Hymnal* and *United Methodist Book of Worship* is clear enough: "Christ our

¹⁷The full text of the resolution may be found at http://submitresolution.dfms.org/view_leg_detail.aspx?id=A089&type=ORIGINAL

¹⁸ E-mail conversations with Dr. Gayle C. Felton, author of the Committee's version of the document.

Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.”¹⁹ This invitation, adopted as part of the liturgy by General Conference in 1988, explicitly opens the table to all who desire to follow Christ, as well as those who have followed him in baptism and discipleship. To ensure that unbaptized persons are also invited, the document continues, “Non-baptized persons who respond in faith to the invitation in our liturgy will be welcomed to the table.”²⁰

At the same time, “This Holy Mystery” declares as a *principle* (meaning a fundamental theological premise that should guide practice), the following:

All who respond in faith to the invitation are to be welcomed. Holy Baptism normally precedes partaking of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a meal of the community who are in covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people, baptism is the sign of the New Covenant (Genesis 17:9-14; Exodus 24:1-12; Jeremiah 31:31; Romans 6:1-11; Hebrews 9:15).²¹

On the face of it, the principle declared here appears somewhat in tension with the foregoing description of the intentional openness of the table. If Holy Communion is a covenant meal, and the sign of the covenant which enables participation in the meal is baptism, then in principle “This Holy Mystery” declares baptismal precedence as normative, if not exclusive. What's going on?

According to Dr. Gayle Felton, author of “This Holy Mystery,” what’s going on is both political and theological. At every point, the committee has actively sought response and input from members of the United Methodist Church at large. At and between every gathering of the committee, members were deluged with mail, telephone calls, faxes and

¹⁹ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House: 1989), 7.

²⁰ Gayle C. Felton, “This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion” (Third Draft, June 19, 2003), 16:630-631. http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=5374
The full version of this document may be read in PDF form at <http://www.gbod.org/worship/holycommunion0603.pdf>. Quotes will refer to pagination and line numbers in the PDF version.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14:577-582.

e-mail telling them to maintain an intentionally open table, especially after a denominational publication included a brief article stating that the committee was “questioning” whether inviting all present in worship to the table was appropriate.²² The thinking of the people in the churches was thus very clear. At the same time, there was enough support on the committee for including the traditional historical and theological justification for the precedence of baptism, that it was included in this way.²³ The result is the kind of both-and, synthetic approach to difficult theological questions that was typical of John Wesley and the people called Methodist. What is to become of this particular synthetic understanding of the relationship of baptism and Eucharist in the United Methodist Church remains to be seen as the document is perfected by the Board of Discipleship in August, and voted upon at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in April, 2004. It is probably not insignificant that in the study document as it currently stands, the rationale given for moving toward embracing the practice of communion open to all present is not biblical or theological principles, but rather the experience and beliefs of relatively contemporary United Methodists. In the polity of The United Methodist Church, the power of the “people in the pews” must be balanced against the historical and theological standards of the ecumenical convergence before any teaching or clarification of teaching may be adopted.

The Presbyterian Church, USA: A Process in Process

According to the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church, USA, there is no question that the Lord's Supper is intended for the baptized:

²² This very brief article-- “Can Non-Baptized Persons Receive Communion”--appeared in the January 2003 issue of *Interpreter for Active United Methodists*. The full text may be found at <http://www2.interpretermagazine.org/pages/showarticle.asp?id=269>. I note, editorially, that I find the article to be misleading in the extreme. The work of the committee, as I understand it, was simply reaching the point of *discussing* the openness of the table in the light of historical, theological, and liturgical scholarship from Methodist and other Christian bodies, rather than simply *questioning* current practice.

²³ E-mail from Dr. Gayle Felton, May 5, 2003.

The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love.²⁴

At the 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA in 1998, a rather different understanding was put forward in what was known as Overture 98-33, submitted by the Twin Cities Presbytery.²⁵ In this Overture, the appeal toward communion for all present is primarily grounded in Scripture, and especially in an argument that calls for Presbyterians to bring Christian table fellowship at the Lord's Supper into line with Jesus' practice of open table fellowship during his ministry. Unlike the Episcopal clergy who are writing in this vein, however, the Presbyterian Overture begins by laying out precept upon precept, line upon line of biblical citations to make its case.²⁶ From this scriptural foundation the Overture moves to perceived inconsistencies within the current liturgical guidelines for the church, particularly in regard to the inclusion or non-inclusion of children, baptized or otherwise, and concludes with two final proof-texts before it asks for specific changes in the language of the *Book of Order*. Those changes amount to reversals of current positions that limit reception to the baptized. Oddly, however, the Overture would maintain that children, baptized or not, who have not received some sort of instruction about the meaning of the Supper, may continue to be excluded.

How did such a proposal come forward in so relatively short a period of time from the clearly affirmative response to baptismal precedence as articulate in BEM? According to Paul Galbreath of the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church USA, it happened in

²⁴ Book of Order W-2.4011a as found at <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-sacrament.htm>

²⁵ The entire document, as amended, may be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/ga210/ovt/98-33.html>

²⁶The first section of the document is devoted to this argument as follows: Whereas, Jesus dined with all, and he kept an open table; and

Whereas, Jesus lived out his own parable of the Heavenly Banquet (Luke 14:15-23); and
Whereas, Jesus was rightly accused by his detractors of being a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34); and

Whereas, Jesus did not even reject Judas from his last meal; and

Whereas, it was the church that began to limit access to His table; and

Whereas, Jesus asked us to set a table for all and to eat in his name "Take, eat; this is my body. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you" (Matt. 26:26-27);

part because of a substantial increase in the frequency of communion among Presbyterian churches during the past 20 years, a shift from an average of quarterly to monthly, and, in an increasing number of congregations, weekly. As communion has become a more regular part of the worship life of these congregations, more people who might attend infrequently have encountered it more often, and so more questions about who may be invited have arisen. Galbreath further notes that while Overture 98-33 uses "hospitality" language to couch its concerns, in the Western United States, where a majority of adults attending worship may have had no previous Christian experience, the issue is positively missional.²⁷

The vote of General Assembly at the 1998 General Assembly was referral to the Office of Theology and Worship for further input.²⁸ The Office of Theology and Worship responded with a recommendation in 2002 that it be permitted to conduct a comprehensive study of sacramental theology and practice with special attention to the ways in which the catechumenate relates Baptism and the Lord's Supper²⁹ and return its report, after adequate time for ecumenical conversation, to the 217th General Assembly (2006). The Office of Theology and Worship had already begun a project to explore the theology and practice of the catechumenate in contemporary ecclesiology when the original referral came in 1998. The 2002 proposal, which was solidly passed, was made on the basis that "[t]he relationship between the two sacraments is so vital to the church's self-understanding that it would be irresponsible to respond to the overture in isolation from a broader and deeper consideration of the our church's ecumenical

²⁷Telephone interview with Paul Galbreath, June 17, 2003. Galbreath also believes that the sentiment in favor of communion open to all is not widespread, but is limited to a few presbyteries, most of them in the Western United States.

²⁸ Found at <http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/ga210/ovt.action.html>

²⁹ Found at <http://www.pcusa.org/ga214/business/10-theological.pdf>

relationships and the centuries-old catholic and evangelical understanding of Baptism, Eucharist, and the relationship between the two."³⁰ Paul Galbreath noted that "we worked ourselves into this position by ignoring baptismal identity for a long time, so it may take us a long time to address the complex, interrelated issues effectively."³¹

Preliminary work on catechumenal rites will be released to the church in Fall 2003. The Sacramental Theology Task Force has just completed its first meeting in its three-year process.

Given the nature of Presbyterian Church (USA) study documents, it would be reasonable to expect that what is returned to the General Assembly in 2006 will not closely resemble in form, or possibly even in substance, the 1998 Overture that has been absorbed into it. While the Sacramental Theology Task Force of the Office of Theology and Worship will certainly provide biblical grounding for its more comprehensive theological, liturgical, and catechetical guidance for the Church, it will more likely do so (if past study documents are any clue) with a reading that is more contextual than declaratory. And the changes that it proposes for the *Book of Order*, if any, will have been the result of at least eight years of listening, reflection, and observation of the practice of the churches and presbyteries across the denomination, as well as ongoing conversations with ecumenical partners. That a matter of this importance for the Church has been referred and deferred relatively gladly for this long is not a sign that it does not wish to deal with the questions raised by the original Overture. Rather, the Office of Theology and Worship is seeking to ensure that when the General Assembly receives a statement from the Office of Theology and Worship in 2006, that body is able to discern in that statement a faithful reflection of the calling of God for the whole Church, and not the

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Interview with Paul Galbreath.

more limited aims of legislative correction that appear to be addressed by the original Overture. One might also observe in this instance that there may be a reticence on the part of the General Assembly to allow the theological or biblical interpretations of any one presbytery to speak directly for all, or even to be allowed to reach the level of being voted upon by the presbyteries, until the relevant arm of the General Church has led the Church through a process of study and offered its guidance.

Conclusion: How Open the Table?

We have explored in these pages how three denominations are currently living with the question of how open the Eucharistic table should be to those present in Eucharistic worship. For the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church USA, no changes in official standards limiting reception to the baptized have as yet taken place. United Methodists, who have never had the clearest guidance on this question, appear to be moving toward openly affirming as official practice what has become a fairly widespread belief in offering communion to all who will respond, while at the same time reminding themselves that baptism is, historically and theologically, the normal means of grace for entrance into the body of Christ. Of the three, United Methodists are currently the most open in practice to a table open to all.

But the question might be posed with a different inflection: "*How open the table?*" In what way can those who are working for a practice that is either at variance with current doctrine, or, in the case of United Methodists, *one possible* interpretation of current doctrine, accomplish their aim of opening the table of the Lord to all who are present in the gathered assembly? Here we might observe the ways that differences in polity and the corporate culture of the Churches significantly mark the differences in

approach. The Episcopal Church is known, nowadays, for its relatively weak episcopate; in short, the priests are often really the ones in charge. Thus it is little surprise that in the Episcopal Church, the movement is being led by individual (though increasingly networking) priests, while to date it does not appear that there is a network of priests forming to address the traditional side of this issue (though a variety of traditionalist networks exist within the church). Instead, the General Assembly has just referred any countervailing work to a variety of committees. If this relatively nascent movement toward open communion is able to continue to build momentum, over time, and perhaps as early as 2006, it may lead to a change in the canons.

While the United Methodist Church has substantially more powerful bishops, its bishops do not have teaching authority apart from that specifically given them by the General Conference. Neither do the agencies of the church, including its Worship Section of the Board of Discipleship, have such authority, even on matters directly pertaining to worship. Teaching authority lies squarely with the laity and clergy who elect and send lay and clergy delegates to the General Convention. So while the original impetus to review and clarify the church's teaching on baptism, Eucharist, and ministry came from church officials who were responsible for working on and responding to *BEM*, it was the outpouring of support from clergy and laity in every part of the United Methodist connection, in response to fears that the study committee may move toward the more ecumenically held understanding of baptismal precedence, that has led to the kind of formulation which is likely to be presented to the General Conference in 2004.

For the Presbyterian Church USA, it is neither the elders nor the people who are the fundamental administrative authority, but the presbyteries. The General Assembly and its standing committees set the doctrinal direction for the church. Thus it seems

quite fitting that a presbytery introduced the idea of opening the table more widely, and that the General Assembly referred the matter not back to the presbyteries, but to the relevant agency of the General Church, the Office of Theology and Worship. While its report in 2006 will set the vision for the Church, any changes it suggests in the Book of Order will still need to be approved by a sufficient majority of the presbyteries before it may become official policy. The quality of the ongoing interaction between the Office of Theology and Worship and the presbyteries will be crucial in the preparation, presentation and implementation of the final report and recommendations.

“How open the table?” is a question that does not easily go away. Those who seek to move their churches beyond the ecumenical and nearly univocal historical standard of “font before table” are engaging the systems in their own denominations in ways that may be effective to accomplish their aims. Those who wish to maintain or move their churches closer to the ecumenical consensus will need to find ways to create a momentum not simply *against* change, but *for* tradition-- an oxymoronic challenge on the face of it-- within their own systems. It would appear that the United Methodists may be first to achieve legislatively the fully approved practice of a table open to all. Episcopal congregations practicing communion open to all may very well continue to increase, with or without "official" sanction in the canons of the Church. Of the three, the Presbyterian Church USA appears best poised to develop a comprehensive and consistent alignment of its sacramental theology and practice going forward, and to do so in a way that both argues against changing and creates momentum for maintaining the ecumenical and traditional Presbyterian standards.