

Communion carpentry: A conversation of wood and word

by [William Johnson Everett](#) in the [January 17, 2001](#) issue

After 30 years of teaching Christian ethics, I decided that I needed to express myself in something besides words. I wanted a fresh start and a fresh form, something that would go beyond nostalgia, some new symbolic form that would be congruent with my deepest convictions and aspirations. I decided to build a communion table.

Though I had always loved to work with wood, household and occupational claims had reduced this urge to making home repairs and constructing a bookcase or two. Then, a few years ago, I became familiar with the hardwood forests around my home in the southern Appalachians and the extraordinary woodcraft of the people here. Soon I found myself assembling a workshop in the basement.

I began studying the importance of the round-table experiences in Poland and the former East Germany, where the round table symbolized the new democratic aspirations for a just constitutional order and the revolutionary move from authoritarian regimes to democratic republics.

When I looked around the churches where I worship, teach and preach, I found only rectangles, and most of the tables were catalog wood products. Some were shoved up under neo-Gothic canopies and used as altars for flower arrangements. Others were hidden in corners. At best, these were utilitarian pedestals for communion ware; at worst, bulky mementos of a “high church” sanctuary.

Jesus probably didn’t even have a table at his last meal. Some say it wasn’t even a Passover seder. Yet I longed to see and touch a table that would bring Jesus into our presence, that would invite Jesus to preside at our communion meal and at the councils of our struggles for a new order of justice. Somehow the table should combine nurture and counsel, the communal and the political.

As I began to work, my tendons and muscles and the prodding of my sciatica told me I had been too long at desk and keyboard. I needed this new dialogue of hands

and wood. I begin to design and assemble. I thought about using wood from a dying black cherry tree on my property. It would offer its falling corpus for the cause. But the wood wouldn't cure in time. So I visited a friend with a portable sawmill and a nearby hardwood yard, and collected enough maple and cherry for top and base.

As I set about planing, jointing, gluing and sanding the pieces, I also began a creative argument with the wood. Although dead, it was still breathing with and reacting to the world around it. For example, as the three maple panels took shape, a woodworking friend noticed that a slight droop had appeared at one end. The wood was under tension, and humidity had made it writhe and stretch in unanticipated ways. Would the wood resist my efforts, even defeat them? Would I be able to accommodate my plans to its character and struggle?

I thought about Jesus and Joseph. What kind of argument did they have with the wood? Had they started with clear designs and tried to force the wood to obey? Or did they have a rough idea and then negotiate the outcome with the stock before them? I thought of Jesus's other construction work. Was he "building" a kingdom or negotiating it? Did his experience with wood and the work of his father shape the way he handled the rotten, broken, twisted and grainy materials of his ministry? I wanted to ask my woodworking friends what kind of guy they thought Jesus was.

As I sanded the maple smooth, moving back and forth from grit to grit, I remembered that woodworking is a matter of touch and feel. The fingers know things eyes can never see—little bumps, grains, distortion and glassy plains. The dialogue of touch coaxes the wood's beauty into full view.

This would be more than a simple round table. It would be a double gateleg table, I decided, partly as a tribute to an elegant, classic piece of furniture and partly as a way to have both a rectangular and a round table. The rectangular table would become a circular table when people took part in communion. First one drop-leaf and then another could be raised to support relationships among those who gathered around the table.

The center would hold an inlaid mosaic piece created by my wife. Its glass tiles would gleam and sparkle with rainbow colors, a Pentecostal dove and flames of fire. A fish would swim in the heavenly waters. The new covenant in the Spirit would be at the center, with the movement of the maple grain playing around it. The drop leaves would have inlays of walnut and holly, with a mandorla in black walnut

embracing the white holly of the cross. Three intertwined circles would hold a holly shell to symbolize the baptism into the assembly of this new covenant. Even the legs, which are gates, would symbolize entry into a new life, where judgment “at the gate,” as the Bible says, would be the “making right” of participation at the table.

As the table reached completion, I realized that it would “argue” with the pulpit in church. This table would not allow itself to be hidden or displaced. It would nurture and counsel, encouraging a “word at table” instead of words pronounced from an elevated pulpit and authority. This table would invite those gathered to use words in conversations and even arguments as they walked a path to reconciliation.

Simply by being there, the table would invite us into a different architecture, a different choreography in worship, a different way of understanding communion. Maybe the word at round table would help reconcile divisions between Protestant word and catholic sacrament, and even bridge the gap between the assembly at worship and other assemblies of the word.

Today the table is in place. Miraculously, the droop in one of the leaves is gone. The hinges work a different tension into its body. The table has begun a conversation with the people. How will they respond? I don’t know. I do know that the table will touch them as they gather around it.