

Methodists mull whether to allow online communion

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [Nov 13, 2013](#) issue

As online worship becomes more common in some churches, leaders within the United Methodist Church are debating whether the denomination should condone online communion.

About 30 denominational leaders met in early October after Central United Methodist Church in Concord, North Carolina, announced plans to launch an online campus that potentially would offer online communion.

Some nondenominational churches already offer online communion, according to United Methodist News Service, but leaders urged the denomination's bishops to call for a moratorium on the practice and do further study of online ministries.

The majority of the leaders agreed with the statement that communion "entails the actual tactile sharing of bread and wine in a service that involves people corporeally together in the same place." Not everyone, however, agreed that congregants must be in the same place.

The debate raises fundamental questions at the heart of the church experience: the definition of community, individual participation, the role of tradition and basic theological understandings of the meaning of communion.

United Methodists practice open communion, meaning all who worship are invited to partake. Many churches celebrate communion once a month, though each church decides how often to serve it.

A move toward accepting online communion might be inevitable in some quarters, given the denomination's history, said Mark Tooley, a Methodist who is president of the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy.

"Methodists have a long history of pragmatism, which might make them a little more susceptible," Tooley said.

Communion takes on different forms among various Christian denominations, but it generally involves the reenactment of Jesus' Last Supper by taking bread and wine (or, as the UMC prefers, unfermented grape juice).

Also called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, many Protestants see the rite as an expression of faith rather than the reception of the body and blood of Jesus, as the Catholic Church teaches.

Many churches have launched online options for church activities, including worship, seminary, ordination counseling and financial giving. Despite the growing availability of church resources online, participating in communion has mostly remained a part of the physical act of worship in a congregation.

With Methodists' history of itinerant evangelism spread through circuit-riding preaching, online communion fits with the denomination's populist bent, said Stephen Gunter, associate dean for Methodist studies at Duke Divinity School. "It's always been about how we get the gospel to the next person," he said.

But Methodists also have a history of accountability, checking on one another's spiritual life, Gunter said. "I can't see how someone [who's] satisfied to be in front of a TV or computer screen would be interested in being held accountable to anything."

Some worry that online communication is becoming an alternate form of community for Christians.

"Digital mediation is now preferred to the immediacy of embodied conversation," wrote Brent Laytham, dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology and professor of theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University. "Like a hug or a kiss, like incarnation and resurrection, communion requires bodies that touch."

It is difficult to tell how many churches are offering online worship or online communion as part of their regular services.

A LifeWay Research survey of a thousand Protestant churches found that while 78 percent have a website, less than half of them use their sites for interactive purposes, such as obtaining and distributing prayer requests (43 percent), registering people for events (39 percent) and automating other church processes (30 percent).

Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary, said none of the 80 or so churches that he has studied that offer online services also offer virtual communion. “In many ways this is a parallel discussion to the earlier debate about whether online community is ‘real’ community,” Thumma said.

Eventually the Methodists’ debate over online communion could be presented before the General Conference, the denomination’s top lawmaking body, in 2016 in Portland, Oregon. —RNS

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