

The morning communion rush

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Since the New Year, I've been stopping at the Chicago Temple on Wednesday mornings for communion. For at least 40 years, this downtown United Methodist church has offered communion to city dwellers and commuters during the morning rush. At 7:30, Phil Blackwell--who inherited the tradition--consecrates the elements with whomever happens to be in the room at the moment. For the next 90 minutes, communion and a simple prayer are offered for anyone who walks in.

The communion, offered without a traditional liturgy, could very well have an "express lane" feel. When I first heard about this communal rite, I wondered: theologically, what is communion absent community? Culturally, why do I and others imagine we don't have time for liturgy? Ecclesiastically, what is communion that is all take (on my part) and no give?

But Blackwell and associate pastors Claude King and Wendy Witt all say the early-morning communion is a personal highlight of their ministries. Sixty thousand people walk by the corner of Washington and La Salle every day, says Blackwell, and even if 59,500 knew about the communion, they wouldn't be interested. But for those few who come in out of the cold, the heat, the wind and the hubbub of the city, the sense of sanctuary is palpable.

"It really isn't 'express lane' communion," Blackwell says, because people actually slow down when they come into the space. They shed their jackets and bags; they breathe deeply.

When John Wesley sent missionaries to America, he said simply, "Offer them Christ." That's what the Chicago Temple sees itself doing, no questions asked. On a recent morning--on my way between the train and work, caught in a throng of commuters with heads down and coats buttoned against the wind--I stopped in.

I sat briefly in a pew of the deeply quiet sanctuary while Blackwell finished administering communion and praying with a group of kneeling communicants. When I went forward and received, I was joined by four others on the kneeler. Blackwell prayed for us together as a group while laying hands on each of us separately, and then we went on our way.

Blackwell says they keep offering early-morning communion because, quite simply, "it works." And I think I know what he means. I was fleetingly but tangibly connected to the whole body of Christ. I was newly oriented toward my day's activities. A wayfaring stranger, I was warmly greeted, welcomed and served.

Oddly enough, instead of being stultifyingly individualistic, early-morning communion had the effect of emphasizing the common in communion. I felt that I was, for the first time that day, sharing the common concerns, joys, burdens and worries of people who drop in from whatever path they are taking.

If that's the express lane, then I will be back in it, with gratitude, as often as I can.