

An Open Table

ALL are welcome to come forward and receive communion, the divine life of Jesus which comes to us in gifts of bread and wine. Come as you are.

If you know the brokenness of life, its fractures within and its division without, then you have participated in the broken body of Christ and you are invited to share in the breaking of bread. If you desire to know the love of God that overcomes indifference and despair, if you desire the reconciliation that overcomes estrangement and alienation, then you are invited to share the cup of the new covenant.

The bread is received in the open palm. It is usual Anglican practice to drink the wine from the common cup. Wine and unfermented grape juice are served. If you would prefer to receive a gluten-free wafer or grape juice, please inform the person administering the bread or wine when they approach you. If you would prefer to receive a blessing instead of Communion, you are welcome to come forward and place your hands across your chest.

The case for open communion

By: The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

Should we invite persons who are not baptized to receive Holy Communion? The church is discussing this question today. Anglicans traditionally have believed that the eucharist is a family meal, reserved for members of the church through baptism. Those who are not baptized are not members of the church; therefore, they cannot participate in the family meal.

This exclusive view of the eucharist has a long history. St. Paul warns against eating and drinking in an “unworthy manner” (I Cor. 11:27), though he seems to leave the decision whether to partake in the meal to each person’s conscience (I Cor. 11:28).

Closed communion is standard practice in some Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox. However, many Anglican churches now practice open communion. There are good reasons, both missional and theological, for doing so.

The Missional Case

Consider the fact that most Anglican churches now celebrate the eucharist every Sunday at every service. Yet many people are not baptized. Do we invite them to church for Sunday dinner and tell them they cannot eat the food?

How can our churches be places of hospitality if we exclude table fellowship with the non-baptized? In Canada, a growing number of the population is not baptized, included people from different religious traditions or people with no religious affiliation at all.

Some Anglican churches are attempting to meet this challenge by becoming open and inclusive faith communities, ready to support people in their spiritual journeys. They understand the Anglican tradition has never been content to adopt a sectarian mentality, to insulate itself from culture or an unchurched population.

Open communion increasingly is seen as a way to build a bridge between the church and the unchurched. If people are “spiritual but not religious,” as several sociological studies indicate, then the desire for transcendence experienced in sacramental worship may well draw them to church.

There is a pattern here: experience, community and faith—in that order. I call this this “experiential evangelism” because it offers an experience of God that draws people into the Christian community and leads to faith in Jesus.

We now live in a postmodern world that places feeling over thought, intuition over logic and image over words. “We have a generation that is less interested in cerebral arguments, linear thinking, theological systems,” observes Leith Anderson, author of *Dying for Change*. Instead, they are “more interested in encountering the supernatural,” he says. It is through an experience with the supernatural that people enter into community. It is through community that people come to faith.

The traditional Anglican model holds that believing leads to belonging—you believe the faith of the church in order to belong to the church. However, an emerging model reverses the order, and holds that belonging leads to believing. Insofar as people belong to a Christian community, they come to believe in the faith of that community. Communion leading to baptism may complement the normative practice of baptism leading to communion.

This new model of Christian formation is consistent with church growth methodology. “The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God,” writes Leith Anderson. “The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.”

Open communion played a major part in the rapid growth of my parish in Southern California. Therefore, I ask: might we not see the experience of receiving communion as a way of drawing people to faith in Jesus?

The Theological Case

There is another consideration, however. Who is the host of the Lord’s Supper? God. God welcomes us. Even before we ask for food, God spreads a table before us. God’s hospitality is a hallmark of the meal we call eucharist.

One of the most powerful witnesses of God’s inclusive love is the welcoming table, so prevalent among southern black churches in the U.S. At these fellowship dinners, held on church grounds, a large meal is prepared for anyone who might come: rich and poor, black and white, stranger and church member. In the days of the segregationist South, the welcoming table was a powerful witness to God’s inclusive love.

Might not the Lord’s table in Anglican churches be understood as a welcoming table? Is it possible for us to see the altar as a symbol of inclusion rather than exclusion?

Anglican biblical scholar John Koenig and reformed theologian Amy Plantinga Pauw have argued separately that the most pervasive image in the Bible is the banquet table, with God serving as a generous host. Salvation is feasting in the kingdom of God, where people will come from north and south, east and west to sit at table together. In Isaiah 25:6–9, for example, the banquet is a symbol of salvation, with the invitation extended to “all peoples” and “all nations”—not just Israel.

This table fellowship is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus welcomed all kinds of people to his table: rich people, poor people, good people, sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, you name them. They all came to eat and drink with Jesus. United Methodist Bishop William Willimon has said that Jesus’ open invitation “manifested the radically inclusive nature of his kingdom, a kingdom that cuts across the barriers we erect

between insiders and outsiders, the saved and the damned, the elect and the outcast—barriers often most rigidly enforced at the table.”

Jesus welcomed all to his table. Might we also welcome people with the same openness and acceptance as Jesus did? After all, it is the Lord’s table, not ours. Ω

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