

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Are church rules God's rules?

Members of many different churches act as if the answer to that question were “Yes, my church’s are.” But in my opinion, the answer is “not necessarily,” because all churches are composed of human beings. Some humans may well be inspired by God and be expressing God’s will to some extent, but I don’t think any of them, either individually or as a group, can know God’s will perfectly or completely.



Responses to the January *Connections*, which was partly about the recent conflict within the United Methodist Church about whether offering Communion online was valid and therefore permissible, have made me think further about this question.

Jesus by “remote access”

Some churches of other denominations regularly offer Communion online. One of those is Countryside Community Church in Omaha, part of the United Church of Christ (UCC). For several years, Countryside has been offering Communion over the internet every Sunday through its coffeehouse, Darkwood Brew. (For more about this innovative way of doing church, read my description in the [February 2012 Connections](#) or see www.darkwoodbrew.org.)

Here’s what Eric Elnes, the senior pastor of Countryside, wrote me in response to the January *Connections*. “Having offered Communion via the internet for over 3 years now through Darkwood Brew, I can say with a full and joyous heart that yes,

Communion is a beautiful ritual to offer in this form. Rumor has it that Jesus himself has had to participate in Communion via ‘remote access’ for the last 2,000 years!”



“If anyone in your *Connections* community would like to try it for themselves,” Elnes adds, “I heartily invite them to join us on Sunday evenings at 5p CST/

What kind of bread?



The hard little square pellets that my congregation used for years for Communion always reminded me of the fish food used for aquariums. They didn’t seem like bread. Then we started using loaves of real bread, but some members complained about their being touched by the Communion preparers and thus spreading germs. To me that seemed like making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Don’t these members ever eat in restaurants or friends’ homes, I wondered, where the bread is undoubtedly touched by someone in the kitchen?

On *The Christian Century* magazine’s website, a [recent blog](#) raised a bread question that I’d never thought about. Now that we’ve become aware of food allergies, wrote Angela Dienhart Hancock, who teaches at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, it’s a challenge to find Communion elements that everyone in a community can eat together.

Forlorn little gluten-free wafers?

“You could have a little plate of gluten-free wafers on the side for those who need them,” Hancock suggests. “But this just doesn’t match the extravagant spirit of the meal itself—those forlorn little wafers in the shadow of the big, crusty loaf blessed and broken for everyone else.” Her seminary’s chapel-service planners, she says, thus tried many gluten-free loaves, but all crumbled badly or dissolved when dipped into wine. The group thought adding potato starch would be the answer, but that made the bread off-limits for people who couldn’t eat nightshades.



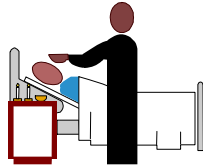
Nightshades? The only nightshades I knew about were what light sleepers wore over their eyes. But now I’ve learned that potatoes, tomatoes, some peppers, and several other vegetables are nightshade foods and can harm some people’s joints.

The bread recipe that Hancock’s group finally came up with contains chia seeds, psyllium husks, and garbanzo fava flour. It has a wonderful taste and texture, she says, and doesn’t explode, crumble, or dissolve into the cup. But I wonder: does offering Communion really need to be this hard?

6p EST at www.darkwoodbrew.org.” I hope that *Connections* readers who aren’t familiar with on-line Communion or who question its validity will accept Eric’s invitation. The experience might be an eye-opener.

Communion for shut-ins

Several readers have pointed out that when churches deliver Communion to shut-in or hospitalized members, as many do, those members are not physically “gathered” with the rest of the congregation. The only person physically present besides the Communion recipient, in fact, is likely to be the priest, pastor, or authorized lay person who brings the Communion elements—the bread and wine or grape juice. Does this differ in any important way from participating in online Communion? I don’t think so, and many churchgoers I’ve heard from don’t think so.



How many people? What words? Who?

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.
—Matthew 18:20



Taking Communion to shut-ins raises the question of how many people must be physically gathered in order for what happens to qualify as Communion.

Two? Three? More? And must they be in a gathering that is designated as a worship service? Or could they simply be a group of friends who gather for a meal during which they acknowledge their kinship as Christians?

I’ve heard pastors insist that in order for a practice to qualify as Communion, the official “words of institution”—the words that the Bible says Jesus spoke at the Last Supper—must be spoken. The pastor who administers Communion can’t omit those words or even paraphrase them, these pastors feel. Should this be so important?

Another frequent question about Communion is who can legitimately administer it. In many churches, only a priest or other ordained person can. It may even have to be a person who has received a particular one of several official levels or categories of ordination. But there are



easy and common ways to get around such rules. The ordained person can authorize a lay person to assist with Communion or to deliver the elements to a shut-in without a clergy person being present. But the priest or pastor must bless—consecrate—the elements before turning them over to the lay person.



A “dial-a-consecration” prayer?

When churches devise ways to obey the letter of these rules without obeying their spirit, however—without accomplishing the purpose they were evidently meant to accomplish—the rules can seem like a farce. One *Connections* reader tells me about a UMC Annual Conference (regional administrative body) that held a monthly Saturday service of consecration of elements, for the pastors whose ordination category didn’t allow them to administer Communion unless the elements had been consecrated by a higher-level pastor. Getting the elements consecrated at the Saturday service allowed the lower-level pastors to use those elements at the next morning’s Communion service in their congregations without having to have another pastor present.



This practice was shut down, my informant says, when someone jokingly suggested merely making a “dial-a-consecration” prayer available by phone, then holding the phone over the elements.

Why require Communion to be administered by ordained Christians? Apparently it’s in order to acknowledge the special calling they have received from God, and to distinguish it from the different kind of calling that lay Christians receive. However, I’m inclined to think that over the centuries the church has made this distinction sharper than is appropriate. We’ve then blurred it by creating more and more categories or levels of ordination, each with different requirements, responsibilities, and privileges. But that’s a subject that goes far beyond who can administer Communion.



A bishop’s concerns

One of the most thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to the January *Connections* came from United Methodist bishop Max Whitfield. He expressed concern about not having seen many UMC

pastors trying to understand Communion from a United Methodist perspective. As a result, he finds, few inform members of their congregations about that perspective and help them to understand it.

The official UMC understanding

Bishop Whitfield referred me to the statement entitled “This Holy Mystery,” which was adopted in 2004 as the official understanding of what United Methodists believe and practice with regard to Communion. This complete document and a brief overview of it are on the UMC website, www.umc.org.



Especially important to Bishop Whitfield is the UMC statement’s role in dialogue with the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, leading to a position of full communion with them. “Without this document,” Whitfield says, “I seriously doubt we would be in that relationship today. We needed to be able to speak with one voice about what we believe and practice.”

The church as individual and corporate

Max Whitfield’s main concern about online Communion is that it devalues, if not eliminates, an understanding of the Church that is both individual and corporate. He feels that in America, religion in general and Christianity in particular have become individual expressions, and that this change contradicts almost 5000 years of Judaic/Christian tradition and understanding.



Sacrament or ordinance?

Bishop Whitfield observed that the view of Communion that I expressed in the January *Connections* was the view taken by members of free churches. Unlike the position of the United Methodist Church,

the free-church view, he tells me, sees Communion as an ordinance—a remembrance of an act that occurred when Jesus ate with his disciples.

The UMC understands Communion as a sacrament, not an ordinance. The UMC says that through sacraments, God discloses things that are beyond human capacity to know through reason alone, and that a sacrament is a vow or promise. Jesus himself and the church as Christ’s body are sacramental, says the UMC, and in addition, the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism were instituted by Christ and given to the church. They have been chosen and designated by God as special means through which divine grace comes to us.



This understanding reflects a more person-like view of God, a more literalistic view of the Bible, and more confidence in the institutional church as a unique recipient of God’s truth than I find convincing, so my view differs in some ways from the official UMC understanding. I see the biblical account of the Last Supper as symbolic rather than historical, and as a call to emulate Jesus’s way of life rather than to observe a religious practice in a prescribed way.



I think of a sacrament as simply any practice that seems to make God’s presence apparent to those who practice it. Different actions can be sacramental for different ones of us, it seems to me, and we may see more, fewer, or different objects or practices as sacramental, compared to those that our churches define as sacraments.

But should the difference between my view and the official United Methodist position keep me from being United Methodist? I don’t think so.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Life experience can affect church choice

Like many other lifelong church members, my original church choice came simply from the family and the setting into which I happened to be born. Only in later years have I deliberately investigated and analyzed churches, religions, and my own beliefs. This process has led me to see that I disagree with some of the UMC's official policies and beliefs, but the UMC still seems best to me.



I know, however, that my 80 years in it are largely responsible for this feeling. The UMC is so familiar

and therefore comfortable to me. Besides, I feel sure that no church can infallibly know God's will. That means that every church's beliefs, rules, and practices are inadequate and mistaken to some degree. So even though I feel that some churches come closer than others to following God's will, I don't see any need to change churches.

Consequently, I'm still a United Methodist despite being part of the UMC's loyal opposition in some ways. That includes trying to promote what I see as needed change in it. If you're in a church, I hope you'll do that for it too.

Barbara

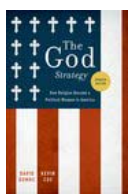


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The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America, by David Domke and Kevin Coe (Oxford University Press, 2010)

With the current news saturated with appeals from candidates and reports of their latest escapades, you might like to read this intriguing, easy-to-read book about how modern campaign strategies are being carefully crafted to "get the God vote." It's an eye-opening look at how religion has become one of the most powerful forces shaping American political life.

Website makeover coming!

Big changes are in the works for my *Connections* website, thanks to a *Connections* reader who is a professional graphic designer and web developer. The redone website will be ready soon.

Meanwhile, if you want paper copies or pdf files of the October, November, or December 2013 issues, or the January or February 2014 issues, which I haven't been able to post on my present website, let me know and I'll snail-mail or e-mail them to you. Then when the re-done website is finished, they'll all be on it.

