

33. Extended Communion

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolution	33/1. The Conference received the Report.

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To consider widening the practice of Extended Communion in the Methodist Church
Main points	• Introduction • Extended Communion in the Methodist Church • Relevant Ecumenical Practices • Conclusion
Background context and relevant documents	Extending Communion (1984) Extended Communion, <i>The Methodist Worship Book</i> (1999), p. 229 Authorisations to Preside (2023)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Conference of 2023 directed the Faith and Order Committee¹ to explore whether the practice of Extended Communion in the Methodist Church might be widened. At present, the Methodist Church only provides formally for Extended Communion – ie an act of worship during which the participants receive elements previously set apart at a service of Holy Communion – for persons in homes (including nursing and retirement homes) or in a hospital or hospice.² What is being explored is whether the possibility of receiving elements previously set apart at a service of Holy Communion might be applied to the context of a congregation gathered for public worship (when an actual celebration of Holy Communion is not possible due to the unavailability of an ordained presbyter or other person authorised to celebrate Holy Communion). The question has sometimes arisen in the Methodist Church in relation to special occasions, such as when all the churches in an area want to have their own communion service at the same time on Easter Day, for example.

2. Extended Communion in the Methodist Church

- 2.1 Provision for Extended Communion in the Methodist Church was originally made by the Conference in 1984³ and a service of Extended Communion is included in *The Methodist Worship Book*. This report noted that Extended Communion is an ancient custom and cited the First Apology of Justin Martyr (c. AD 150) which described deacons carrying the elements “to those who are absent.” It continued by highlighting the support for the practice among Lutherans and Anglicans, and by Calvin as well as some earlier Methodist precedent. The report recognised a justification for the practice from widespread tradition and from theological justification: pointing to an emphasis on one church sharing at one table.
- 2.2 The report also drew attention to the need for Methodists to be aware that the Eucharist is a whole and is not simply the act of receiving Holy Communion. The full celebration of the Eucharist includes the Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of the Sacrament. The Ministry of the Sacrament customarily includes the setting apart of the elements in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving which recounts God’s great acts throughout salvation history as well as in the incarnation, life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Upper Room becomes a lens for the celebration of all that God has done. As the 1984 report noted ‘it is vital for our people to understand that **communion** is but a part of the Eucharist[ic] action and that it needs to be place[d] in the context of the work of God in Christ which the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist “brings to every thankful mind.”’⁴ In the context of

¹ Resolution 29/6

² SO 609(1)

³ Methodist Conference, 1984, *Extending Communion*; available from https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/fo-statement-extending-communion-1984_fjRwaWu.pdf

⁴ *Extending Communion*, p. 191

considering the wider use of Extended Communion during public worship, the loss of this broader context of the Eucharist would be substantial.

- 2.3 Intrinsic to any question relating to the Eucharist is how we understand the Eucharist itself. The committee offered some reflection relating to this in the report *Holy Communion and Online Worship*.⁵ The committee noted:

There are also issues around the nature of Holy Communion itself and the fact that different Methodists understand this differently. It is possible to group such understandings very roughly under three approaches, whilst recognising that the Eucharist is a mystery and people's faith experience cannot always be categorised. Some Christians speak of the 'real presence' and see Christ's presence as being in some way embodied in the bread and wine. For others, the presence of Christ is understood more broadly and the emphasis falls on Christ's presence among the congregation and in the reception of the elements: Christ is understood faithfully to feed the believer who receives the bread and wine. The third heading is that of 'memorialism', in which the emphasis falls on the congregation's act of remembering Christ's sacrifice.

There is no single Methodist position about how Christ is present in Holy Communion; indeed the liturgies authorised by the Conference are carefully written so that the various understandings of Christ's presence may be heard, thus enabling those who understand Holy Communion differently still to worship together. Ultimately, the Lord's Supper is a mystery which is greater than our attempts to explain it.⁶

- 2.4 While for those who emphasise Christ's real presence embodied in the bread and wine set apart, a wider practice of Extended Communion may be theologically justified, for others their separation from their context within the congregation's worship may be theologically problematic. In a memorialist understanding, it would be hard to justify the practice at all, but for its antiquity. In the committee's view, the mystery of the Lord's Supper is best served by maintaining practices which allow for this breadth of understanding.

3. Relevant ecumenical practices

- 3.1 Among some other British churches, authorised provision exists for the distribution of communion elements set apart during an earlier celebration of Holy Communion, in the context of the congregation's public worship. This occurs in (and only in) the Anglican churches (Church of England, Church in Wales, Scottish Episcopal Church) and in the Roman Catholic Church. The liturgical forms used are available as follows:
- Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (2013) (and the same essential form as would be used, where permitted, in the Catholic Church in Scotland): <https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/CWC/CWAC.pdf>
 - Church of England (2001): <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/public-worship-with-communion-by-extension.pdf>
 - Church in Wales (2006): https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/publications/liturgy/Holy_Communion_Outside_The_Eucharist/
 - Scottish Episcopal Church (1997): <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/who-we-are/publications/liturgies/communion-from-the-reserved-sacrament-1997/>
- 3.2 The key thing these churches have in common is that for them, Holy Communion can **only** be celebrated by an ordained presbyter: there is categorically no provision for lay or diaconal presidency at communion. The use of communion by extension in public worship has, therefore, in those churches, been provided for as one response to the situation of lack of availability of presbyteral ministry. It should be noted that these are also churches for whom it is customary, on the whole, for

⁵ Methodist Conference, 2021, *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, available from https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2021-39-holy-communion-and-online-worship_JOTB7Rq.pdf

⁶ *Holy Communion and Online Worship*, paras. 2.11 and 2.12

their congregations to celebrate Holy Communion *every Sunday* – if, indeed, not more frequently still.

- 3.3 While it may be thought that the practice of Extended Communion in public worship is commonplace among our ecumenical partners, it should be noted that in the words of Phillip Tovey (whose 2006 PhD thesis examined this):

These services were received with great criticism in the liturgical literature and in the case of the Church of England passed through General Synod with the closest of margins. They continue to be of controversy, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. [...] A key point of debate has been the validity of these services.⁷

In the Church of England, Church in Wales, and the Catholic Church, heavy emphasis is given in the rubrics to the services that they can only be used in exceptional situations and with the express permission of the bishop. The notes to the Church of England provision state, “Explicit permission must be obtained from the bishop for the use of this rite. This permission should relate to specific pastoral circumstances, thus emphasizing the exceptional nature of this ministry.” In the Catholic Church in England and Wales, although liturgical provision exists, the practice is prohibited outright in some dioceses by their diocesan bishops. By contrast, the Scottish Episcopal Church is more freely permissive of the practice – but stands apart in this respect from its British Anglican and Catholic siblings.

- 3.4 One thing which is given great emphasis in all of these churches’ liturgies for communion by extension is the link with the particular celebration of Holy Communion from which the elements have been taken. This underlines what it *is not* by drawing attention to the fact that the ‘main’ celebration, from which those present are absent, is the celebration of Holy Communion itself. To quote from the introduction to the Scottish Episcopal liturgy, “Whatever the circumstances, whenever this service is used, the relationship of the Administration of Holy Communion to the Eucharistic celebration of which it is an extension needs to be explained and made clear, so that it is not experienced as either a pale imitation of the Eucharist or as a kind of ‘lay-led alternative’ to it.”
- 3.5 Intrinsic, then, to these liturgical forms is the sense that, notwithstanding that communion by extension is being permitted, absolutely preferable to this would be an actual celebration of Holy Communion. It is only due to the impossibility of this (due to the constraints of their tradition with regard to presidency) that communion by extension is being employed. Other traditions, such as the United Reformed Church (URC), make no authorised provision for communion by extension in public worship. The URC provides, as the Methodist Church does, for individuals other than presbyters to be authorised to preside at Holy Communion.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The practice of Extended Communion separates out one aspect of the Eucharist (the reception of Holy Communion) from the wider context of the Eucharistic liturgy. In its use in homes and hospitals, there is nevertheless a strong connection to this wider context through the bond of the pastoral ministry that is being offered. The witness it provides to the unity of the church may be seen to outweigh the loss of an immediately broader liturgical context. However, in the context of public worship, where congregations will generally be used to their worship being complete of itself, the broader context is in danger of being lost.
- 4.2 Where other (non-Methodist) churches practice communion by extension for public worship, it is generally only in exceptional cases, and is only used as a remedy for what we would call Eucharistic deprivation. Its purpose is not to enable an ‘extra’ holy communion for some special occasion (e.g. when all the churches want to have their own communion service at the same time on Easter Day), but rather to provide for a congregation – whose normal tradition would be to have communion every Sunday – to receive communion with that regularity when that would otherwise not be possible. It is used in that way to address the same problem that in the Methodist Church we address by the granting of authorisations for persons other than presbyters to preside.
- 4.3 The Committee concludes that the practice of communion by extension for public worship, by those other churches that provide for that, does not represent a precedent that is applicable to the Methodist Church’s situation: for Eucharistic deprivation, we have provision for the authorisation by

⁷ Phillip Tovey, *The Theory and Practice of Extended Communion* (Routledge, 2016), p. 173

the Conference of persons other than presbyters to preside; for one-off 'special' communion services, that is not what other churches use communion-by-extension for. The precedents of all those churches all point very strongly to the priority to be given to sharing in an actual celebration of Holy Communion over communion by extension, wherever possible.

- 4.4 The Committee therefore recommends that the practice of Extended Communion in the Methodist Church should not be widened beyond what is currently permitted by Standing Orders. This is in keeping with the original 1984 report which noted "it is doubtful if extended communion is a satisfactory way of dealing with deprivation, or one which would commend itself to the majority of Methodists."⁸

***RESOLUTION

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APPENDIX: Further reading

Public Worship and Communion by Extension: Some Pastoral and Theological Issues: No. 53 (Joint Liturgical Studies) by Alex Hughes (Grove Books, 2002)

Public Worship with Communion by Extension: A Revised and Updated Commentary by Phillip Tovey (Grove Books, 2021)

The Theory and Practice of Extended Communion by Philip Tovey (Routledge, 2016)

- n.b. this is a slightly cut-down version of what was originally his PhD thesis "The Theory and Practice of Extended Communion with particular reference to parishes within the Anglican Diocese of Oxford" (2006), available at <https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/file/2099a75e-9861-408b-9329https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/file/2099a75e-9861-408b-9329-e2bac8986503/1/tovey2006theory.pdf>

The Roman Catholic *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (Vatican, 1988), available at <https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/CWC/Directory-SCAP.pdf>

- this is the principal Vatican document, from the Congregation for Divine Worship, that explains the basis and gives the underlying authority for the practice of communion by extension in public worship in the Catholic Church

⁸ *Extending Communion*, p. 191