

Communion and Community



How do we replace the "avoidance" with "remembrance"?

N BY JAMES A. DITTES

EXT WEEK WILL BE COMMUNION SABBATH."

What emotions do those words strike in your church? Hope? Excitement? Awe?

Or do those words ensure rows of empty seats the following Sabbath?

Communion Sabbath is among the least-attended, least-appreciated rituals on the church calendar. One can almost hear the date books opening as those words are spoken: anxious church members planning outdoor activities or visits to other churches the following Sabbath—anything but Communion.

"Attendance is always lowest [on Communion Sabbath], no matter the size of the church," says David Hartman, pastor of the 600-member Highland church in Portland, Tennessee. "There are people who are always missing."

The apathy extends beyond the church members to the pulpit. Seldom scheduled more than four times a year, Communion has to fit in between guest speakers or sermon series; it can be a programming nightmare that leaves pastors to agonize over cutting various aspects of the program in order to close the service promptly at noon.

Too often Communion Sabbath deals as much with "avoidance" as with "remembrance."

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INSIDE THIS WEEK

WHAT'S UPCOMING

GET PAST ISSUES

LATE-BREAKING NEWS

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PRINT INDEX

HANDY RESOURCES

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SUNSET CALENDAR

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Ken Rogers, Southern Adventist University chaplain, remembers a recent Communion Sabbath when he saw churchgoers turn back at the door. "People came in, looked at the bulletin, and just left," he says.

The Significance of the Foot-washing Service

Union in Communion

Such signs of apathy are an alarming indicator of the church's health. Communion is one of Christianity's most defining traditions-the purest, most legitimate practice of spirituality available.

"The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are two monumental pillars," Ellen White wrote in the book *Evangelism*. "Upon these ordinances Christ has inscribed the name of the true God" (p. 273).

As important as it is to Christian tradition, the Communion service is also the most meaningful-if not the most graphic-display of discipleship available to the Christian: no less so today than when, in the days of the early church, Roman authorities accused Christians of cannibalism and other lewd practices because of their insistence on eating their beloved Leader's body and drinking His blood.

The practice of Communion raises a specter almost as offensive to modern churchgoers as cannibalism was to the Romans: a public declaration of unworthiness and inferiority. "[Reluctant participants] know they need forgiveness," says Rogers, "but they are not at the point of confession and do not want to participate."

In some churches, the Communion service isn't graphic at all-in fact, it is downright boring, bogged down by formality, repetition, and ritual. "It's almost like singing a hymn without comprehending the words," says Hartman.

"Typically, Communion is a very administered type of program," says Rogers. "The [churchgoer] is just a recipient." The caretakers of the bread and wine are separated from the audience by the Communion table-sometimes even the platform. Only the pastor and elders kneel, raise hands in blessing, and speak the time-honored words of Christ. The congregation is passive, save for the testimonies common in some small and medium-sized churches.

Designed for Sharing

Communion wasn't meant to be that way. Christ designed it as a ritual to be shared by His disciples "in remembrance," even as He Himself swore not to touch the Passover meal again until He shared it with all His disciples in "the kingdom of God" (Luke 22: 16, 18).

But that remembrance wasn't limited to a body "broken for you" (1 Cor. 11:24) or blood "poured out for you" (Luke 22:20, NIV). It also implied an ongoing relationship with Christ through His body until He came again. As Paul told the Corinthians: "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*" (1 Cor. 11: 26, NIV). The service balanced the agony of His imminent sacrifice with the joy of the fact that this supper would indeed *not* be the last

supper He ate with His closest friends.

As important to the Communion service as the foot washing, bread and wine is the implicit transformation of the recipient. For if Christians consume Christ's body without the recognition of what Christ's gift symbolizes, they are no more than cannibals nibbling at bones and sipping blood-as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 11:27. The recognition of Christ's sacrifice staggers the Christian into a state of repentance, and through that repentance comes change.

"It is at these, His own appointments," White wrote in *The Desire of Ages*, "that Christ meets His people, and energizes them by His presence" (p. 656).

A Supper Celebration

For Adventists one of the most powerful reasons to celebrate Communion is its link with the celebration of the Sabbath. The most obvious connection is through the word "remember" (Ex. 20:8; Luke 22:19). The similar language implies a similar meaning: God set up the Sabbath both as an outward sign of obedience as well as to encourage an ongoing relationship with Him, celebrated once a week. Christ also left Communion to signify membership among His disciples and to ensure that they kept His mission "in remembrance."

A second connection between the Sabbath and Communion is the intimacy of the bond these two exercises symbolize. These rituals transform two of the most common aspects of life-a day of the week, a meal of bread and wine. Yet their power and uniqueness come from celebrating these everyday occurrences "in remembrance" of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

"The meal in the Orient was a time of intimacy-a time of closeness," explains Hartman. Communion celebrates the closeness of friends as well as the ingredients of the meal.



If Communion Sabbath is indeed essential to the practice of Christianity, then Adventists should be vigilant for ways to make the service more meaningful, more applicable, and more accessible. Communion Sabbath should be the high point of the church calendar, and the Communion service should enhance activities both within and outside the church.

The following are six suggestions for making Communion more meaningful.

1. Celebrate Communion as the conclusion to a day of fasting.

One of the hardest images to comprehend in the well-fed society of North America is that of Jesus, "the Bread of Life." Amid such wealth, fasting reminds us of what it means to "hunger and thirst for righteousness," particularly when the breaking of that fast coincides with Communion. The believer realizes, as they receive the bread and the wine, "that *this* is what I hunger for; *this* is what I thirst for," and they are filled, physically as well as spiritually.

2. Celebrate Communion "in the round." Most churches feature a clear line between audience and pulpit, which leaves the Communion service as just one more thing dispensed from the pulpit, along with the sermons. Christ said at the Last Supper, "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27, NIV). Let the pastor and the church elders dispense from the middle of the congregation. Let the church members face each other. Hartman even suggests passing around large, flat loaves of bread for believers to tear apart. While this may be difficult to do in larger churches, it is a worthy challenge for pastors and programmers to demonstrate the close linkage between the words "communion" and "community."

3. Use Communion and the ordinance of humility to counter divisions within the church. The graphic element of Communion is a great backdrop from which to deal with differences between believers. As Christ's body is broken and consumed, it puts petty differences into perspective. Foot washing is the most acceptable form of public forgiveness available to believers. I still remember one Communion Sabbath that followed a rather contentious nominating committee meeting in which two members of the church had criticized each other. Following an appropriately worded sermon from the pastor, both men washed each other's feet, and the division was healed.

4. Find unique times throughout the year to include Communion as part of the service, such as Easter, the dedication of new church officers, special seasons of prayer, etc. Rather than being relegated to a handful of Sabbaths, Communion should permeate the church calendar and be used to consecrate the high points. So many of the activities within the church, from Building Fund drives to Weeks of Prayer, require the consecration of the church members. There is not a more powerful means of consecration within Christendom than that of Communion, which may be one reason, Rogers says, that some couples are even incorporating Communion into the weekend events that lead up to their weddings.

5. Incorporate Communion into activities outside the church, such as campouts, marriage seminars, small-group Bible studies, alumni reunions, and youth meetings. "It's hard to make Communion intimate," Rogers says. Sometimes-especially in larger churches-that can best be accomplished by practicing Communion and foot washing in a smaller setting. Hartman uses both traditions with couples following his marriage seminars and describes it as the climax of the weekend.

6. Finally, make Communion meaningful and accessible to kids. Every parent knows there are few things more difficult than celebrating

Communion next to squirming children. What a few have found, though, is that teaching kids about Christ's mission-through the practice of Communion-can be one of the most spiritually energizing times of the year. The typical approach has been to deny Communion to unbaptized children-or those that do not participate in foot washing. Instead, children could be prepared for Communion during the Sabbath school service as well as the divine service/worship hour and become practicing Christians from a young age. For preschool children, who may not understand the meaning of Christ's death-or who may be horrified by it-a great technique is to emphasize that the Communion meal was the way Jesus said goodbye to His friends. That while we eat bread and drink grape juice to remember Him, He has promised He would do neither until He could be with us again. If children cannot grasp the concept of redemption, remember that reunion is also the message of Communion Sabbath.

Christ's Communion service, though practiced for some 2,000 years, is waiting to transform the spirituality of every member of every church. It is time to make Communion refreshing and invigorating again. Why not begin next Sabbath?

James Dittes administers a grant program for refugees who have resettled in Nashville, Tennessee. He contributed an additional article on Communion as one of Adventism's 27 fundamental beliefs to Fresh Faith, the 2002 young adult devotional.

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