The Practice and Understanding of the Eucharist in the United Church of Christ: A Practical Theological Study

Tamilio, John

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Dissertation

THE PRACTICE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL STUDY

By

John Tamilio III
(B.A. Salem State University, 1990; M.A. Northeastern University, 1992; M.Div. Andover Newton Theological School, 1999)

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By

John Tamilio III

APPROVED

By

First Reader: Dr. Claire E. Wolfteich
Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Spiritual Formation
Co-Director for the Center for Practical Theology

Second Reader: Dr. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker
Professor of Worship
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John Tamilio III

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Major Professor: Claire E. Wolfteich, Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Spiritual Formation and Co-Director for the Center for Practical Theology

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the complexity of the understanding and practice of the Eucharist in the United Church of Christ as revealed in a textual analysis of the UCC Book of Worship (1986) and a qualitative study of five representative UCC congregations. Little has been written on this topic, save for several brief articles on the history of the theology of the sacrament in the two bodies that merged to form the UCC in 1957: the Congregational Christian Churches (CC) and the Evangelical and Reformed Church (E&R). This dissertation advances the topic through a practical-theological study that brings into critical conversation contemporary eucharistic practices in five congregations and a historical theological analysis of liturgical traditions in the UCC and antecedent denominations. Through this
conversation, the study articulates common themes of a UCC eucharistic theology and explores implications for ongoing theology and practice in the denomination.

The introduction explicates the methodology employed in this study, guided by Don Browning’s work.¹ The first two chapters present the findings of the focus group interviews and an interpretation of those results respectively. Chapter three analyzes the eucharistic liturgies in three historic books of worship used in the E&R heritage. In chapter four, two of the antecedent resources utilized in the CC tradition are analyzed. The short-lived Hymnal of the United Church of Christ, published in 1974, includes liturgies that would find fuller expression in the 1986 Book of Worship. That hymnal is examined in chapter five. Chapter six interprets the two services of “Word and Sacrament” found in the Book of Worship. Chapter seven offers a comparative analysis of the focus group findings and the theology inherent in the Book of Worship. The final chapter offers strategic recommendations for revised theory and practice. The conclusion points toward areas for further research: it propels a critical conversation around the notion of covenant, Christ’s presence in the meal, and who can receive and officiate at the Eucharist.

This dissertation concludes that the UCC lives within a balance of multiple, complementary theologies and challenges the denomination to make stronger connections between the meal and mission, reconciliation, and tradition.

INTRODUCTION

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY,
AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

I: Preface

Over the last six years, the United Church of Christ (UCC) has been clarifying its ecclesial identity. During Advent 2004, the denomination launched its national “God is Still Speaking” campaign to make even more public its position as a church that subscribes to liberal social, political, and theological views, especially the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into the full membership and ministry of the church. There are many scholars in the denomination who claim that such clarification is also needed when it comes to the UCC’s understanding of the core doctrines of the Christian faith. The Rev. Dr. David M. Greenhaw, President and Professor of Preaching and Worship at the UCC-affiliated Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis, asserts:

The United Church of Christ, an ecumenical experiment approaching its fiftieth year, has demonstrated boldness and an increasing clarity about its position on the social and political issues of our time. What is needed now, and needed urgently, is a similar boldness and an increasing clarity about its sacramental life. What happens in the Eucharist? What is the meaning of Baptism? What is the relationship between these two? These are not incidental questions. They are constitutive and urgent questions for the United Church of Christ.²

² David M. Greenhaw, transcription of telephone interview conducted by John Tamilio III, August 31, 2006.
Greenhaw’s call for clarity is, in large part, a response to an assumption held inside and outside of the denomination: the UCC is both a “non-creedal” and a “non-liturgical” church. The former assumption, notwithstanding critiques levied against the UCC from the ecumenical community, has been challenged fervently by the scholarship of renowned UCC theologian Gabriel Fackre. In this dissertation, I explore the validity of the latter assumption by determining if the UCC has a eucharistic theology (or theologies) and, if it does, by uncovering and articulating its contours.

I do this by looking at the UCC’s Book of Worship (1986) and several liturgical resources employed by the four antecedent bodies that merged on June 25, 1957 to form the UCC—resources that guided the editorial board of the Book of Worship. I compare this textual analysis to qualitative research that I have conducted with focus groups from four representative UCC congregations (one from each of the antecedent denominations) and a fifth church that joined the denomination after the 1957 merger. These churches are: the First Congregational Church of Kittery in

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4 These are the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches (which previously merged in 1931), and the Evangelical Synod in North America and the German Reformed Church of the United States (which previously merged in 1934).
Kittery Point (Maine), the First Christian Congregational Church United Church of Christ (Swansea, Massachusetts), Evangelical United Church of Christ (Webster Groves, Missouri), the First Reformed United Church of Christ (Greensburg, Pennsylvania), and Imani United Church of Christ (Euclid, Ohio). I will discuss these congregations later. These churches reflect and embody the history, theology, polity, and identity of their predecessors and they were chosen in consultation with Conference Ministers and members of the National Offices of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio. Furthermore, they represent a fair geographical diversity that reflects the UCC’s presence in the United States.

Thus, the central research question pursued in this study is: What theology and practice of the Eucharist emerges when an historical theological analysis of the UCC Book of Worship is put into critical conversation with a qualitative study of five representative UCC congregations? How does this conversation reflect the complexity and diversity of UCC theory-laden practices more fully than would either source alone?

II: Methodology

The methodology that I employ in this dissertation is the one outlined by Don S. Browning in his seminal study A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals. Browning’s methodology for conducting and presenting practical theological research unfolds through four distinct movements.
The first movement in Browning’s paradigm is *descriptive theology*. Descriptive theology “attempts to analyze the horizon of cultural and religious meanings that surround our religious and secular practices.” It offers what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick” description of the congregation under investigation—the contemporary context of its life and practice is richly described. As Browning states, “Practical theology describes practices in order to discern the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our action and provoke the questions that animate our practical thinking.”

*Historical theology* is the second movement. As Browning contends, the description of practices “inevitably leads to a fresh confrontation with the normative texts and monuments of the Christian faith—the sources and norms of practice. Historical theology becomes the heart of the hermeneutical process.” Historical theology is concerned with normative texts. It asks, “What do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history *really* imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible?” This movement is not just an activity that takes place in library stacks where the researcher reads volumes of ancient tomes. It is a hermeneutical dialogue that “should be a community effort involving several people.

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6 Ibid., 48.
7 Ibid., 49.
8 Ibid.
and their respective horizons in a dialogue with the classic texts.”

The third movement is *systematic theology*. This is what Browning calls “the fusion of horizons” where the community’s practices are engaged by its normative texts. There are two questions that guide this movement:

1. What new horizon of meaning is fused when questions from present practices are brought to the central Christian witness?
2. What reasons can be advanced to support the validity claims of this new fusion of meaning?\(^9\)

These guiding questions lead the community into critical reflection on its practices in dialogue with its normative texts.

This leads to the fourth movement in Browning’s methodology: *strategic practical theology*. After having surveyed the landscape, its practices, and normative texts, pragmatic proposals are made. Browning presents four questions that guide pastors and lay persons engaged in such research at this juncture:

1. How do we understand this concrete situation in which we must act?
2. What should be our praxis in this concrete situation?
3. How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?
4. What means, strategies, and rhetorics should we use in this concrete situation?\(^11\)

These questions lead the community to find meaning in their context and practices and to ensure that the latter is faithful to their beliefs, history, and needs. In this final

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\(^9\) Ibid., 50.
\(^10\) The following two questions are quoted directly from Browning, 51-52.
\(^11\) Ibid., 55-56.
stage, suggestions for changes in congregational practices are offered that better embody the theories on which the community has reflected. The converse may also occur: changes in theories that better inform extant practices may be suggested.

Browning’s method is not unique. Other practical theologians have developed models that are quite similar. Two are worth mentioning here for they influence how my research unfolds and is presented.

The first is the one developed by Thomas H. Groome, professor of Theology and Religious Education at Boston College. In his book, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*, Groome offers the shared praxis approach that he claims can be adapted to all areas of theological research.

Groome opens his text with a maxim that permeates his entire book: “Christian religious educators have a growing conviction that the ‘lasting song’ of Christian faith must be nurtured in and arise from the ‘the marrow bone’ of people, that we cannot settle for engaging ‘the mind alone’ of our co-learners.”12 The remainder of his “comprehensive” text unpacks this statement by illustrating the shared praxis approach, which Browning himself acknowledges is similar to his fundamental practical theology.13 Groome outlines his method accordingly:

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13 See Browning, 219-222.
Focusing Activity: ENGAGING

LIFE → Movement One: EXPRESSSING

TO Movement Two: REFLECTING

FAITH → Movement Three: ACCESSING

TO Movement Four: APPROPRIATING

LIFE → Movement Five: DECIDING

Whether one is leading a Bible study, a Sunday school class, or preaching a sermon, the objectives are the same. The participant (the class or congregation) must be engaged. Compositional theorists often refer to this as the attention getter. In a similar fashion, Groome claims, “The focusing activity turns people to their own ‘being’ in place and time, to their present praxis, and establishes a focus for the curriculum.”

People are then encouraged to express—or “name”—that praxis (Movement One), be it their own or the community’s, and then reflect upon it critically (Movement Two). The model then accesses the tradition (Movement Three). The tradition is that which is normative to the community. Movements Four and Five are the most crucial. In these final stages, people are empowered to allow what they brought to the tradition to be transformed by it. They are encouraged to assimilate the learning, to appropriate it to their own life and faith (Movement Four), and to decide whether or not to own it, to live according to it (Movement Five).

Although Groome is speaking of curriculum development and implementation, in terms of practical theological research the movements are quite

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14 Groome, 146.
similar. It is simply the context that is different. The researcher examines a particular communal practice as it is currently executed. The practice is brought into a critical, comparative dialogue with the tradition, the normative texts that guide the ecclesial community: the horizons are fused, to use Browning’s language. The purpose is for the community to appropriate the tradition: to return to more informed and faithful practices.

In the more recently published *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat offer a four-step method for doing practical theological research that complements Browning and Groome’s methods. The first stage of Swinton and Mowat’s model is current praxis. In this “intuitive, pre-reflective stage,” the researcher identifies “a situation that requires reflection and challenge.”

Nothing is prescribed at this juncture. “Rather it is an attempt to make some initial sense of what is going on, why things are structured in ways that they are and why people function in particular ways.”

After describing the practice under scrutiny, we move into the second stage of Swinton and Mowat’s methodology: cultural/contextual. This is where the learnings from qualitative research bolster the practical theological endeavor. “At this stage we begin to engage in a disciplined investigation into the various dynamics (overt and

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16 Ibid., 94.
covert) that underlie the forms of practice that are taking place within the situation.”

In the third stage, *theological reflection*, “we begin to focus more overtly on the theological significance of the data that we have been working with in stages 1 and 2, and how it can be used to develop our understanding of the situation we are exploring and the practices which emerge from the various practices we encounter.”

At this point a critical conversation takes place between the practice under investigation and the community’s normative texts and tradition.

In the fourth stage, suggestions are made in order to implement more faithful practices. In *formulating revised forms of practice*, the community is poised to modify their practices so that they better reflect the theology laden within them. Again, the opposite is possible: a revision of the theology inherent in the practice—a theology that may have been misinterpreted or may have latent dimensions—may be suggested.

All three of the above methods employ qualitative research to describe the current practice of the congregation and then to enable that practice to engage in a mutually critical conversation with the ecclesial community’s normative texts in order to yield practices that are more faithful to what the church proclaims. However, there are some differences in these approaches to conducting practical theological research. Browning notes that “Groome’s movements one and two are similar to

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17 Ibid., 96.
18 Ibid.
what I have called descriptive theology. His movements three and four are analogous to what I have called respectively historical and systematic theology. His movement five is similar to what I have called strategic practical theology. The entire process is practical theology through and through.” However, Browning explicates how his method owes more to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics than Groome’s does. Also, the method proposed by Swinton and Mowat asserts the logical priority of theology in a way that Browning does not. They argue that, “theological concepts are conceptually independent of the data offered by qualitative research methods…It is an independent source of knowledge that draws on qualitative research for the purposes of clarification and complexification, but has no need of it in terms of its self-understanding.” This can lead one to argue that Swinton and Mowat’s approach is distinct from the mutually critical correlation method, since it gives priority to theology. Swinton and Mowat call their approach a revised model of mutual critical correlation. “It assumes that there is a realist dimension to the conversation that gives logical priority to theology.” Yet they allow for theology to be approached with a hermeneutic of suspicion, particularly when latent ideas and interpretations are uncovered in the research process by theology’s conversation partners. In their methodology the primary conversation partner is qualitative research methods.

19 Browning, 219.
20 Swinton and Mowat, 87.
21 Ibid., 88.
My own approach is a combination of the above. Following Browning’s model, I begin by doing descriptive theology: I offer a “thick description” of the five congregations mentioned above. My objective is to gain as comprehensive an understanding of their practice and understanding of the Eucharist as possible. My two guiding questions are what are the various understandings of the Eucharist that are evident in each setting, and how are these understandings expressed and shaped by the various liturgical practices found in each congregation? I discern this information (primarily) by working with focus groups from each of these churches.

Each focus group consists of eight to twelve members. Michael Quinn Patton offers similar guidelines in his comprehensive Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. “A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically 6 to 10 people with similar backgrounds who participate in the interview for one to two hours.”22 This is an efficient number with which to work: a sample large enough to facilitate a meaningful dialogue and to glean a fair representation of the congregation’s beliefs, yet small enough to make data collection and analysis feasible. The members were selected in consultation with the pastor and/or the director of Christian education. I sought to include participants who were members of each congregation before and after the 1957 merger to give a fuller range of perspectives. My goal is to gather a fair cross-section of the church—the same

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representation of people that the church would choose for a pastoral search committee, for example, to give prospective candidates as accurate a depiction of the congregation as possible. I asked the members of the focus groups the following questions:

1. What name do you use for this sacrament in your congregation: the Eucharist, Communion, Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, or another name?

2. How often does your congregation celebrate this sacrament?

3. How is this sacrament practiced in your congregation? In other words, are members served the elements while seated in pews or do they come forward to receive them from the pastor and/or a deacon? Do people other than the pastor or deacons serve the elements? Also, does everyone receive bread and wine? Is juice served along with or instead of wine?

4. Do participants partake of the elements as they receive them or do they wait and eat them together at the same time?

5. Is everyone in attendance allowed to receive the sacrament or is it reserved for just members of your church? Do you only serve the sacrament to baptized Christians?

6. Is the sacrament distributed to homebound members and those confined to hospitals and nursing facilities? If so, who brings it to them?

7. Do you ever practice intinction?

8. Does your pastor ever preach on the meaning of the sacrament? How often? What does he/she say about it—in other words, what is his/her basic theology or emphasis about the sacrament?

9. Does the congregation read or respond to parts of the liturgy or does the pastor recite it from a resource? In either case, do you know what resource is used?

10. What does this sacrament mean to you as an individual Christian?

11. What do you think this sacrament means to your church community at
large?

12. Has your congregation’s practice and understanding of this sacrament changed over time? If so, how?

13. What is your congregation’s understanding of the role or place of Christ in this meal?

14. What does “the body” and “the blood” of Christ mean to you?

Other questions emerged from our conversations, but these fourteen provided a basic compass for our discussions. Conversations were recorded onto a digital audio recorder.

After collecting this data, I analyzed it using the method of coding suggested by Patton. Once the information from each focus group is transcribed into a manuscript from the recorded sessions, the data is classified using a coding system—the information is organized into categories that represent congruent patterns. As Patton writes, “Content analysis...involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data. This essentially means analyzing the core content of interviews and observations to determine what’s significant.”23 In developing my categories, I look for elements of convergence and divergence. The former pertains to the way in which the researcher works with the data and the established categories “to verify the meaningfulness and accuracy of the categories and the placement of data into categories.”24 After doing this, the

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23 Ibid., 463.
24 Ibid., 466.
researcher looks for divergence: he/she “fleshes out the patterns of categories.”

In other words, “The analyst brings closure to the process when sources of
information have been exhausted, when sets of categories have been saturated so that
new sources lead to redundancy, when clear regularities have emerged that feel
integrated, and when analysis begins to ‘overextend’ beyond the boundaries of the
issues and concerns guiding the analysis.”

The second movement, which occurs concurrently with the first, is historical
theology. Historical theology examines the normative texts that are part of the UCC’s
eucharistic heritage. The principal text that I analyze is the UCC’s 1986 Book of
Worship, particularly the two primary and the abbreviated orders for the sacrament of
Holy Communion. Because the Book of Worship is “informed by insights of the
Protestant Reformation and the most recent ecumenical consensus concerning
worship, including the recommendations of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry from the
Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches,” I incorporate the
learnings from the BEM document as well as the eucharistic teachings of four major
Reformers (i.e. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and Martin Bucer) into
my discussion.

However, there are other texts that are part of the UCC’s liturgical heritage

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Book of Worship: United Church of Christ (New York: United Church of Christ Office for
Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 31.
which I also examine in this study. What did the pre-merger groups bring to the creation of this new denomination that will be useful in gaining a deeper insight into how both the *Book of Worship* and the UCC’s eucharistic understanding has developed over time? In order to address this question, I examine selected books of worship that were utilized by the UCC’s antecedent denominations prior to 1957. My research in this area includes consultation with the Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Dipko. Dipko is widely known throughout the denomination as the key author of the 1986 *Book of Worship*. Dipko also gathered and examined many of the resources used by the UCC’s four founding denominations. In this dissertation, I analyze these predecessors before delving into the 1986 *Book of Worship*.

*Systematic theology* is the third step. This is where the fusion of horizons about which Browning speaks takes place: where the community reflects critically on their practices in light of their normative texts. In this study, the critical reflection that takes place is two-fold. The communities reflected critically on their practices when I worked with them in their respective focus groups. Afterwards, when I coded and analyzed the data, I reflected critically on their practices as well. In Browning’s

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28 All but one of these resources (*A Book of Worship for Free Churches*) were authorized by the denominations that published them.

29 Although I have heard this information from several people throughout the United Church of Christ, the most in depth information came from the Rev. Dr. Bertrice Y. Wood, a member of the committee that wrote *Book of Worship*, and Dipko himself.

30 It must also be noted that the antecedent resources analyzed in this dissertation are not the only ones that existed before the 1957 merger. However, they are the ones that had the greatest influence on the construction of the 1986 *Book of Worship* according to Dipko.
methodology, the community is also engaged in such work. I deviated from that pattern, however, due to time constraints, the number of churches and participants with which I worked, and the overall objective of this dissertation. One could argue that I am giving normative priority to the tradition’s texts. While that is valid in one sense (i.e. I am engaging in a critical conversation with the texts myself) it is also inaccurate, because I apply equal weight in my comparative analysis to what the focus groups said and what the texts reveal. The overall objective in this movement, however, is the same: to discern if the eucharistic theory-laden practices of the sample communities reflect the theologies inherent in their normative texts. As Sharon Peebles Burch writes in her assessment of Browning, this “is systematic theology’s task to examine the particular and obtain as comprehensive a view as possible, identifying those themes that participate in the common set of assumptions or collective absolute presuppositions governing the Christian (or other) religion.”

The fourth and final movement in Browning’s methodology is strategic, or fully, practical theology. At this point suggestions for more faithful practices are offered to the community that has been studied. Having thoroughly examined the congregations’ practices and their normative texts, the practical theologian recommends revised practices that better reflect the theology to which the community subscribes—or it may be that the researcher will proffer a more informed

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theology that better reflects the practices held sacred to the community. As Browning states, “The conclusions of strategic practical theology play back on the entire hermeneutic circle.”32 In this dissertation, I work with a sample of congregations to tease out what the UCC believes and embodies about the Eucharist. Those findings, when subject to a critical conversation with the UCC’s historic texts, open the window to a variety of theologies of the Eucharist in the United Church of Christ that will be presented in the latter half of this study.

III: Significance of the Study

To say that the UCC is a “non-liturgical” church is to concur with the perception that sacraments do not play a constitutive or normative role in the development of ecclesial identity within the denomination as they do in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Such perceptions are not wholly unfounded. As the late UCC historian Louis H. Gunnemann once noted, “Liturgal life in the UCC, as in much of American Protestantism, represents the dominance of privatistic faith and therapeutic religious practice.”33 Likewise, in their study on the twentieth-century liturgical movement, John R. K. Fenwick and Bryan D. Spinks note that aside from the German Reformed Church, “who produced the famous Mercersburg Liturgy in the nineteenth century,” the other three denominations that formed the UCC “had

32 Browning, 58.

no real liturgical tradition, though individual churches and ministers did produce liturgies.”

That said, the preamble of the UCC Constitution explicitly states, “In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, [the UCC] recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.” Furthermore, candidates for ordination are required to explicate their understanding of the sacrament—and other major tenets of the Christian faith—in an ordination paper. Upon ordination, they are asked: “Will you be faithful in preaching and teaching the gospel, in administering the sacraments and rites of the church, and in exercising pastoral care and leadership?”

The Eucharist is also celebrated on a regular basis in most UCC congregations (either weekly, monthly, or quarterly) and the UCC Book of Worship contains two primary and two abbreviated orders for the sacrament. These initial findings led me to want to investigate this characterization of the UCC as a “non-liturgical” denomination and, more accurately, to try to understand what the UCC believes about Holy Communion. Is there a common understanding surrounding this meal or are there a diversity of understandings? If the latter, what are they and how do they inform

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36 *Book of Worship*, 407-408.
congregational practices? How might actual congregational liturgical practices be shaping the theologies of UCC laity today?

Hearkening back to Greenhaw’s contention, though, why is increased clarity about the UCC’s sacramental life so urgent? On one hand, it is because sacraments do nurture the ecclesia and, along with the proclamation of the Word, help establish its identity. As Augustine wrote, “There can be no religious society, whether the religion be true or false, without some sacrament or visible symbol to serve as a bond of union.” 37 On the other hand, there is a burgeoning desire for such sacramental clarity within the UCC stemming from the pews.

At General Synod 24 (2003), the Worship and Educational Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries called for a discussion of the worship life of the UCC and for the implementation of worship resources and program initiatives. 38 As the summary of the resolution reads, the above-mentioned team called upon “General Synod 24 to request Local Church Ministries to launch a broad-based inquiry into worship in the UCC and to consider and develop models for worship resources and programs that complement Book of Worship: United Church of Christ.” 39 The desire to launch such a discussion and implement new liturgical resources was not a hierarchical mandate. It came from requests arising from local churches. The third

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38 General Synod is the biennial meeting of the national body of the United Church of Christ.

point in the resolution clearly states, “churches throughout our denomination have expressed the need for ways to enhance their worship life.”

One year later, the Worship and Educational Ministry Team, in collaboration with Research Services of the Office of General Ministries, published *Worshiping into God’s Future: Reflections, Liturgies, Music, Images, and Ideas for Engaging Worship in the United Church of Christ*. This publication, which was sent to each of the approximately 5,500 local congregations in the denomination, includes a book of praise songs, a CD-ROM containing images and liturgies to be projected during worship, and the text *Prayers and Patterns for Worship*. The latter contains a chapter entitled “Engaging Holy Communion,” which contains liturgical resources to supplement the “Orders for Word and Sacrament” that are found in the *Book of Worship*. Yet the 1986 *Book of Worship* is still the principal liturgical resource published and endorsed by the denomination, though certainly not utilized by all local UCC congregations.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of a Christian practice in any church or denomination, one must work with the normative texts of the tradition as well as with those engaged in the practice using those texts. This study, then, seeks to fill a gap in UCC scholarship and liturgical studies. It also is hoped that it will contribute to reflection that will empower the UCC to hone its identity further as a united and uniting denomination that seeks to be faithful to its still-speaking God.

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40 *Minutes of the Twenty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ*, ed. Mary Ann Murray and Nancy Cope (Minneapolis: July 11-15, 2003), 79.
IV: Limitations

I am aware of two limitations that this study faces. The first is the problem of normativity. How, in a denomination that prides itself on its autonomous polity and its diversity of thought and practice, can one find “a theology” of the Lord’s Supper or any doctrine of the faith for that matter? It may be that there are common strands of thought that exist within the UCC on this topic, or it may be that there are multiple, complex theologies of the Eucharist. But this is exactly the point of my research question. If there is a common strand of thought on Holy Communion in the UCC, this study hopes to articulate what it is. If there are multiple theologies, then this dissertation may begin a conversation around the issues of normativity and sacramental identity within the UCC.

The second obstacle has to do with the small sample of churches with which I worked. A study of five congregations will not be generalizable, given that the denomination consists of approximately 5,500 churches. However, the study will offer an exploratory investigation of the understanding and practice of Eucharist in the UCC that may well serve as a springboard for further research and reflection. It should be noted, too, that the five congregations represent geographical, liturgical, theological, and historical diversity and the focus groups provide contact with approximately sixty people (in sum) from these churches.
CHAPTER ONE

THE PRACTICE OF THE EUCHARIST: A DESCRIPTION
OF FIVE CONGREGATIONS

I: Introduction

The first step in our study is to examine the theory-laden practices that exist in five distinct local United Church of Christ congregations. These churches were chosen in consultation with National staff persons and Conference Ministers. Three principles guided the selection of them. First, as stated in the introduction, four of the five churches represent the four antecedent denominations that formed the UCC in 1957; the fifth church joined after the merger. Second, these churches have strong historic ties to their predecessor denominations, which makes them more demonstrative of the Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed heritages respectively. The fifth church represents what the UCC hopes to be: a more racially integrated denomination. Third, these churches manifest geographical diversity as well. New England has long been a stronghold of the Congregational and Christian tradition. One church (the Congregational church) hails from northern New England (Maine); the other, from southern Massachusetts, is the oldest church in the United States from the Christian denomination. Reformed congregations populate the four conferences that comprise Pennsylvania. The church I selected, in conversation with Penn West Conference Minister Rev. Alan McLarty, has a strong sense of its Reformed identity. One of its members recently published a book on the history of
the First Reformed Church of Greensburg and its connection to the German
Reformed movement in America. The Evangelical church I selected fully embodies
the notion of extravagant welcome that lies at the core of the UCC’s God is Still
Speaking campaign. It is also very cognizant of its Evangelical roots and has a close
relationship with the historic “E” seminary, its neighbor Eden Theological Seminary,
in Saint Louis. Lastly, the newer church I selected is located in the Cleveland area
and works closely with the National headquarters of the denomination, also located
in Cleveland.

The questions that guided our discussion are listed in the introduction. Each
group met for about two hours and delved deep into how they celebrate the
sacrament and the meanings they (and they believe each of their churches) hold in
regards to it.

II: First Congregational Church of Kittery in Kittery Point

The name of this church intimates a congregation steeped in tradition. The
members of The First Congregational Church of Kittery in Kittery Point, Maine
proudly proclaim that they are part of the quaint and historic Kittery Point, as opposed
to the more commercial Kittery, which attracts hordes of tourists to their outlet
stores. Kittery Point, which is home to the Portsmouth Naval Yard, claims about
1,200 residents. It is considered the capital of Kittery proper, which has a population
of approximately 10,000. The citizenry is ninety-eight percent Caucasian. Kittery
Point is a middle-class community with very little poverty or the economic plights one finds in urban environs.

Built in 1730, the meeting house (which is separate from the parsonage and church offices, although they are all located on the same property) “is the oldest church building in continuous use in the state of Maine.”\(^{41}\) This church has deep Congregational roots that stretch back three centuries, yet it is a church that is not inextricably tied to the past. They consider themselves quite progressive and have fully identified themselves with the United Church of Christ’s God is Still Speaking campaign. They are a liberal alternative to many of the more conservative churches in the area, yet they savor their New England Congregational heritage.

In many respects, Kittery Point is the quintessential New England UCC congregation. The white clapboard building stands on the sharp turn of Pepperrell Road (which leads to the center of town) across the street from a small graveyard in which many of its founding members are interred. On the other side of the graveyard is the Atlantic Ocean, which one can see from the front steps of the meeting house. The layout of the sanctuary reflects eighteenth-century New England meeting house architecture. Three sets of boxed-pews create two aisles which lead to the front of the church where one finds the Communion table and a baptismal font. Behind the table is the pulpit, which is raised about three feet from the floor. This is

\(^{41}\) First Congregational Church of Kittery in Kittery Point, Maine website: www.kitterypointucc.org/AboutUs.dsp.
common in many New England Congregational churches. It represents the elevation of the Word over everything else. Choir lofts flank each side of the pulpit; an organ stands against the far right wall of the chancel.

Large windows admit natural light into the congregation from both side walls. One cannot help but notice that some of the panes are not as translucent as others. The glass is a bit streaked and wavy. Those “original windows” stand side-by-side with newer panes that replaced the wavy ones broken by stray baseballs at church picnics.

This church has two Sunday morning services: one at eight o’clock and the other at ten. The first service is quite small. It usually has between a dozen and two dozen regular attendees. The second service varies between eighty and one hundred parishioners and guests. Communion, as their members almost always call the sacrament, is celebrated once a month (at both services) and on a few special days on the Christian calendar: Easter sunrise service, Maundy Thursday, and Christmas Eve. The regular monthly celebration is always on the first Sunday.

When they do celebrate the sacrament, they alternate their practice each month: one month people are served in the pews; the next month they come forward to receive via intinction. During the summer months, they always receive the sacrament by intinction. When they celebrate the meal by intinction they either pick a piece of bread off of a common loaf or they select a pre-cut piece that is on the same tray. They dip the bread in the cup and partake, then return to their pews.
When served in their pews, trays of bread are passed first and then trays with small Communion glasses follow. A piece of the loaf used by the celebrant as part of the liturgy is on each tray that circulates, as are pre-cut pieces. Like many UCC congregations, they only use grape juice in order to be sensitive to alcoholics and children. (One man expressed a deep desire for the church to offer both wine and juice.) Everyone holds the bread and eats together when instructed. They do the same thing with the cup, which is served after they partake of the bread. When they are served in the pews, they receive the bread and the cup from two of eight deacons. When they come forward, the pastor (the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey M. Gallagher) holds the chalice and a deacon holds the tray of bread. The deacons also prepare the elements before the service on Communion Sunday.

Everyone is welcome to the table. Rev. Dr. Gallagher often uses the words from the UCC’s Still Speaking campaign, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” Children are also allowed to celebrate the sacrament although they usually only receive it twice a year. “You can tell it is very special to them,” one person said. Sunday school runs concurrently with the 10:00 am service and children are dismissed after the children’s sermon, which occurs early in the worship. They do have two special services a year, one of them being World Communion Sunday (the first Sunday in October). Children attend the entire service on these days. The church is also clear that baptism is not required in their church for one to receive Communion, nor is adherence to any sort of creed or confession.
Normally, the pastor presides over the sacrament. They could not recall a situation when he was not available and a lay preacher led the service on Communion Sunday. Therefore, the question as to who could preside over the meal (i.e. does it have to be an ordained pastor) was not an issue for them. The officiant has always been an ordained minister, but they do not think that this is “a hard and fast rule.” In fact, one member of the focus group with whom I worked said, “I could care less who officiates at the meal.” Several others nodded in agreement. If the issue ever arose, they believe that the diaconate would preside over the meal after consulting the pastor. One member of the focus group said that at their annual women’s retreat, they always share Communion without an ordained pastor in attendance.

Communion is served by the pastor to those who are sick or shut-in “when it is requested.” They do not have an official program to distribute Communion to homebound members, nor do they recall ever having one. If a member of the diaconate wants to bring the Eucharist to a homebound parishioner, he/she usually accompanies Rev. Gallagher.

It is rare that the pastor will preach on the meaning of Communion, but two of Kittery Point’s newer members did note that he has a question-and-answer component to his new member class in which he talks about Communion. Typically, it is an avenue for prospective members to compare the ways in which they practiced the meal in their former churches with how Kittery Point celebrates it. It was also noted that church attendance really does not fluctuate on Communion Sunday.
Half the members of this focus group were reared in a diversity of denominations: Roman Catholic, American Baptist, the Presbyterian Church USA, Unitarian Universalist, United Methodist, and Lutheran (ELCA). Five of the other six members came from the Congregational tradition (one was born and raised at the Kittery Point church) and another person hailed from the Evangelical and Reformed strand of the United Church of Christ. Therefore, they brought with them a variety of perspectives on the sacrament (one woman said that she was not sure if she was allowed to receive Communion when she started attending Kittery Point), but they also had a keen sensitivity as to how the meal was celebrated in this church and they lifted up a shared understanding of the meal.

The liturgy that the pastor uses in the Communion service typically comes from *Seasons of the Spirit*, an inclusive, ecumenical resource for Christian education and worship published in Canada by Wood Lake. He ensures that the liturgy fits the theme of the season and the lectionary for that particular Sunday. Communion is always celebrated after the sermon. As an entrée into the celebration, a Communion hymn is offered by the seated congregation. The hymn varies each month.\(^42\) Afterwards, the pastor offers “all the introductory words,” as one person said. After the invitation, the pastor offers a brief prayer. This prayer varies each month depending on what is published in *Seasons of the Spirit* for that day, but it typically

\(^42\) I debated whether or not to examine the theology inherent in hymns used in the United Church of Christ, and to ascertain what influence such hymnody has had on UCC eucharistic theology, but chose not to because such a vast endeavor requires a doctoral study in itself. This is clearly an area for further research.
thanks God for the gifts of creation, for Jesus Christ, for the church, for the Holy
Spirit, and for inviting the community to the table. The pastor then tells the story of
the institution of the supper (an adaptation of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26), after which he
speak words that are understood to set apart or consecrate the bread and wine. This
ushers the congregation into a unison prayer of confession followed by a spoken
assurance of God’s pardoning grace given by the pastor. The congregation also sings
the Sanctus from The New Century Hymnal (selection number 793) after the assurance
of pardon. The eucharistic elements are then shared, as illustrated above. The
Communion liturgy comes to a close with a prayer of thanksgiving that the minister
recites.

The practice of the Eucharist has changed over time at Kittery Point. It was
not until Pastor Jeff was called seven years previously that they started practicing
intinction. Before that they always received the meal seated in the pews, which is part
of the Congregational heritage. Previously, when they only received the meal seated
in the pews, they did so the way they do now on alternative months.43 There are
several family surnames that are part of the long annals of this historic congregation,
including the Pepperrell family whose name was given to the street on which the
church is located (Pepperrell Road). Over time, expensive Communion ware was
given to the church in honor of many of those families. Those silver plates and
chalices are no longer used. One woman recalled, “I grew up here. I always thought

43 See pp. 33-34 above.
of Communion as a very quiet, prayerful ceremony. The feeling of everyone praying at the same time, but not being led in prayer, was always meaningful for me.” This woman expressed her disdain with the church’s apparent break with their history. “It used to be more formal. I cannot concentrate when I get up and walk around the church. It loses something for me. It used to be so special using the old silver-set given in honor of the Pepperrell family. I used to marvel at that when I was a kid. Now we use pottery!”

In contrast to this critique, another person said that she prefers receiving the sacrament by intinction. First, it is a conscious, deliberate act. By this she meant that standing up and walking forward is a more intentional act than being served the meal while seated. Second, “you feel as if you are part of the circle more, the community. Everyone walks to the table together. We are unified.”

The focus group was also quite vivacious and loquacious when discussing their individual and collective understandings of the sacrament. A common theme that arose from the discussion was the sense of community that the Eucharist engenders. In fact, one person noted the etymological connection between the words “Communion” and “community.” For the First Congregational Church of Kittery in Kittery Point, Maine, the principal meaning of the Eucharist is that it creates and maintains community.

One elderly woman observed, “I do not have a family. I live alone. This church is my family. When we share Communion we become a stronger community,
a stronger family. This is our family dinner.” Another woman noted that some people decide not to take Communion of their own volition and that “stabs” her. “It is kind of like they are outside the circle. The community becomes less than,” she said (sic). Another person noted the intimacy that is shared at the earlier service. “At the 8:00 o’clock service we all come to the front and sit together. Pastor Jeff does not do anything from the pulpit. There may be only a dozen of us. It is as if we are that close-knit community of Jesus and his disciples in the Upper Room.”

But there were others who spoke of the community extending far beyond their congregation. In language that sounded straight out of T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets, one woman observed, “The connectedness that we share at Communion goes beyond us. We are connected to the world. We are also connected to the past. Past and present meet as one. It transcends time and place, and it does not change. It is a non-verbal feeling of connection that sustains me.”

The relationship created and sustained by the Supper is not just with one another, or with people around the world, or with the great cloud of witnesses. One person noted, “Communion is about my relationship with God.” A young woman, raised Catholic, said, “It is about forgiveness. During the week I do all kinds of things—I say the wrong things. But then I come to this table and I am like ‘Phew!’ It takes away my guilt and rejuvenates me.”

In a similar vein, one man, who spent a great deal of his career overseas in the United States Navy, compared the open table at Kittery Point to more closed
Communions and the feelings that instills. “Sometimes it is hard to think about what [Communion] means until you cannot have it,” he said. “One time I was stationed overseas. We really liked the Baptist church we went to, but because we were not members of that tradition we were excluded from receiving Communion. I really missed it and felt sort of shunned.” He continued, “I do not get that feeling of guilt here, because we do not use Communion as a weapon.”

Other understandings of the meal surfaced. One person mentioned that Communion is “a collective memory that we share along with the bread and wine. It is a memory of what Jesus did for us and what are supposed to do for one another following his example.” Another member of the group added to this sentiment: “I think Jesus was saying every time you eat the most common thing and drink the most common thing you remember what I have been telling you: take care of each other, do good works.” She continued, “I do not do that at every meal. I do not always pray before I eat. This is the one time each month when I can be intentional about this and be grateful.” There is an ethical dimension to the meal. It is the culmination of Jesus’ self-giving, agape love. One man said, “It reminds us that Jesus sacrificed himself for us.”

The group felt as though they were a good cross-section of the congregation and that they represented the beliefs of the rest of the church. “Sure there would be the odd person out,” one man said, “but given the quietness and respect that is
exhibited in the service, you would hear the same comments” from others members. No one added anything else regarding the congregation’s understanding of the meal.

The respondents also felt that they were “a fair slice” of the congregation’s demographics. One couple that attended the session was quite young (late twenties, early thirties) and was expecting their first child. They recently moved to Kittery Point and found this church similar to the one they attended in their previous community. Another couple was retired and still another, a lesbian couple, was middle-aged and in the midst of their careers. The rest of the participants consisted of one man and five women. They ranged in age from fifty to ninety.

When asked about the presence of Christ in the meal and the terms “body” and “blood,” they offered a perspective that focused less on sacrificial overtones. Although they see the meal as a “symbol” of Christ’s sacrifice, they made it clear that they have an aversion to body and blood language. “We never say ‘body and blood,’” one person said. They also did not see Christ as being in the actual eucharistic elements, although one woman said, “I feel the Holy Spirit is in the bread and the cup somehow. It calls us together to live out the teachings of Jesus.” Again, a combination of the ethical and the communal underlies the sacrament for Kittery Point. The members of this group agreed that the sacrament is best understood experientially rather than cognitively.

This points to the fact that practices sometimes yield theological knowledge and understanding. As Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass write: “we believe that it
is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves.” Practices not only reflect theology but they also can open up theological understanding. Dykstra and Bass continue: “insofar as a Christian practice is truly attuned to the active presence of God for the life of the world, participating in it increases our knowledge of the Triune God.”

III: First Congregational Christian Church United Church of Christ

The smallest of the denominations that formed the United Church of Christ in 1957 was the American Christian Convention, which merged first with the Congregational Churches in 1931. Comprised of people who emigrated from the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches, the Christian Church was a frontier movement, spreading a message of personal theology, piety, and biblical authority westward. In 1866, almost half a century after the northern and southern branches of this diminutive and diverse denomination officially merged, it published the six principles that formed its ecclesial foundation:

1. Christ is the only head of the church.
2. Christian is a sufficient name for the church.
3. The Holy Bible is a sufficient rule of faith and practice.
4. Christian character is the only requirement for membership.
5. The right of private judgment and liberty of conscience are rights and privileges for all.

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6. Union of Christ’s followers is sought.⁴⁶ Though some within the denomination found these principles to be too creedal, they were adopted in the middle of the nineteenth century. “The sixth principle was added in the twentieth century.”⁴⁷

Two centuries beforehand (1680), the First Christian Church, the oldest extant Christian Church in the United States, was founded in Swansea, Massachusetts (on Boston’s South Shore) “without church or clergymen.”⁴⁸ In 1693 this congregation “was organized with seventeen members and Thomas Barnes of Plymouth [was] ordained as their pastor.”⁴⁹ Today, they have been largely assimilated by both their bigger Congregational brother and their even larger parent, the United Church of Christ. Today, their official name is The First Christian Congregational Church United Church of Christ. Their nickname, the name by which most people in town refer to them, is “The Olde White Church.”⁵⁰ Eight members of this congregation

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⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “The Olde White Church: a short sketch of a long history,” a one page unpublished history, which is available on-line at swanseawhitechurch.org/AboutUs.htm.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ This is because this newly restored building stands as a traditional, white-clapboard New England meeting house in the center of Swansea. It was only recently that one of the members of the focus group mentioned that she noticed the racial overtones in their name. No one else in the focus group ever thought of that. Ironically enough, the demographic of this small church is elder and Caucasian.
met with me in the basement of their building to talk about their practice and understanding of the Eucharist.

The group was fairly reserved—a stereotype often associated with the Puritan heritage from which they, in part, hail. Five of the eight members of the focus group were senior citizens. This accurately reflects the demographics of Swansea’s membership: at least two-thirds of the church is retired or elderly. Of the other three, one was a single gentleman in his late fifties; the other two were a husband and wife in their early fifties. Although the members of this congregation hail from a diversity of denominations (originally), which is a reflection of the history of the Christian Church, many of them, including several members of this focus group, were born and raised, baptized and confirmed, at The First Christian Congregational Church United Church of Christ of Swansea.

This congregation has been through several pastoral changes in the last twenty years; one departure caused a contentious split in the congregation. Apparently, they had called a more conservative pastor who was dictatorial in his approach to church administration. He had little respect for the customs of the church or the authority that Congregational polity grants its members. Half of the membership left during his tenure. After he was released from his position, half of the remaining members of the church left with him to form an independent conservative church a few blocks away from First Christian. The parishioners that remained constitute the current membership of the church.
All of this conflict has created a sense of ecclesiastical vertigo for its members. However, there is also a sense of reform taking root at The Olde White Church. Their sanctuary and other parts of their property have been beautifully and historically renovated and the congregation is currently being led by a strong, interim minister (the Rev. Beverly Edwards) whom they all respect and admire. They mentioned that this discussion afforded them the opportunity to reflect on an important aspect of their theology.

The worship space of this community shows affinities with other Christian and Congregational churches, yet it also is uniquely theirs. Inscribed in gold letters over the arch at the front of the sanctuary are the words from Psalm 93:5: “Holiness becometh thine house, O LORD, for ever.” These words are quite fitting. There is a holiness that pervades Swansea’s sanctuary. It is reflected in the meticulous refurbishment that occurred two years prior. It seemed as if the sanctuary had just been restored. The paint and carpeting smelled fresh and the beautiful woodwork on the pews seems to have been recently varnished. The church hired a member’s daughter, who specializes in historic architecture, to help them refurbish their worship space. The lower perimeter is painted forest green with a lighter, complimentary hue stretching from the lower window sill to the ceiling. On the floor, to the left of the chancel, is the Communion table. The wooden table is solid white with the words “This do in remembrance of me” carved into the front. The top is natural wood stained tan. Over the top is a piece of protective glass. The table
seems oddly placed in a corner. They do not move it to the front of the sanctuary on Communion Sunday. According to Rev. Edwards, “There is no theological reason for why the table is where it is.” The decision to leave the table to the left was simply due to space. When they refurbished the sanctuary, they wanted to keep the area in the front of the congregation open and spacious.

They celebrate the sacrament on the first Sunday of each month, and they refer to it interchangeably as Communion and the Lord’s Supper. They understand the terms to be synonymous. They also celebrate Communion on Maundy Thursday at a joint service with their sister church located five miles away: Somerset Church United Church of Christ.

On Communion Sunday, they receive the sacrament while seated in the pews. Trays of bread and juice are passed by two of the seven members of their diaconate. This occurs after the recitation of the Communion liturgy. While the elements are being passed, music is played by the organist and oftentimes the choir sings. One member of the focus group, who is also a member of the diaconate, mentioned that no “uniform words” are said as they pass the trays, but discussion of this matter was on the agenda for their committee’s next meeting.

They sing a hymn before they celebrate the sacrament; it is always the African-American spiritual “Let Us Break Bread Together.” Following the hymn, the pastor recites the entire liturgy (there are no congregational responses). There is a loaf of bread and a chalice on the Communion table. She breaks the bread and puts the two
halves on the two trays that are passed. She pours juice into the chalice from a flagon and trays with small Communion glasses are distributed by the deacons after the bread is distributed.

No one knew what resource the pastor used for the Communion liturgy, but in a separate telephone conversation she informed me that she uses a modified and abbreviated version of the liturgies in the UCC Book of Worship (1986). She prefaces the celebration by saying, “This is not our table; it is Jesus’ table. We are all sinners. We are all invited to this table. We come here from many different places and traditions, so if receiving Communion this way is not comfortable for you then just pass it on, but stay with us and pray with us, because the Holy Spirit is with us within this Communion and within this place.”51

The congregation eats the bread in unison once everyone is served. The same is true of the cup. In terms of the latter, the congregation uses grape juice as opposed to wine. (One member of the focus group claims that the congregation would like to supplement the juice with wine.) In terms of the former, each tray contains half of the loaf used in the liturgy (as previously mentioned) along with both regular and gluten-free bread for those who have allergies. All of this is done for the congregation to be as inclusive as possible. They also use a variety of breads. It is not uncommon for them to have white bread one month and on subsequent months to offer wheat bread and even sweet or corn bread. After the congregation is served,

the pastor serves the deacons and then herself from the same tray; she never drinks from the chalice.

The Swansea Church has seen many pastoral changes over their long history. This has and has not influenced their practice of the Eucharist. As long as the interviewees could remember, the congregation has been served while seated in the pews and the table has been open to all people. Baptism is not a requirement for receiving Communion, although it is stated that you need to believe in Christ in order to partake. Children are also allowed to receive the Lord’s Supper in their congregation, although that was not always their practice. Historically, they could not receive the Lord’s Supper until they completed confirmation. The youngest member of the focus group, a middle-aged woman who was raised in the congregation, fondly recalls going through confirmation, receiving her “first Communion,” and she smiled as she spoke of how “special it was.” Ironically enough, their attendance declines on Communion Sunday, because of children. In other words, worship runs late on Communion Sunday. The people who have children and do not want them in worship that day (on all other Sundays children are in church school during worship) or for that long, stay home on the first Sunday of the month. There are some people who choose not to receive the sacrament, but that is of their own volition. “More often than not, visitors are the ones who refrain from receiving Communion,” one member of the group, who serves on the diaconate, noted.
The deacons are the ones who prepare the meal and oversee all aspects of it. “We keep check on it,” one deacon said. The deacons are in the process of putting together a program, in conjunction with the pastor, to serve Communion to their sick and homebound members. Such a program, which has fallen by the wayside in recent years, used to be available to shut-ins.

The most novel and interesting aspect of their Communion liturgy is what they do after the service. The meal is followed by a final hymn, which is followed by the benediction. After that, the members form a circle around the sanctuary. They try to form a complete circle, but lately have been unable to due to a declining membership. They call this the “Circle of Love.” Everyone holds hands and faces each other. Then they sing the John Fawcett and Johann G. Nageli hymn “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.” To them, this is the most meaningful aspect of the service. Their pastor claims that this probably has to do with the tradition of Christian piety.52

What is also of note is the fact that this congregation used to use the New Century Hymnal (1995). When they did, they would participate in the Communion liturgies found in the front of this resource.53 This very controversial and progressive resource has been replaced with the more conservative and traditional Hymnal for Worship and Celebration (1986). The change was instituted by their new organist, whom they deeply admire. However, the congregation prefers the New Century Hymnal. This

52 Ibid.
53 The resources in the front of the New Century Hymnal are taken directly from the UCC Book of Worship.
is interesting for two reasons: being an older, traditional congregation, one can assume that they would be adverse to the *New Century Hymnal*, as many UCC congregations with a similar demographic tend to be. Also, changing hymnals changed their participation in the service. They no longer say any part of the Communion liturgy. The bulletin simply says “Communion” to indicate where the sacrament falls within the service. There are no responsive or unison prayers.

There seemed to be a mixed assessment coming from the focus group. On one hand there were those who indicated that their Communion service really has not changed over time, whereas others said that it has evolved. Teasing this out further, it seems as if the basic practice has remained the same—the elements being served to a seated congregation—but that certain aspects of the service have changed. For example, the congregation does not participate in the liturgy any more (as noted above) and children of all ages can receive the sacrament if their parents so desire. They did acknowledge that each of their pastors (with the exception of the last one who caused a rift in the congregation) brought their own “flair” to the service, but respected the tradition of the church and were sure to consult the diaconate to ascertain the way in which they celebrated the sacrament.

What has remained a standard practice is that only ordained clergy can preside over the meal. Last summer a seminarian preached on Communion Sunday. She refused to serve the sacrament in-keeping with UCC regulations, which, in turn, corresponds to what Swansea believes and practices.
When asked if the pastor ever preaches on the meaning of Communion, the answer was, “Pastors preached on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper in the past more than our interim pastor does. In the past, the preaching focused on this being a communal meal that united the congregation together.” This theology is part of the ecclesiological DNA of the Olde White Church. Seeking the unity of all Christians was a fundamental tenet of the early Christian Church, as explicated above. “The way in which the pastor intentionally invites everyone to the table has to do with forming community,” an older woman, who grew up at the church, said. Sharing the meal creates community. “It unites us with one another in Christ,” another person observed. The same person reflected on the difference he felt existed between the Catholic practice of the Eucharist and their practice. He argued that, “The Catholic view is inward and mysterious. It is closed. With us, it is an invitation to come in: an open invitation to anyone to come to the church, to be part of the church, and to participate in a formal sacrament. Having been Catholic, I find that refreshing.”

They made it clear that (in general) they do not subscribe to the doctrine of transubstantiation, especially the two members of the group who are former Roman Catholics. One man explained: “The bread is the body of Christ. The juice is the blood of Christ. We absorb it and think about what he went through. He gave his life for us on the cross.” In giving this explanation, the man specified that by “is” he meant represents. The group pointed out that by using this language (this “is” the
body/blood of Christ) the church makes allowances for people to receive and understand the meal on their own terms.

The group was referring to the location of Christ in the meal. Some members of the congregation may believe that Christ is present in the eucharistic elements themselves; that the bread and juice transform into Christ’s actual body and blood. Others believe that Christ’s presence at the meal is ubiquitous, as Martin Luther maintained. Others understand the bread and the juice as symbols of Christ who is indeed present, although the elements themselves do not undergo any change. Still others see Jesus as present in the community and the entire eucharistic sharing. Thus, in its use of the word “is,” the congregation understands itself as allowing for a diversity of eucharistic understandings to coexist.

They concluded by noting that they would not celebrate the Lord’s Supper more often if it were up to them. One person referred to the law of diminishing returns. “Communion would lose some of its meaning if we celebrated it more often. It would become just another ritual. This way it is more special.”

IV: Evangelical United Church of Christ

Located a quarter of a mile west of the Eden Theological Seminary campus in Webster Groves, Missouri (a suburb of Saint Louis), is Evangelical United Church of Christ. This congregation, founded in 1920, was part of the Evangelical Synod of North America before being grafted into the Evangelical and Reformed Church,
which began in 1934, and later the United Church of Christ, which was born twenty-three years later. The Evangelical heritage is known for its pietism and outreach endeavors, especially the founding of schools and hospitals. Evangelical United Church of Christ (EUCC) conforms to this tradition. This German congregation met in a house when they were founded and saved money for a church building. They kept giving the funds away, however, to help establish local institutions that needed it more, such as Eden Seminary and Deaconess Hospital. They quote the motto of Eden Seminary as being foundational to their congregation: *In essentials unity, in non essentials freedom, in all things charity.* “This motto, first published in 1848 by Philip Schaff in *Der Deutsche Kirchenfreund*, effectively captures the spirit of the Evangelical tradition.”\(^{54}\) Ralph C. Quellhorst qualifies this a bit more by noting, “What matters in polity and practice is whether or not the church expresses *charity.*”\(^{55}\) This liberal church (they were the second UCC congregation in Saint Louis to become Open and Affirming) has developed this motto to be even more reflective of their charitable roots as well as of their commitment to the United Church of Christ’s God is Still Speaking campaign, which is entrenched in openness and extravagant welcome. They claim that they are:

- **Inclusive** in our diversity,
- **Intentional** in our commitment to social justice,


\(^{55}\) Ibid.
• **Intimate** in our fellowship together,
• **Inspiring** in our communal worship and
• **Inquisitive** in our personal spiritual growth.\(^56\)

Comically playing on the commercial for pork (“the other white meat”), EUCC claims to be the “other ‘Evangelical’ church,” in contrast to the well-known conservative Protestant movement that emerged in the early twentieth century.

The building is made of stone and stands back from the main road several more yards than the houses adjacent to it. The church is located in a fairly affluent suburb. Between the main building, which contains the sanctuary and various offices, and the local YMCA is a more modern prefabricated steel building that used to belong to the Y, but was recently purchased by EUCC. The inside of this building is being renovated to house the Christian education program as well as some fellowship space. Twelve members of this church and I gathered in one of the rooms of this annex to discuss the Eucharist. The conversation was humorous yet profound.

The members of this focus group hail from diverse denominations and age groups. They are from churches such as the Roman Catholic, Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian Church USA, United Methodist, Greek Orthodox, and American Baptist, and some were raised in the UCC—some in this very church. Aside from one elderly woman and a female member of the youth group, the rest of the group (half men and half women) were middle aged. Two couples attended the discussion: one heterosexual and one homosexual. Their views on this sacrament are obviously

\(^{56}\) This information is available at evangelicalucc.org.
influenced by their ecclesial backgrounds, but they use their history more as a means to enter into a critical dialogue with what their church professes as opposed to being a hook on which they can hang their beliefs.

EUCC refers to this sacrament as “Communion.” They have two services each Sunday: an 8:30 am service, which “shares” Communion (they do not like to say “give” or “receive” because neither term connotes the charitable, reciprocal symbolism that lies at the heart of the meal for them as “shares” does) every week, and a 10:30 am service, which celebrates the Eucharist on the first Sunday of each month. They also share Communion at the late Christmas Eve service, on Easter Sunday, and on Maundy Thursday. On Maundy Thursday they are joined by Sts. Clare and Francis Ecumenical Catholic Church (ECC): a church that is part of “a separate denomination within the universal Christian Church,” according to the ECC website. Sts. Clare and Francis ECC utilize EUCC’s worship space for the former’s Saturday Mass. At both services, Communion is received by intinction. After the pastor consecrates the elements (the liturgy will be discussed later), three members of the congregation are selected at random to join her in serving the elements. (Sometimes children are selected.) They form two stations on each side of the Communion table: one person holds the plate of bread and another holds the chalice on each side. People typically sing as they come forward. Although their service is

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57 Sts. Clare and Francis Ecumenical Catholic Church’s weekly Mass is held at EUCC on Saturdays at 5:00 pm.
“very sacred, structured, and efficient,” the songs they sing are typically joyous. They often sing the up-tempo “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” and clap as they process to the table.58 If people are unable to come forward due to physical limitations, two of the servers bring the sacrament to them in the pews.

When people come to one of the two stations they take a piece of bread off a common loaf, dip it in the chalice, and partake. They use a variety of breads, seeing this variety as a reflection of the diversity within their member demographics and a celebration of their radical inclusivity. Although they have a paid chaplain who prepares the meal each week, members sign up to bring the bread. Sometimes it is pita bread, sometimes it is a loaf, and one time they even used matzoh. Although they used to serve both juice and wine (as recently as ten years ago) they now use only grape juice (they alternate between red and white juice). What is said to them varies depending on the server. Some people will say, “This is the cup of blessings,” for example. Others will say, “This is the cup of Christ’s blood that was shed for you.” Some people say nothing. The servers offer the meal to each other after everyone comes forward. People who are homebound receive the meal from the pastor. EUCC does not have a formal program that serves Communion to shut-ins or the infirmed.

EUCC insists that an ordained person officiate at the sacrament, as is a UCC custom according to the denomination’s Manual on Ministry. In fact, if the pastor is

58 Tune: Traditional. Inspired by Naomi Batya and Sophie Conty.
away and a lay person happens to preach and lead the service that day, they will have an ordained person (they have several ordained members who work at Eden Seminary) preside over the meal. One member of the focus group was perturbed by this practice. He felt it was a contradiction. “All of our messages are about being egalitarian, but with Communion it is as if power is being maintained. It is as if the clergy are saying, ‘No one gets this bread except through one of us. We have the magic words that make it Communion.’” He recalled a time when they did not have an ordained member available and had to hire a guest minister who only celebrated the sacrament; he did not preach or lead any other part of the service that day.

Each week at the first service and on Communion Sunday for the second service, the rubrics of worship change a bit. An offering is not collected. Baskets are available next to the Communion table where people leave their tithes and offerings. Also, they have two separate tables full of votive candles—one on either side of the Communion table. After receiving the sacrament, members can light a candle and offer a prayer. The former Catholics and the woman who hailed from the Greek Orthodox Church love this practice. A woman from the Reformed tradition felt that it was too “high church,” but, since it was meaningful to others in the congregation, she is pleased that they have retained it.

The pastor offers the words for the Communion liturgy from memory. They are similar each time, but vary depending on the theme of the service. If, for example, there are several visitors in attendance, she stresses that this table is “open
to all people,” as is the case at EUCC. In fact, the pastor often uses the recent UCC slogan, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” to call people to the table. Everyone is welcome: members, visitors, children—no distinction is made. They do not even use baptism as a prerequisite for the meal. This, however, is a practice that evolved over time. It used to be that children could only receive the sacrament after they were confirmed and they could only be confirmed if they were baptized. One woman who was raised in the church recalls, “It was so special. After we were confirmed we received Communion for the first time on Maundy Thursday and we got to keep the cup. I still have mine,” she said with a smile. The decision to admit children to the table (if their parents choose to allow them) was not an easy resolution. It came at the end of much intentional discussion.

Several members of the focus group also commented on the dramatic action that occurs at the table. The pastor holds the bread high and breaks it. Then she puts the pieces back together in an almost dramatic way. “We go from brokenness to unity,” one person said. “It is beautiful.” The pastor also holds the flagon high and brings it close to the chalice as she pours the juice, and then raises the former high into the air again. “She never spills a drop,” one person said in utter amazement.

Before the congregation comes forward, they are led into a prayer that they say each time they share the meal. The prayer is printed in the bulletin, but most of
them know it by heart. These are typically the only words the congregation says as part of the liturgy.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Bless this bread and bless this fruit of the vine.
Bless all of us in our eating and drinking
that our eyes might be opened,
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst
indeed, in one another. Come, Holy Spirit, come.59

There is an unscripted dramatic pause between the last two lines to accentuate the word “indeed.” Indeed, they believe that Christ is present in the members (the body of Christ) as opposed to the meal (the body of Christ that is the bread). This will be discussed further below.

After the meal is shared, a brief prayer of thanksgiving is offered. It is a piece that simply offers gratitude to God for the meal and is one that the pastor pens or obtains from a worship resource. Sometimes it is a responsive piece, but, more often than not, it is offered by the pastor or that week’s lector. After the prayer of thanksgiving, a final hymn and the benediction conclude the service.

They ascribe a plethora of meanings to the meal. They noted that the pastor will often use the words “body” and “blood” to be inclusive, meaning that people from divergent backgrounds can apply those meanings to their unique understanding of the sacrament however they wish. Some see them as symbolic terms; some as literal. Most members, though, especially those who were part of this discussion,

59 This information was taken from evangelicalucc.org/files/Bulletin.09.06.09_web.pdf.
focus on the *communal* aspects of the meal. One woman reflected, “It is as if every Communion Sunday is World Communion Sunday. This meal unites us with Jesus and one another as a church, but it goes beyond us. When I share this meal I get a very real sense that I am sharing with people all over the world, not just Christians. I feel a deep connectedness with the divine and with all who are connected to the divine,” she said almost lyrically.

The word “sacred” kept being employed when talking about the meaning of the meal. They were clear, however, to specify that by *sacred* they meant *meaningful.*

“Our pastor refers to us as a quirky bunch,” one person joked. “The same can be said about what we think about Communion. We bring a lot of different ideas and meanings to the table, but when we get there we are united with Christ and one another in community. It has profound meaning. It is very sacred. It is full of symbolism, but it isn’t rigid.” Another person added, “Before I receive Communion [as the pastor recites the liturgy], my focus is solitary. It is about me. But when I come forward, and see everyone else come forward, the image of community is very real.”

Another meaning that arose from the conversation was *forgiveness.* EUCC does not offer a corporate confession on Communion Sunday or any Sunday for that matter. “We do not like to confess,” one woman said, which caused the entire room to erupt with laughter. That said, the notion of being forgiven, being made new, being made whole is deeply embedded in the sacrament. Very seriously, and almost
in tears, one woman said, “Communion lets me know that I am ok. It isn’t so much that I did something wrong and was pardoned, but, rather, that I am ok the way I am.” Another gentleman immediately added, “Exactly! Communion lets me know that I am accepted as I am. I leave ready for the week ahead. I leave knowing that I am accepted by God and this community.”

New Testament scholar Dr. Stephen J. Patterson, who used to be on the faculty at Eden, but recently moved to Salem, Oregon to assume the position as George H. Atkinson Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies at Willamette University, used to be a member of Evangelical United Church of Christ. While he was there, he used to give workshops on various New Testament pericopes and theological subjects. One of the members of the focus group said, “I remember something that Steve told us one time that has stuck with me ever since and I think it says a great deal about what we believe here.” Not mentioning 1 Corinthians 11, the man explained, “Steve was talking about the Early Church and how there would be abuses at the Supper. If you were rich, you would eat first. The poor would get the leftovers or go without and no one would care. Jesus came here to upset social order and class distinctions. When we come to the table the things that divide us no longer exist. It does not matter whether someone is a Republican, a Democrat, wealthy, or poor. We are all of equal value. We’re all going to the same place. We’re all getting the same stuff.” The others shook their heads in agreement. Clearly, egalitarian communitarianism lies at the heart of their understanding of the Eucharist.
The pastor, who has been at EUCC for fourteen years, never really preaches on the meaning of Communion, *per se*, although references appear in her homilies occasionally. However, she is a prolific writer and muses on the meaning of the meal more so. Her reflections on Communion have a dual focus: 1. all are welcome, and 2. this is your weekly “do over.” One member of the group recalled one of Pastor Katy’s reflections. She spoke of one instance when she served Communion and witnessed two people coming forward next to one another. She knew that one person was doing quite well and led a relatively righteous life. The other person was going through a difficult time; he was in a strained relationship. Yet, when they received this meal, they were both equal and worthy regardless of who they were, what they may have done, or what they were going through. This story reflects the general consensus of what Communion is about at EUCC. It is imbued with an ethic of equality and justice. It forms and transforms the covenantal community.

Lastly, it is pertinent to note that EUCC and their practices are not static. Communion, as an example, has evolved over time. Already noted are the changes that developed in terms of when children could receive the sacrament and that wine is no longer used. (In terms of the later, one person said that “the old Germans” still wish that we offered fermented wine.) In the past, they only celebrated Communion a few times a year: quarterly and on special occasions. Also, when they did share the Eucharist, they remained seated and trays were passed through the pews. This is to say that EUCC is open to how the Spirit will lead them in the future. Although they
cherish the way they celebrate the meal now, they know that further changes may lay in wait. “Pastor Katy did not change everything right away. A lot of what we do now came with her, but it unfolded over time.” Central to their corporate theology, though, are the words they say each week. They see Christ in one another indeed. Most of them do not see Christ in the meal itself, but they do see him in each another as they share what he shared with his disciples 2000 years before “and their eyes were opened.”

**V: First Reformed United Church of Christ**

In the book *Church Family Roots: A History of the Families of the First Reformed United Church of Christ Greensburg, PA*, author Linda J. Soles refers to the *History of the Westmoreland Classis of the Reformed Church*, which records the following: “On the 2nd day of April, 1796, in the newly built church in Greensburg, the Holy Communion was held for the first time, and I, John William Weber, the Reformed minister, communed with the following persons…”\(^{60}\) According to Soles, Weber was “One of the most influential ministers in the beginning of the German Reformed Church.”\(^{61}\) He was the founding pastor of the First Reformed Church of Greensburg, of which Soles is a current member. She also notes that, “The life of the First Reformed congregation in Greensburg began a number of years before the traditional date given


\(^{61}\) Ibid., 20.
for its organization. As early as 1784, a log school building had been erected by the Germanic people...for some years, services were held there for the Lutheran and Reformed people of Greensburg and the surrounding area." It would be another twelve years until Rev. Weber began the actual First Reformed Church in Greensburg.

On the site a newer building stands. In the fellowship hall of this 1966 structure, I gathered with Soles and eleven other members of what is now called the First Reformed United Church of Christ to discuss their practice and understanding of Communion.

They refer to the sacrament as Communion and the Lord's Supper (though not so much the latter) and they celebrate it on the first Sunday of each month. It used to be shared quarterly and on special liturgical holidays. With the calling of the Reverend Steven L. Craft as pastor, Communion is now celebrated these twelve marked times each year and on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Advent (at a special service), and Christmas Eve. Their attendance actually increases on Communion Sunday. It is a sacrament revered by this congregation of mostly (though not exclusively) aged parishioners. With the exception of one middle aged

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62 Ibid., 7.

63 It was noted by the focus group that Pastor Steve never really preaches on the meaning of Communion. One member of the group said that he preaches “on the meaning and depth of baptism quite a bit, but not on Communion.” This is of note, because having changed the celebration of the Eucharist to monthly from quarterly, one could easily assume that Communion would be of importance to Rev. Craft. It may be that it is or it may be that he changed the practice to be in accord with standard UCC practices. Most UCC congregations celebrate Communion once a month, but this is not a hard and fast rule.
woman, the members of the focus group of which I met were in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. (Only two members of the group were male.) Some of the members of the group come from other religious traditions, but the vast majority of them are from the Reformed heritage, many having been raised at First Reformed. Like many in the UCC, they receive Communion while seated in the pews. They used to come forward occasionally and receive the sacrament by intinction, but this is another change that came with Rev. Craft. They do, however, have a combined service once a year with Trinity United Church of Christ located four-tenths of a mile away. Trinity is a “splinter church” that broke away from First Reformed several years prior because the former did not want sermons delivered in German. Although the homilies at First Reformed are no longer delivered in German, its members celebrate Communion by intinction with their sister congregation once a year.

Now, trays that contain bread cut into cubes are passed through the congregation. Once everyone has a piece, they eat together. The same occurs with small, disposable, plastic Communion cups: they are passed through the pews on trays and everyone drinks together. They only use grape juice to be sensitive to alcoholics.

Towards the end of the service, just before the final hymn and the benediction, the sacrament is distributed by two members of the consistory once it is blessed by the pastor as part of the Communion liturgy. The consistory is the
governing body of the congregation and comprises six elders and fourteen deacons. After the consistory serves the congregation, they serve one another. Many of these people sing in the choir, so they rotate who sings on communion Sunday and who serves. The members of the consistory who do serve enter the chancel from side doors during the first hymn and sit together in the first row. The choir is located in the chancel with the pastor, the organist, and the Communion table. Two sets of choir pews face each other from behind the pulpit and lectern. The sanctuary décor is comprised of dark wood and red carpet beneath a white ceiling. A center aisle leads to the chancel. Large, colorful, stained glass windows fill the side walls.

The Communion table is fairly new. It was elegantly crafted in Amish country in memory of an elder’s wife who died a few years ago. Communion is served from that table. Before that, it was served from the altar that is adjoined to the rear wall of the chancel. Standing behind the table, Pastor Steve breaks a ceremonial loaf of bread, which is not distributed. The grape juice is already in the chalice; it is not poured by the minister.

The liturgy they follow is from the *New Century Hymnal* (1995), which, in turn, is from the UCC *Book of Worship* (1986). The parts that require congregation

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64 Most congregations in the United Church of Christ have a board of deacons (or a diaconate, as it is often called) that oversees all aspects of worship. Some churches, such as First Reformed in Greensburg, have a consistory. A consistory, which is more common in the Reformed tradition, comprises deacons and elders (i.e. older, long-standing church members). Churches that do not have a board of elders typically have a church council that consists of chairpersons from the various church boards and committees as well as the church moderator (president), assistant moderator, treasurer, scribe, and pastoral staff. The pastoral staff usually has voice but no vote.
participation are printed in the bulletin, including the post-Communion prayer of
thanksgiving. Music is played by the organist while Communion is served. No one
ever sings. The liturgy is always one of the two services of Word and sacrament from
the hymnal. The rest of the service is the same order they follow every other Sunday.

Everyone present receives both the bread and the cup. “Pastor Steve offers
an open invitation to everyone,” one member of the focus group stated. “Some
people abstain by their choice.” Children, however, are not able to receive the
sacrament until they are confirmed, which usually occurs in the seventh or eighth
grade (ages twelve to thirteen). Rarely is this an issue, because the children leave after
the children’s sermon for “children’s church,” so they are not in the sanctuary when
the sacrament is celebrated. If a child is present and a parent wants him/her to
receive Communion, the consistory will not deny them, but this is not an approved
practice at First Reformed.  

As in many UCC congregations, confirmation at First Reformed is a nine
month process which mirrors the public school calendar. Several members of this
focus group recalled their confirmation and how it was a two-year process. “We had
to earn Communion” one member of the group said. Confrmands used to memorize
The Heidelberg Catechism: a foundational, normative text in the German Reformed
tradition. (The section on Holy Communion in The Heidelberg Catechism will be

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65 It is interesting to note that baptism is not a prerequisite to receive Holy Communion, yet
children need to be baptized before they are confirmed and, according to the congregation’s
Constitution and By-Laws (adopted on January 19, 1949), members must be baptized.
discussed below to ascertain what influence it bears on First Reformed’s practice and understanding of the Eucharist.

First Reformed is not handicapped accessible. It does, however, have a chapel on the lower-level where people with disabilities sit during church. A sound system enables them to hear the service (soon they will add a closed circuit television system) and one member of the consistory brings them Communion when it is celebrated.

Homebound members receive the sacrament minimally every other month. There is a program in place by the consistory that ensures this. On the Monday after the first Sunday of the month, Communion is distributed to shut-ins by paired teams. One member of the focus group spoke about this at length. She said, “Serving Communion to the homebound is one of the most humbling experiences for us. The people by-and-large are very hungry for it and sometimes they are not doing too well.” She continued, “They cannot thank you enough. It is hard to leave because they are thanking you so much. Their faces become illuminated. We, the servers, have not done anything. It is so powerful. It is hard to talk about, because it means so much to them. You never get used to this experience.”

One practice in particular needs to be noted. It used to be required that members receive Communion at least once a year to retain their membership. Communion cards located in the pews enabled people to register their attendance.

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66 First Reformed UCC has approximately twelve homebound members. Three to four teams of two people each bring Communion to them.
Those cards are still used, although regular participation in Communion is no longer a requisite for membership. Those in attendance complete these cards on Communion Sunday. They can indicate who in the congregation “is sick or in trouble.” Visitors can use them to record their attendance that day. The cards are then deposited in the offering plates along with a special Communion offering envelope that members have.

In examining the meaning of Holy Communion at First Reformed UCC, a brief examination of The Heidelberg Catechism is necessary since it is a strong part of this church’s history. There are six questions in The Heidelberg Catechism regarding Holy Communion:

Question 75  How are you reminded and assured in the holy Supper that you participate in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross and in all his benefits?

Question 76  What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his shed blood?

Question 77  Where has Christ promised that he will feed and nourish believers with his body and blood just as surely as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup?

Question 78  Do the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ?

Question 79  Then why does Christ call the bread his body and the cup his blood, or the New Covenant in his blood, and why does the apostle Paul call the Supper “a means of sharing” in the body and blood of Christ?

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67 Communicant’s Card used at The First Reformed United Church of Christ in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.
Question 80  What difference is there between the Lord’s Supper and the papal Mass?\(^{68}\)

The answers to these questions are presented in the Catechism after each query. In terms of the first, believers are to share Communion in remembrance of Jesus, particularly keeping in mind Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for them. In so doing, believers recall that Jesus “promised that he himself as certainly feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life with his crucified body and shed blood.”\(^{69}\) Clearly there were members of the group who identified with this theology. One person said that Communion “represents the sacrifice that Christ made for us. It represents his body and his blood.” Building upon this statement, another member added, quite astutely, “The body and blood of Christ means that Jesus died. They are symbolic words, but they are more than symbols; they are living symbols that we participate in.” Another person mentioned how at a Penn West Conference she once heard a pastor say, “May the Spirit of God use this meal to feed your deepest hunger.”\(^{70}\) She claims that such a statement encapsulates what she (and she claims most members of First Reformed Greensburg) believe about the Lord’s Supper. These statements reflect what is found in question seventy-five of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

The answer to question seventy-six claims that by sharing this meal

\(^{68}\) *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1962), 73-81.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 74.

\(^{70}\) The United Church of Christ is divided geographically into thirty-eight Conferences, which are further divided into Associations comprised of local churches. Pennsylvania happens to have four Conferences. First Reformed is a member of the Penn West Conference.
communicants not only embrace the entirety of Christ’s passion; they also “receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.”71 In regards to the first point, it was clearly expressed that in sharing this meal the congregation is remembering Christ’s sacrifice and especially the Last Supper. In regards to the notion of absolution, one man, who was born in Germany during Third Reich, stated that Communion yields a spiritual cleansing. “I feel that Communion is a holy, holy experience,” he said. “I am one of these people who is constantly aware of my sins of omission and commission. I feel very close to the spirit of Jesus when I partake of Communion. It is spiritually uplifting, because I truly feel that my sins of omission and commission are forgiven. I truly feel forgiven and I am at peace.”

Question seventy-seven leads believers to reflect on the institution of the Eucharist as recorded in the Gospels and Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. In so doing, the German Reformed Church proclaims that by sharing this meal they partake of the Lord. Related to this, one member of the focus group claimed that the meaning of this meal has more to do with the experience of it than anything to do with cognition. Another person adjoined this comment with the observation, “It is a special service. It means we are partakers in Christ. It’s special. It is special.”

Clearly the questions and answers to The Heidelberg Catechism are part of the spiritual DNA of this congregation.

The next question, which asks if any change occurs in the elements

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71 *Heidelberg Catechism*, 74.
themselves, is to be answered, “in the Lord’s Supper the sacred bread does not become the body of Christ itself, although, in accordance with the nature and usage of the sacrament, it is called the body of Christ.” One man, who took notes during our discussion, raised his hand towards the end and said, “To me, this meal is about Christ’s sacrifice and gift to us. I do not believe in the Catholic doctrine of transmortification (sic), and I don’t think that there are too many people in this church that do either. I do believe that this meal is very symbolic, though. It is also foundational to our faith.”

The seventy-ninth question in the Catechism builds on the previous answer. If the bread and wine do not become the body and blood of Christ, then why are they referred to in those terms? The apt answer is:

Christ does not speak in this way except for a strong reason. He wishes to teach us by it that as bread and wine sustain this temporal life so his crucified body and shed blood are the true food and drink of our souls for eternal life. Even more, he wishes to assure us by this visible sign and pledge that we come to share in his true body and blood through the working of the Holy Spirit as surely as we receive with our mouth these holy tokens in remembrance of him, and that all his sufferings and his death are our own as certainly as if we had ourselves suffered and rendered satisfaction in our own persons.72

This group truly feels that the Eucharist sustains them as individuals and as a community. They expressed the belief that the meal was, indeed, food for their souls. As mentioned above, they also see the Eucharist as a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. One woman spoke of her own shortcomings and how Christ, through the

72 Ibid., 78.
Holy Spirit, cleanses her of them. The meal is her “fresh start to do better.”

The last question on Communion in *The Heidelberg Catechism* compares the Lord’s Supper to the Catholic Mass. The argument is that through the Supper, Christ offered himself once for our complete forgiveness. There is no need for the recapitulation of this sacrifice each day on the Catholic altar.\(^7^3\) Also, through the meal communicants are sustained as members of the Church, the body of Christ, into which they have been incorporated by the Holy Spirit. We have already spoken of the forgiveness we receive symbolized in the meal and achieved through the cross. In terms of incorporation into the church, the First Reformed focus group spoke at length about tradition. Through this meal and “through the Holy Spirit we are incorporated into Christ, who is now in heaven with his true body at the right hand of the Father and is there to be worshipped.”\(^7^4\) The body of Christ transcends place and time and unites us to our history. One member said that this meal makes her “part of a tradition. My parents did this, their parents did this, and so on and so forth. This creates a continuity of being in touch with God.” This same person lamented the decline in mainline church attendance. Her ultimate fear was that this tradition would eventually die and be forever lost.

This chapter illustrates how five distinct UCC congregations practice the Eucharist and it explicates what they believe about the sacrament. Although it is not

\(^7^3\) Some scholars argue that *The Heidelberg Catechism* reacted against an interpretation of Catholic teaching that may not have been what the Catholic Church truly intended.

\(^7^4\) *Heidelberg Catechism*, 79.
my objective to analyze any normative texts in this chapter, the incorporation of one in particular is pertinent at this juncture. While interviewing the focus group participants from the First Reformed Church of Greensburg, it became evident that their understanding of the Eucharist reflected the answers to the questions on “The Lord’s Supper” found in *The Heidelberg Catechism*. Because they are part of the German tradition that produced this resource, it has been advantageous to compare First Reformed’s understanding of the meaning of Communion in conversation with this tool.

The only other understanding of the meal that is not discussed in *The Heidelberg Catechism* but arose in our conversation was the exceptional significance of the meal. In fact this came up several times. One person reflected on being confirmed when she was twelve years old and how special it was finally to receive Communion. Another person waxed, “I feel it is special, because when I joined this church it was something you took seriously. I still feel that this is the way we all view it.” It was unanimous that the rest of the congregation would express a similar understanding of the sacrament. “None of us,” one gentleman said, “would want to celebrate it more often than we do now. We used to have it four times a year. Once a month keeps it often enough, but not too often. It is more special this way. It keeps you more in-tune. Less is more.”
VI: Imani United Church of Christ

There is a movement afoot in the United Church of Christ to plant and foster congregations that are multicultural and multiracial. The UCC celebrates diversity and wishes to see this identity embodied in all of its settings. Some have critiqued the denomination as being homogeneous, still comprised of mostly white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (the UCC’s recent television and internet commercials notwithstanding) and that its claim to be racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse is more of a desired goal than a current reality. That said, there are congregations within the denomination that are either racially/culturally diverse or are comprised almost entirely of people from minority races and ethnicities. To augment this study I included one such church—a church which joined the denomination after the 1957 merger and represents what the UCC (in part) hopes to become.

Imani United Church of Christ is mostly an African-American congregation that in 1992 was founded and joined the UCC. Located on the East Side of Cleveland, Ohio in a fairly impoverished, black neighborhood, Imani’s membership is ninety-eight percent African-American with only five white families on its rolls. Because of the church’s young age, most of its adult members hailed from other faith traditions. The religious backgrounds of congregants range from conservative

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75 See, for example, the essay, “Aspiring to Be a Multiracial and Multicultural Church,” from _The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ_, vol. 7, ed. Frederick R. Trost and Barbara Brown Zikmund (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 627-643. This essay argues that while the UCC *strives* to be multiracial and multicultural, it has not fully lived into that identity yet. The essay also lifts up the contributions that African-Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asian Americans, and Hispanics have already brought into the denomination.
Southern Baptist, to mainline Presbyterian Church USA, to Roman Catholic. Imani is considered quite progressive for a black church not just because it chose to be part of a mainline, liberal denomination, but also because it called a woman, Michele Teague Humphrey, as their pastor, which is proscribed in some African-American ecclesial traditions.

Eight members of Imani participated in the focus group discussion. We met in one of their Christian education classrooms and faced one another sitting in a circle. Meeting in a CE classroom seemed quite fitting since the interior of the entire main building—which includes the sanctuary, offices, and a few classrooms—looks like a school that was build in the 1960s as opposed to a church.

Imani holds three Sunday services: at 8:00 am, 10:00 am, and 12:00 pm. These services are identical and “Communion” (the name they use for the sacrament) is offered at all three of them. It is celebrated in their sanctuary, which is a very plain, bright, open space. On the right side of the front of the church is a piano as well as a full praise band consisting of drums, guitars, bass, and keyboards. This band plays at all of their services. The Communion table sits in the center of the chancel between the pulpit and lectern.

They have celebrated Communion on Maundy Thursday, but they do not typically do so. The church never practices intinction, although members do come forward to receive the elements. In fact, the rubrics of how the congregation celebrates the sacrament are the same every time they do.
Communion is shared towards the end of the service right before the benediction is offered. Everyone who is present is invited to receive the meal: members as well as visitors, children as well as adults. In terms of children, they receive the meal at the two later services. They are in “children’s church” at 10:00 am and noon, but “come across the parking lot” to receive Communion with the adults. When it is time to celebrate the meal, the pastor says (from behind the Communion table), “All who believe in God and want to can receive Communion.” These are the only instructions. Baptism, as a prerequisite to receive the meal, is never mentioned—only belief.

The deacons of the church are the ones who bless the elements. Although the number varies, there are typically eight deacons on hand to serve the meal. They gather on both sides of the table with the pastor (as just mentioned) behind the table and between them. Another deacon will offer a prayer over the trays of wafers (they never use leavened bread), which are being held by the other deacons, and another will pray over the cups of juice immediately afterwards (they do not use wine). The deacons also prepare the meal the day before. Of particular interest is the fact that no one (other than members of the diaconate) is allowed to be in the room when they prepare the elements, nor is anyone allowed to touch the bread and juice before the worship service at which they are shared. At Imani, deacons are deacons for life. It is an office of honor and prestige.

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76 Two deacons hold the bread on each side of the table—likewise with the juice.
When it is time for the meal to be received, everyone stands. The elements are blessed and then the people are invited forward, row-by-row, as directed by the ushers. When they come forward, music is typically played but no one sings: neither the congregation, nor the choir, nor a soloist. When they come to the table, communicants receive a wafer from one deacon and a small cup of juice from another. They do not partake at that point, but return to their pews. When they get there, they sit down. Finally, once everyone is served, the deacons are served by the pastor. Once everyone is seated, people share “the bread” together when instructed. They do the same thing with “the wine” afterwards.

If people are unable to come forward because of physical limitations, then the deacons bring the elements to them in the pews. The deacons also serve Communion to anyone who is homebound or hospitalized on the same day that the congregation celebrates the sacrament. If someone requests Communion on a day other than Communion Sunday, the pastor typically brings it to them.

Although participants noted that their Communion services are meticulously organized and highly reverent, the pastor does not utilize a specific book of worship or resource for the liturgy. “She just says the words right off the top of her head,” one gentleman said. Her introductory words lead into the prayer of confession, which they only recite on Communion Sundays and it is always the same one. It is a

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77 With eight deacons on duty, there are four stations: each station has one deacon holding a tray of bread and another holding a tray of small cups of juice.
responsive piece adapted from a prayer by Joe Seremane, the South African politician and federal chairperson of the country’s principal opposition party, the Democratic Alliance.

**Pastor:** You asked for my hands that you might use them for your purposes. I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them, for the work was hard.

**Men:** You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice. I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.

**Women:** You asked for my eyes to see the pain of poverty. I closed them for I did not want to see…

**Pastor:** You asked for my life that you might work through me. I gave a small part that I might not get too involved.

**Men:** Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you only when it is convenient for me to do so.

**Women:** Only in those places where it is safe to do so, and only with those who make it easy to do so.

**Unison:** Lord, forgive us, renew us, send us out as usable instruments that we might take seriously the meaning of your Cross. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen! 

The assurance of pardon that follows is by Bishop Desmond Tutu.

**Pastor:** Goodness is stronger than evil; Love is stronger than hate; Light is stronger than darkness; Life is stronger than death; Victory is ours through Jesus Christ who loved us. Let all the people say:

**Unison:** THANKS BE TO GOD! 

After this, the entire congregation reads 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (NIV) in unison. The

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78 Unpublished eucharistic resource used by Imani United Church of Christ in Euclid, Ohio.

79 Ibid. NB: this prayer can also be found in Desmond Tutu’s *An African Prayer Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 80.
words are printed on the same bulletin insert on which one finds the above confession and words of absolution. Then the elements are blessed by the deacons and the meal is served.

The only other “written” part of the liturgy is an explanation of what Communion means to Imani UCC. For the purposes of this study, and to segue into what the focus group said about the meal’s meaning, I offer that printed explanation here.

“Holy Communion,” “The Eucharist,” or “The Lord’s Supper” is one of two Sacraments, the other being Christian Baptism, that Imani Church, along with most other churches, practices. A “Sacrament” is a Christian rite ordained by Jesus Christ that is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality. Jesus Christ left these practices on record in Holy Scripture for His disciples and followers (the Church), to practice. When Jesus began the practice of Holy Communion it was in the context of the Passover Meal where unleavened bread (bread baked without yeast) and wine were used. At Imani Church wafer (sic) of flower (sic) and water are used to symbolize the unleavened bread and grape juice is used to symbolize Christ’s blood. Holy Communion is open to all Christian Believers, including children who have acknowledged Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. When sick or unable to attend First Sunday Holy Communion Services, requests for visitation and/or Holy Communion may be directed to the Deacons’ Ministry through the Church Office.80

When asked what the meal means to them, the responses were somewhat varied, but focused, by and large, on the atonement, which is only hinted upon in the explanation above. As we went around the room, people made direct connections to the meal and Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. “This is something to be taken very

80 Ibid. It is odd that the wafer is said to symbolize unleavened bread since it is unleavened bread.
seriously,” one woman said, “because it is his body and blood that he sacrificed for us.” One older gentleman was brought to tears as he reflected on the cross and the connection to the meal. “When I receive Communion, that picture of the Last Supper always comes to my mind,” he said. “I think about the actions in that room—the sharing. I also think about the blood,” he continued. “There is so much power in blood. Jesus shed a lot of blood on the cross. There was an awful lot of blood.” Following him, one woman said that images from Mel Gibson’s 2004 film The Passion of the Christ come to mind when she receives the meal. Again, the focus was on the atonement, particularly the blood that was shed, which she (and the majority of the participants) connected to the juice they received. “All the pain, all the blood,” she reflected. “It brings me back to that place.”

When discussing the actual elements, those gathered did not use “presence” language nor would they pin down exactly how they felt Christ was “present” at the meal. One woman, who attended a Catholic school as a teenager although she was never Catholic, said, “We do not believe in transubstantiation, like Catholics do. We feel that the bread and the juice represent Jesus’ body and blood.” They use the words “body” and “blood” all the time, but in a symbolic fashion. In fact, the pastor actually says “this represents the body and blood of Christ” in the liturgy.

There was also a great deal of talk about forgiveness and feeling “unworthy.” One woman defined Communion as a washing away of her sin. “It is a serious reminder of my shortcomings and all that Jesus went through just for me,” another
woman said. “Therefore, sometimes I feel guilty when I take it. If I feel really guilty I will not take it. This is something that I cannot just do,” she said. “I take it very seriously.” There are people in the congregation who will not receive the meal if they feel tremendous guilt. That is their choice, though; it is not an ecclesial mandate.

One person made the connection between the sacrificial symbol at the heart of the meal and the cleansing it brings. He said, “I imagine the anxiousness that must have clouded that actual, historic meal on the night before he was crucified, especially for Jesus. We do not experience that anxiety today, but when we come to the table we reflect on it.” This makes the meal a serious, somber, and contemplative practice for them. The focus is on the atonement, the blood, and the sacrifice. This, in turn, offers pardon, they assert. It renews their spirits with a deep sense of forgiveness.

The reflective aspect of their practice is evident in other ways that point to cognition. When commenting on the fact that not everyone in the congregation gets up to receive the sacrament—for various reasons—two of the participants shared that they did not feel that they should receive Communion when they started attending Imani, because they did not feel they understood the meal enough. They felt as if they needed to be part of the church for a while before they communed. Again, this is not church doctrine; it is individual choice. They claimed that others at Imani felt the same way.

They also stated that they feel that their understanding of Communion reflects what their church believes as a whole. The focus, again, was on the sacrifice of Christ
and how the meal symbolized his passion. Atonement theology is imbued in the hymn that they sing every Communion Sunday. “I Knew it Was the Blood” is not in the hymnal that Imani uses, but “everyone in the congregation knows it by heart.”

That was all they said about the congregation’s understanding of the meal.

They did mention, however, that Communion has been practiced pretty much the same way since the church was formed eighteen years prior. Imani has become a younger church since Pastor Humphrey was called; it was an older congregation during the tenure of her predecessor and the church founder, Pastor Norwood. Regardless, they claimed that the practice and understanding of this sacrament has not changed with pastors or with the demographics of the congregation becoming younger. They did note that their attendance always seems to be higher on Communion Sunday. “Communion is very important to us as a congregation,” one person said. “It unites us with Christ and one another. People come out for it.”

This prompted the question that if it were up to them, would they celebrate Communion every week? With the exception of one man, everyone else said “No!” quite emphatically. “It would be out of place if we did it any other way.”

VII: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the findings from focus groups that represent five congregations in the United Church of Christ: again, one from each of the denominations that united in 1957 to form the UCC and one that joined the
denomination after the merger. More specifically, I have offered a description of how these churches celebrate the Eucharist and what meanings they attribute to the meal. At this juncture these findings have not been analyzed in any comparative way to ascertain what qualitative researcher Michael Q. Patton would call elements of convergence and divergence. I will offer such an analysis, based on qualitative research methods, in the following chapter.
CHAPTER TWO

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

I: Introduction

Part of the practical theologian’s task is to provide a thick description of the practice under investigation and the community engaged in that practice. The religious practices in which faith communities engage reflect, embody, and enact the beliefs of the community. Practices also shape faith. According to Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, practices enable a community to “rehearse a way of life.” They write: “A Christian community gathered at worship is a community gathered for rehearsal.” Thought and action are woven together as a community rehearses the divine drama. The community is rehearsing the story that it has received from God. Study of the practices of faith communities is critical for understanding a community’s theological life. Kathryn Tanner describes the nature of Christian practices:

[T]he diversity of Christian practices are unified in a task. Christian practices are engaged in the same task in that, first of all, they tend to revolve around a similar set of claims and ritual actions (for instance, biblical claims, the basic ritual forms to be found in most Christian churches), claims and ritual actions that because of their lack of definition amount in practice to a similar set of questions to be answered in the effort to be true to God. Who Jesus was, the difference he made in human life, the practices and beliefs that came into the

world with him, are understood to be of crucial significance for how one is to live.\textsuperscript{82}

Practices also respond to fundamental human needs. As Dykstra and Bass assert, ecclesial practices—including, for example, worship, teaching, evangelism, mission, and pastoral care—enable “concrete help for human flourishing that is informed by basic Christian beliefs about who human beings really are and what God is doing in the world.”\textsuperscript{83} Practices also alert us to God’s intent for us: “Christian practices address needs that are basic to human existence as such, and they do so in ways that reflect God’s purposes for humankind.”\textsuperscript{84} Thus, reflection on practices, which are always theory-laden, is a vital dimension of the tasks of theology and ministry.

In order to provide a thick description of a community’s practice, the researcher may utilize the tools of qualitative research methods to glean this information in a constructive and reliable manner. Totally objectivity is not possible in qualitative research, nor should it be a guiding principle. “Qualitative inquiry, because the human being is the instrument of data collection, requires that the investigator carefully reflect on, deal with, and report potential sources of bias and error... Qualitative inquiry depends on, uses, and enhances the researcher’s direct

\textsuperscript{82} Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 153.


\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 21.
experiences in the world and insights about those experiences.

However, the responsible accumulation of what the community being studied does and what they believe about those practices should calibrate the compass for the practical theologian. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat provide an excellent resource that compares the aims of practical theology as a discipline and the techniques used by qualitative research methods to empower practical theologians to “articulate our initial observations and identify the primary issues that will be explored during the research process.”

The previous chapter presented, with minor interpretive commentary, the focus group research with the five congregations. Having illustrated the practice and understanding of Communion in five churches, we need to analyze the practices comparatively before we ascertain any common and disparate meanings. In this chapter I code, categorize, and classify this information to see what congruent patterns emerge from the data. This work is a pertinent component of descriptive theology. As Don S. Browning writes, “Practical theology describes practices in order to discern the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our action and provoke the questions that animate our practical thinking.”

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II: Comparative Analysis of Eucharistic Practices

In his book on six common themes and practices in the United Church of Christ, Sidney D. Fowler discusses the diverse ways that Communion is celebrated within local churches:

The number of times a church celebrates Holy Communion ranges from seldom to weekly, but it is usually celebrated monthly. Some use a common loaf of bread and a cup; others use wafers and small communion cups. Some receive communion in the pews, others join together at the front of the worship space. Some congregations reserve communion for those who are baptized and confirmed, while others invite all regardless of baptism or confirmation. Increasingly, children are welcome to communion at their parent’s discretion.  

This diversity of practice is reflected in the focus groups from the five representative UCC congregations with which I worked.

All five of these churches celebrate the sacrament once a month—on the first Sunday of the month. This seems to be the norm in UCC congregations that hail from the denomination’s distinct antecedent traditions and in churches located in different geographical regions of the country. There are some exceptions, of course. Evangelical United Church of Christ in Webster Groves, Missouri provides an early service at which Communion is available every week. Some claim that this is to afford a more frequent eucharistic service for former Catholics.  


89 According to some estimates, forty percent of the people entering the UCC from other faith traditions are Roman Catholic. For a detailed analysis of this trend, and how the denomination is seeking to offer a healthy transition to former Catholics, see the monograph Catholics in the United Church of Christ by J. Mary Luti and Andrew B. Warner (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).
offered at special events, such as the annual women’s retreat at the First Congregational Church in Kittery Point, Maine. Many UCC churches celebrate Communion on Maundy Thursday (at which it is received via intinction regardless of how it is practiced throughout the year) and special seasonal services—the most common being Christmas Eve (often it is a supplemental service) and an Easter sunrise service. It is interesting to note that Imani was the only church that held a Maundy Thursday service at which Communion is not usually celebrated. Also, the Maundy Thursday service held at Evangelical UCC is an ecumenical service: they break bread with a splinter Catholic congregation that is housed within their building.

Most congregations receive the sacrament while seated in pews. This practice has its roots in the Congregational tradition. As will be discussed in chapter four, the Puritans “received [the elements] in a seated position, because kneeling was viewed as implying ‘a worshipping of the bread.’”

Trays of bread (sometimes a piece of the loaf used by the pastor in the consecratory act is placed on the trays) and trays containing small Communion cups are circulated by deacons to congregants seated in pews. Most people eat the bread together when instructed, and do the same afterwards with the cup. Some churches instruct communicants to come forward and receive the sacrament via intinction. When they do, they take a piece of bread

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91 I have seen several UCC churches that encourage people to eat the bread when they are served to symbolize each person’s individual relationship with God, but to hold the cup and drink in unison to symbolize the covenantal connectedness they share with one another and Christ.
from a common loaf (or a pre-cut piece of bread) and dip it into the chalice. Imani was the only UCC congregation (of the ones with which I worked) that used the more “Catholic” unleavened wafers.

Typically, churches use plain white bread that is cut into cubes or they use a common loaf with a thicker crust. Some churches use a variety of breads from different cultures on World Communion Sunday, the first Sunday of October. All the churches in this study use grape juice to be inclusive of children and alcoholics. This is becoming a common custom in the UCC. At least one person in each of these groups expressed a desire to either use wine exclusively or at least as a supplement to grape juice. The desire was not just to “have alcohol in church,” as one person joked, but to be more faithful to the original meal shared by Jesus and his disciples.⁹² Some congregations in the UCC do offer both. If they serve Communion by intinction, they have two chalices: one with grape juice, the other with wine. If parishioners are served from trays, there is typically an outer ring that contains cups of juice and an inner ring that offers fermented red wine. The coloring of the liquid is slightly different (i.e. the juice is usually a darker hue) to clarify the distinction.⁹³

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⁹² Although it was not articulated, it may be that members from these focus groups want to use fermented wine as a sign of ecumenical solidarity as well.

⁹³ There is a trend towards using white wine and/or grape juice in many congregations today. The groups with which I worked did not mention employing white wine or juice. The assumption is that the color of the juice they do use (red) is a more cogent symbol of Christ’s blood. See, for example, the connections made between the shed blood and the red juice at Imani UCC in the previous chapter.
Music plays an important role in the celebration of Communion. In many churches, people receive the sacrament while the organist plays an instrumental piece. In some instances, the choir sings while people are served. As at the Evangelical Congregation outside Saint Louis, people sometimes sing when coming forward and, at times, clap their hands. The different practices when it comes to music reflect a specific tenor in each church: *is the meal a somber, reflective practice or is it a more joyful, festive experience?* Although contemporary scholars of the liturgy, such as Laurence Hull Stookey, encourage us not to see the meal as “a funeral for Jesus,” the piety that is central to the Congregational and Christian tradition, as well as the liturgical reverence found in the Evangelical and Reformed Church, makes it arduous for their heirs to celebrate the Eucharist otherwise.\(^9^4\) It is not so much that the meal is seen as exclusively somber, at least not with these focus groups, as much as it is an occasion to be solemn and contemplative. Regardless of the tone of the music that is offered during the reception of the meal, a Communion hymn is often incorporated into the order of worship for Communion Sunday. There are several in *The New Century Hymnal*, as well as in the various hymnals that are also utilized by UCC congregations. Some of the more popular selections are traditional pieces, such as “Let Us Break Bread Together,” which is in the *Pilgrim Hymnal*.\(^9^5\) Some are more recent, upbeat

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\(^9^5\) The *Pilgrim Hymnal*, which will be discussed in detail in section two of chapter four, was a widely used resource in the Congregational Christian tradition prior to the publication of *The New Century Hymnal*. It is still used in many UCC congregations.
offerings, such as “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ,” a popular New Century Hymnal piece used by many UCC congregations. Regardless of what is sung (or not sung), all five churches touched upon music as a vital component of the eucharistic liturgy.

Two interesting topics that arose from our discussions were who presides over the sacrament and who prepares and serves the meal? The United Church of Christ has little jurisdiction over beliefs and practices within local congregations, but Associations do monitor pastoral conduct and maintain clergy licensure. The UCC’s Constitution and Bylaws clearly states that the denomination recognizes that “God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required.” The principal duties of ministers in the UCC are to preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments, and provide pastoral care. The Manual on Ministry clarifies the distinction between fully ordained, commissioned, and licensed ministers. Ecclesial authorization to a specific ministry (be it ordained, commissioned, or licensed) is required to celebrate the Eucharist. Most local churches in the UCC understand and observe this ecclesiastical requisite, although

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97 Each of the thirty-eight Conferences in the United Church of Christ is divided into Associations, which are comprised of local churches. Each Association has a Church and Ministry Committee that oversees the licensure of pastors and the ordination process for seminarians.


some struggle with it. A perfect example is Evangelical UCC. They require (in accordance with the rules and regulations of the denomination) that only ordained pastors officiate at the Eucharist. When their pastor is unavailable, an ordained person leads the congregation in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Even if a lay person serves as the guest preacher, an ordained member (usually an employee of the neighboring Eden Theological Seminary) or a guest minister is assigned the task for the day. As noted in the previous chapter, one person found this to be impertinent. “We are egalitarian in all ways, but when it comes to Communion only certain people can officiate. Do we really believe that such people have special powers to turn the bread and juice into a sacrament?” The UCC does not believe in the power of certain persons to make Communion efficacious. However, they do believe that ministerial training and oversight better ensure proper administration of Holy Communion.

Evangelical UCC is not the only church with which I worked that insists on having an ordained person preside over the meal. The Christian Church in Swansea made it apparent: “The person who presides over Communion has to be ordained.” The First Congregational Church in Kittery was less stringent about the rule, because “it never really came up.” It is important to note, however, that this is the congregation that also celebrates Communion at their annual women’s retreat without an ordained minister present. That fact was of no concern to anyone in the group, including some of the women who are regular attendees of the event.
Imani UCC probably has the most formal process for serving Communion of all five congregations. Not only are ordained clergy to preside over the sacrament at Imani, but the diaconate plays a more exclusive role than deacons in most other UCC congregations. The churches from the Congregational, Christian, and Evangelical traditions have deacons who prepare and serve the sacrament. The Reformed church has a consistory that is comprised of deacons as well as elders. The practice is the same, though: they prepare and serve the bread and the cup. At Imani, however, the deacons prepare the sacrament in seclusion: no one is even allowed to be in the room the day that they get everything ready. It is also the deacons who are the only ones served by the pastor and they offer the blessing over the elements. One is a member of the Imani diaconate for an indefinite term, which is typically the case for pastors in UCC congregations. All the other congregations with which I worked have term limits for their deacons. Being a relatively new congregation to the United Church of Christ may explicate this difference: this might be an African-American tradition that this congregation has brought to the UCC. There is no reference to such a historic practice in the work of African-American liturgical scholar Melva Wilson Costen, for example. However, it is pertinent to note that African worship modes, though not homogeneous, have their common roots in continental tribal practices and within pre-Civil War slave culture in America. Such worship did not necessarily include

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clergy or designated worship leaders. Many leaders and liturgical expressions melded
together to form diverse worship experiences. The same reality is found at Imani,
who imbue more authority in their deacons than many UCC congregations.

All the churches with which I worked—with the exception of Evangelical
UCC—normally allocate the consecration and distribution of the eucharistic elements
to specific persons: pastors and deacons. Those who assist the pastor in serving the
meal at Evangelical UCC are chosen from the congregation at random by the pastor
just prior to the actual sharing of the meal.

What was unforeseen in my field research were the practices that were unique
to specific congregations—practices only exercised on Communion Sunday. Recall
the “Circle of Love” that concludes the Communion service at the Christian Church
in Swansea, or the more somber votive candle lighting that members of Evangelical
UCC find to be either “deeply spiritual” or “too Catholic.” The Reformed Church
has a special offering that is collected on Communion Sunday. There are other
congregations that do the same—the money received going towards a special
outreach fund. Some UCC churches have mission moments on the days they
celebrate the Eucharist and others connect the Supper to a potluck meal that the
congregation shares afterwards, a reflection of the agape feast in the Early Church.
There are many reasons why such practices are part of the liturgy on Communion
Sunday. Two of the above emphasize a theme that will be discussed at length in the
next section, but it is helpful to touch upon it here.
Among its various meanings, Communion is about *community* and the bonds that unite us as a church family. Those bonds are nurtured at Christ’s table. Following a set common liturgy yet inculturating it to make it more personal to their particular contexts, both the Christian Church (Swansea) and the Evangelical Church (Webster Groves) illustrate their covenantal unity in tangible ways. Holding hands while facing one another and singing the first stanza of “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” the members of First Congregational Christian UCC actually *embody* the communal theology that is intricately woven into the holy meal. As Gabriel Fackre writes, “Koinonia is the life together of sister and brother in Christ, *being* the story.”

The stanza they sing is illustrative of this:

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Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.
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The unity they share is a reflection of God’s Tri-unity. “The Lord’s Supper discloses what human life by God’s grace is intended to be—a life together in mutual sharing and love.” The candles that are lit after Communion (by those who so desire) at Evangelical UCC are not just individual, votive prayers. They are a way of making a connection between the past and the present. They are a way of illustrating the

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transcendent unity that is actualized at the table. As Daniel L. Migliore observes, “The Lord’s Supper gathers together the past, present, and future of God’s creative and redemptive work.”104 Such practices are clearly theory-laden, imbued with theological significance.

Lastly, I would like to examine the practice of serving Communion to homebound members or those who are in hospitals or nursing care facilities. Laurence Hull Stookey discusses this practice at length in the first of two appendices in his text, Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church. After rhetorically asking if “worshippers assembled on Sunday have a true sense of Christian community when, in fact, members of that community are thus hidden from the corporate consciousness” because they homebound, Stookey offers a systematic method of distributing the elements and connecting the delivery to the Sunday liturgy by incorporating the names of the servers and those being served into a eucharistic prayer at the end of the service.105 I asked all five focus groups if they have such a program in their respective congregations. Evangelical UCC stated that the pastor brings Communion to people who are sick or shut-in, but they do not have a program that includes laity, as Stookey suggests. Similarly, the participants of the Kittery Point focus group said that they used to have a lay Communion distribution program in place, but now the pastor does it alone. Once in a while someone will

104 Ibid., 288.

accompany him, but, more often than not it is a friend (not necessarily a deacon, church leader, or member of a team that brings Communion to shut-ins) of the recipient. The Christian church in Swansea said that they are currently putting together a program that will include the deacons and the pastor.

The First Reformed Church and Imani UCC have the most formal programs of the five churches. Some members of the Reformed church focus group are part of the Communion visitation team, which brings the sacrament to shut-ins every other month. They spoke at length about how humbling it is to the members of the consistory who participate in this program and how meaningful it is to those they serve. The Imani church ensures that homebound or hospitalized members receive the meal on Communion Sunday to create a unity between the congregation and those who are unable to attend. They do this each month.

The distribution of Communion to homebound members who wish to receive the sacrament is one that extends the definition of “church” beyond the walls where people worship on Sunday so that they can be the people of God more fully. It unites the community in ways that sharing the sacrament in the sanctuary alone does not. And, as is the case with persons from the Reformed church in Greensburg, those who serve are often humbled beyond words, which, in itself, can lead to deeper spiritual growth.
III: Comparative Analysis of Eucharistic Understandings

The main theme that arose from the focus group discussions was the sense of community that the Eucharist creates and nourishes. For the members of the First Congregational Church of Kittery in Kittery Point, Maine, the sense of community that the meal engenders was the principal meaning of the meal. Their understanding of koinonia was actually quite inclusive. It is as if there are three concentric circles that encapsulate the levels of community they find in the Eucharist.

The inner (red) circle represents their congregation: the members and visitors that attend either of their Sunday services. The Eucharist unites them as a family, as a covenantal community. In fact, as one person claimed, when attendees choose not to receive the sacrament it is as if they are “outside the circle.” The middle (blue) circle

![Diagram of concentric circles representing community levels]

Figure 1
represents the Church Universal. As with all five focus groups, the members of
the Kittery Point Church hail from several different denominations. (Indeed, this is
the case for the United Church of Christ in general: it is an amalgam of Christians.)
The members of this focus group stated that they felt united with Christians in all
times and places when they break bread and share the cup. This was also the case
with the Evangelical United Church of Christ in Webster Groves, Missouri. These
were the two most liberal churches with which I worked. Just the same, they see this
meal as an ecumenical feast. In The Living Theological Heritage, the UCC has essentially
codified this position. Being an experiment in ecumenism and a united and unifying
church, “ecumenicity is not an option for us; rather it is a mandate that prohibits a
restrictive view that would separate mission from unity, or unity from mission.”

Yet there is a third circle (black). This circle represents the world, which
includes non-Christians. There were members of both the Kittery Point and the
Evangelical groups that identified the eucharistic symbolism as pointing to sharing
bread beyond the church. In fact, one member of the latter group stated, “I feel a
connectedness with the divine and with all who are connected to the divine.” She
specified that this certainly includes those outside of the Christian community. One

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106 By “Church Universal” I mean all people who are members of a Christian Church,
regardless of denominational divisions and differences. A common belief in the United Church of
Christ (and other denominations) is that all Christians become part of the ecumenical body of Christ
through the sacrament of baptism. Holy Communion affirms this unity.

107 The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ, vol. 7, ed. Frederick R. Trost and
Barbara Brown Zikmund (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 571. The Living Theological Heritage is a
seven volume series that anthologizes the history, theology, and polity of the UCC, as well as many
of the social justice movements in which the denomination has played a role.
could argue that this is an embedded belief in all of these churches. All five groups (the four that were part of the 1957 merger as well as the Imani congregation) stated that baptism is not a requirement for receiving Communion in their congregations. The debate about baptism being a prerequisite for receiving the Eucharist is a topic of disputation within some churches and denominations. It is generally accepted that baptism is a necessary precursor to receiving the Lord’s Supper. This raises the question: if any of these churches required baptism as a requisite, precursory sacrament, would they feel as if they were sharing the Eucharist with the non-Christian world? The Imani Church was the only congregation that requires “belief in Christ” as conditional to celebrating the meal. That said, the general perception was that to be fully inclusive—as the UCC strives to be—then the table that lies at the heart of our identity is not only open to all people, but it is the means by which we achieve ecumenical (and some would say interfaith) unity.

In a recent article on the practice and understanding of Communion in the United Church of Christ, Peter Schmiechen, former professor of theology and president of the UCC affiliated Lancaster Theological Seminary, writes,

the key to the Eucharist is captured in the word so often used to name the service: communion. In Eucharist we are in communion with the living Christ, which means we always remember that he was crucified and raised by God, that this act is part of God’s history of salvation, and that the focus is as much on the present and future as the past, as much on the redemption of the whole world as acts of grace are extended to individuals.108

The unity achieved through Communion—the establishment and maintenance of community with God and one another, and possibly those outside the Christian circle—is probably the predominant understanding of the sacrament in the united and uniting UCC. Fowler develops this point further in his text on UCC practices and beliefs. Fowler states, “At Holy Communion, we do share a simple meal of bread and wine. Yet in the meal, we experience the presence of Christ again. Together, around God’s welcome table, we recall God’s loving acts especially in Jesus [and] experience our oneness in Christ.”109 Such unity was the most common understanding of the sacrament offered by these five focus groups.

Another common theme that was expressed within these groups was that the Eucharist is a means of forgiveness. Later in this dissertation the influence that the sixteenth-century Reformation theologian Martin Bucer would have on the theology of the Eucharist in the UCC will be examined. Suffice it to say at this juncture that Bucer believed that the Lord’s Supper offered forgiveness of sins, among other meanings.110 The members of these focus groups did indicate that a sense of spiritual cleansing accompanied the reception of Holy Communion. One of the participants in the Kittery Point group stated that “The meal purifies us. It takes away my guilt.” In a like manner, one of the members of the Reformed Church in Greensburg,

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109 Fowler, 33.

Pennsylvania noted his sins of omission and commission and how the Eucharist offers pardon. “It is spiritual uplifting,” he noted, “because I truly feel that my sins of omission and commission are forgiven. I truly feel forgiven and I am at peace.” It is interesting to note that such a theology, though not exclusively tied to the Eucharist, is part of the UCC’s understanding of absolution. In the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” in the 1986 Book of Worship: United Church of Christ, which will be examined in depth in chapter six, the primary confession of sin states, “We confess that we are captive to sin, that our sin binds us with false pride, and that the wrong we do is made worse by the good we leave undone.”

Similar prayers are found in the “Service of the Word I” as well as in the general resources found in the appendix to the Book of Worship. Members of the Imani Church stressed the connection between the meal and the cross with the emphasis being the pardon achieved through Christ’s passion. One person claimed that Communion “is a washing away of my sin.” Not much discussion along these lines was expressed in the focus group from the First Congregational Christian UCC in Swansea, Massachusetts, but it was raised in the progressive Evangelical UCC. One woman reflected—in somber tones punctuated by dramatic silences—that the Lord’s Supper “is about forgiveness.” She believes that it offers her not just an assurance of pardon, but a reassurance that “she is ok” the way she is.

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In terms of the cross, the more conservative focus groups made solid connections between the Supper and the *atonement*. Many remarked on the Gospel narrative—that the meal was instituted “on the night of betrayal and desertion”—and spoke of the cross as being inseparable from the meal. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Imani focus group made the strongest connections between the two. Members spoke of images from Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper” and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* as coming to their consciousness when they partook of the meal. They also mentioned how the only prerequisite in their church for receiving the Supper is that they have to believe. When I probed further asking, “Believe what?” many said, “That Jesus died on the cross for you.” However, the Communion insert they have on the first Sunday of each month only states that “Holy Communion is open to all Christian Believers, including children who have acknowledged Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”112 This is not to suggest that the members of the focus group are in error. It may be for them, and other members of this church, that seeing Jesus as “Savior and Lord” is inseparable from the atonement. Clear connections were made in their spiritual lexicon between the blood of Christ and the eucharistic wine (juice). “Jesus sacrificed his body for us,” one person said. “Communion is about that.” Members of First Reformed in Greensburg, Pennsylvania offered a similar theology. Although there seemed to be

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112 Unpublished Eucharistic resource used by Imani United Church of Christ in Euclid, Ohio.
less of a consensus in this group, as opposed to the unanimity found at Imani, there were still those who articulated a clear connection between the bread and the cup and the sacrifice of Christ. “It represents the sacrifice that Christ made for us,” one person claimed. “It represents his body and his blood.” Building on this, a member of the same group stated, when asked what the words “body and blood” meant to them, that “The body of Christ and the blood of Christ means that Jesus died.” The same person added that these are “symbolic words.” In contrast, no one in the more liberal Evangelical UCC in Webster Groves, Missouri mentioned the connection between the cross and the Eucharist. The only thing they said about the “body and blood” is that such language enables a myriad of understandings to coexist in their congregation. In other words, participants can apply whatever meaning they want to the meal by employing this language, which can be symbolic, literal, or something all together different.

The group from the Christian Church in Swansea did not speak at length about the sacrificial overtones in the meal, although one person did reflect, “The bread is the body of Christ. The juice is the blood of Christ. We absorb it and think about what he went through. He gave his life for us on the cross.” Using almost identical language (save the poetic “absorb”), a member of the Kittery Point focus group—the first person to offer an explanation of what the meal means—said, “It reminds us that Jesus sacrificed himself for us.” Later in our discussion, someone in
the same group stated that this sacrament is a “commemoration of what Jesus did for us.”

One of the other ideas that surfaced in regards to people’s understanding of the meal is correlated to the UCC’s recent advertising campaign. This was touched upon briefly above, but it requires further analysis.

In the fall of 2004, the United Church of Christ launched its “God is Still Speaking” campaign to market itself as a church that extravagantly welcomes everyone. The slogan “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” has not only been used in a plethora of advertising media (print, radio, television, and the internet); it is also employed in many local UCC congregations as part of the invitation to the Lord’s Supper. It is language that is quite familiar to the members of the Evangelical and Kittery Point focus groups. In the previously mentioned text, Sid Fowler explains that this is not just an advertising mantra. It is quite biblical and is reflective of Jesus’ ministry of hospitality. “In gratitude because God welcomes us, we are called to make bold stands. On behalf of and along with those who remain oppressed, suffering, alienated, and poor in God’s world, we speak and act.”113 Fowler goes on to quote the UCC’s former General Minister and President, The Rev. John Thomas, who said, “It’s not an extravagant welcome to an ‘anything goes’ religion, a comfortable form of Christianity, but to a

113 Fowler, 13.
costly form of discipleship.”  Thomas’ observation is rich. There are two parts to it: the notion of being an anything goes religion and costly discipleship. We will reflect upon the first half of the statement as it relates to how these churches understand the meaning of the Eucharist.

In their quest to be a more open and extravagant church, the UCC is often criticized as being an “anything goes” denomination. Fringe movements within the UCC—such as Biblical Witness Fellowship, Confessing Christ, and Faithful and Welcoming Churches—are calling the UCC to be more biblically-based, creedal, Christ-centered, and to embrace more traditional values, particularly in regards to abortion and homosexuality. Others mockingly claim that UCC actually stands for “Unitarians Considering Christ.” In other words, the UCC’s theology is so liberal it is more akin to Unitarianism, which embraces, among other doctrines, a pluralistic perception of soteriology and often rejects the divinity of Jesus. The central critique being that people can subscribe to nontraditional Christian beliefs in UCC churches and can practice the faith however they wish. This is true, in the sense that the UCC’s polity empowers local churches, which are autonomous, to be self-governing. When it comes to resolutions that are passed at General Synod, for example, each congregation can decide which ones they will accept, reject, and ignore. Furthermore, the UCC Statement of Faith is not a test of faith, but rather a testimony of the core tenets that unite its members. Each congregation can decide who can

114 John Thomas quoted in Fowler, 13.
receive the Eucharist. A recent evangelism pamphlet on Communion published by the denomination quotes the 1986 *Book of Worship* in an attempt to answer the question who can receive Communion in the UCC. It states, “In most United Church of Christ local churches the communion table is ‘open to all Christians who wish to know the presence of Christ and to share in the community of God’s people.’” The same resource notes that in most denominations “baptized children and even infants are able to receive communion. Practice in the United Church of Christ varies, but increasingly children are welcomed to the Table at their parents’ discretion following a period of instruction about the sacrament’s meaning.”

The Reformed Church with which I worked was the only congregation that required confirmation as a prerequisite for youth to receive the meal, yet even this church did not stress the need for communicants to be baptized before coming to the table. The other four churches said that all people are welcome to the table without reservation. Only Imani said that communicants need to believe in Jesus.

This lengthy explication serves to tease out an understanding of the Eucharist that is somewhat problematic in certain local UCC congregations. Can communicants believe anything they want and still receive the meal? If baptism is not a necessary rite in order to receive Communion, then how is faith nurtured by the

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115 “Communion” pamphlet from *Practices of Faith in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: Local Church Ministries), published within the last decade though no copyright date is listed.

116 Ibid.

117 This is contradictory, because both the Reformed heritage and the United Church of Christ require people to be baptized before they are confirmed.
Eucharist within a setting that does not require any precursory sacrament of initiation? These issues point to the problem of normativity in the United Church of Christ, as noted in the introduction. They also illustrate the tension between setting practical/doctrinal standards while being truly inclusive to all people, which is clearly a concern in the UCC.

**IV: Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction, these five churches do not reflect how all local UCC churches practice the Eucharist, nor do they encapsulate what all congregations believe about it. Representing a fair cross-section (theological as well as geographical), however, they do give us a glimpse into the various ways the sacrament is practiced and understood in the denomination. Such work is part of the qualitative research endeavor: digging deep within a small sample to gain a rich description of its practices.

The following three chapters move to historical theology as they examine selected resources that were part of the history of these churches before they became part of the United Church of Christ—resources that would influence the publication of the UCC’s *Book of Worship*. As stated earlier, practices reflect the beliefs that congregations hold. Having looked at the practice of Communion in five churches, we delve into the resources that have been formative as part of their respective traditions. Browning notes: “Different churches have different classics; they base
their identity on different scriptural and creedal selections.” In terms of eucharistic practice and theology, some communities hold fast to specific liturgical texts. Others have little sense of their heritage and use a variety of liturgical resources—some from their tradition, some not. Even in the case of the latter, the community is often influenced by their “classics” (whether those texts are part of their collective memory or not) in ways they may not understand or be able to articulate. Examining these historic texts not only illuminates the influence they would have on the 1986 *Book of Worship*, but doing so also provides access to the ancestors of the churches examined in chapters one and two. Analyzing those texts may illumine the beliefs and practices of those congregations and may provide important resources for constructive work around a Eucharistic theology in the United Church of Christ.

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118 Browning, 49.
CHAPTER THREE
ANTECEDENT RESOURCES: THE EVANGELICAL
AND REFORMED CHURCH

I: Introduction

In his study *United and Uniting: The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey*, the late United Church of Christ scholar Louis H. Gunneman wrote, “For the Evangelical and Reformed and the Congregational Christian people, the union of their church bodies was understood as a faithful response to the prayer of the Christ ‘that all may be one.’”\(^{119}\) Gunneman, however, also acknowledges, “The realization that union achieved is not in itself unity, however, comes slowly and somewhat painfully as the church seeks to respond in faithfulness to God’s call.”\(^{120}\) As the 1957 merger approached, the process was somewhat tender. The Congregational Christian Churches (CC) feared that they would have to sacrifice their democratic polity when they united with their German and Swiss Evangelical and Reformed (E&R) sisters and brothers, who subscribed to a more Presbyterian form of governance. In turn, the latter fretted about the absence of creeds and confessions within Congregationalism as well as their alleged relegation of the sacraments to a status secondary to the Word. As children of the Mercersburg Movement (to be discussed


\(^{120}\) Ibid.
later in this chapter), the E&R Church—particularly the Reformed root—was known as a “more highly liturgical movement” within North American Christianity.121

The Evangelical and Reformed Church was formed in 1934 when two separate denominations, the German Reformed Church of the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America, merged. Their roots extend back to eighteenth-century Germany. The Reformed Church, which followed the teachings of Calvin, was formed in 1793 from German immigrants who established congregations in the newly established United States. The Evangelical Synod of North America, which subscribed to Lutheran and Reformed beliefs, was primarily a Midwestern denomination that was established in 1872 by German immigrants as well. During their twenty-three year union, the E&R Church was known for promoting liberty of individual conscience, Christian charity (they established many hospitals and schools), and the authority of the Scriptures over all else. Gunnemann argues that “The German experience in America is…the context of Evangelical and Reformed history.”122

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In this chapter, key resources that were utilized within the E&R tradition prior to the 1957 merger are examined.\(^\text{123}\)

**II: Order of Worship for the Reformed Church (1867)**

Sixty-seven years before the merger that birthed the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and ninety years before the E&R Church joined the Congregational Christian Churches to form the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church published the *Order of Worship for the Reformed Church*. In it there are two separate (though complementary) orders for Holy Communion. The first, entitled “Preparation for the Holy Communion,” a complete service in itself, comes before the service that includes the actual reception of the Eucharist. These services will be examined separately.

The “Preparation for the Holy Communion” is a thirteen page order that prepares congregants to receive the sacrament. The service commences with commandments from the Old and New Covenants. After taking his place at “the altar,” the officiant reads the Ten Commandments and then the Great Commandment from the New Testament: to love God wholeheartedly and one’s neighbor as one’s self. The law revealed to Moses “is now published unto

\(^{123}\) I was directed to the resources that I will examine in this chapter (and in the next two) by Thomas E. Dipko. It is well known throughout the United Church of Christ that Dipko was the principal writer of the 1986 *Book of Worship*. The antecedent resources that I am analyzing here (and in chapters four and five) had, according to him, the most profound influence on the Communion liturgies in *Book of Worship*. 
us...through the Mediator of a new and better covenant.”\textsuperscript{124} From the outset, the order establishes the authority of Christ and the Reformed Church’s adherence to the Nicene defense of the Trinity. As part of the opening litany, the minister states: “O God the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son; have mercy upon us.”\textsuperscript{125} This Nicene Trinitarian understanding is reiterated in the second service, in which the sacrament is actually received. The Nicene petition introduces a lengthy prayer of deliverance (which contains no mention of the Eucharist) that follows immediately after the references to the biblical commandments and the Trinity.

Following the prayer of deliverance, a Psalm or hymn is sung, the sermon is offered, and then the minister expounds upon the meaning of the meal. According to this exposition, there are a half a dozen meanings to Communion:

1. Our blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, when He was about to finish the work of redemption, by making Himself a sacrifice for our sins upon the cross, solemnly instituted the Holy Sacrament of His own Body and Blood;

2. that it might be the abiding memorial of His precious death;

3. the seal of His perpetual presence in the Church by the Holy Ghost;

4. the mystical exhibition of His one offering of Himself made once, but of force always, to put away sin;

5. the pledge of His undying love to His people;


\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
6. and the bond of His living union and fellowship with them to the end of
time.126

This is followed by a reading of the scriptural words of institution and an exhortation
which further expounds upon the meaning of the supper. The exhortation states,

It has not been without reason, therefore, that the celebration of the Holy
Eucharist has ever been regarded by the Church as the inmost sanctuary of
the whole Christian worship. We have to do here, not with outward signs
only, but with the heavenly realities themselves which these signs represent.
Our Lord Himself calls the bread His body, and the cup His blood, or the new
testament in His blood.127

It is apparent in this tradition that the meal as symbol participates in that which it
signifies. The bread is the body of Christ. The cup is the blood of Christ. The
writers of the Reformed Order use the Pauline directives from 1 Corinthians 11 to
cautions those who approach the table. Paul’s admonition to the Christians in Corinth
was directed to the corporate body to eliminate abuses of class distinction and
oppression. Here it is a charge for a corporate act of contrition: “it is plain that the
Lord’s Supper can be rightly and safely approached only by those who are of a truly
devout and religious mind.”128 On the other hand, those who are unrepentant are
sternly warned: “being without repentance and faith, and yielding yourselves to the
power of worldly affections and lusts, we solemnly warn and admonish you...Ye

126 Ibid., 164-165. The enumeration of these six points is mine. It does not appear
enumerated in the actual liturgy.
127 Ibid., 165.
128 Ibid., 165-166.
cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils; ye cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the tables of devils.” These lengthy instructions, from 1 Corinthians 10:21, lead directly into the prayer of confession, which is corporate.

The prayer of contrition, over a page in length, flows with exquisite poetic language and cadence. Not only does the confession apologize for sins committed in “thought, word, and deed,” it specifically states, “We acknowledge and bewail before Thee, the corruption of our nature, the vanity of our minds, the waywardness of our hearts, the wanderings and apostasies of our whole fallen life. Righteousness belongeth unto Thee, O Lord; and unto us only confusion of face.” The prayer is followed by the pastor offering the declaration of pardon. Rooted in the Gospels, particularly Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, the minister pronounces to the congregation (who have been kneeling in supplication since the confession), “I declare, by the authority of the Gospel, that all your sins are remitted and forgiven, through the perfect satisfaction of the most holy passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The service concludes with the recitation of a doxology and the pronouncement of the benediction.

As stated above, this service does not include the actual reception of the elements. It prepares adherents to receive the bread and the cup in the order that

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129 Ibid., 166.
130 Ibid., 169.
131 Ibid., 170.
follows. Interestingly enough, that order begins where the previous one ends: with a prayer of confession. Of particular interest is that this prayer of confession (about half the length of the previous one) elucidates and reiterates what appears to be the Reformed Church’s understanding of the Eucharist, as illuminated in the previous order.

Dearly Beloved in the Lord: If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let us therefore humble ourselves before the throne of Almighty God, our heavenly Father, and confess our manifold sins and transgressions with lowly and contrite hearts, that we may obtain forgiveness of the same through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who dost admit Thy people unto such wonderful communion, that partaking of the Body and Blood of Thy dear Son, they should dwell in Him, and He in them; we unworthy sinners, approaching to Thy presence, and beholding Thy glory, do abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes. We have sinned, we have sinned, we have grievously sinned against Thee, in thought, in word, and in deed, provoking most justly Thy wrath and indignation against us. The remembrance of our transgressions and shortcomings fills us with sorrow and shame. Yet now, O most merciful Father, have mercy upon us; for the sake of Jesus Christ, forgive us all our sins; purify us, by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, from all inward uncleanness; enable us heartily to forgive others, as we beseech Thee to forgive us; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please Thee in newness of life; to the honor and glory of Thy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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132 Such rites of preparation were typical of the Reformed tradition from Calvin onward. NB: nothing in the liturgy states whether or not these two services were observed on the same day. A note at the beginning of the second service (wherein the Eucharist is actually celebrated) simply states: “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper shall be administered publically in the Church, in every Congregation, at least twice a year, and if possible oftener” (171).

133 Order for the Worship for the Reformed Church, 171-172.
In the process of confessing “our manifold sins,” the congregation acknowledges to God that by “partaking of the Body and Blood of Thy dear Son, they should dwell in Him, and He in them.” Clearly, Christ is present in/at the meal, but it goes beyond presence: it includes incorporation of the communicants into Christ, and Christ into the communicants. Might this be a reflection of the theology of John Williamson Nevin, the Mercersburg scholar who, one year before the publication of the Reformed Order, “condemned spiritualistic, subjective, and memorial views of the Lord’s Supper and urged an appreciation of the ‘spiritual real presence’ in the Eucharist” in his work The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist?\(^\text{134}\) Between March 1865 and March of 1866, six meetings (comprising forty-five sessions) occurred in the Reformed Church to produce the Reformed Order, a revision of the Provisional Liturgy published in November 1857. In his comprehensive monograph entitled Worship and Reformed Theology: The Liturgical Lessons of Mercersburg, Jack Martin Maxwell notes that even though the revision of the order for Holy Communion “was the work of the entire committee,” according to the committee’s minutes, the revision of the order of preparation was done solely by Nevin.\(^\text{135}\) It is safe to assume, therefore, that Nevin’s thought would have had a profound influence on all the eucharistic practices in the Reformed Order.


In some respects, “Mercersburg” was a school of thought that sought to reform the theological doctrines of Incarnation, Ecclesiology, Eucharist, Baptism, and Ministry. It is primarily associated with the teachings of John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff, two professors at the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, in the middle of the nineteenth-century.

Only a few American theologians took the Mercersburg theology seriously, and most of them fought against it. It seemed an alien implant, too absorbed with German modes of thought to fit the American context. It was Christocentric rather than bibliocentric; it elevated the incarnation over the atonement; it celebrated the corporate Christian “life” within the church rather than individual religious experience; it spoke of organic development in history rather than of the restitution of the primitive church; and it placed the sacraments rather than preaching at the forefront of Christian devotion.\(^{136}\)

There are some who argue that the crux of the movement’s focus lie in its eucharistic reforms. J. H. Nichols writes, “The Mercersburg movement might be called essentially a sacramental, more particularly a Eucharistic revival.”\(^{137}\) In sum, the Mercersburg eucharistic reform was inaugurated by the writings of Nevin, particularly in *The Mystical Presence*. Nevin sought to resuscitate Calvin’s understanding of the meal by clarifying misinterpretations of the Reformer’s thought, particularly in nineteenth-century Reformed churches in the United States.


Calvin’s eucharistic theology is sometimes described as virtualism, which comes from the Latin word *virtus*, meaning *power*. It has nothing to do with the similar English word *virtual*, which means *close to reality*. Albert Curry Winn, in interpreting Calvin, explains that “the Holy Spirit ‘unites things that are separated in space,’ not by bringing the body of Christ down to earth as in the mass, but by raising the congregation up to the heavenly places.” Through this meal, the gathered church experiences the fullness of the Risen One by ascending, via the Holy Spirit, to his table. James F. White uses a modern analogy to try to explicate this: “the Holy Spirit operates like an escalator to raise us up to heaven where we truly feed on Christ.” Calvin himself said that this is a mystery that cannot be explained rationally. He wrote, “I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.”

The obvious critique against Calvin’s virtualism is of a practical nature. *How does this happen? How is this possible?* The Mercersburg theologians asked the same questions. For Calvin, the answer was a matter of faith, not reason:

But though it seems an incredible thing that the flesh of Christ, while at such a distance from us in respect of place, should be food to us, let us remember

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how far the secret virtue of the Holy Spirit surpasses all our conceptions, and how foolish it is to wish to measure its immensity by our feeble capacity. Therefore, what our mind does not comprehend let faith conceive—viz. that the Spirit truly unites things separated by space.¹⁴¹

Calvin, long characterized for his stern, rational theology, offers a eucharistic understanding that is deeply spiritual and is to be accepted on faith: in ways that we cannot possibly comprehend, we are transported by the power of the Holy Spirit to heaven by our participation in the Lord’s Supper. “When the Holy Spirit descends upon the bread and wine on the table the congregation experiences koinonia with its crucified and risen Lord.”¹⁴²

Nevin claimed that the union between Christ and his believers was not a physical one. Human beings, like Christ, have a physical and a spiritual nature. Maxwell, interpreting Nevin, claims that Calvin made “too great a distinction between Christ’s flesh and his soul or his divinity.”¹⁴³ As a reaction, “Nevin’s point is that communication between the Body of Christ and the bodies of his people need not necessarily imply ‘any transition of his flesh as such into their persons.’”¹⁴⁴ The union achieved is of a purely spiritual nature; it is a mystical union. In debates which ensued, Nevin’s position was challenged by his mentor Charles Hodge, who penned a review


¹⁴² Winn, 231.

¹⁴³ Maxwell, 32.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
of *The Mystical Presence*. Nevin’s 100 page response in the second volume of *The Mercersburg Review*, entitled, “The Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” silenced Hodge, according to Robert Clemmer, and “constitutes one of the most brilliant and devastatingly effective pieces of polemical writing in the history of American theological controversy.”

The eucharistic position that emerged from Mercersburg holds that Christ is present at the meal—and it is a real presence—but that presence is spiritual; through the eucharistic sharing, believers are incorporated into Christ and vice versa. Is that not the position proffered in the *Reformed Order*? By “partaking of the Body and Blood of Thy dear Son, [communicants] dwell in Him, and He in them.”

The presence of Christ at the meal, which is real, albeit spiritual, creates a mystical connection between Jesus and those who share his meal. This is Nevin’s influence on the *Reformed Order*, to which we return.

The order continues with the declaration of pardon, which is similar to the one found in the preparatory rite. Following the assurance, the congregation rises and recites the Nicene Creed with the minister after which the *Gloria in Excelsis* “shall be sung, chanted, or recited.” Since it is unusual to find the Nicene Creed used in the liturgy in the Reformed tradition, this might be an influence from the

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146 *Reformed Order*, 172.

147 Ibid., 173.
Episcopal/Anglican tradition. A homiletic option follows: the minister may preach a sermon, read “a lesson of moderate length” from the Gospels, or he may speak of Christ’s passion and death. The offering follows. The order states, “Then shall follow a collection of the Offerings of the people, to be devoted to the service of the poor, or to some benevolent purpose.” The gifts of bread and wine are uncovered by the minister immediately after the monetary gifts are brought forth.

After the offering, the minister may recite from several Scripture passages. Most notable is the pericope from John 6 wherein Jesus claims that he is “the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Although John’s Gospel contains no account of the Last Supper, many, like Laurence Hull Stookey, argue that it is the most sacramental of all four Gospels. Sacramental “teaching pervades the entire book in subtle but insistent ways.” John 6 has long been associated with the Eucharist—and was a text used by Protestants in the eucharistic debates of the Reformation.

Then follows the actual Communion prayer. This piece is structured according to the basic, biblical narrative—beginning with Creation to the institution

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148 Ibid., 175.
149 Ibid.
150 The liturgy does not specify when the elements are brought forward.
151 Laurence Hull Stookey’s *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 38.
of the Church—but it is pertinent to note its christological scope. This portion of the prayer (dealing with Christ) reads,

> For all Thy mercies and favors, known to us and unknown, we give Thee thanks. But most of all, we praise Thee, the Father everlasting, for the gift of Thine adorable, true, and only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who by His appearing hath abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. We bless Thee for His holy incarnation; for His life on earth; for His precious suffering and death upon the cross; for His resurrection from the dead; and for His glorious ascension to Thy right hand.  

Here we have the full scope of Jesus’ life and deeds. Here we have the traditional prophetic, priestly, and royal offices of Christ at the core of the eucharistic prayer, along with references to the incarnation and the eschatological Christ. This is significant because does it not illustrate the fullness of Christ that communicants find at the table? This is the theology extrapolated in the teachings of Nevin. As E. Brooks Holifield notes, Nevin “argued that this presence was the occasion for a special mystical union of the faithful with the whole person of Christ, the humanity and the divinity, the flesh and the spirit. He distinguished this view from Catholic doctrine and from the confessional Lutheran position, both of which he thought erred by designating the presence as local and corporeal.” It is the incarnate Christ, who taught and healed multitudes, who suffered on the cross, and who was raised from the dead, that we find at the table and in the center of the Communion prayer.

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152 *Reformed Order*, 179.

153 Holifield, 478-479.
The prayer culminates in the *Sanctus* and the words of institution. What is of
great interest, however, is the epiclesis. The minister prays for the Holy Spirit to
descend upon the elements “that being set apart now from a common to a sacred and
mystical use, they may exhibit and represent to us with true effect the Body and Blood
of Thy Son, Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Reformed Order, 180. Italics mine.} Aside from the fact that the liturgy emphasizes an
epicletic character to the act of consecration, unusual for a Protestant liturgy during this
time period, a specific point about the presence of Christ in the meal is offered. It is
clear that the change in the elements has more to do with their significance as opposed
to a physical change. The elements, having been blessed, do not change, but, imbued
with the spirit of Christ, they are set aside for a specific purpose: i.e. the celebration
of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Before offering a plethora of petitions for the Church universal, the local
church, all leaders, the President of the United States, evangelism, the dying and the
dead—as seen in the preparatory service—there is a prayer which refers to the meal
as the “memorial of the blessed sacrifice of Thy Son.”\footnote{Reformed Order, 181.} This brief collect is not just
about remembering the life and deeds of Christ. It seeks to nourish community and
to empower the people to serve God in the service of others. The entire prayer
follows:

And be pleased now, O most merciful Father, graciously to receive at our
hands this memorial of the blessed sacrifice of Thy Son; in union with which
we here offer and present unto Thee, O Lord, the reasonable sacrifice of our own persons; consecrating ourselves, on the altar of the Gospel, in soul and body, property and life, to Thy most blessed service and praise. Look upon us through the mediation of our great High Priest. Make us accepted in the Beloved; and let His name be as a pure and holy incense, through which all our worship may come up before Thee, as the odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God. Amen.\footnote{Ibid.}

Through this prayer, those gathered call upon God to empower them to serve God with the entirety of their lives: body, soul, and possessions. They seek, through Christ, for their worship and service to be acceptable in the sight of God. The Order then moves from the Lord’s Prayer, to the sign of peace (again, unusual for a Protestant liturgy of this time period), and to the actual reception of the meal.

The eucharistic liturgy proper begins with instructions as to how the congregation is to come forward to receive the elements. The minister receives the elements first, serves his assistants, and then he “shall...proceed with their help to administer [Communion], first to the elders and deacons, and afterwards to the people; distributing first the bread and then the cup.”\footnote{Ibid., 184.} When administering the elements, the minister says, “The bread which we break, is the Communion of the body of Christ,” and, likewise with the cup, “The cup of blessings which we bless, is the Communion of the Blood of Christ.”\footnote{Ibid.} The order does not indicate how the eucharistic elements are served. All that is offered are the instructions, “After the people have communed in both kinds, the Minister shall say: May the Holy
Communion of the Body and Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, keep, and preserve you, each one, in body, soul, and spirit, unto everlasting life.” Following this is a post-Communion prayer in which the officiant thanks God for “the great goodness Thou hast shown...in vouchsafing to feed us, through these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of Thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ; assuring us thereby, that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of Thy Son, and heirs through hope of Thine everlasting kingdom.”

In sum, this encapsulates the Reformed Order’s understanding of Holy Communion.

From the outset, the liturgy declares that there is an innate connection between signs and that which they signify. The bread and the cup, as symbols, point to the body and blood of Christ, which they signify. Though not transubstantiated elements, they symbolize the body and blood of Christ, but this is more than just representation. Through participation in this meal, particularly through consuming the elements, the gathered community becomes the body of the Risen Christ. Directly related to this point is the need for forgiveness among communicants. This is a crucial component of this liturgy. As the prayer of confession, connecting the indwelling of Christ with the need for repentance, states, “Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who dost admit Thy people unto such wonderful communion, that partaking of the Body and Blood of Thy dear Son, they should dwell in Him, and He...

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159 Ibid.
160 Ibid., 184-185.
in them; we unworthy sinners, approaching to Thy presence, and beholding Thy glory, do abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.”161 Also, as seen in the writings of Nevin, who expounded upon Calvin’s doctrine of virtualism, the Mercersburg theologian argued that a unity occurs between Christ and participants when they consume the bread and wine. Communicants not only ascend to heaven and feast on Christ through the power (virtus) of the Holy Spirit, as Calvin maintained. The presence found at the meal is a real presence, but it is spiritual. Through consuming the eucharistic elements believers are incorporated into Christ and Christ is incorporated into them. The people are also united with one another. The Christ that is found at the table is not just the crucified and risen One; it is the fullness of Christ: humanity and divinity; Galilee and Calvary; the crucified, risen, and ascended one.

In many respects, this theology would have a profound influence on the Book of Worship that the United Church of Christ published in 1986. For now, we turn to a resource that was in use by the Evangelical Church before it merged with its Reformed counterpart: the Evangelical Book of Worship, published by the Evangelical Synod of North America in 1916.162

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161 Ibid., 172.

162 The Evangelical Book of Worship and the Order of Worship for the Reformed Church, along with the resource we will examine in part four (the Evangelical and Reformed Book of Worship), are, according to Thomas Dipko, the most influential E&R resources on the development of the 1986 Book of Worship.
III: The Evangelical Book of Worship (1916)

“The Order for the Administration of Holy Communion” as it appears in the *Evangelical Book of Worship*, consists of four separate but related orders. Spread across nineteen pages, we find:

1. Preparatory Service
2. The Celebration of the Lord’s Supper
3. Complete Form of the Lord’s Supper
4. The Order for Private Communion

The “Preparatory Service” consists of an act of confession and words of assurance. Communion is not actually celebrated in this service. This is followed by the lengthier “The Celebration of the Lord’s Supper” wherein communicants receive the bread and the cup. This service is to be used only when it is preceded by the “Preparatory Service.” As a third option, the *Evangelical Book of Worship* combines the previous two services in the “Complete Form of Lord’s Supper.” This service includes the confession and words of forgiveness as well as the reception of the meal.\(^1\) Lastly, there is the “Order for Private Communion” for those who are ill and, we assume, homebound or hospitalized. This last service concludes with two optional prayers: one “For all Cases of Affliction” and another “For special and serious Cases.” Because of the repetitive nature of these four services (for example, whole segments, such as the words of institution and the Lord’s Prayer, are repeated)

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\(^1\) The text does not indicate if the first two services are celebrated on the same day. Because the *Evangelical and Reformed Book of Worship* offers a third service that combines the first two, the assumption is that service one and two are celebrated on separate days. If the “Preparatory Service” and “The Celebration of the Lord’s Supper” are to be observed on the same day, would not the church use the third option that combines the two into a unified liturgy?
and due to the fact that it is much simpler than the service examined in the last section and the one that will be interpreted in section four, the overall theology inherent in all four services will we examined as opposed to dissecting each segment of the liturgy.

One of the dominant themes in these services is that the Eucharist strengthens communicants for their spiritual journey. The opening prayer in the very first service declares, “Fill us with the firm confidence, that in partaking of this heavenly nourishment our feeble faith shall be strengthened against all temptation.”\(^\text{164}\) Likewise in the second service (wherein participants actually celebrate the meal) the exhortation begins, “Dearly Beloved: Forasmuch as we purpose to come to the holy Supper of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, wherein He giveth us His Body to eat and His Blood to drink, in order to strengthen and confirm our faith in Him.”\(^\text{165}\) Similarly, a few lines further: “this holy Sacrament is instituted as a special means to strengthen and comfort the troubled conscience of those who confess their sins, and who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”\(^\text{166}\) There is a more nuanced dimension to this understanding of the Eucharist. Communicants are strengthened for their sojourn by the Eucharist because the Risen Christ is present with them and in them at the meal. As similarly purported in the 1867 *Reformed Order*, this document also states: “Whosoever eateth


\(^{165}\) Ibid., 162.

\(^{166}\) Ibid.
of this bread, and drinketh of this cup, firmly believing the words of Christ, dwelleth in Christ, and Christ in him, and he hath eternal life.”\textsuperscript{167} Granted, the previous declaration is more individualistic. It does, however, point to the mutual indwelling that occurs between believers and Christ. That unity also occurs between believers. The invitation to the meal (on the next page) states, “O Thou everlasting Son of the Father, sanctify us by Thy Holy Spirit, and make us worthy partakers of Thy sacred Body and Blood, that we may be cleansed from sin and \textit{made one with all the members of Thy Church in heaven and on earth.”\textsuperscript{168} As Theodore L. Trost, Jr. reminds us, “The unity of the Church in heaven and on earth is affirmed and communion occurs with the Living Christ as well as with other members of the Body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{169} Aptly called \textit{Communion}, the meal creates community between Christ and those who partake of the sacrament.

In relation to this point, the \textit{Order} suggests that there is a soteriological dimension to the meal. In the exhortation to the second service (as just noted) we read, “Whosoever eateth of this bread, and drinketh of this cup, firmly believing the words of Christ, dwelleth in Christ, and Christ in him, and \textit{be hath eternal life.”\textsuperscript{170} Likewise, in the prayer that immediately follows the exhortation, the celebrant

\begin{flushendnote}
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 162-163.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 164. Italics mine.


\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Evangelical Book of Worship}, 162-163. Italics mine.
\end{flushendnote}
declares, “We bless Thee that Thou didst institute and ordain, as a memorial and seal of redemption, Thy holy Supper, in which Thou givest us Thy Body to eat, and Thy Blood to drink. Graciously grant, that being in Thee, even as Thou art is us, we may have eternal life, and may be raised up on the last day.” 171 Aside from reiterating the reciprocal indwelling of Christ and communicants at the table (as explicated above), the order asserts that the meal is a means to salvation. It seals what Christ accomplished on the cross. A few lines later in the same prayer we read, “And if in our weakness we are lacking in true repentance and in living faith, do Thou graciously supply our want from the fullness of merits of Thy suffering and death, that our sinful life may be amended and our earnest purposes strengthened.” 172 Such a theology needs to be parsed a bit further.

Walter Brueggemann, UCC Hebrew Bible scholar and son of an Evangelical pastor, claims that there are three gifts that are part of the Evangelical Synod of North America’s history that they later brought into the UCC. 173 In his brief though excellent essay on the Evangelical Church, Ralph C. Quellhorst unpacks Brueggemann’s claim. The principal asset that the Evangelical Church offered the merger was *a pietism informed by orthodoxy and rationalism*. Although Evangelical Synod theology is rooted in the belief of “Jesus Christ crucified,” as opposed to formal

171 Ibid., 163.

172 Ibid.

adherence to the ecumenical creeds, it was tempered with rational thought. As
Quellhorst states, “Over against doctrinal rigidity, rationalists were the forerunners of
American pragmatism, open to the insights of scientific technocratic humanism.”
Although Evangelical theology centered on faith in the crucified Christ, it was (and is)
open to the teachings of reasonable, secular disciplines. Yet it is this faith (at least in
this 1916 liturgical resource) that suggests that the Eucharist is a means to eternal life.
Is such a faith claim unrealistic? It seems to belie a church whose authority is based,
in part, on rational thought. Did the writers of this order claim that partaking the
Eucharist ipso facto leads to salvation, or was it more a matter of faith—the Eucharist
being a sacrament that bolstered the spirit of the individual communicant and,
therefore, led (secondarily) to eternal life? Unfortunately, this resource does not
make this claim axiomatic. Suffice it to say, it does speak of salvation as a hope—that
for which the Church anticipates, and the Eucharist is a means to it.

This raises the question about the relation between the Eucharist and baptism
in the Evangelical tradition, which needs to be unpacked briefly. Harry G. Royer tells
us that although the founding pastors of the Evangelical Church, who immigrated to
the Midwest from Germany in the nineteenth-century, “were not interested in rigid
orthodoxy,” the German Evangelical Church Society of the West did publish a
catechism in 1847 (the *Evangelical Catechism*) that “was abridged by Andreas Irion

\[174\] Ibid.
between 1859 and 1862.”

The theology of baptism that appears in this resource reflects the soteriological hope found in the eucharistic liturgies examined in this chapter. The catechism points out that “Baptism founded upon Christ’s commission (Question 117) imparts the gift of new life, receives the baptized into fellowship with God as God’s child, and admits the baptized as a member of the Christian church (Question 118).” Royer shows that the catechism also states that, “Children are to be baptized because they need the gift and are as able to receive as are adults, for Christ has promised them his kingdom (Question 120).”

In the 1916 Evangelical Book of Worship (from which “The Order for the Administration of Holy Communion” being interpreted in this section of this chapter comes), the prayer of thanksgiving for the baptized asks God to receive this child “into the Church of Thy Son” and asks for the baptized “to be partaker of Thine everlasting kingdom.”

Laden within this practice is the hope for salvation. The sacrament of baptism in the 1916 Evangelical Book of Worship points toward eternal life. “Doubt not, therefore, but earnestly believe, that He is likewise willing to receive this child (these children), and to embrace him (her, them) with the arms of His mercy, and to give him (her, them) the blessing of eternal life, and to make him (her, them) partaker of His

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176 Ibid., 46.
177 Ibid.
178 Evangelical Book of Worship, 148, 150.
everlasting kingdom.”

Likewise, in the sacrament for Holy Communion we read, “Whosoever eateth of this bread, and drinketh of this cup, firmly believing the words of Christ, dwelleth in Christ, and Christ in him, and he hath eternal life.” The promise of salvation is central to the understanding of the sacraments in the Evangelical tradition. Baptism and Eucharist point to heaven.

This leads to our next point: sacraments are signs that point to other realities, but the sign participates in that which it signifies. The exhortation to the third service (which combines the services of confession/pardon with the reception of the meal) states that this sacrament is “the innermost sanctuary of the whole Christian worship”; it also claims that “We have to do here, not with outward signs merely, but with the heavenly realities which these signs represent.” Such language was seen in the 1867 Reformed Order that we discussed in section two above. By claiming that the sign participates in the reality it signifies, are we saying that the hope for salvation that communicants bring to the table is actualized at the table? By celebrating the Eucharist, do congregants participate in the kingdom as opposed to simply receiving elements that represent it? The liturgy seems to suggest an affirmative response to both questions. Hugh of St. Victor would proffer a similar argument in the twelfth

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179 Ibid., 148.
180 Ibid., 163.
181 Ibid., 166-167.
century: the sign participates in that which it represents. The salvation for which the Church hopes is not merely a future event. It is found when communicants gather at the table as well.

The actual reception of the meal is quite simple. Communicants come to the altar. The liturgy refers to the Communion board as an “altar,” not a table. This highlights the sacrificial imagery that pervades the meaning of this meal. The table is where people break bread, where they share a meal. An altar is used for sacrifices. The minister distributes the bread and cup with the commands, “this is the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for you; this do in remembrance of him” and “Take and drink, this is the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for you, and for many, for the remission of sins; this do in remembrance of him.” Hence, the significance of referring to the main furnishing as an altar. This segment of the second service (“The Celebration of the Lord’s Supper”) is followed by “The Dismissal” and the “Prayer of Thanksgiving,” in which, again, we read about the meal both strengthening participants and providing the “blessed hope of everlasting life.” Clearly, these themes pervade this 1916 resource.

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183 *Evangelical Book of Worship*, 165.
184 Ibid., 166.
IV: The Evangelical and Reformed Book of Worship (1943)

We turn now to the third resource from the Evangelical and Reformed tradition that we are examining in this chapter—a resource that also had a significant influence on the eucharistic liturgies found in the Book of Worship (1986). The E&R Book of Worship, the first liturgical resource that was published after the Evangelical Synod in North America and the German Reformed Church of the United States merged in 1934, contains three orders for the Lord’s Supper: the main “Order for Holy Communion,” an alternate order, and an order for communing the sick. Since the supplementary, shorter services do “not differ much in substance and theological rationale,” the focus will be upon the principal order.185

The order begins by commenting on how often Holy Communion is to be celebrated in the E&R tradition: “at least twice a year, and preferably more often.”186 John C. Shetler notes that, “While Calvin desired the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Geneva, the Reformed Church came to observe it less frequently and finally settled on quarterly observance.”187

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186 Book of Worship, Approved by the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (Cleveland: Central Publishing House, 1943), 42. The 1947 revision was to change this instruction to read “four times a year” if not more often.

A greeting in the name of the Trinity (also known as the solemn declaration) is followed by an exhortation that offers a five-fold meaning of the meal:

1. the abiding memorial of [Jesus’] atoning death;
2. the seal of his perpetual presence in the Church through the Holy Spirit;
3. the mystical representation of the sacrifice of himself on the cross;
4. the pledge of his undying love for his people;
5. and the bond of his living union and fellowship with them to the end of time.\(^{188}\)

The spiritual state of each communicant is also pertinent. The exhortation adds, “We cordially invite to partake of this Sacrament all who are truly grieved and penitent for their sins, who look to the Lord Jesus Christ for righteousness and salvation, who abide in the fellowship of his Church, and who desire to possess his Spirit and walk in his ways.”\(^{189}\) Such a directive leads us to the next segment of the order: the confession of sin.

In this service two prayers of confession are offered: one for corporate worship and an alternative for an individual act of contrition. The theology and language (in the first half of each option) are almost identical, save the changes in the pronouns from the first person plural to the first person singular. As an example:

\(^{188}\) *Book of Worship*, 42. Again, the enumeration of these points is mine.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.
**Option I (Corporate):**
We acknowledge and confess our manifold sins, Which we from time to time have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty.

**Option II (Individual):**
I, a poor sinner, Acknowledge and confess my manifold sins, Which I from time to time have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty. 190

Both prayers ask for God’s mercy and strength to lead a new, more righteous life, echoing the words of Psalm 51:10.

The components that follow the confession are not uncommon to many liturgical resources used by other churches during this period: the *Kyrie*, an assurance of pardon, an act of praise, a collect, the reading of the holy Scriptures, and a confession of faith (this resource offers both the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds). These are followed by a sermon, a hymn, the offering of both monetary gifts as well as the bread and wine, and then the eucharistic liturgy proper.

The celebration begins with a eucharistic prayer, which commences with the *Sursum Corda* and then offers praise to God for God’s deeds: for creating heaven and earth, for creating humankind in God’s image, for Jesus Christ, for the Holy Spirit, for the Church, for the gift of grace, for everlasting life, and for the return of Christ at the end of time. 191 The prayer moves into the *Seraphic Hymn* and the *Sanctus* (a

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190 Ibid., 43.

191 This section of the eucharistic prayer is technically known as “the preface,” although this resource does not refer to it as such.
combination of Isaiah 6:3 and Matthew 21:9, cf. Mark 11:10). The congregation is instructed to offer one or the other. Although they are typically combined, the E&R Book of Worship separates them accordingly:

**Seraphic Hymn**
Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;  
Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of thy glory;  
Hosanna in the highest!  
Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord;  
Hosanna in the highest!

**Sanctus**
Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts;  
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High.

The minister continues with the words of institution followed by the fraction (the breaking of the bread) and the raising of the cup. Then, *the double epiclesis* is offered over the elements as well as the communicants:

Wherefore, we beseech thee, O merciful Father, to send thy Holy Spirit upon us, and upon these elements of bread and wine, that the bread which we break may be to us the Communion of the Body of Christ, and the cup of blessings which we bless, the Communion of the Blood of Christ.

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192 NB: these are actual titles used in the liturgy, not the author’s titles.

193 Book of Worship, 49.

194 Ibid., 49-50. Shetler, in the above mentioned essay, indicates that this was influenced by the Mercersburg movement. He writes, “The Mercersburg professors’ historical study of the Eastern Church and of the St. James Liturgy here put the Reformed Church a century and a quarter ahead of other communions in the West who only in recent years have adequately included the epiklesis in their liturgies” (20).
Although the entire rite is consecratory, it appears as if the E&R *Book of Worship* offers a specific prayer of consecration with the double epiclesis. Later, we will see the influence this was to have on the Communion liturgies found in the 1986 *Book of Worship*. Though not claiming that there is a magic moment when the bread and wine are consecrated, Theodore Trost does point out the pneumatic focus that is part of the liturgy. He claims “that the whole Eucharistic Prayer is also a prayer of consecration…The Evangelical and Reformed service,” he writes, “understands the consecration in the sacrament being effected by the Holy Spirit, in response to the corporate petition of the faithful, requesting that in receiving the bread and the cup, we may be partakers of the Body and Blood of Christ.”

Calling the bread we break a “Communion of the Body of Christ” does not offer a cogent eucharistic theology in and of itself. However, in the very next line we have the act of oblation or sacrifice. The liturgy states:

> And be pleased now, O most merciful Father, graciously to receive *this memorial* of the blessed sacrifice of thy Son which we here offer unto thee, in union with the sacrifice of our thanksgiving and praise, consecrating ourselves in soul and body, property and life, to thy most blessed service and praise. Look upon us through the mediation of our great High Priest. Make us accepted in the Beloved; and let his Name be as pure and holy incense, through which all our worship may come up before thee, a sacrifice acceptable and well pleasing in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee, and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

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195 Trost, 42-43.

196 *Book of Worship*, 50. Italics mine.
Two points of clarification are in order. First, the remembrance is not just reflecting upon the cross; by recalling Calvary, communicants dedicate themselves to carrying out Christ’s ministry through lives of service and praise. Second, referring to the meal as a “memorial of the blessed sacrifice of thy Son” hearkens us back to the exhortation (cited earlier), which indicates that Christ instituted “the Holy Communion of his Body and Blood, that it might be the abiding memorial of his atoning death.”\textsuperscript{197} The focus here is on the meal as \textit{a symbolic memorial} of Christ’s death. However, Trost argues that, “the Epiclesis and Oblation assume the presence of Christ throughout the entire eucharistic transaction, though his presence is not defined and is spiritually discerned.”\textsuperscript{198} In other words, the presence of Christ pervades the entire service. We see this in the exhortation (“the seal of his perpetual presence”) and later we will read in the prayer of thanksgiving, “Almighty and everlasting God, we give thee most hearty thanks for…the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ; assuring us thereby, that we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body of thy Son.”\textsuperscript{199} Although the liturgy does not specify a physical presence in the elements \textit{per se}, it does confirm a spiritual presence that is to be discerned by each communicant—a presence that is shared between communicants and God. Trost also notes that “the criteria for coming to the Lord’s Table have nothing to do with a particular doctrinal

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\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 42. Italics mine.  \\
\textsuperscript{198} Trost, 43.  \\
\textsuperscript{199} \textit{Book of Worship}, 54.
\end{flushleft}
understanding of the nature of Christ’s presence in the eucharist. What matters is to look to Jesus Christ for righteousness and salvation, to possess his Spirit, and to walk in his ways.”

The Eucharist is a means of individual and corporate spiritual edification. By coming to the table and discerning the spirit of Christ, the individual is to lead a life of righteousness in and through Jesus. Having found Christ in the communal gathering and sharing, the community is also to live righteously. As the text states, “And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as shall please thee.” This is not found by adhering to any denominational tenets that explicate Christ’s presence in the meal. It is found through each individual’s unique experience of Jesus Christ in the meal and his or her faithful response to the Word revealed in and through the bread and wine and the community.

The service continues with intercessions for all humanity, the Church universal, the local congregation, all rulers, the President of the United States, the governor of that particular commonwealth, successful evangelism, those who suffer, and the dying. Following the Lord’s Prayer, the Agnus Dei, and the passing of the peace, the elements are received.

In terms of practice, the service can be conducted so that communicants either receive the elements by coming forward or by remaining in their pews. If the

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200 Trost, 40.

201 Book of Worship, 54.
former, the minister receives the elements first and then he offers them to his assistants. Attendants and minister together serve the congregants. If, however, the latter is observed, then the minister, after partaking of the elements, gives them to his assistants who first serve the bread to the communicants. “When all have received the Bread, the Assistants shall return to the Table, and the Minister shall in like manner, deliver the Cup to them.” The liturgy then states that, “When all have communicated, the Minister shall pronounce the blessing, and the Assistants shall return to the Table, after which the service shall proceed according to the prescribed order.”

The order consists of prescribed directives the minister gives for the actual consumption of the elements. In terms of the bread, there are two options. The first is, “Take and eat; This is the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was broken for you. Do this in remembrance of him.” The other option is the Pauline rhetorical invitation found in 1 Corinthians 10:16: “The Bread which we break, is it not the Communion of the Body of Christ?” Similar options accompany the reception of the cup, the first being, “Take and drink: This Cup is the New Testament in the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for you for the remission of sins.

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202 Ibid., 53.
203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid., 54.
Do this in remembrance of him.”

The alternative, again, is the rhetorical, “The Cup of Blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the Blood of Christ?” There are some interesting practical and theological observations to be made here.

In terms of practice, it can safely be assumed that communicants hold the bread and eat it together (and do the same with the cup afterwards) as opposed to consuming the elements when they receive them. If this were not the practice, then there would be no need for the celebrant to give such direction.

In terms of theology, both options (for bread and cup) are received “in remembrance” of Christ. The Greek word for this is anamnesis. W. Jardine Grisbrooke reminds us that this “Semitic concept...is all but untranslatable into English.” It is typically translated as remembrance, but this is problematic, for remembrance typically signifies a subjective, cerebral activity: i.e. individual cognitive recall. The Greek understanding of this word is communal and it signifies eradicating the line between a historic event and the contemporary re-enactment of that event. Grinsbrooke continues: remembrance suggests “that the person or deed commemorated is past and absent, whereas anamnesis signifies exactly the opposite: it is an objective act, in and by which the person or event commemorated is actually made present, is brought into the realm of the here and now.”

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206 Ibid.


208 Ibid.
Eucharist, this means that Christ’s actions at the Last Supper and on the cross are experienced anew by those who partake of the bread and wine and the benefits of the ancient meal are actualized in the present. Anamnesis is a communal action wherein an event (particularly a historic, ritual act) is recalled within the community as they participate in the ritual. In a similar vein, J. Paul Sampley notes that through such a reenactment, “The old story becomes the tellers’ story; liturgy unites the old story with the current worshippers’ story. What happened back then is retold to incorporate the new tellers and hearers as part of the narrative, as participants in the old and ongoing story.”

The ministerial directions also suggest real presence. As noted above, the bread that is broken “is the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Likewise, the “Cup is the New Testament in the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To say that the bread is and the cup is (as opposed to signifies) suggests that Christ is somehow present in the meal itself. The prayer of thanksgiving which follows the reception of the elements clarifies this. It is almost identical to the prayer of thanksgiving found in the 1867 Order of Worship for the Reformed Church.

Almighty and everlasting God, we give thee most hearty thanks for the great goodness thou hast shown toward us at this time in vouchsafing to feed us through these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ; assuring us thereby, that we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body of thy Son, and heirs through hope of thine everlasting kingdom. And we most humbly beseech

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thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue
in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as shall please thee;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Spirit, be all
honor and glory, world without end. Amen.210

In this prayer, gratitude is expressed to God for “the spiritual food of the
most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ; assuring us
thereby, that we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body of thy Son”211
This raises an interesting point. Although it does not explicate exactly how Christ is
present in the meal, it does note that through this meal participants become further
incorporated into the “mystical body” of Jesus. Is that not the Church? It is no
coincidence that “the body of Christ” is a phrase used for both the bread of the
Eucharist and the Church. The chapters in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians that
utilize both terms are consecutive: chapter eleven deals with the Eucharist and twelve
the Church. Once the body (the community) is fed by the body (the holy meal), it is
better equipped to serve God in the service of others—to remember Christ’s Gospel in
action, not just language.

The service concludes with the Nunc Dimittis (also known as the Song of
Simeon, a reiteration of Luke 2:29–32), the Te Deum Laudamus (an early Christian
hymn of praise), and a Trinitarian benediction.

In reflecting upon this service, Trost offers an interesting observation. This
service, he claims, not only unites communicants in the body and blood of Christ, but

211 Ibid., 54.
it gives them a clearer sense of their identity as well. This was important in a tradition filled with theological diversity. Yet, as Trost reminds us, those who penned this service, “transcended their diversity in a fresh, creative way. They would have us do the same.”

V: Conclusion

What theology (or theologies) of the Eucharist surface from these three resources? There are several, as already discussed, but three in particular stand in the fore. First, Christ is present in a very real way in the meal. That presence is a mystical, spiritual presence as opposed to a physical presence found in the actual elements. Christ is not just remembered in the meal; Christ is experienced. Such a theology, which was a fundamental aspect to the Mercersburg movement, exists in the United Church of Christ to this day. Second, the meal is a means of strengthening our faith; it is a means of grace. In the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the meal is one way that our faith is bolstered as individuals and as faith communities. Third, communicants are united with Christ and one another at the meal. The Eucharist creates a reciprocal indwelling. This was evident in the above prayer of thanksgiving, which speaks of the “holy fellowship” participants find at the table. In some respects, this point conjoins the first two: Holy Communion strengthens our faith, because we meet the Risen Christ at the table.

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212 Trost, 45.
When the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged with the Congregational Christian Churches in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ, the former feared that the latter would make them less “liturgical.” The Congregation Christian focus on the proclaimed Word would make the Eucharist secondary at best. That has not been the case. Likewise, the meaning of Communion in the E&R antecedent texts is not wholly different from the theology of the Eucharist found in the resources utilized by the Congregational Christian Churches prior to 1957. It is to those resources that we now turn in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR
ANTECEDENT RESOURCES: THE CONGREGATIONAL AND
CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

I: Introduction

It is pertinent to note from the outset that on the Congregational Christian side of the United Church of Christ, denominationally-based practices were mandated far less. Imbued with democratic, Congregational polity, individual churches were (and still are) autonomous. They coexist in a covenantal relationship, but each local church is self-governing. That means two things for our purposes. The first is that unlike the Evangelical and Reformed Church (E&R), the Congregational Christian Churches (CC) referred to their 1931 merger in the plural: they were not a church; they were churches. Second, liturgical resources were not (and are not) required for use in the Congregational Christian Churches (or in the United Church of Christ for that matter) as they are in other denominations. Each local church is free to decide for themselves which liturgical resource(s) they will utilize or if they will employ any at all. In an article on the Congregational heritage, UCC historian Elizabeth C. Nordbeck writes, “Historically, Congregationalism has always rejected adherence to creeds and confessions as pernicious and binding.”213 The

same is true for liturgical resources. For decades, the only eucharistic resource that was considered “official” (for lack of a better term) is “An Order for Worship with Communion” found in the back of a Congregational staple, the Pilgrim Hymnal. To understand Congregational-Christian liturgical theology, we begin with that text.

Before we do, it is pertinent to note the history of these two antecedent denominations briefly to place these liturgies in context. The New England Congregational Churches, established in the seventeenth-century by the Puritans and Pilgrims who came to America in search of religious freedom, brought the concept of a democratic polity to the original Colonies. This form of governance, eventually adopted by the United States of America and codified in its Constitution and Declaration of Independence, was used to order church life in these early New England meetinghouses. This Calvinist denomination, with roots in England and Holland, merged with the Christian frontier churches, comprised of transplants from the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist traditions, in 1931. These churches not only stressed congregational autonomy, but maintained that the Church should be in a continual state of reform. This is reflected in the words that Rev. John Robinson said to the Pilgrims before they departed for the New World in 1620: “God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word.”

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214 This quote by John Robinson can be found in numerous United Church of Christ-related publications. See, for example, Sidney D. Fowler, What Matters to You? Matters to Us: Engaging Six Themes of Our Faith (Cleveland United Church Press, 2008), 68-69.
II: “An Order for Worship with Communion” in Pilgrim Hymnal (1931)

The indefinite article at the beginning of the title of this order is no mistake: this is not *the* order for Holy Communion; it is *an* order. It is one possibility among many. Ironically enough, there were not *many* to choose from. The Pilgrim Hymnal, though not required for use in worship, was widely used in the Congregational Christian tradition throughout the twentieth century. It was published the year these two denominations merged: 1931. Revised in 1935 and again in 1958, its red cover became synonymous with singing in many local Congregational Christian Churches. The appendix contains a host of services, prayers, and readings.215

The first part of “An Order for Worship with Communion” is a service of the word. After the organ prelude and the hymn or processional, there is a proclamation of God’s love in Christ (John 3:16) followed by an invitation of Christ, which is a combination of three Gospel passages strung together: Matthew 11:28, Luke 11:9-10, and Mark 12:30-31b. This is followed by a Communion collect (offered by the minister) and a general confession (offered by the minister and the congregation in unison): both are void of any specific eucharistic language or references. These, in turn, are followed by a series of liturgical components that are basically descriptive titles without model prayers: an assurance of God’s forgiveness, the Lord’s Prayer, a call to praise (a four-line responsive reading based on the Psalms), the Gloria Patri, a

215 In this chapter, I work with the revised version of the Pilgrim Hymnal, namely the 1958 edition. Although this version is somewhat different than the 1931 edition, it reflects the same theology and offers a similar liturgy as the 1931 text. Prior to the 1958 edition, the Pilgrim Hymnal was published with blue and green covers as well.
Scripture lesson, an anthem or hymn, a call to prayer, prayers, an offering (which includes sentences, collection of gifts, and doxology), and a sermon. What is especially interesting is the footnote for the “prayers” mentioned in the previous sentence. It states that the minister may use one from *A Book of Worship for Free Churches* (which we will examine in the next section) or one of his/her own. The little information offered in this service, as well as its brevity, may hint at the trepidation of mandating anything in this “free” denomination. Horton Davies offers an explanation for this, though not in regards to this resource *per se*. He reminds us that the Congregational and Christian Churches united, in part, “because both denominations emphasized the biblical warrant for the sacraments and the witness and autonomy of the local church.”

The instruction granting the pastor full license with the prayer reflects this tenor. After the invitation (one is not provided), the “Sursum Corda and Sanctus” follow. The text for the latter is provided. This is followed by headings (with no exemplary words) for the “Prayer of Consecration or Eucharist Prayer” and the words of institution.

The only text included comes with the next three items: the giving of the bread, the giving of the cup, and the prayer of thanksgiving. The words for the bread and cup come from Scripture, as with the invitation of Christ noted above. The words are from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians—they are the words he

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216 The “Collection of Gifts” does not specify if this is money, bread and wine, or both.

“received from the Lord” and handed on to the church, hence the biblical basis for the Eucharist:

**GIVING OF THE BREAD:**

The Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

Ministering to you in his name, I give you this bread.

**GIVING OF THE CUP:**

After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till he comes.

Ministering to you in his name, I give you this cup.\(^{218}\)

Although there are no instructions in the order for the distribution of the elements, John von Rohr explicates how the meal was celebrated within the Congregational heritage in his comprehensive *The Shaping of Congregationalism 1620-1957*. “The administration of the Lord’s Supper was simple, the elements being offered in silence after a recitation of Christ’s words instituting the sacrament. The celebration, however, was always preceded by preaching, lest it be meaningless as ‘the seal on a blank document.’ The elements were received in a seated position, because kneeling was viewed as implying ‘a worshipping of the bread.’”\(^{219}\) Although von Rohr

\(^{218}\) *Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1958), 496.

illuminates the practices sixteenth and seventeenth-century English Puritans brought to the New World, many local Congregational Christian churches maintained this practice well into the twentieth-century when this text was published.

Lastly, we have the prayer of thanksgiving. This piece offers the most insight into this order’s theology of the Eucharist:

We give thanks to thee, almighty God, that thou hast refreshed us with this memorial of thy love, and hast granted to us the presence of thy Son, even Jesus Christ our Lord; and we beseech thee to strengthen our faith in thee and to increase our love toward one another; through him who is our redeemer. Amen. 

First, we declare corporately that through the Eucharist we are refreshed by both a memorial of God’s love and the presence of Christ. We are not told how Christ is present, or in what way it is a “real” presence (if it is). This raises the question, what was the Puritans’ theology of the Eucharist and does that theology find expression in this service?

In his essay “The Lord’s Supper in the Congregational Christian Tradition,” Davies argues that Puritan eucharistic theology was a cross between Huldrych Zwingli’s memorialism and John Calvin’s virtualism. “Sometimes the theology of the communion accepted by Congregationalism seems Zwinglian, at other times more richly Calvinian. That is to say that its emphasis on remembrance is strong, although it is never the recollection of an absent Lord.”

So, on one hand, we have a

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220 Pilgrim Hymnal, 496.
221 Davies, 31.
tradition whose adherents approach the table remembering what Christ accomplished on their behalf. Conjoined to this is the belief that through the power of the Holy Spirit, believers ascend to heaven and are united with Christ in a spiritual union when they partake of the Lord’s Supper. The life and works (death) of Christ are remembered, but Christ is truly present with communicants when they partake of the sacred meal. “Calvin’s theology of the Supper emphasized the presence of Christ and the mystical, spiritual union of the members of the Body of Christ with their Lord. This, according to Calvin, is an accommodation of the ascended Lord who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, unites faithful believers with himself.”

The prayer of thanksgiving also requests that through this meal our faith is strengthened and our love for one another is increased. The Evangelical and Reformed orders that we explored in the previous chapter, especially the service in the 1916 Evangelical Book of Worship, spoke of the Eucharist as a means of strengthening the faith of participants. How, though, does the meal strengthen our love for one another?

Eucharistic fellowship has its roots in the fellowship meals practiced in Christian antiquity. The meal about which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 11 is a fuller, communal meal known as the *agápe* feast, which is different from the practice and understanding of the Eucharist that exists in most mainline churches today and certainly in the Congregational Christian tradition at the time the *Pilgrim Hymnal* was

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222 Ibid.
published. This text does offer a theology that envisions the eucharistic rite as a means of strengthening our communal love, much like the *agápe* meal. What was evident in the Early Church seems to be the theory behind the eucharistic practice in the Congregational Christian tradition. As Paul Bradshaw writes:

> Ritual meals like this were powerful expressions of the concept of the participants’ communion with one another and with God. Their presence at this meal was a sign of their reconciliation to God and their membership among the elect who would one day feast together in God’s kingdom, and the intimate fellowship with one another that they experienced around the table was a foretaste, an anticipation, of the union that they would enjoy for ever with God. The whole meal event was thus both a prophetic symbol of the future and also a means of entering into that future in the present.²²³

Confessing Christ as our redeemer, the prayer comes to an end. Headings indicating a final hymn, a prayer of dedication (if a second offering is received), a benediction, and an organ postlude bring this service to a close.

This service is brief, and because of the use of headings instead of full texts, there is little evidence from which to determine the denomination’s theological interpretation of the sacrament. To get a fuller understanding of Congregational Christian eucharistic theology we need to turn to another service: that found in *A Book of Worship for Free Churches*.

### III: A Book of Worship for Free Churches (1948)

Published nine years before the merger that birthed the United Church of

Christ, *A Book of Worship for Free Churches* was a text offered to pastors in Congregational Christian churches who were looking for a liturgical resource to augment their ministries. In some circles, the text was shunned—it was considered too hierarchical for this gathering of autonomous congregations.

This text contains three orders for Holy Communion: “An Order of Morning Worship with Communion,” the shorter “Service of Holy Communion,” and an even briefer “Service for Private Communion.” I will focus on the morning service, since that contains the full rite of the Eucharist, and will reference the other two as needed.

“An Order of Morning Worship with Communion” contains the eucharistic rite couched in a service of the word: a service that includes prayers, the reading of Scripture, hymns, an offertory, and a Communion sermon. The items on the first two pages of the order could be applied to any service of the word, not necessarily one that includes Communion since there are no eucharistic references. These items include:

- Organ Prelude
- Hymn or Processional of Adoration of Christ
- Invitation of Christ
- Communion Collect

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224 In a recent interview, the Rev. Richard O. Sparrow (the former Minister and Team Leader for Parish Life and Leadership at the National Offices of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio) informed me that when he was a student at Andover Newton Theological School from 1965 to 1968, *A Book of Worship for Free Churches* was not noted or sanctioned by the seminary’s professors of worship. In worship classes students studied the liturgical practices of the Early Church. The focus was on the writings of Hippolytus and Justin Martyr, not the groundbreaking work that had just unfolded at Vatican II, nor was there any discussion or endorsement of *A Book of Worship for Free Churches*. Andover Newton students who were involved in field education (like Sparrow) purchased the text on their own, which they heard about through word of mouth.
Immediately following the anthem or hymn is a lengthy prayer preceded by a short “Call to Prayer.” The first Communion references in the order come in this call.

The call is an invitation to the meal. The “beloved” are beckoned to the Lord’s Table where they are to “earnestly consider our great need of having our comfort and strength renewed in this our earthly pilgrimage and warfare.”225 As with the 1916 *Evangelical Book of Worship* and the Communion order in the back of the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, the Eucharist is a means of strengthening believers for their earthly sojourn. As part of their spiritual edification, it is “necessary” that communicants “come to the Lord’s Table with thanksgiving, faith, repentance, love, and with hearts hungering and thirsting after him.”226 The aforementioned prayer follows, which is a page and a half in length. The only reference to the meal comes in the middle of the prayer.

Three petitions are made halfway through the prayer: one for those in power, one for Christian ministers, and one for the people. The middle petition contains the only mention of the holy meal. The request reads, “Give grace, O heavenly Father,

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226 Ibid.
to all Christian ministers, that they may, both by their life and teaching, set forth thy true and living word, and rightly administer thy holy sacraments.” Clergy are responsible for what UCC theologian Gabriel Fackre calls “the ministry of identity”: responsibly preaching the Gospel and rightly administering the sacraments. Such a theology is foundational to the Communion service in this resource. Before the meal is even received, grace is sought for those who preside over the meal so that their lives and teachings may reflect the Gospel message and, therefore, enable them to “rightly administer thy holy sacraments.”

We move from the prayer to the actual reception of the meal. After the offering and the Communion sermon comes the invitation to the meal. It is interesting to note that in the invitation we move from a discussion of the spiritual state of the celebrant to that of the communicant:

Ye who truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort.

There are no direct references to the Pauline injunctions in 1 Corinthians 11, but

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227 Ibid., 106.
229 A Book of Worship for Free Churches, 106. Taken from the Book of Common Prayer.
230 The term “homily,” often employed in Roman Catholic circles, is also used in some settings of the United Church of Christ to designate a sermon that accompanies Holy Communion. The sermon in this order, however, is entitled “Communion Sermon.”
clearly those who approach the table must be in a state of penitence. But it goes beyond words. Not only should communicants “repent...of [their] sins,” but they must also change their actions, “walking...henceforth in [God’s] holy ways.”

Furthermore, the Eucharist, as noted in other orders we have examined, is a source of support. Whereas Communion strengthens us spiritually as proclaimed in the Pilgrim Hymnal and the Evangelical Book of Worship (1916), in A Book of Worship for Free Churches the Eucharist provides solace to the contrite: “take this holy Sacrament to your comfort.”

The invitation is followed by the Sursum Corda, the Sanctus, and the “Prayer of Consecration.” Many of the antecedent resources that we have noted in chapters three and four, including A Book of Worship for Free Churches, include a specific prayer entitled a “Prayer of Consecration.” This highlights an interesting tension. When is the moment of consecration? Are the eucharistic elements consecrated through the epiclesis or is it when the words of institution are offered? Or is it, rather, a result of the entire eucharistic act as many churches maintain? This resource suggests that it is achieved through a specific consecratory prayer, which asks God to “to grant thy Holy Spirit, and to sanctify this bread and wine, that they may become symbols of the body that was broken and of the blood that was shed for us.”²³² What is of particular note here is the claim that the bread and cup are “symbols” of Christ’s sacrifice. The Eucharist is a means by which we “commemorate [Jesus’] last supper with his

²³² Ibid., 108.
disciples, and his offering of himself in the sacrifice of the cross.”233 The elements help us recall Christ’s atonement. But this prayer also builds upon the previous theme we discussed: the Eucharist as a means of providing spiritual sustenance to communicants. By sharing in the feast, it is hoped that recipients will develop “penitent hearts and a quickened faith” and they will “receive this holy Sacrament to our present and everlasting comfort.”234 By partaking the consecrated symbols of the crucified One, the faith of believers is nourished.

The “Prayer of Consecration” is followed by the standard words of institution. The bread is offered and then the cup, but the order provides no clue as to how the elements are received. The pastor simply states Christ’s words from the Upper Room and adds, “Ministering to you in his Name, I give you this bread,” and, respectively, “this cup.”235 There are a diversity of ways in which Congregational Christian Churches received the elements, the most popular being that communicants would receive them on trays while seated in the pews. This practice hails from the Puritan legacy.

[The Puritans] strongly objected to the custom of kneeling for the reception of communion, since this seemed to imply a belief in transubstantiation, to them sheer superstition. Furthermore, this gesture was a deviation from the Upper Room, where the Lord and his disciples sat at table. Also the reception of the elements singly, person by person, contradicted the corporate participation

233 Ibid.
234 Ibid.
assumed in the Lord’s command, “Take and eat…”

The prayer of thanksgiving, recited after the meal (the liturgy does not specify if this prayer is offered by the minister alone or in unison with the congregation), reiterates briefly four themes for the holy meal, three of which have already been discussed, yet they are offered here with fresh light: the Eucharist refreshes participants as a “memorial of thy love”; it has “granted to us the presence of thy Son”; it has “strengthened our faith in thee”; and it serves to “increase our love toward one another.” We have already treated the second and third themes at length. The first one shines much light on the events surrounding Holy Week. The Eucharist, instituted on the night before the crucifixion, symbolizes the recapitulation of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Yet the remembrance here is not conveyed with the violence associated with the atonement—Christ died on the cross to pay the price for our sins. Here, as opposed to the sacrificial theology implied in the “Prayer of Consecration” (the elements being symbols of Christ’s death), the memorial centers on God’s love. The cross, a symbol of substitutionary atonement, brutality, and death, is also a sign of God’s merciful, agápè love.

Related to this is the fourth theme: Holy Communion increases our love for one another. Love is a fundamental aspect of Christian discipleship. Christ claimed that the Greatest Commandment—which is recited after the Ten Commandments at

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236 Davies, 29.

the start of the briefer “A Service of Holy Communion” that follows this order—is to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Such reciprocal love creates koinonia, through which the living Christ is experienced among believers. That koinonia is reaffirmed each time Christians gather with one another and share the bread and the cup of the Eucharist. They reiterate the covenantal love that unites them with one another and with God, two of the prominent themes in this prayer of gratitude. God’s love is evident in the Scriptures. John makes it clear that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, NRSV). Through the Word experienced at the table, “God’s love is also demonstrated through signs and sign-acts.”238 This order maintains that love of God and neighbor is increased at Jesus’ table. This is achieved by parishioners not only sharing “the signs” of bread and wine, but by also participating in that which these signs signify: i.e. love of God and neighbor.

The prayer of dedication and benediction bring this order to a close. The benediction makes no reference to the Eucharist, although the prayer of dedication states quite poetically,

O God…grant unto us who have now tasted of thy goodness, that the eyes of our spirit may never cease to see thee, nor our ears to hear thy voice; that we, constantly remembering thy love and goodness toward men, may give ourselves with pure heart and thoughtful mind to serve and follow thee.239

This prayer builds on the theme of love presented in the previous petition. Having


tasted God’s “goodness,” which brings Psalm 34:8 to mind, communicants will remember God’s love towards us. That love experienced at the table, however, compels us to “serve and follow” God in the world. Coming just before the benediction, the prayer of dedication prepares us for such service.

IV: Conclusion

These two resources were to have a profound influence on the development of Congregation Christian eucharistic thought and practice. Upon examining the Communion liturgies in the *Pilgrim Hymnal* and *A Book of Worship for Free Churches*, several themes rise to the surface. Among them is the impetus that there must be a biblical warrant for the sacrament(s). This mandate was of principal importance to Congregational Christian thought. Also, through partaking the bread and the cup, the faith of communicants is strengthened for their earthly journey and their love for one another—those with whom they travel on this sojourn—increases. As Horton Davies argues, the Puritan theology of the sacrament is a cross between Zwinglian *memorialism* and Calvinian *virtualism*. He reminds us that this is because the “emphasis on remembrance is strong, although it is never the recollection of an absent Lord.”

In other words, the Lord’s Supper calls to the fore of our collective consciousness Christ’s sacrifice for us on the cross, but, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are united with Jesus when we come to the table. Lastly, those who receive the meal

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240 Davies, 31.
with a penitent heart receive comfort—a solace that comes through the pardon received from the One who is actually present at the meal.

When the CC Churches united with the E&R Church these understandings would become even more multifaceted. Before we look at how the five resources we have examined in chapters three and four were to influence the 1986 UCC Book of Worship, we need to examine a text that was influenced by all of these antecedent resources beforehand and how that text (along with the antecedent resources) would find a fuller expression in Book of Worship.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE HYMNAL THAT FAILED

I: Introduction

The seven volume series entitled *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, the last installment of which was published in 2005, is a treasure trove of practical, theological, historical, ecumenical, and liturgical information regarding the UCC. Volume seven examines a liturgical movement that unfolded in the UCC between the 1957 merger and the 1986 publication of *Book of Worship* that would have a profound influence on the development of the new book. “In 1961, the new Constitution of the United Church of Christ set up a Commission on Worship ‘to pursue a scholarly study of worship and give leadership to the United Church of Christ ministers and church in the conduct of worship, corporate and personal.’”241 As a result of its work, the Commission “argued that weekly services of ‘Word and Sacrament’ ought to be ‘uniformly observed’ in all Christian churches.”242 In 1966, they offered a resource entitled the “Lord’s Day Service,” a service of Word and sacrament. Churches and pastors with roots in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition embraced this. Not unexpectedly, it was strongly rejected by the churches that hailed from the Congregational Christian heritage for two principal reasons.


242 Ibid.
First, the descendants of the Pilgrims and the Puritans felt it would detract from the Word as the centerpiece of Christian worship. Second, they felt that by focusing on the Eucharist, baptism would be relegated to a secondary sacramental status.

Various liturgical resources surfaced over the next two decades as alternatives. Two of particular interest are *Services of the Church* (1969), which was a series of services in notebook form compiled under the leadership of the late UCC scholar Louis H. Gunnemann; the other was *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* (1974). The latter included liturgical materials similar to those that would appear twelve years later in the *Book of Worship*: services of Word and sacrament, baptism, confirmation, and the reception of new members. Many of these services were revisions of earlier resources.

It is pertinent to note that this publication, though influential in terms of late twentieth-century liturgical practices in the United Church of Christ, was a commercial failure. There are many reasons for this. *The Living Theological Heritage* highlights three of them:

Unfortunately, its size and its language limited its usefulness. First of all it contains only 386 hymns and pieces of service music, a major reduction from the 592 hymns/service music in the *Pilgrim Hymnal* of the Congregational Christian Churches and the 559 hymns/service music in the *Hymnal* of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Second, it is an odd shape and does not fit easily into pew racks in many UCC churches. Furthermore, by the time it was published in 1974 growing concern about inclusive language in hymns and liturgy made it unacceptable to many UCC leaders and members.243

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243 Ibid., 162.
The hymns in *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* are organized according to the seven major proclamations that comprise the UCC Statement of Faith. The liturgical resources appear in the front of *The Hymnal*. The “Service of Word and Sacrament I” is twelve pages long. The second service covers slightly over five pages. For our purposes, we will examine the theology inherent in the first service (the primary service) and will touch upon the second service afterwards.

II: Service of Word and Sacrament I

The service commences with the standing congregation either singing a hymn or listening to several possible words of adoration from Scripture offered by the minister who is instructed to stand at the table. There are eight choices for the words of adoration: Habakkuk 2:20, Psalm 95:6-7, John 4:24, Psalm 100:1-2a, Psalm 19:1, Psalm 124:8, 1 John 4:9, and James 4:8, 10. The service notes that “the introit of the day may be used in place of the sentences.” This is followed by the confession of sin, the *Kyrie Eleison*, the assurance of pardon, and responsive lines of praise from Psalm 51:15 rewritten in the first person plural from the first person singular. These are followed by one of four options: the *Gloria in Excelsis*, a psalm, the *Gloria Patri*, or a hymn of praise. Lessons from the Old and New Testaments are delivered followed by the Gospel reading and the sermon.

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Following the proclaimed Word, the congregation recites either the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, the Apostles’ Creed, or the Nicene Creed. The service continues with a hymn and a series of prayers. These petitions, which may be substituted by other prayers or litanies, are offered by either the minister or the congregation in unison. As in the antecedent resources discussed in chapters three and four, these prayers are lifted up for various concerns: the church, peace, the President of the United States and “those who share the public trust in every land,” workers, the sick and sorrowing, the troubled, family members and friends, enemies, the deceased, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs. Following the prayers is the offering of monies, which is brought forward with the gifts of bread and wine.

The eucharistic liturgy proper begins with an invitation modeled after the Emmaus story which is followed by the great thanksgiving. The prayer begins with the responsive *Sursum Corda:*

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right and meet to do so.**

Foreshadowing what was to be suggested for incorporation into the prayer of thanksgiving in the 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* convergence document by the World Council of Churches, as well as in the Communion prayers in the 1986 *Book of

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245 Ibid. The prayers appear on pages 17-19. The noted quote is from page 18.

246 Ibid., 20. The bold print indicates the response offered by the congregation.
Worship, this petition offers supplications for a host of acts that follow the biblical narrative:

- the created universe,
- the heavens and the earth,
- every living thing,
- humanity created in the image of God (the *imago Dei*),
- being delivered from bondage (i.e. sin), even though we rebelled against God,
- the revelation of God’s will through the Law and the Prophets (signifying two of the three segments of the Old Testament: the Torah and the Prophetic Writings),
- Jesus Christ (the prayer highlights key moments in Christ’s life and ministry: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and eschatological return),
- the Holy Spirit,
- the Church, and
- the promise of salvation.

The prayer then leads into the *seraphic hymn* (“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty…”) that follows a segue found in various forms in numerous liturgical resources, including the 1986 *Book of Worship*: “With patriarchs and prophets, apostles and martyrs, with your church on earth and with all the company of heaven, we magnify and praise you, we worship and adore you, O Lord Most Holy.”

The great thanksgiving continues with the words of institution followed by the double *epiclesis*:

Bless and sanctify by your Holy Spirit both us and these your gifts of bread and wine, that in this holy communion of the body and blood of Christ we

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247 Ibid.
may be made one with him and he with us, and that we may remain faithful members of his body until we feast with him in your heavenly kingdom.²⁴⁸

Five points need to be raised regarding this segment of the prayer—some of them have already been discussed in the previous two chapters, but bear repeating.

First, the blessing upon the eucharistic elements and the community combines traditional Western and Eastern features. In other words, the words of institution, which were routinely used to consecrate the elements in the Western tradition, come right before the more Eastern epiclesis upon the congregation as well as the bread and wine. Second, most United Church of Christ congregations (even in the 1970s) began substituting grape juice for fermented wine (or offering both) to be more inclusive of children and people suffering from alcoholism. Later, the word “cup” would be used instead of “wine” to allow for this modification. Here, the editors went with the traditional “wine.” Third, the theological assertion that this meal unites communicants and Christ in a common body continues an emphasis found in the antecedent orders. Fourth, the meal is a foretaste of the eschatological banquet. Many people in the UCC see Communion as an ethical act: a proleptic event in which enemies and friends will one day feast at a common board where righteousness will abound and true reconciliation will be embodied. United Church of Christ theologian Gabriel Fackre expounds upon this concept: “In this event is to be seen the liberation and reconciliation to come; sin, evil, and death are passed away and the

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.
broken relationships with God, neighbor, and nature are healed.”

Fifth, many people in the UCC today, and when this hymnal was published, consider the word “kingdom” a masculine reference to regal, political power and, therefore, prefer the gender neutral “realm” to signify an egalitarian community. On one level, this is no surprise. Although the inclusive language debate was underway before 1974 (when this hymnal was published), it was not until General Synod 11 (1977) that a recommendation was made to develop a book of worship that incorporated inclusive language. However, “the earliest action related to inclusive language in the United Church of Christ was a 1973 ‘Resolution on Inclusive Language.’”

It would be sixteen years until the denomination adopted a resolution on inclusive language, though, and, in response, the Office for Church Life and Leadership published “How Shall We Speak: A Study Guide” in 1993.

This segment of the prayer is followed by a congregational response wherein communicants offer themselves to God as a thankful response for the perfect offering of Christ. This is followed by two options for the Lord’s Prayer: one that uses the term “sins” and the other “debts.” The latter also includes Elizabethan English pronouns such as “thee” and “thine.”

The liturgy continues with the fraction of the bread and the pouring of the cup. With the former, the minister offers the words, “The bread which we break is

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250 *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, vol. 7, 392.
the communion of the body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{251} Likewise with the cup, he/she says, “The cup of blessings which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.”\textsuperscript{252} At this juncture it would be helpful to reflect a bit on nomenclature. Different churches and denominations use diverse titles for this sacrament. The title “the Lord’s Supper,” which calls to the fore the events of the Upper Room as first described in 1 Corinthians 11:20, is the term most often used in Reformed congregations. The United Church of Christ, however, commonly uses the term “Communion” or “Holy Communion” to signify the unification between those who partake of the meal and the mutual indwelling they share in Christ. The focus group participants articulated this concept across the board. That term is not only used here in the title of the order; it is also employed in the words that precede the distribution of the elements. This highlights one of the United Church of Christ’s understanding of the meal—an understanding that we find in the antecedent resources. Through the meal, we are united with Christ and one another.

The service does not provide rubrics to explicate how the elements are distributed. It simply says that when the bread is offered the minister says, “Take and eat; this is the body of Christ, which is broken for you.”\textsuperscript{253} Likewise with the cup, the officiant says, “This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ. Drink of it, all

\textsuperscript{251} Hymnal of the United Church of Christ, 22. Italics mine.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid. Italics mine.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid.
of you.”254 There are four possibilities for distribution that can be inferred: in pews, intinction, the community gathered around the table, or small groups that come forward to receive. Serving parishioners in the pews and offering the sacrament via intinction is, and historically has been, the most common practice for the distribution of the eucharistic elements in the UCC. In this liturgy the bread is distributed and parishioners partake once everyone receives a piece. Then, the same actions are repeated with the cup. This could suggest any of the aforementioned means of receiving the meal. That said, the order does state that “When table communion is used the following words of dismissal may be said.”255 This may signify that the congregation comes forward to receive the elements by intinction, or it could imply that congregants gather around the table and receive the meal together. More likely than not, it is the later, because the dismissal is neither the commission nor the final blessing, both of which appear later in the service. This is a practice that we do not often see in the UCC, but the liturgy certainly offers allowances for it.

Before the benediction, the prayer of thanksgiving is offered by the minister. The prayer acknowledges that God has “fed us with the Holy Communion of the body and blood of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ,” and through this “gift” we are assured of being “members of the mystical body of your Son and heirs through hope

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254 Ibid.
255 Ibid. Italics mine.
of your everlasting kingdom.”

This prayer deals with three of the themes highlighted in chapters three and four. The prayer in its entirety reads:

Almighty and eternal God, you have fed us with the Holy Communion of the body and blood of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ; we thank you for this gift, by which you assure us that we are members of the mystical body of your Son and heirs of hope of your everlasting kingdom. So assist us by your Holy Spirit that we may grow daily in knowledge of your truth, and in faithfulness to your will, abiding in that fellowship in which all your saints have part; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

First, although the liturgy does not indicate how Christ is present in/at the meal, it does suggest that the elements are, in some way, the body and blood of Christ. Although neither the UCC nor any of the four bodies that formed the denomination in 1957 officially subscribe to any traditional doctrine of presence (i.e. transubstantiation, consubstantiation, memorialism, virtualism, and the like), this prayer assumes the real presence of Christ. Those who come to the table receive the body and blood of Christ. It may be that the elements are symbols of Christ’s body and blood. It may be that Christ’s presence is seen as a spiritual presence. It may be both. The liturgy does not say, but such a statement certainly allows for a plethora of individual conclusions, which, in many respects, the UCC encourages its adherents to draw. The reality of Christ’s presence, however, is affirmed in this prayer.

Second, through this meal, we become members of “the mystical body” of Christ. The mystical church is the unity of all Christians beyond time and place, what

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256 Ibid.
257 Ibid.
some call the great cloud of witnesses (cf. Hebrews 12:1). This relates to the interconnection of all Christians and the sacramental life of the Church. This understanding was certainly lifted up in the focus group discussions. Since the body of Christ is divided into different denominations on earth, this is an ecumenical claim as well. The United Church of Christ’s motto is “That They May All Be One,” which is taken from Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17. The UCC, often touted as a modern experiment in ecumenism, prays that all Christian churches will be unified as one eventually. This mindset informs the UCC’s ecumenical tenor. Related to that is the UCC’s understanding that through the sacrament of baptism (which is reaffirmed each time we come to the table) we are initiated into the Church Universal. This complements the ecclesiology central to Paul’s thought as illustrated in 1 Corinthians 12—an ecclesiology embraced by many in the UCC—that all Christians are united in Jesus and that all of their gifts are necessary in order for the mystical body of Christ to be complete. The Eucharist affirms our unity in that mystical body.

Third, Holy Communion embodies eschatological hope. The faithful who gather at the table are “heirs of hope of [God’s] everlasting kingdom.” As discussed above, the Eucharist gives us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in which enemies and friends will eat together at the table of sister and brotherhood in Christ. If this is the case (if enemies and friends are to feast side-by-side) then the holy meal is imbued with a sense of reconciliation. Such a theology is central to UCC thought and finds its most tangible expression in many of the UCC’s stances (some of them quite
controversial) for social justice. It is no surprise that this eschatological hope would be part of a prayer of thanksgiving in one of the central rites of the church.

The prayer of thanksgiving also asks for God to “assist us by your Holy Spirit that we may grow daily in knowledge of your truth.” 258 This suggests, as many people in the UCC believe, that the Eucharist is a means of spiritual formation. Again, we saw this in the antecedent resources and the focus group dialogues. We are edified by the proclaimed Word. We are also fed, physically and spiritually, by the Eucharist. This is why, as many denominations (including the UCC) maintain, Word and sacrament should not be separated. Although weekly Communion was not a standard practice in most UCC congregations when this hymnal was published (and that is still the case), it is strongly suggested that the Word always accompany the sacrament when the latter is celebrated. The belief is that both Word and sacrament collaborate to bolster the faith of worshippers more fully: the sacrament being the seal upon the promises proclaimed in the Word. Susanne Johnson aptly argues that “Christian spirituality is irreducibly communal, liturgical, relational, and sacramental, as well as deeply personal.” 259 This prayer of thanksgiving, which is part of an order of “Word and Sacrament,” suggests the same.

The prayer is followed by a choice between a hymn or the Nunc Dimittis. This, in turn, is followed by the commission and blessing offered by the pastor; neither

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258 Ibid., 22.

include any eucharistic references. Finally, the order comes to a close with an oddly placed “New Creed” which comes from one of the UCC’s sister denominations, the United Church of Canada. No eucharistic references appear in this creed either.

III: Service of Word and Sacrament II

The “Service of Word and Sacrament II” opens with a Psalter greeting (from Psalm 66), a hymn, and the usual three-part act of confession: the call to confession, the prayer of confession, and the words of absolution. This is followed by an act of praise in which the minister simply says, “Praise the Lord,” and the congregation responds by saying, “The Lord be praised.” After this the congregation sings either the Gloria Patri or a hymn of praise. The people are then seated for the reading of Scripture. After the reading of the Epistle or the Gospel lesson the sermon follows. Upon completion of the homily, the minister leads the congregation in the recitation of the UCC Statement of Faith, a historic creed, or the covenant of that particular local church. A hymn or anthem is sung, and then the minister guides


261 As part of a denomination that honors autonomy at all levels of its ecclesial life, many local churches have crafted proprietary covenants to be recited in worship in lieu of ecumenical creeds. One example is The Colonial Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, United Church of Christ. At every worship service the members of this congregation recite the following covenant: “We covenant with the Lord and with one another and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in Christian love. We seek to worship God in spirit and in truth and to love our neighbor as ourselves. With God’s help, we will honor Colonial Church in our conduct, support its program, and extend the influence of Christ throughout the world.” This Colonial Church covenant is available on-line at colonialucc.org/aboutus/beliefs.html.
the congregation into intercessory prayer. Prayers are offered “for all people…asking for them those things which they need and which [God] desire[s] for them.” 262 Specifically, prayers are offered for the world, our nation and those who govern it, the church, and those in need. The Lord’s Prayer is lifted up to God preceded by a prayer of thanksgiving for when Communion is not celebrated. We then move into the celebration of the Eucharist.

As with the previous order, the gifts of bread and wine are brought forward with the monetary offering. The congregation then recites a doxology. (One is not suggested.) The order then instructs us that “If the Lord’s Supper is not celebrated, the service will conclude with a prayer of dedication, a hymn, and a blessing.” 263

If the Eucharist is celebrated, then the Lord’s Prayer is recited and, before the offering, the minister issues an invitation in which he/she acknowledges that the monetary gifts are brought forth. The officiant then says, “We invite to this table all who are members of a Christian church, who desire peace with their neighbor, and who seek the mercy of God.” 264 The second and third of these prerequisites are self-explanatory. The first is quite interesting, especially in a free church such as the United Church of Christ. One of the eucharistic debates that existed in the UCC at the time this resource was published was who should be invited to the table. It is a debate that still exists in some circles. Some people feel that Communion is only for

262 Hymnal of the United Church of Christ, 25.
263 Ibid., 27.
264 Ibid.
youth and adults; children are excluded. Others have a table that is open to people of any age. Some state that only baptized Christians should receive the elements. Many denominations and churches hold this view, because Communion is one of the ways we affirm our baptismal vows. (How can one confirm the sacrament of initiation if they never received it?) In this order, only “members of a Christian church” can receive Holy Communion. Obviously, that includes people of other Reformed churches as well as Catholics and members of Orthodox traditions.

The order continues with the people standing and the minister offering words that recall the breaking of the bread in the Emmaus story. The congregation responds by saying, “In company with all believers in every time and beyond time, we come to this table to know him in the breaking of the bread.”265 The reference to sharing bread with all believers is reminiscent of our last point: the table being opened to all people. The acknowledgment that we know Christ in the breaking of the bread speaks to Christ’s presence in the meal, although, as mentioned in regards to the previous order, how Christ is present is not explicated. This is followed by the words of institution and the Sursum Corda. This is unusual since the words of institution function as a warrant for the Sursum Corda. It may be that the editors of this hymnal are breaking from a traditional liturgical form for a theological reason that they do not explicate. It may be that they are framing the Sursum Corda between the words of institution and the prayer of thanksgiving (which follows) to highlight

265 Ibid., 27.
the gratitude expressed in the latter. It may also have to do with the overall flow of the order: it does seem, when looking through the liturgy, that the components that require congregation participation are evenly spaced between what the officiant declares. Unfortunately, nothing in the liturgy or the extant, secondary literature explicates why this is the case. As just mentioned, the prayer of thanksgiving comes next.

Though not referred to as the great thanksgiving as it is in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I,” the thrust of the prayer is similar. The minister expresses gratitude for Creation, the *imago Dei*, forgiveness in spite of our rebellious nature, Jesus Christ’s life and works (specifically the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection), the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the promise of eternal life. This leads into the congregation reciting the words of the *seraphic hymn* (as we also saw in the previous order), which, in turn, is followed by the *epiclesis*. The blessing through “Word and Spirit” is sought on the community and on the meal so that the people may not only offer “faith and praise,” but so they may also be “united with Christ and one another, and remain faithful to the tasks he sets before us.”

Clearly, the meal is to feed the people spiritually so that they may embody Christ’s ministry to the world. It concludes with the congregational response, “In the strength Christ gives us we offer ourselves to you, giving thanks that you have called us to serve you.”

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.
The order then offers specific directives for the breaking of the bread. Between saying, “Through the broken bread” and “we participate in the body of Christ,” the minister is instructed to break the bread.\textsuperscript{268} Then the minister is to take the cup (there are no instructions as to whether the wine/juice is in a flagon waiting to be poured or if it is already in the chalice) and say, “Through the cup of blessings we participate in the new life Christ gives.”\textsuperscript{269} They indicate that through the bread we acknowledge our assimilation into Christ’s church and through the cup we recognize the new life that this gives us. These statements bring to the fore the theology inherent in the antecedent orders, namely the unification in Christ and the gifts it bestows upon communicants.

A slight change in this order indicates something quite interesting: the people do not come forward to receive the gifts, but rather, in the tradition of Congregationalism, they remain seated. The previous order did not specify this. Here, the minister says, “Come, for all things are ready” (even though no one comes forward) immediately after the above mentioned words in regards to the fraction and the “taking” of the cup. However, the order indicates that “The people shall be seated.”\textsuperscript{270} The minister gives the bread with the words, “Eat this, for this is the body of Christ, broken for you.”\textsuperscript{271} Likewise in offering the cup, the officiant declares,

\textsuperscript{268} Ibid. \textsuperscript{269} Ibid. \textsuperscript{270} Ibid. \textsuperscript{271} Ibid.
“Drink this, for it is the blood of Christ, shed for you.”

The minister then leads the congregation into the post-Communion prayer of thanksgiving by saying, “Let us give thanks,” and the order offers the instruction, “The people shall stand and give thanks.”

We are led to assume that the elements were not received via intinction or else the congregants would not be instructed to sit and rise. If they did come forward to receive the elements, then the order certainly would have said so having given instruction as to when they should be seated and when they should stand.

The prayer of thanksgiving, which also appears in the resource we will discuss in the next chapter, is succinct and beautifully written:

We give thanks, almighty God, that you have refreshed us at your table by granting us the presence of your Son, Jesus Christ. Strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and send us forth into the world in courage and peace, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In many respects, this prayer aptly concludes this order for it encapsulates the theology contained therein. Gratitude is expressed to God for rejuvenating participants by granting them Christ’s presence. Communicants also experience reconciliation and fellowship with God and one another. The prayer then asks for the faith of communicants to be bolstered so they may be filled with valor and solace as they venture into the world. Lastly, as they go forth, the people rejoice in the

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272 Ibid.
273 Ibid.
274 Ibid., 29.
power of the Holy Spirit. Following this, the congregation sings a hymn and the minister offers a Triune benediction.

IV: Conclusion

In discussing the orders in the front of *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ*, the editors of *The Living Theological Heritage* note that “When the church is at worship the people of God give public expression to the faith that shapes their lives.”275 This appropriately encapsulates the aim of the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” and “II.” The same source also indicates that although these two services are the “chief service[s] of the church for weekly worship” they are not mandated.276 In fact, it is noted (in true UCC fashion) that “What is offered in this book is not normative but indicative.”277

For all its failures in terms of limited hymn selection, overall structure, and physical size, *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* offers much liturgically. It draws together many of the themes presented in the antecedent resources. First of all, Christ is present at the table. It is a mystical presence that unites believers with Christ and one another. The language points not to an absent Lord, but the Living Christ who is revealed in the entire liturgy and within the community that participates in it. Second, as we will see stated explicitly in the 1986 *Book of Worship*, it is also an order

275 *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, vol. 7, 162.
276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
that moves from meal to mission. The liturgy ends with those who supped offering gratitude that God has called them into Christian service. Having been fed physically and spiritually at the table, communicants are called to feed others likewise, particularly the poor, the hungry, and the outcast. Third, through this meal those who commune experience Christ’s eschatological hope—it is a foretaste of the kingdom banquet at which all people will share Christ’s body and blood in a spirit of sister and brotherhood.

These themes, which we have seen in all the resources we have examined so far, find further expression in the only principal liturgical resource published by the denomination: Book of Worship: United Church of Christ.
CHAPTER SIX

BOOK OF WORSHIP: UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

I: Introduction

This chapter will examine the liturgies for Holy Communion in the 1986 Book of Worship: United Church of Christ and how they were influenced by the antecedent resources analyzed in chapters three, four, and five. Moreover, this chapter will include attention to the writings of the major Reformers (particularly Martin Bucer) as well as the 1982 World Council of Churches’ convergence statement Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry insofar as they were critical influences in the development of the Book of Worship.

There are two principal orders for the celebration of “Word and Sacrament” in the Book of Worship, as well as an abbreviated service and a brief order for the infirmed. Lastly, a Communion service is included in the “Order for Marriage” rite. The two primary services will be the focus since the latter orders are basically variations on these two. In the next chapter these orders will be compared to the focus group findings discussed in the first two chapters.

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278 “This order is shaped by traditional forms characteristic of orders of worship found in the Western church. It reflects the unitive structure of the primitive Services of Word and Sacrament known to us by the witness of Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, Egeria, and others. It is also informed by insights of the Protestant Reformation and the most recent ecumenical consensus concerning worship, including the recommendations of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches” (from the introduction to the “Order for Word and Sacrament I” in the United Church of Christ Book of Worship, 31).
II: Service of Word and Sacrament I

From the outset we are told that “This order is informed by Isaiah’s experience and conveys a sense of the majesty of God. Its central focus is God’s victory over sin and death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”279 These themes pervade the entire service—a service that moves from confession and absolution, to the proclaimed Word, to the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup. For our purposes we will focus on the segment of the order that deals with the celebration of the Eucharist.

Following the offertory of money (the order allows for the eucharistic elements to be brought forward at this time as well), which appears in the middle of the service, we have the invitation to the meal. It begins with a reference to the resurrection, noting Christ’s appearance to Mary Magdalene, and how he was made known on the same day to two of his disciples in the Emmaus story. This is followed by the congregation either saying or singing, “This is the joyful feast of the people of God. Men and women, youth and children, come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and gather about Christ’s table.”280 This is an adaptation of the congregational response in the invitation found in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” in The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ.281 It also foreshadows one of the prayers of thanksgiving that appears at the end of the “Service of Word and

279 Book of Worship, 31.
280 Ibid., 44.
281 See pp. 19-20 in The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ.
Sacrament II.” The reference is to communicants who have gathered from the four corners of the world: east, west, north, and south.\textsuperscript{282}

Of particular interest in this invitation is the fact that the table is open to people of all ages; it is for “Men and women, youth and children.”\textsuperscript{283} Obviously, there is little if any debate about men and women, but opening the table to youth and children, particularly the latter, is a point of contention even in liberal denominations such as the United Church of Christ. In her article “Things Old and New: The Sacraments and the Nurture of Children,” Helen Archibald offers a methodology that empowers children to incorporate the practice and understanding of the Eucharist into their entire spiritual formation and identity as Christians. She claims that, “The decision to admit children to communion is nothing less than a decision to rethink the church and the formative power of its liturgy and sacraments in shaping Christians.”\textsuperscript{284} In the same issue of \textit{Prism} in which Archibald’s article appears, Vicki Kessler offers a complementary argument. Kessler asks, quite rhetorically, “If we really want our children to be Christians, how can we risk denying them the opportunity to experience the totality of the Christian life found at the Lord’s

\textsuperscript{282} This is adapted from \textit{Services of the Church}, 1 (New York: United Church Press, 1966 and 1969).

\textsuperscript{283} \textit{Book of Worship}, 44.

Each time participants share the bread and the cup of the Eucharist, they reaffirm their baptism. Therefore, Communion is, in some respects, the second half of the sacrament of baptism. If that is the case, there is no reason why baptized children should be excluded from the table. In any event, the Communion liturgies in *Book of Worship* presuppose the participation of children.

The invitation ends with the congregational response, “This table is for all Christians who wish to know the presence of Christ and to share in the community of God’s people.” The people acknowledge that at the table they encounter Christ’s presence and are unified as the Church. These motifs surfaced a great deal in the antecedent resources. We then move into the Communion prayer.

Many of the orders in *Book of Worship* have two options for each prayer: A and B. In keeping with this form, the Communion prayer offers two choices that the pastor leads by “recalling God’s great acts of salvation.” Before the prayers commence, however, the order indicates that if the officiant decides to construct a Communion prayer, it is to include the following:

- Give thanks for God’s goodness to us shown in the creation of the world and in the events of history.
- Remember people of faith through whom God has spoken to the human

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286 *Book of Worship*, 44.

287 They are simply two options: one does not signify a certain style, form, or approach over the other.

288 *Book of Worship*, 45.
family as witnessed in scripture.

- Give thanks for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Recall Jesus’ words at the institution of the supper in the upper room.
- Remind us that our participation in Holy Communion is a sacrifice of praise which includes the offering of our lives to God.
- Briefly proclaim faith in Christ who has died, is raised, and will return at the close of history.
- Give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit whose presence is invoked.

These prescriptions are evident in options A and B of the Communion prayer, though not exactly in the same order as they are recommended above.

**CREATION**

**Option A:**
We give you thanks, God of majesty and mercy, for calling forth the creation and raising us from dust by the breath of your being.

We bless you for the beauty and bounty of the earth and for the vision of the day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none.

**Option B:**
We give you thanks, Holy One, almighty and eternal God, always and everywhere, through Jesus Christ, the only one begotten by you before all time, by whom you made the world and all things.

We bless you for your continual love and care for every creature. We praise you for forming us in your image and for calling us to be your people.

**WITNESSES IN SCRIPTURE**

**Option A:**
We remember the covenant you made with your people Israel, and we give you thanks for all our ancestors in faith. We rejoice that you call

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289 Ibid., 49.

290 What follows (examples from Options A and B of the suggested contents of a Communion prayer) appears on pages 45-47 of Book of Worship. I do not present them in the exact order that they appear in this resource. I am simply illustrating that the suggested contents are fully present.
us to reconciliation with you and all people everywhere and that you remain faithful to your covenant even when we are faithless.

**Option B:**
Although we rebelled against your love, you did not abandon us in our sin, but sent to us prophets and teachers to lead us into the way of salvation.

**LIFE AND DEEDS OF CHRIST**

**Option A:**
We come in remembrance and celebration of the gift of Jesus Christ, whom you sent, in the fullness of time, to be the good news. Born of Mary, our sister in faith, Christ lived among us to reveal the mystery of your Word, to suffer and die on the cross for us, to be raised from death on the third day, and then to live in glory.

**Option B:**
...we give you thanks for the gift of Jesus, our only Savior, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

In the fullness of time you came to us and received our nature in the person of Jesus, who, in obedience to you, by suffering on the cross, and being raised from the dead, delivered us from the way of sin and death.

We praise you that Jesus now reigns with you in glory and ever lives to pray for us.

**SACRIFICE OF PRAISE**

**Option A:**
With your sons and daughters of faith in all places and times, we praise you with joy.

**Option B:**
...with the entire company of saints in heaven and on earth, we worship and glorify you, God Most Holy.
**THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST**

**Option A:**
Christ’s death, O God, we proclaim. Christ’s resurrection we declare. Christ’s coming we await. Glory be to you, O God.

**Option B:**
Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

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**THE HOLY SPIRIT**

**Option A:**
We bless you, gracious God, for the presence of your Holy Spirit in the church you have gathered.

**Option B:**
We thank you for the Holy Spirit who leads us into truth, defends us in adversity, and gathers us from every people to unite us in one holy church.

The words of institution from the Upper Room are also recited (as suggested). In the first option they are from 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; in the second they are adapted from the Consultation on Church Union’s (COCU) 1968 text *An Order of Worship for the Proclamation of the Word of God and the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper*. The two are almost identical, the biggest difference (in Option B) being that the cup is offered specifically “for the forgiveness of sins.” Both prayers also offer the *Sanctus* as part of the sacrifice of praise to God. Only one version of the *Sanctus* (also known as the *Tersanctus*) is listed with optional musical settings that appear in the back of *Book of Worship*.

Both options of the prayer continue. The specific language used in each

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291 *Book of Worship*, 47.
choice brings to the fore a particular theology of the Eucharist. In Option A, it is noted that the meal unites participants in a covenant of faith and the table is spread “with the gifts of the earth and of our labor.” In his study *What Happens in Holy Communion*, Michael Welker examines how the meal requires both natural gifts from God (wheat and grapes) and human interaction to transform them into the elements at the center of the meal (bread and wine/juice). This has strong ramifications for social justice, because, as Welker writes, “Without the participation of human beings, a cultivated world and fruitful vegetation capable of regenerating itself are biblically unthinkable. Nature and culture are reciprocally interconnected.” Option B, referring to the elements as holy mysteries, adds the petition, “Grant that all who share the communion of the body and blood of our risen Savior may be one in Jesus Christ.” The same theology is stated in the introduction to this order, wherein the editors claim that, “The wheat that is gathered to make one loaf and the grapes that are pressed to make one cup remind participants that they are one in the body of Christ, the church.”

Option A then offers an *epicletic* consecratory prayer that calls upon the Holy Spirit to bless the meal and those gathered to share it so that the latter (identified as

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292 Ibid., 48.
295 Ibid., 32-33.
the “universal church”) may be “the champion of peace and justice in the world.”

Although this segment of the prayer is not labeled a “prayer of consecration,” it does reflect a portion of the Communion prayer offered in the “Brief Order for the Service of the Word and Sacrament,” the instructions for which read, “for use to consecrate the elements.” Of note as well is the fact that little mention is made of presence. The only reference to presence comes after “the consecration” and it reads as an appendage: “Be present with us as we share this meal, and throughout all our lives.” Option B does not offer much more in terms of a substantive eucharistic theology. After a reference to the eschatological feast, of which Communion is a foretaste, the people ask God to “accept with favor this our sacrifice of praise, which we now present with these holy gifts.”

United Church of Christ liturgical theologian and pastor Chalmers Coe, who served as vice-chair of the UCC Commission on Worship from 1960 to 1967, is one of the most ardent critics of the Communion liturgies in the Book of Worship. Coe was one of the people that the editors of the UCC-related scholarly journal Prism asked to offer a critique of Book of Worship shortly after its publication. Coe’s analysis is pithy, astute, and sometimes utterly comical. One of Coe’s main points of contention is that the utilization of inclusive language throughout Book of Worship (which, as we

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296 Ibid., 48.
297 Ibid., 85.
298 Ibid., 48.
299 Ibid.
saw, was absent in the 1974 *Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* and was one of the principal reasons for its failure) depreciates Christology in this resource, particularly in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I.” Coe writes:

> The persistent avoidance of the words “he,” “his,” and “him” for Jesus is, in the final analysis, not only clumsily done but also docetic. If the “scandal of particularity” is inherent in our holy religion, the fullness of the Incarnation requires that the Savior be either a woman or a man. The New Testament is unambiguous about the manhood of Jesus. Any effort, therefore, to avoid the implications of this fact is in effect to deny the Incarnation, and is as heretical as the claim of many long ago that Jesus did not really die.\(^{300}\)

> The significance of the Incarnation is that Jesus is *fully human* and *fully divine*. His gender is somewhat insignificant. In other words, Jesus, as Coe intimates, would have embodied the fullness of humanity had he been born a female. That said, Coe makes a valid point: the New Testament is clear about Jesus being a male. To avoid the fact because it is exclusive is, to some extent, to deny his humanity. The use of inclusive language in the *Book of Worship*, as well as *The New Century Hymnal* that followed, would galvanize the critique that is often levied against the United Church of Christ by many inside and outside of the denomination: the UCC seeks to be politically correct even at the expense of orthodoxy. If this is true, and if Coe is correct about the “scandal of particularity” being an issue in the UCC, this poses a serious challenge to the denomination’s theology of the Eucharist. Is this meal instituted by *the* Savior of humanity or is it simply a meal that a controversial rabbi

shared with his disciples on the night before he was executed for sedition? If the latter is the case, then the UCC’s theology of the Eucharist is hindered by more than just inclusive language.

The prayer of thanksgiving is followed by three versions of the “Prayer of Our Savior” (again, to be language inclusive, “Lord” has been excised, although “Father” has not): one that uses sins/sin, one that uses trespasses/trespass, and one that uses debts/debtors. The breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine is preceded by these instructions: “The bread is broken and the wine is poured as visible and audible reminders of the sacrificial self giving of Jesus Christ. These actions call to mind the cost as well as the joy of Christian discipleship.” ³⁰¹ The Word made known in Scripture and in preaching is both a visible and an audible reminder of God’s grace. The same is said here in regards to the Eucharist. This is one of the central arguments as to why both Word and sacrament belong together in worship. In an article entitled “Theological Guidelines that Informed the Development of the Book of Worship,” Thomas E. Dipko maintains that one of the principles governing the committee that assembled this resource was “that worship at its fullness includes both Word and Sacrament.” ³⁰² This enables us to encounter the living Christ in a

³⁰¹ Book of Worship, 50.
variety of ways using all of our senses. “The Book of Worship, in keeping with the
witness of the primitive church and the teachings of Calvin and Luther, holds both
Word and Sacrament together in a unified order.”303 In a similar vein, United
Methodist theologian Laurence Hull Stookey argues that, “God’s promises come to
us most amply only as words and signs are given together.”304 Although many in the
UCC would concur, combining Word and sacrament is not the practice in most local
churches on Sunday morning. Dipko claims that there is a practical reason for this.
He writes, “where holy communion is celebrated weekly on the Lord’s Day, the
preaching of the word takes a subordinate place. Where the sermon has risen to
predominance, holy communion is celebrated only occasionally and often in an
abbreviated order.”305

The bread is then broken and the wine/ juice is poured with the respective
words, “The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ” and
“The cup of blessings which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.”306
With both, sacrificial imagery rises to the fore, as suggested in the above-mentioned
instructions. The Agnus Dei is then either said or sung (with appended musical
settings for the latter) and the people are called to the Supper with the words, “The

303 Ibid.
304 Laurence Hull Stookey’s Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 60.
305 Dipko, 191.
306 Book of Worship, 50.
gifts of God for the people of God. Come, for all things are ready.” 307 This is supplemented with a second option: “The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died and was raised for you.” 308 As indicated in the introduction to this order, “The invitation and the call to the supper emphasize that all people of faith are welcome at Christ’s table. The invitation and call celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past, but an actual meal with the risen Christ that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history.” 309 These themes permeate the entire service; they are not just part of the invitation and the call to the Supper. In the vast majority of local UCC churches, the invitational emphasis is that all people are welcome to the table. This is expressed in one of the recent slogans of the United Church of Christ’s God is Still Speaking advertising campaign: “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” This raises an interesting dichotomy. The “authorized” introduction makes it clear that the sacrament is for “people of faith,” yet most churches, as evinced by the majority of the focus groups examined above, invite “all people” regardless of their faith to the table. What about those who lack faith and yet come to the table? Do they encounter Christ? How is that qualified? The openness of the table in many UCC churches does not reflect what we find in this normative text.

The elements are then shared. The text states that while sharing the elements

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307 Ibid., 51.
308 Ibid.
309 Ibid., 32.
the pastor and assistants may say one of two options for both the bread and the cup, the first being, “Take and eat, this is the body of Christ, broken for you,” and “Take and drink, this is the cup of the new covenant poured out for you.”310 Option B reads, “The body of Christ, the bread of heaven,” and “The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.”311 Both are ratified by the congregational “Amen!” It is interesting to note that the way in which the elements are served is open to each specific setting. Two directives follow the giving of the bread and cup. The first is, “After the distribution of the bread and the cup, the elements may be covered, according to local custom.”312 In some traditions, including many local UCC churches, the elements are covered with a veil before and after distribution. There are various reasons for this, the most common being out of reverence for the body and blood of Christ. One British source claims that this has more to do with hygiene: the elements are covered to be “protected from inadvertent adulteration by insects and birds that, in the past, probably more than today, enjoy life in the beams and rafters of the roof.”313 The veil is often white to signify the burial linens that covered Jesus when he was entombed. Sometimes metal coverings are used. The second directive is, “Words of dismissal may precede the prayer of thanksgiving if people have moved

310 Ibid., 51-52.
311 Ibid.
312 Ibid., 52.
313 Christopher Haffner, “Chalice and Pall,” from Church Times, Issue 7383 (September 10, 2004): found online at: www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=22298.
from their seats to receive communion.”  

Clearly, the order allows for people to receive the elements either by coming forward or by remaining in their seats. In most UCC congregations, people receive the elements by intinction if they come forward. If they receive them while seated they sometimes eat and drink in unison; sometimes they consume the elements at the time they are served. Eating and drinking simultaneously comes from the Congregational tradition and signifies the communal aspect of the meal. Taking the elements individually signifies each communicant’s personal relationship with Christ. Sometimes a combination of the two is observed: the bread is eaten individually when each person receives it; the cup is shared in unison.

Two options for the prayer of thanksgiving after Communion follow. Option A reemphasizes the ecumenical, unifying aspects of the meal. After thanking God “for the gift of our Savior’s presence in the simplicity and splendor of this holy meal,” the prayer asks God to “Unite us with all who are fed by Christ’s body and blood.” This is for a specific purpose: so that the Church may “proclaim the good news of your love and that your universal church may be a rainbow of hope in an uncertain world.” Chalmers Coe balks at this option of the prayer stringently:

The *Prayer of Thanksgiving* is unfortunate in two respects. First, to speak of Jesus’ presence ‘in the simplicity and splendor of this holy meal’ is to call

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314 *Book of Worship*, 52.
315 Ibid.
316 Ibid.
excessive attention to our evaluation of, or response to, an objective act which has just occurred. It is atmospheric. It is subjectivist. The focus is not on God but, cloyingly, on the quality of the service we are now concluding. Second, the hope that God’s universal church may be a ‘rainbow of hope in an uncertain world’ is simply mawkish.  

Coe does not comment on Option B. One assumes that this is because this prayer takes up more traditional language and with less ostentatious verbiage. Gratitude is offered to a “Bountiful God” for refreshing us “at your table” and for “granting us the presence of Christ.” Furthermore, the congregation petitions God for three things: “Strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and send us forth into the world in courage and peace rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.” The meal, at which we encounter Christ, unifies us, bolsters our faith, and prepares us to enter the world as Christ’s disciples. These same themes were evident in the antecedent orders previously examined. In fact, it is identical to a prayer of thanksgiving found in *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ.*

The “Service of Word and Sacrament I” comes to a close with a hymn of parting, the Song of Simeon (with optional musical settings found in the appendix), a commissioning, a benediction, and a postlude. The introduction to this order claims that it moves “from meal to mission.” We see the impetus for outreach in both prayers of thanksgiving and also in the commission (an adaptation of the benediction

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317 Chalmers Coe, 36.
318 *Book of Worship,* 52.
319 Ibid.
320 Ibid., 33.
found at the close of 1 Thessalonians), which is attributed to UCC historian Horton Davies.

According to the *Book of Worship*, “the Risen Christ is the central focus” in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” and “II.”\(^{321}\) Whereas the former moves “from meal to mission,” the latter has a slightly different focus. The second order “is more explicit in its attempt to call forth the joy of Christ’s victory over death.”\(^{322}\) It is noted, however, that the second order moves “from meal to mission” as well.

### III: Service of Word and Sacrament II

It is pertinent to note that, as with the previous service, this one “is shaped by the customs and practices of the church in every century and is faithful to the ecumenical convergence published in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*” and that the “flow is from adoration to instruction and only then to contrition, confession, and absolution.”\(^{323}\) This introduces the reader to the basic structure and tenor of what follows.

“Word and Sacrament II” is a complete order that begins clearly with adoration and leads to instruction. The service begins with the concerns of the church, a prelude, a hymn of adoration, a greeting, an invocation, an act of praise, and the reading of the Scriptures. In keeping with the Revised Common Lectionary, to

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\(^{321}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^{322}\) Ibid.
\(^{323}\) Ibid., 55.
which the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship* and the denomination’s annual calendar point, it is suggested that Old Testament, Psalter, Epistle, and Gospel lessons be utilized. The readings are followed by a homily and an affirmation of faith. In keeping with the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* convergence statement, which calls for a confession of faith or creed to be recited whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, the *Book of Worship* instructs participants that “All who are able may stand for a form of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ, a creed, or a church covenant.” The UCC has long been categorized as a non-creedal church. This view is contested in the scholarship of UCC systematician Gabriel Fackre, who claims that honoring our rich confessional heritage is a matter of preserving our memory and claiming our identity. It is interesting to note that the first act of business on which the denomination embarked when it merged in 1957 was to construct a Statement of Faith (that evolved through three revisions) and that this statement (or one of the classic creeds or confessions of the historic church) be incorporated in both services of Word and sacrament. This is telling since, the United Church of Christ [does] not have a set of beliefs which members are required to accept and which serve as a test of faith… The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, for example, is not an authoritative statement to which members are required to give allegiance. Rather than being a test of faith, it is a testimony of faith which informs, instructs and inspires the

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324 Ibid., 62.

325 See especially Gabriel Fackre’s article “The Confessional Heritage of the United Church of Christ,” which was reprinted in his collection *Believing, Caring, and Doing in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2005), 66-81.
members, local churches and national bodies of the United Church of Christ.\textsuperscript{326}

Following this communal creedal proclamation, a hymn or anthem is sung and then the prayers of the people are offered. The editors of this order do not provide specific prayers as much as they make explicit thematic suggestions followed by two options for litanic responses.

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textbf{OPTION A:} & \textbf{OPTION B:} \\
\text{LEADER} & \text{LEADER} \\
\textbf{God, in your mercy,} & \textbf{O God, hear our prayer.} \\
\text{PEOPLE} & \text{PEOPLE} \\
Hear our prayer. & Let our cry come unto you.\textsuperscript{327}
\end{tabular}

The suggestions offered reflect what we saw in the antecedent orders. With the congregation seated, intercessions are voiced for:

- The church universal, including ecumenical councils, specific churches in other places, the United Church of Christ and its leaders, and this local church.
- The nations and all in authority.
- Justice and peace in all the world.
- The health of those who suffer in body, mind, and spirit.
- The needs of families, single people, and the lonely.
- Reconciliation with adversaries.
- The local community and all other communities.
- All who are oppressed or in prison.\textsuperscript{328}

\textsuperscript{326}“Theology in the UCC,” from \textit{The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ}, vol. 7, ed. Frederick R. Trost and Barbara Brown Zikmund (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 308. This piece originally appeared in the 1982 resource published by the United Church of Christ Office of Church Life and Leadership entitled \textit{The Leaders Box}.

\textsuperscript{327} \textit{Book of Worship}, 62.

\textsuperscript{328} Ibid.
As the introduction to this order outlines, the next movements are acts of contrition, confession, and absolution. This is followed by the congregation passing the peace, participating in the offertory, and reciting the Lord’s Prayer. The introduction to the offering (Option A) makes a lucid connection between the monetary gifts brought to the table along with the eucharistic gifts. This was evident in the antecedent orders, such as the 1867 Reformed Order, as well. The Reformed Order states that after the sermon “shall follow a collection of the Offerings of the people, to be devoted to the service of the poor, or to some benevolent purpose.” Within a page of these instructions, we are told that the pastor is to “uncover and expose to view the vessels containing the Bread and the Wine for use of the Holy Sacrament.”\(^\text{329}\) The liturgy connects the monetary offerings with the eucharistic gifts. From there, we move into the actual Communion liturgy.

All who are able are invited to stand for the invitation. If neither Option A nor B is used, then the officiant is instructed to craft one that is biblically-based and reminds those gathered that “Christ is the host, and they are guests at the table.”\(^\text{330}\) From the outset, the presence of Christ—being the host at the table—is established. In Option A, the pastor offers words adapted from John 6:35. The congregation responds by acknowledging, “In company with all who hunger for spiritual food, we

\(^{329}\) Order of Worship for the Reformed Church, 175.

\(^{330}\) Ibid., 176.

\(^{331}\) Book of Worship, 68. “Host” here is often misunderstood by former Roman Catholics.
come to this table to know the risen Christ in the sharing of this life-giving bread.”332 As indicated above, the focus of this order is expressing “the joy of Christ’s victory over death.” The risen One is noted in Option B as well. Also rooted in Scripture, specifically the Emmaus event (itself a resurrection story), the congregation responds with the Option B proclamation, “In company with all believers in every time and beyond time, we come to this table to know the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.”333 The Risen One transcends time. He is present with those gathered. Jesus is found in community.

The minister then offers a Communion prayer or utilizes one of the two options provided in this order. As with the Communion prayers in the first order, these prayers recount God’s acts in creation and the gift of life; the *imago Dei*; the birth, life, death, resurrection, and anticipatory return of Jesus Christ; for the church and its mission in the world; the presence of the Holy Spirit; and for the life and deeds of prophets, martyrs, and saints in every age. This leads us into the seraphic hymn, which is identical in both options, and then into the words of institution.334 Option B deviates slightly in that it adds the promise Christ made “not to drink of the fruit of the vine again until the heavenly banquet at the close of history” as

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332 Ibid.
333 Ibid.
334 This version of the seraphic hymn reads: “Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!” (Book of Worship, 70).
narrated in Matthew 26:29 and Luke 22:18. This is followed by a consecratory prayer. It is pertinent to reflect on this act momentarily.

Neither prayer specifically calls this segment of the communion prayer “an act of consecration.” However, the language at the opening of both options clearly intimates this:

**OPTION A:**
Gracious God,
we ask you to bless this bread and cup and all of us with the outpouring of your Holy Spirit.

**OPTION B:**
Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Bless this bread, and bless this fruit of the vine.
Bless all of us in our eating and drinking at this table…³³⁵

Interestingly enough, in the “Brief Order for the Service of Word and Sacrament,” which follows this service, there are two options in the Communion Prayer: one “for use to consecrate the elements” and the other “for use when the elements have been consecrated.”³³⁶ The first begins, “Consecrate, therefore, by your Holy Spirit, these gifts of bread and wine, and bless us that as we receive them at this table…”³³⁷ The latter acknowledges, “Bless us, therefore, by your Holy Spirit that as we receive the consecrated bread and the fruit of the vine at this table…”³³⁸ The act of consecration, as noted in the antecedent orders, is upon the elements and the participants. This is the case in both options in the “Service of Word and Sacrament

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³³⁵ Ibid., 71.
³³⁶ Ibid., 85.
³³⁷ Ibid.
³³⁸ Ibid.
II,” Option A in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I,” the “Brief Order” noted above, and the “Brief Order for One Who is Sick.” No commentary is offered as to what change (if any) transpires when the bread and cup are consecrated. However, blessings upon communicants imbue them with either a specific charge or spiritual illumination. In the first option in “Service II,” participants pray that through this meal they may be transformed into “the body of Christ, the church, your servant people, that we might be salt, and light, and leaven for the furtherance of your will in all the world.”

Here the supplication is that the body of Christ (the Church) will faithfully fulfill God’s will in the world after sharing the body of Christ (the bread) and the cup. The second option is more spiritual. It reads, “Bless all of us in our eating and drinking at this table that our eyes may be opened, and we may recognize the risen Christ in our midst, in each other, and in all for whom Christ died.”

Sharing the Eucharist is a means by which we see Christ all around us more clearly, particularly in others.

The bread is then broken and the wine (or juice) is poured. This, as the service states, is a way of making Christ present to our visual and auditory senses.

“These actions [also] call to mind the cost as well as the joy of Christian discipleship.” Reflecting upon the cost brings us to an expression of joy: the

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339 Ibid., 71-72.
340 Ibid., 71.
341 Ibid., 72.
resurrection acclamation, which follows. Again, a few words of explanation are necessary in regards to both options.

The *Book of Worship* clearly states that Communion “is the memorial feast of the risen Christ, not a fast held for a deceased Jesus.”342 There is a sense in many congregations (inside and outside of the UCC) that Communion is a pensive, reflective, somber practice. It is meditative, dour, and repentant. Stookey refers to such a practice as a “funeral for Jesus” in his analysis of 1 Corinthians 11.343 In that same vein, Ronald Byars encourages the church to “make the shift from ‘funeral for Jesus’ to eating and drinking with the risen Lord.”344 Yet much of the literature and resources in the UCC—including the *Book of Worship*—seek to highlight the celebratory aspects of the meal. Again, the objective of this order is to commemorate the presence of the *Risen* Christ among us. The directions to the resurrection acclamation reiterate that tenor. Even some of the hymnody the UCC published not long after the *Book of Worship* would be filled with jubilation in regards to the Eucharist. *The New Century Hymnal* (1995) includes solemn Communion selections such as “Let Us Break Bread Together” and “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” but it also includes the more celebratory “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ.” The latter, set to a Jamaican folk melody, cheerfully declares in its first stanza:

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342 Ibid., 73.
343 Stookey, 31.
Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a shout of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.
Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound!  

Again, Christ is present to our eyes and ears as the congregation joyfully celebrates his presence.

In his recent book on six practices that frame the common faith in the United Church of Christ, Sidney D. Fowler, the denomination’s former Minister of Worship and Liturgy, writes, “At Holy Communion, we share a simple meal of bread and wine. Here we experience the presence of Christ again. Together, around God’s welcome table, we recall God’s loving acts especially in Jesus, we experience our oneness in Christ, hope for a time when all will be fed, and anticipate the fullness of God’s love and justice throughout creation.”

This liturgical concept—of Christ being present and the gathered body, the Church, experiencing Jesus in hopeful, anticipatory, love-and-justice-laden ways—speaks to the joy that comes from this resurrection meal. This is central to UCC thought. In fact, the leaflet on Communion from a series of pamphlets that the UCC’s Worship and Educational Ministry Team recently published “to help in ministry to new members, visitors or others interested in a brief introduction of UCC practices of faith,” explicitly states

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that one of the central meanings of the meal is that the Lord’s Supper is “a joyous act of thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will do for the redeeming of creation.”  

The elements are then shared. Option B is particularly interesting. While offering the bread, the pastor, and whoever assists, says, “Eat this, for it is the body of Christ, broken for you.” Likewise with the cup, the minister and servers say, “Drink this, for it is the blood of Christ shed for you.” Are we speaking of Christ being present in the elements themselves or is he symbolically represented, his presence existing elsewhere in the meal? Although the Book of Worship does not specify, the rest of the liturgy seems to point to the later. We have already mentioned that the introduction to these orders indicates that the writers and editors are indebted to the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry convergence document of the World Council of Churches as well as the contribution of the major Reformers, particularly Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli. It would be useful at this point to examine the theology of the Reformer Martin Bucer, whose legacy probably had as much (if not more) of an influence on these liturgies than the aforementioned three, particularly in regards to his understanding of the presence of Christ in/at the meal.

347 “Communion,” in Practices of Faith in the United Church of Christ (Cleveland: Local Church Ministries), published within the last decade though no copyright date is listed.
348 Book of Worship, 73. Italics mine.
349 Ibid., 74. Italics mine.
Reformation historian Martin Greschat carefully argues that at the heart of Bucer’s teachings on the Eucharist was the desire to “admonish the people to pay more attention to why he [Jesus] instituted them [the elements] for us than to what they are in themselves.” In other words, the faith that the sacrament nourishes in communicants individually and communally (though Bucer emphasized the latter) and the benefits that such nurture yields were far more important to the Strasbourg theologian than any change that may or may not have occurred in the actual bread and wine. Christ is made tangibly present to sinners through the meal, but that presence, while real, is symbolic. Our attention needs to be directed to the purpose of the sacrament and the change that occurs in those who share it instead of pondering any metaphysical transformation that transpires in the elements themselves. Christ is *spiritually present* in the sacrament. Furthermore, the aid that comes from the sacrament is dispensed primarily (Bucer would say exclusively) within the church community. Bucer argued that through the Eucharist,

> God wants to help us, that is give himself to us, within and through the church, with and by means of the words and sacraments....For this reason nothing in the body and blood of Christ is changed, displaced or destroyed, and our souls are fed not with bread and wine but with our Lord Jesus Christ himself; we would certainly feel this adequately and sufficiently in ourselves if we were only obedient to the Gospel, as we should, had true fellowship in Christ, and proper devotion to his Word and to the sacraments.  

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Furthermore, Bucer believed that through the cross, Christ offered himself once for all. “Believers receive this gift in the Lord’s Supper in such a manner that Christ really imparts himself fully and entirely to them when the elements of bread and wine are distributed, and he does so in order that they also may offer themselves in a life of service and love toward their fellow human beings.” Again, we encounter Christ when we share Communion as a community, and in so doing we are to offer ourselves to serve Christ in the service of all people.

Elsewhere, Bucer wrote that the sacrament, while “efficacious in the Church,” should be offered to the baptized without prejudice—effectiveness has nothing to do with the worthiness of officiant or recipient. That said, the sacrament is observed properly only within the ecclesia. Bucer maintained that, “no presence of Christ is enjoyed in the eucharist unless it is rightly observed, and then [it is] only a presence both apprehended and retained by faith alone.”

In sum, the crux of Bucer’s theology of the Lord’s Supper is the belief that Christ is indeed present in the meal. Although that presence is symbolic, it is real and it is imparted to communicants for multiple purposes, among them: the spiritual edification of the people of God, the remission of sins, the equipping of the church to serve God in the service of others through the Holy Spirit, and the strengthening

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352 Greschat, 103.
354 Ibid., 391.
of the *koinonia* that unites the members of the Church with one another and with Christ.

In the first chapter we saw this theology articulated quite clearly in the beliefs maintained by a diversity of members who participated in all five focus group discussions. We also see such a theology imbued in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” and “II” in the UCC *Book of Worship*. This particular service, as discussed above, uses the signifying *it is* language: “Eat this, for *it is* the body of Christ, broken for you.” Likewise, we read, “Drink this, for *it is* the blood of Christ shed for you.” The same language is used in “Service I.” It is my assertion that the United Church of Christ, a child of the Reformation, is incorporating, consciously or not, the theology of Bucer here. I am not alone in this viewpoint. Gabriel Fackre, in discussing the presence of Christ in the eucharistic services in the *Book of Worship*, seems to have taken a page out of Martin Bucer’s writings as well. In commenting on the UCC’s official response to the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document, Fackre writes, “the mystical Presence is at the heart of the church’s eucharistic faith.”

Fackre maintains that this presence is not to be found so much in the bread and the wine, but in the entire eucharistic act. Likewise, Bucer clearly held that “Christ does impart himself to believers in the Lord’s Supper, but he is not in the elements of bread and wine.” Therefore, “is” is symbolic language. This being the case, then

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356 Greschat, 93.
“Christ truly gives himself to the faithful in bread and wine, without being bound…to the actual elements.” Thomas Dipko clarified this. In a recent telephone interview, he said:

In the *Book of Worship*, the word “is” in the administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion does not mean that the bread and wine are “mere” symbols or signs that stand in the place of Christ who is sensately (*sic*) absent. The “is” language, while respecting fully the mystery of the eucharist and our limited ability to capture its meaning in rational terms, intends that the bread and wine are effective tangible signs that convey what they signify, the real presence of Christ in the full eucharistic action, including the bread and wine and the community of faith. Fackre is right. When we use the word ‘is’ we are pointing to the mystical presence of Christ that surpasses all our rational explanations.

Clarification may be found in the two prayers of thanksgiving that conclude this service. The first option offers gratitude to God for calling communicants from all four corners of the earth—east, west, north, and south—and for “the spiritual presence of Christ’s body and blood.” As in Bucer’s thought, the presence is symbolic; it is spiritual as opposed to inherent in the elements themselves. Also, as we see in Bucer’s theology of the Lord’s Supper—and the theology in the *Book of Worship* eucharistic liturgies—the movement is from meal to mission. Having experienced the presence of Christ at the table, believers implore God, through the Holy Spirit, to “keep us faithful to your will. Go with us to the streets, to our homes, and to our places of labor and leisure that whether we are gathered or scattered, we

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357 Ibid., 96.
358 Telephone interview with Thomas E. Dipko, November 15, 2010.
359 *Book of Worship*, 74.
may be the servant church of the servant Christ.” In the second option those gathered “give thanks” to God for “granting us the presence of Christ.” Having been “refreshed…at your table,” the people ask “almighty God [to]…send us forth into the world in courage and peace.” An identical petition is offered in the second option to the prayer of thanksgiving in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I.”

This theology is also central to the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry convergence statement, which, as we noted, was formative in the writing of the liturgies in the Book of Worship. Linked to the sharing of the bread and the cup (as we see in Bucer) is an ethic of unity and action: having shared the sacred meal, participants, now more fully united to one another, are called to serve. It is interesting to note that the last two (of five) segments in the BEM document that deal with the meaning of the Eucharist are entitled “The Eucharist as Communion of the Faithful” and “The Eucharist as Meal of the Kingdom.” Again, action follows ecclesial unity. The UCC’s understanding of unity and its social conscience are deeply rooted in its practice and understanding of Holy Communion. This argument is expressed by the late UCC theologian and historian Louis H. Gunnemann, who closes United and Uniting: The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey: United Church of Christ 1957-1987 with a similar observation:

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360 Ibid., 74-75.
361 Ibid., 74.
362 Ibid.
The eucharist, or Holy Communion, is an anchoring point for liturgical discipline in which unity and mission are fully exhibited….In corporate worship, anchored in [baptism and Communion] and informed by the proclaimed Word, the church experiences the liturgical discipline that nurtures and actualizes the link between unity and mission.³⁶³

IV: Conclusion

This study concurs with both Keith Watkins and Fritz West. Watkins claims that “the UCC Book of Worship is a worthy companion of other new worship books—a strong expression of the classical liturgical tradition as transmitted by the Reformed churches.”³⁶⁴ West writes that the Book of Worship “did play a constitutive role in the formation of the liturgical tradition in the United Church of Christ.”³⁶⁵

In analyzing the Communion liturgies in Book of Worship, one sees that there is no real theological or linguistic difference that follows the separate threads of option A and B. They stand, more than anything else, simply as options from which the leader of worship may select. The text also allows for users to mix and match. For example, in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” one may begin using option A for the “Communion Prayer” and then switch, after the Seraphic Hymn, to option B. After the Seraphic Hymn comes two different (though complementary) versions of the words of institution. Likewise, in “Service of Word and Sacrament II” pastor and


congregation can easily move between options A and B when offering the confession of sin, assurance of pardon, the invitation to the table, the communion prayer, and the post-Communion prayer of thanksgiving. Both orders afford the user much liturgical flexibility and creativity.

Several themes surface in these liturgies. The introduction to “Service of Word and Sacrament I” states, “The invitation and call celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past, but an actual meal with the risen Christ that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history.” Christ is indeed present at this meal. The elements are symbols that participate in that which they signify. Structuralist literary theorists often speak of the connection between the sign and that which it signifies. The same is true in sacramental theology. Christ is not absent. Though the Book of Worship does not connect Christ’s presence with the actual eucharistic elements, it maintains that the bread and cup point to (or signify) the risen, mystical Lord who is found in the sharing and in the community.

The Book of Worship also reminds us “that our participation in Holy Communion is a sacrifice of praise which includes the offering of our lives to God.” In their discussion on Christian practices, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass note that “in Holy Communion…every one of the Christian practices finds guidance. The worshippers experience the extravagant hospitality of God at the table and

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366 See the instructions offered in Book of Worship, xii.
367 Ibid., 32.
368 Ibid., 49 and 72.
commit themselves to extend God’s welcome to others.”369 Communion informs all of our other practices. Having been fed at the table, it prepares us to feed others. Being strangers who have been welcomed to Jesus’ table, we are encouraged to welcome the outcast into our communities. It prepares us to move “from meal to mission.” The commission that concludes “Service I” encapsulates this:

Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.370

Option A of the Communion prayer in “Service II” ends with a similar charge:

“make us the body of Christ, the church, your servant people, that we may be salt, and light, and leaven for the furtherance of your will in all the world.”371

One final observation, which is related to the previous one: the Communion liturgies in the Book of Worship embody and reflect Christian ethics. This was one of the main guidelines that led the editorial staff in constructing the orders contained in this resource. Thomas E. Dipko writes, “for Christians, worship cannot be separated from ethics. Liturgy, ‘the work of the people of God,’ includes not only what we do when we gather for what is narrowly called ‘worship,’ but what we do as persons


370 Book of Worship, 53.

371 Ibid., 71-72.
baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” We affirm our baptism each time we come to the table. Through the sacrament of baptism we are initiated into the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers. When we come to the table, we reaffirm that identity. Part of the reaffirmation is to see the sacraments as formative and informative instruments that shape our Christian identity. Dipko notes that this connection between baptism and Communion, Christian identity and ethics, is noted in the Communion liturgies. He notes that “the second Service of Word and Sacrament begins with the prophetic words of Micah 6:8, calling us ‘to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.’” Dipko then observes that the same service ends with a petition through which those gathered affirm this ethic: “Go with us to the streets, to our homes, and to our places of labor and leisure that whether we are gathered or scattered, we may be the servant church of the servant God.”

Indeed, liturgy shapes the Christian community. We now look at how these formative liturgical practices, found in the antecedent resources as well as the Book of Worship, offer a theology (or theologies) of the Eucharist when compared to what was gleaned from our five focus groups.

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373 Ibid., 187.

374 Book of Worship, 74-75. See also Dipko, Ibid.
CHAPTER SEVEN

FUSING THE HORIZONS: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

I: Introduction

The third step in Don S. Browning’s model, as explicited in *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, is systematic theology. In Browning’s practical theological method, systematic theology “is the fusions of horizons between the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of the normative Christian texts.”\(^{375}\) Normativity arises in the conversation between the theory-laden practices (with their implicit normative claims) and the classic texts of the tradition. Clearly, as John Swinton and Harriet Mowat argue, “when we refer to Christian practices we have something normative and theological in mind.”\(^{376}\) Swinton and Mowat assert: “One of the primary tasks of the practical theologian is to ensure that the practices of the Church remain faithful to the practices and mission of God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and his coming redemptive practices.”\(^{377}\) In this assertion, they assume that those practices and that mission are reflected in the texts that comprise Scripture as well as those that define and set the


\(^{377}\) Ibid., 24.
parameters of the Christian tradition.

As part of the Reformed tradition, Scripture is the text that is normative in the United Church of Christ. In most UCC churches—and in the Congregational Christian Churches that coupled with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form this united and uniting denomination—Communion is not celebrated each Sunday. Part of the reason for this is the trepidation that the sacrament will detract from the service of the Word. Also, adhering to Luther’s mandate that Christian faith and theology is to be guided *sola scriptura*, the UCC holds the Word in high esteem, although few UCC pastors and parishioners are biblical literalists. That said, some found it peculiar that this denomination would publish a liturgical resource to be used in worship as their Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian counterparts had, even though its antecedent denominations did publish books of worship. Interestingly enough, the introduction to the 1986 *Book of Worship* acknowledges that this is a *provisional* resource. The editors of this text note, “The *Book of Worship*, like all books of worship, is *transitional* literature. It seeks to provide a small span in the bridge that will traverse and link the worshipping church of the twentieth century with the church of the past and the church of the twenty-first century.”\(^{378}\) Although this book is recommended for use in local churches so “that the spirit and form of worship in the church may be enhanced and the potential for the local church as the center of

the Spirit’s life may be realized,” this text is not required. As with most resolutions in the UCC, the local church is asked to prayerfully consider them, but it is not requisite for them to be adopted. Yet, in the quarter of a century since its publication, the Book of Worship has not been revised and it is still used throughout all settings of the denomination: local church, Association, Conference, and National Church. One can therefore conclude that Book of Worship is normative for worship life in the UCC, at least in many circles.

In this chapter, I will bring into critical conversation the 1986 Book of Worship, the antecedent texts that informed its publication, and the theory-laden practices of Eucharist in the five UCC congregations that I studied. Through this conversation, I will attempt to construct an understanding of the theology of the Eucharist in the United Church of Christ, highlighting several themes that emerge from this critical conversation. In this chapter we are concerned with what rises to the surface from the work done so far. Or, as Harriet Swinton and John Mowat write, “At this stage

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379 Ibid.

380 It is pertinent to note that at the Twenty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ (General Synod is the biennial meeting of the denomination), Local Church Ministries was instructed “to launch a broad-based inquiry into worship in the UCC and to consider and develop models for worship resources and programs that complement Book of Worship: United Church of Christ” (from the Minutes of the Twenty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ, ed. Mary Ann Murray and Nancy Cope (Minneapolis: July 11-15, 2003, 79)). One year later (2004), the Worship and Educational Ministry Team, in collaboration with Research Services of the Office of General Ministries, published Worshiping into God’s Future: Reflections, Liturgies, Music, Images, and Ideas for Engaging Worship in the United Church of Christ. This publication, which was sent to each of the approximately 5,500 local congregations in the denomination, includes a book of praise songs, a CD-ROM containing images and liturgies to be projected during worship, and the text Prayers and Patterns for Worship. This resource lived a short life and has not replaced or even supplemented the 1986 Book of Worship in most local UCC congregations as was expected.
we begin to develop the conversation by drawing out the implicit and explicit theological dimensions of the situation, sifting through the data and exploring the ways in which they complement and challenge one another; searching for authentic revelation in a spirit of critical faithfulness and chastened optimism.”\textsuperscript{381} In the following chapter recommendations will be offered for more informed practice.

**II: From Presence to Justice**

**Presence.** One of the questions posed to all five focus groups, a question raised in all the liturgies examined in this dissertation, has to do with *the presence of Christ in the meal.* How is Jesus present in the bread and the wine, if he is? This was one of the questions at the heart of the discussions surrounding Communion during the Protestant Reformation. It led the major Reformers in diverse directions. Martin Luther spoke of an *ubiquitous* presence: Christ is “in, with, and under” the elements consubstantiating the bread and wine. Huldrych Zwingli believed that the Eucharist helped bolster the faith of communicants; it is a *memorial* of Christ’s life and deeds, particularly the events surrounding Holy Week. He also believed that Christ was present in the community itself. John Calvin focused on the role of the Holy Spirit in the meal. His concept of *virtualism* spoke of Christians being united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, transporting them, in ways that cannot be

\textsuperscript{381} John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 96.
rationally explained, to heaven. Martin Bucer argued that Christ is present in the
meal, but it is a symbolic, spiritual presence. That presence, made efficacious through
the ecclesia, is not contingent upon the righteousness or impiety of celebrant or
recipient.

It appears that a combination of Calvin and Bucer’s thought has most strongly
informed the practice and understanding of the Eucharist in the United Church of
Christ. One of the greatest contributions of both thinkers is their focus on what
occurs in and with communicants as a result of sharing the meal as opposed to a
metaphysical argument which attempts to ascertain how Christ is physically present in
the elements themselves. Although Calvin and Bucer were concerned with the latter,
their focus was on the former. Christ is present, essentially, within the community.

As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, it is no coincidence that the
phrase the body of Christ is used for both the bread in Communion and the Church.
This appellation comes from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians in two consecutive
chapters in which he discusses both the Lord’s Supper and the ecclesia: 1 Corinthians
11 deals with the Eucharist and 1 Corinthians 12 uses the body of Christ as a
metaphor for the Church. The role that Christ plays in forming and nurturing community
in the meal is a common thread we find in the focus group discussions, the
antecedent resources, and the Book of Worship.

Each of the focus groups with which I worked articulated the belief that
Christ’s presence in the meal is spiritual. It is a presence that serves to unite
communicants with one another and with Jesus. That unification is a mystical one. Some spoke of seeing Christ in those present at the table. Recall the words that the members and friends of Evangelical United Church of Christ outside of St. Louis say at each Communion service:

Come, Holy Spirit, come.  
Bless this bread and bless this fruit of the vine.  
Bless all of us in our eating and drinking  
that our eyes might be opened,  
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst  
indeed, in one another. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

The resources developed and used within the Evangelical and Reformed heritage before the 1957 merger that spawned the United Church of Christ point to a real presence in the meal, but it is a presence that is spiritual as opposed to being physical. The 1867 Order of Worship for the Reformed Church states, in its section entitled “The Holy Communion,” that one of the six meanings of the Lord’s Supper is “the seal of [Christ’s] perpetual presence in the Church by the Holy Ghost.” This explanation is found in the first part of the order for the sacrament entitled, “Preparation for the Holy Communion.” As discussed in chapter three, the theology in this segment of the order owes much to the Mercersburg’s theologian John Williamson Nevin. Nevin “condemned spiritualistic, subjective, and memorial views of the Lord’s

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Supper and urged an appreciation of the ‘spiritual real presence’ in the Eucharist.”

For Nevin, though, that presence was spiritual, not corporeal. Nevin believed that human beings have a physical and spiritual nature, just as did Jesus. At the Eucharist, communicants participate in a mystical union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. They are incorporated into Jesus in a real, though spiritual, way.

This resource is part of the Reformed tradition and it was published six-and-a-half decades before they united with the Evangelical Church. However, less than ten years after the merger, the new E&R Church published its Book of Worship (1943). There are some who claim that this resource served “as a vehicle of unity within the Evangelical and Reformed Church and was a source of its strength.”

In Book of Worship, we find articulated an almost identical understanding of the presence of Christ at/in the meal. “The Order for Holy Communion” begins with the exhortation:

Dearly Beloved in the Lord; Our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ, instituted the Holy Communion of his Body and Blood, that it might be the abiding memorial of his atoning death; the seal of his perpetual presence in the Church through the Holy Spirit; the mystical representation of the sacrifice of himself on the cross; the pledge of his undying love for his people; and the bond of his living union and fellowship with them to the end of time.

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385 Book of Worship, Approved by the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (Cleveland: Central Publishing House, 1943), 42.
Theodore L. Trost, Jr. notes that “In this service several theological emphases predominate which are included in the catholic, reformed, and evangelical traditions.”\textsuperscript{386} One of these emphases, he notes, is “real presence.”\textsuperscript{387} This presence, however, has more to do with what it accomplishes at the meal—it unites believers with one another and with Christ—as opposed to where Christ is located in the elements.

In my field research I found that former Catholics had an aversion to identifying the presence of Christ within the bread and the wine/juice. They saw this as an endorsement of \textit{transubstantiation}, a theology to which none of them subscribed. They believed that Christ was present in a spiritual way among the community in the sharing of the meal. It is my contention that the meaning of the Eucharist in the UCC, at least among the laity, seems to have more to do with what the meal accomplishes in the communal experience as opposed to any metaphysical change that occurs in the elements themselves.

In his book \textit{Eating and Drinking at the Welcome Table: The Holy Supper for All People}, William K. McElvaney (who has worked with focus groups in various denominations, including the United Church of Christ) offers an understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist that reflects an emerging consensus of UCC thought, as uncovered in this study. It shifts the focus more towards Christ’s

\textsuperscript{386} Trost, 39.

\textsuperscript{387} Ibid.
presence in the community gathered to share the meal as opposed to the actual elements. It breaks out of the Aristotelian metaphysical paradigm and moves, as the Book of Worship states, from meal to mission more fully.

I have no hesitancy in speaking of the real presence of God in Jesus Christ in the eucharist. I mean that the promise and claim of God’s gospel in Jesus Christ is as surely present to faith in the upper room or the Emmaus experience. I find this functional or action-oriented description of Christ’s presence in the sacrament more satisfactory that the more substance- and spatial-oriented interpretation rooted in Aristotelian and medieval philosophy. To me Christ is truly present in the entire sacramental experience…in the bread and wine, in the gathered community of faith, in the liturgical interaction of God and people.388

The understandings of the meal shared by all the focus groups had far more to do with the effects of the meal upon the community—what it does to us or inspires us to do—as opposed to the transformation that occurs (if any) in the actual elements.

The introduction to the “Order for the Service of Word and Sacrament II” in the 1986 Book of Worship states, “In this order an effort is made to remind each worshiper not only of God’s presence, but also of the presence of all other worshipers who constitute the community of faith.”389 One congregational response to the invitation to the holy meal proclaims, “In company with all who hunger for spiritual food, we come to this table to know the risen Christ in the sharing of this

388 William K. McElvaney, Eating and Drinking at the Welcome Table: The Holy Supper for All People (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 43.
Communicants journey together to the table. There, they encounter the resurrected Christ—a spiritual presence—in the Eucharist. This presence incorporates believers into Christ and connects them with one another. It may be that the Book of Worship is shaping congregants’ understanding of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in one another.

The arguments that surrounded the Reformation about where Christ is located in the bread and wine dealt more with trying to acclimatize the Christian faith with a worldview in which Aristotelian metaphysics was the norm more than any other agenda. In The Banquet’s Wisdom: A Short History of the Theologies of the Lord’s Supper, Gary Macy tells us that “In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the discovery of the texts of Aristotle changed scholarship.” Many of the debates about the Eucharist that ensued in the following centuries, particularly during the Reformation, sought to connect any change that occurred (or did not occur) in the bread and wine to Aristotelian metaphysics. The philosophy of Aristotle became one of the benchmarks by which the Reformers sought to explain “the real, but not sensed, presence of the risen Lord in the sacrament.” Luther, in reacting to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, argued that “Scripture, not Aristotle, should be the foundation for all Christian thinking on the eucharist, and Luther was well aware that

390 Ibid., 68.
392 Ibid. 81.
the teaching of Aquinas on transubstantiation depended on a very shaky reading of Aristotle.” Although few denominations construct their theology of the Eucharist in conversation with Aristotle’s concept of realism (also known as in re, or moderate realism), debates about how and where Christ is present in the meal still exist throughout the wider Church. The United Church of Christ presents an alternative to this quandary by focusing, instead, on what is actualized at the table—i.e. what theology is imbued in communicants and how that influences Christian witness as opposed to what (if any) change occurs in the bread and the wine. Christ is present within the community and the entire eucharistic celebration. Among other results, that presence bolsters the faith of communicants.

**Faith.** Another common theme that surfaced in the focus groups and in the literature is the belief that *Communion strengthens the faith of communicants*. One of the more poetic invitations to the meal in the 1986 *Book of Worship*, states,

> This table is open to all who confess Jesus as the Christ and seek to follow Christ’s way. Come to this sacred table not because you must, but because you may. Come not because you are fulfilled, but because in your emptiness you stand in need of God’s mercy and assurance. Come not to express an opinion, but to seek a presence and to pray for a spirit. Come to this table, then, sisters and brothers, as you are. Partake and share. It is spread for you and me that we might again know that God has come to us, shared our common lot, and invited us to join the people of God’s new age.

This prayerful invitation, which appears in the “Brief Order for the Service of Word and Sacrament,” is actually an adaptation of one found in *The Minister’s Service Book for...*  

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393 Ibid., 148-149.  
394 *Book of Worship*, 80-81.
Pulpit and Parish Use, edited and compiled by James Dalton Morrison in 1937. Clearly there is an overtone of spiritual edification that pervades this summons. People are invited to the table of their own volition to follow in Christ’s way. They gather seeking God’s blessings, forgiveness, and Spirit. They come to participate in the Christological narrative and to receive the promises of the Gospel.

The 1916 Evangelical Book of Worship also depicts Communion as a sacrament that strengthens Christians for their spiritual journey. The opening prayer in the very first service declares, “Fill us with the firm confidence, that in partaking of this heavenly nourishment our feeble faith shall be strengthened against all temptation.”

Likewise in the second part of the order (wherein participants actually receive the elements) the exhortation begins, “Dearly Beloved: Forasmuch as we purpose to come to the holy Supper of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, wherein He giveth us His Body to eat and His Blood to drink, in order to strengthen and confirm our faith in Him.” Similarly, a few lines further we read, “this holy Sacrament is instituted as a special means to strengthen and comfort the troubled conscience of those who confess their sins, and who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

The Pilgrim Hymnal, from the Congregational Christian tradition, offers a prayer of thanksgiving that was adapted in the contemporary idiom into The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ as

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396 Ibid., 162.
397 Ibid.
well as the *Book of Worship*. It reads, “We give thanks to thee, almighty God, that thou hast refreshed us with this memorial of thy love, and hast granted to us the presence of thy Son, even Jesus Christ our Lord; and we beseech thee to strengthen our faith in thee and to increase our love toward one another; through him who is our redeemer.”398 *A Book of Worship for Free Churches* includes a call to prayer as part of “An Order of Morning Worship with Communion” that points to the spiritual nature of the Eucharist. As part of their spiritual edification, it is “necessary” that communicants “come to the Lord’s Table with thanksgiving, faith, repentance, love, and with hearts hungering and thirsting after him.”399 This resource, unlike the others cited in this paragraph and the previous one, suggests that faith is a prerequisite for receiving the meal. While this is true, the invitation to the meal in this resource welcomes communicants to “take this holy Sacrament to your comfort,” and the “Prayer of Consecration,” which appears on the next page, states, “May [the eucharistic elements] beget in us pertinent hearts and a quickened faith, and may we receive this holy Sacrament to our present and everlasting comfort.”400

This was a common understanding of Holy Communion found in the focus group discussions. Participants spoke of the spiritual sustenance they received from sharing the bread and the cup. People in both the First Congregational Church in

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400 Ibid., 107, 108.
Kittery Point and Evangelical UCC spoke of the renewal they felt having come to the table. The meal rejuvenates their spirits and lets them know that “all is well.” One person spoke about being able to face the week ahead with more strength. A member of First Congregational Christian UCC eloquently said, “The bread is the body of Christ. The juice is the blood of Christ. We absorb it and think about what he went through.” Although this statement has as much to do with the presence of Christ and the sacrificial overtones in the meal, it also relates to faith. The key word here is “absorb.” One cannot help but think of gastroenterological processes. If our bodies absorb Christ, then we receive divine nourishment. This enables us to serve Christ having been fed at his table. One of the prayers of thanksgiving in the Book of Worship (utilizing the Consultation on Church Union’s 1984 Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: A New Text) ties this together: “Strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and send us forth into the world in courage and peace, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.” An earlier version of this prayer exists in the Pilgrim Hymnal, which predates the COCU resource. The crux of this prayer, however, lies in the recognition that our faith is nourished by the meal, which, in turn, empowers us to better serve Christ in the service of others. The body of Christ (the Church) becomes the body of Christ (Jesus’ body on earth) by sharing the body of Christ (the Eucharist). Its faith is fed and bolstered.

Forgiveness. Connections between the cross and the sacred meal were made in all of the focus group discussions and they saturate the antecedent literature. One
cannot separate the Last Supper, at which Jesus instituted this meal, from Good Friday. Institutional narrative language about Christ’s body being broken and blood being shed for the forgiveness of sins cannot be divorced from the passion. For the members of the Imani focus group, this was the central meaning of the meal. The United Church of Christ struggles with this notion of substitutionary atonement. The violence associated with sacrificial atonement does not sit comfortably with many pastors, parishioners, and churches in the UCC. This is due to many factors, primarily the UCC’s commitment to social justice issues. UCC feminist theologian June Christine Goudey summarizes it best in her book *The Feast of Our Lives: Re-imaging Communion*. She writes, “Suffering for another may lead to victory in the minds of some, but for those who most often do the suffering—the poor and disenfranchised, the outcast and the different—the consolations of self-sacrifice ring hollow...When Jesus’ suffering is understood to be a reflection of God’s suffering love for us, suffering is wrongly accepted as the way of love in the world.”401 The theory-laden practice of the Lord’s Supper at Imani clashes with critiques of substitutionary atonement theology by contemporary UCC theologians. However, there is a precedent for this theology in the liturgical resources of the antecedent traditions.

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The *Book of Worship for Free Churches* is the resource from the Congregational Christian wing of the UCC that had the greatest CC influence on the *Book of Worship*. In the prayer of consecration (labeled as such), the officiant clearly connects the meal to the events at Calvary. “Now, as we commemorate his last supper with his disciples, and his offering of himself in the sacrifice of the cross, we humbly beseech thee to grant thy Holy Spirit, and to sanctify this bread and wine, that they may become symbols of the body that was broken and of the blood that was shed for us.”  

**402** The 1867 *Order of Worship for the Reformed Church*, the earliest resource from the E&R heritage that I examined, offers a similar understanding of the Eucharist. In fact, the first of six meanings they attribute to the meal is, “Our blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, when He was about to finish the work of redemption, by making Himself a sacrifice for our sins upon the cross, solemnly instituted the Holy Sacrament of His own Body and Blood.”  

**403** Regardless of more recent aversions to substitutionary atonement at the denominational level, the people in the pews see a clear connection between the Eucharist and the cross and how Christ’s vicarious suffering—that we remember when we come to the table—offers them forgiveness.

It was not just the members of Imani who expressed this theology. If it were, one could dismiss it as doctrine that came into the denomination with this post-1957 congregation. A member of the Kittery Point focus group said, “The meal purifies

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us. It takes away my guilt.” Likewise, a member of First Reformed in Greensburg said that the meal is “a spiritual cleansing” and spoke at length about how Communion absolves his sins of omission and commission. Some UCC congregations, like Imani, incorporate a prayer of confession into the liturgy whenever they celebrate Communion. Some, like the Greensburg church, confess their corporate sins every week whether the Eucharist is shared or not. Some churches, like Evangelical UCC, never offer a prayer of confession. (The latter is becoming more and more of a trend in liberal UCC congregations who have an aversion to any talk about sin and atonement.) The Book of Worship, following the suggestions of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, suggest the inclusion of an act of corporate contrition in every service where the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.

Clearly a tension exists in the United Church of Christ around the theology of forgiveness and its presence in the eucharistic rite. The violence associated with the cross seems to clash with the UCC’s aversion to violence—in 1985 the UCC declared itself a Just-Peace church—and a denomination-wide commitment to taking up the cause of the poor and the oppressed. As Goudy writes, “Whereas many frame the essence of the atonement as a suffering ‘for’ the sake of others unto death, the true nature of compassion is an empathetic being with others to bring them into well being.” 404 Yet the liturgical resources that are part of the UCC’s heritage (historic and contemporary), and the theology articulated by some of the laity, see a clear

404 Goudy, 33.
connection between the blood of the cross and the forgiveness of sins. That forgiveness is affirmed each time communicants come to the table. This will continue to be a theological issue with which the UCC will grapple.

**Tradition.** The concept that *the Eucharist perpetuates the Christian tradition* is another theme that came to the fore. All of the orders I examined in this study incorporate the words of institution, the narrative of the Upper Room. Traditional Western eucharistic thought necessitates this as part of the act of consecration. Beyond this—and one could even argue that part of this—is the passing on of the story. Practices enable us to bring to life that which we inherited. Ray A. Anderson opens his book, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, with this observation: “Before the theologian there was the story teller.”

He then states, “What makes theology practical is not the fitting of orthopedic devices to theoretical concepts in order to make them walk. Rather, theology occurs as a divine partner joins us on our walk, stimulating our reflection and inspiring us to recognize the living Word, as happened to the two walking on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter.”

Each time we share the Eucharist we join Cleopas, the nameless disciple, and Christ on the Emmaus trek. We participate in the story that has been handed down to us. This is how many of the focus group participants informally defined

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406 Ibid., 12.
memorialism. One person who participated in the discussion at Evangelical UCC said, “We are sharing something Christ did 2000 years ago. We share in that history.” She then commented on the historic origin of the meal (“It was ‘On the night that he was betrayed’”) and connected that, quite beautifully, to the moments “we gather in the sanctuary to share Communion.” Likewise, several members of the Imai group spoke of “the night of betrayal.” One man referenced da Vinci’s classic painting; others spoke of the practice in terms of the actions that occurred in the Upper Room and how those same actions are replicated in their church (and others) to this day. The Eucharist creates an indissoluble connection between the past and the present. History comes alive each time the meal is shared.

In the First Reformed Church there was a sense of mourning not so much over the inevitable changes that occur in congregations over the years, but over what is lost with those changes. They spoke about how it used to be that communicants had to be baptized, but that is no longer the case. They also discussed how less rigorous the confirmation program has become. “We have become more lenient,” one person lamented. This remorse was not just about preserving “the good old days.” It was more of a fear—a sense of trepidation that their history would be lost; that they would no longer be part of this historic tradition.

Part of that tradition (which is all but absent in the verbiage of the Book of Worship’s eucharistic liturgies) is the theology of grace that lies at the heart of all sacraments. Saint Augustine defined a sacrament as an outward, visible sign of an
inward, spiritual grace. Whether there are seven sacraments, as the Roman Catholic Church maintains, or two, as we find in most mainline Protestant denominations, grace is central to the definition. Sacraments are signs, but they also participate in that which they signify. What they effect in individuals and communities is achieved by the grace of God. The *Book of Worship for Free Churches* speaks of this grace in a blessing on the officiant. Likewise, the 1943 *Evangelical and Reformed Book of Worship* speaks of the *gift of grace* in its eucharistic prayer. Also, at the beginning of the segment on Communion in the more recent resource *Worshiping into God’s Future*, mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation and published by the United Church of Christ in 2004, a sacrament is clearly defined as “first and foremost, a gift of pure grace, God’s presence to God’s people.” In between the publication of the antecedent resources and the newer *Worshiping into God’s Future* is the 1986 *Book of Worship*. It is troubling to note that hardly any mention of “grace” is made in the latter. Furthermore, none of the focus groups used the word “grace” in their discussions with me.

This is problematic on several levels. First, is the sacramental presence of Christ—and the blessings that presence imparts—something we deserve as opposed to something we receive in spite of our shortcomings? In discussing one of the calls to the confession of sin in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” from the 1986

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Book of Worship, Chalmers Coe raises a similar question. Because the language in the prayer of confession assumes the certainty of God’s assurance of pardon, Coe asks, “Are we encouraging that idolatrous reliance on cheap grace to which [we] are all too prone? Liturgical precedent to the contrary notwithstanding—and there is much of it—does not the initial bland assertion of God’s willingness to pardon seem a bit like pulling gently at the divine sleeve as if to remind God how inappropriate it would be to ignore past promises and assurances? Second, if there is a scarcity of the theological concept of grace within the UCC’s theology of the sacraments, then where else is it lacking in its corporate, ecclesial life? In other words, is the UCC’s theology of worship and mission, for example, informed by something other than God’s grace? If so, what is it? Related to this is a third problem. Might the forfeiture of sacramental grace lead to a trust in works-righteousness, something the forebears of the UCC (such as John Calvin) rejected? The seventh proclamation in the UCC Statement of Faith reminds us of God’s promises, one of them being “You promise to all who trust you...fullness of grace.” Commenting on this declaration, UCC ethicist Roger L. Shinn observes, “Common grace, a term used by Calvin, is the grace that sustains the whole creation, the grace that day in, day out supports us and

408 After the leader states, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,” the people respond, “But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Book of Worship, 36-37.


410 The UCC Statement of Faith can be found on the UCC’s website (ucc.org) as well as in The New Century Hymnal (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 885.
our planet and our universe, whether we acknowledge it or not.” If grace is absent from our theological language—which is informed by Holy Communion and the language we use when sharing the bread and the cup—is it replaced by trust in one’s self, one’s endeavors, and one’s accomplishments? These are formative questions that we will discuss in the next chapter.

**Justice.** The UCC has long been committed to social justice issues. At General Synod 15, held in 1985, the UCC voted to become both an Open and Affirming church (meaning that the UCC fully welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into the full life, membership, and ministry of the church and affirms their lifestyle as normal) and a Just Peace denomination. The Still Speaking campaign, about to enter its seventh year, seeks the radical inclusion of all people, particularly those on the margins of society, into the church. The Book of Worship, published one year after General Synod 15, does not emphasize the social justice aspects of the meal nearly as much as the Still Speaking campaign has. (This writer believes that this would be a key aspect of the Book of Worship if a new edition were released today.) Recent literature in the UCC does emphasize this aspect of the meal, though. In her book *The Evolution of a UCC Style: Essays in the History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ*, Randi Jones Walker observes,

In the contemporary United Church of Christ, with our celebration of inclusivity, and our reluctance to create a test of faith, we will have to order

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our beloved community in such a way that the margins are continually drawn into the center. This is one way that covenant functions among us. Ideally it makes every part of the church aware of and attentive to all the other parts. The covenant among us arises as we look around the Table of people Christ has called together. These are not people we thought to invite, but those who have received a call, an invitation, from Christ. Eating together we unavoidably become stamped with our common relationship to Christ and become as my colleague Archie Smith Jr. puts it, “siblings of choice.” I might add, by divine choice, not our own. All of our human covenants and constitutions must be measured by this central covenant of communion with the living Christ.412

Aside from a few cursory observations that communicants feel that they are breaking bread with people across the world each time they come to the table, and the universal emphasis that all people are invited to partake of the holy meal, none of the focus groups really mentioned the social justice aspects of the meal.

The connection between the Eucharist and social justice is one of the emphases in the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document on which the liturgies in *Book of Worship* are modeled (in part). The fifth meaning of the Eucharist offered in the *BEM* document is entitled “The Eucharist as Meal of the Kingdom.” Many theologians speak of the Eucharist as a foretaste of the great eschatological banquet. In doing so, the focus is often on justice. As an example, James F. White reflects, “The eucharist...allies us with all humanity, indeed all of creation...The service of worship leads to the service of humanity.”413 *BEM* offer a similar theology: “The


very celebration of the eucharist is an instance of the Church’s participation in God’s mission to the world. This participation takes everyday form in the proclamation of the Gospel, service of the neighbour, and faithful presence in the world.”

As part of the God is Still Speaking campaign, the United Church of Christ published an extensive list of novel, historic stances that the denomination has taken in its quest to be an advocate for justice for any oppressed people. This list of “UCC Firsts” can be found on the denomination’s website and are discussed at length in Sidney D. Fowler’s book, *What Matters to You? Matters to Us: Engaging Six Themes of Our Faith*.

Among those stances was the vociferous opposition to the enslavement of African-Americans in the United States, which included the legal defense of the slaves who revolted and took hold of the Amistad and were exonerated in 1839. The UCC was also the first denomination to ordain an African-American man, a woman, and an openly gay person. Forerunners of the UCC were principal players in denouncing economic oppression at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1959, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called upon the United Church of Christ to help keep airwaves public when Southern television stations imposed blackouts to downplay the emergent Civil Rights Movement. On July 4, 2005, as America celebrated her independence from British rule, the twenty-fifth General Synod of the

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UCC passed a resolution advocating for equal marriage rights for all people, particularly those in the LGBT community, who were welcomed into the full membership and ministry of the church twenty years beforehand.

All of the focus groups latched on to their open table and a theology of extravagant welcome as a crucial aspect of social justice—and it is. Whether they officially opted in to the God is Still Speaking campaign or not—only Kittery and Evangelical UCC in Webster Groves had—all of these congregations embraced its notion of extravagant welcome: all people are welcome into the faith and fellowship of their congregations regardless of who they are. One of the challenges that lie before all of these congregations—an issue that exists in the *Book of Worship* and the antecedent resources—is making stronger connections between worship and social justice beyond just welcoming people into their church.

As an example, the “Service of Word and Sacrament II” offers a responsive invitation to the meal that intimates this justice-aspect of the meal. After the minister proclaims, “Jesus said: I am the bread of life. You who come to me shall not hunger; you who believe in me shall never thirst,” the congregation responds saying, “In company with all who hunger for spiritual food, we come to this table to know the risen Christ in the sharing of this life-giving bread.” What about those who hunger for actual food? The movement “from meal to mission” is not as lucid as it could be. Likewise, one of the unison prayers of thanksgiving at the end of the “Service of

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416 *Book of Worship*, 68.
Word and Sacrament I” states, “Almighty God, we give you thanks for the gift of our Savior’s presence in the simplicity and splendor of this holy meal. Unite us with all who are fed by Christ’s body and blood that we may faithfully proclaim the good news of your love and that your universal church may be a rainbow of hope in an uncertain world.”417 This prayer was discussed in chapter six in relation to Coe’s critique that “the hope that God’s universal church may be a ‘rainbow of hope in an uncertain world’ is simply mawkish.”418 Is it mawkish because of what Coe would call trite word choice or because it speaks idealistically about ecumenical solidarity in addressing the needs of the world instead of being engaging in mission informed by sound liturgy? My contention is that it is the latter. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

III: Conclusion

At this stage we have begun, as Swinton and Mowat suggest, “to reflect on what we have discovered from a theological perspective…to focus more overtly on the theological significance of the data that we have been working with.”419 As Swinton and Mowat also state, theological reflection was not absent from the first

417 Ibid., 52.
419 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research (London: SCM Press, 2006), 96.
two steps in the process—descriptive and historical theology—nor will it be absent from the next step of strategic practical theology.

Five major themes emerge from the critical conversation between the theory-laden practices of the Eucharist in five United Church of Christ congregations, the Book of Worship, and antecedent resources: presence, faith, forgiveness, tradition, and justice. These themes do not exhaust the range of practices and theologies uncovered in the focus group discussions and in the analysis of the normative liturgical texts. However, they are the major threads that begin to weave a tapestry that illustrates how this denomination, which believes that God is still speaking to the church, practices this sacrament and what it believes about it.
CHAPTER EIGHT

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS: REVISED

THEORY-LADEN PRACTICES

I: Introduction

Having surveyed the landscape and engaged in the systematic work of placing the community’s practices into dialogue with its normative texts, the practical theologian is poised to make recommendations to enable more faithful practices within the community. It may also be that contemporary practice poses important critical questions back to the classic texts. Fresh interpretations may need to be crafted, interpretations that are more aligned with extant practices. Following Browning, then, I bring the classic texts of the tradition into a mutually critical dialogue with contemporary theory-laden practices. However, in my research I have given priority to the classic texts that are part of the UCC’s liturgical heritage. While I have crafted an open dialogue between those texts and the focus group findings, the former is understood to have more normative weight. This is due, in part, to the belief that “The ‘things handed on’ are the practices that express and shape who we are…This is the ethos of a church that gets passed on to the next generation. This is the living reality of what we in the UCC are, and what we believe.”

This is not to suggest that the UCC or its normative texts are inerrant or infallible, as many

fundamentalists see Scripture. It is, however, to argue that the texts that have been handed down have already been shaped by the ecclesia. They did not arise *ex nihilo.* They were part of a critical, historic conversation between the people who developed and utilized them and the way those resources evolved in the church over time. This, in turn, led to new understandings (and ways of expressing those understandings).

That being the case, new findings that emerge from the pews need to become part of that same stream of conversation if our faith is to remain a living faith. That does not mean each idea that enters those waters changes the flow of the entire conversation.

Browning calls this movement strategic (or fully) practical theology. As one of Browning’s devotees summarizes the process that leads to this final step:

> In the process of developing a thick description, following historical clues to their inception, and assessing the systematic theology that represents the congregation’s assumptions about the nature of the Christian endeavor, those involved in these activities realize the practices of their congregation do not always represent its intentions. The suggestions for changes in congregational practices that result from the examinations of the theology embedded in extant practices is strategic practical theology.⁴²¹

In Thomas Groome’s methodology this fifth and final step is referred to as Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith. He writes, “Whatever the form or level of response invited, the practical intent of the dialogue in movement 5 is to enable participants—by God’s grace working through their own discernment and volition—to make historical choices about the praxis of Christian faith in the

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Comparing Groome’s fifth movement to Browning’s fourth, Robert J. Schreiter observes, “For both Groome and Browning, the final move in doing practical theology is action, a renewed practice of faith…Having listened to the conversation between your own [or another] congregational story and the rich resources of your tradition, it is time to imagine and plan the next chapter.”

According to Schreiter (as well as Browning and Groome) that “next chapter” is offering recommendations that will empower the congregation to modify their practices in order to be more faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to minister more effectively in their particular context(s) and the world.

This chapter then takes up the work of strategic practical theology. Having worked with five representative focus groups to discern their practice and understanding of the Eucharist, and having created a dialogue between those practices and the United Church of Christ’s normative texts, recommendations for more faithful practice, and for the construction of new liturgical resources, are explored here. Before delving into revised suggestions for practice and theology, this study examines the wider ecclesiological significance of such recommendations.

In his latest book, *New Ecclesiology and Polity: The United Church of Christ*, Clyde J. Steckel challenges the UCC to reexamine its theology of the church and its political

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governance, because he maintains that both impede mission in the post-modern era. Steckel opens his third chapter with a prophetic observation: “If the United Church of Christ is to survive in post-modernity, it will need to revision its ecclesiological identity. This will require a denomination-wide exploration and consensus-building addressing the nature and mission of the church of Jesus Christ.” Dr. Steckel maintains that “Ecclesiological urgency finally means recovering the identity of the church in a post modern age.” There are various marks and models of the church found within contemporary ecclesiology. In general, the church is to proclaim the Gospel, to celebrate the sacraments, to serve God in the service of others, and to co-exist as a covenantal community. These marks are often referred to as kerygma, leitourgia, diakonia, and koinonia, respectively. In the aforementioned chapter, Steckel focuses on the first two as hallmarks of ecclesial identity. He unpacks the need for a renewed understanding of baptism and preaching and then, in his third point, he speaks of the church honing its identity through its eucharistic faithfulness. He writes, “the church gathered at the table where the broken bread and the poured wine are shared shows itself to be ordered by Jesus Christ who is its sole head. Christ is himself present, not just in the elements, but also in the liturgical action of the whole community of his followers gathered at the table.”

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425 Ibid., 72.
426 Ibid., 87.
Steckel suggests that there is a Christological core, embodied in the Eucharist, that lies at the heart of a renewed ecclesiology. Such an ecclesiological renewal is essential for the survival of the United Church of Christ. This does not mean that there needs to be a single understanding of Holy Communion to fortify UCC ecclesiology, but it does mean that the table needs to stand at the core of the UCC’s worship life and ecclesiological identity. How is this possible if there are multiple understandings of the meaning of the Supper across the denomination?

One of the arguments that I am setting forth for revised Communion practices is that in order to maintain denominational identity there needs to be a careful balance between eucharistic practices laden with a UCC liturgical theology (if such a thing is possible) tempered with the liberty to augment those practices to reflect each congregation’s unique character. In 1987 Robert S. Paul published a study on the doctrine of ecclesiology in the UCC entitled *Freedom with Order*. This title aptly categorizes the theology of the Eucharist in the UCC (or better yet the theologies of the Eucharist) and any strategic recommendations being proffered as a result of this study. In other words, freedom in the local church, when it comes to doctrine and practice, is a fundamental aspect of UCC identity. However, in order for the denomination to have an identifiable character, there needs to be some constraints, some limits within which that freedom expresses itself.

My research has illustrated that there are several theologies of the Eucharist at work in the United Church of Christ: some very diverse and some complementary.
There are points of convergence and divergence between the classic texts and the practices and understandings of the Eucharist in local churches. The convergence and divergence yields a complex picture of UCC eucharistic theology and points to the need for more critical conversation about what is normative in UCC practice.

Practice and theology are not mutually exclusive. Revising practices within a congregation often entails revising theology. Thus, this dissertation explores the complex task of reshaping, regrounding, and reenvisioning eucharistic practice and theology within the United Church of Christ.

II: Mission, Reconciliation, and Tradition

How does one even begin to revise practices within UCC congregations or within the denomination at large? There are a diversity of eucharistic practices across the UCC. How does one implement changes in local churches that pride themselves on self-governance? Many a lifetime or longstanding member of the United Church of Christ has been heard to say, with enormous pride, “The UCC is not going to tell us what to do!” Believing that “we can do whatever we want” is written in the UCC’s ecclesiological DNA code. “It is entirely possible that some will greet the implied judgment that there is theology neither in nor of the UCC with thanksgiving.”427 And yet, with more and more people “converting” to the UCC from other traditions,

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427 Gabriel Fackre, Believing, Caring, and Doing in the United Church of Christ, 28.
particularly the Roman Catholic Church, a sense of common denominational beliefs and practices are missing from the perspective of some people.

The antecedent resources lift up a host of meanings. Three principal theologies emerge from the Evangelical and Reformed tradition. First, Christ is present in the sacrament in a very real way. That presence is spiritual instead of physical, mystical instead of corporeal. The presence of Jesus is found within the community gathered about the table as opposed to being manifest in the elements themselves, although the elements are a means of conveying Christ’s presence. Christ is experienced when we break bread and share the cup. Such a theology is fundamental to the reforms that took place in the Mercersburg movement and the teachings of Martin Bucer. The antecedent resources from the E&R heritage also maintain that the Eucharist is a means of strengthening our faith. Communion is a sacrament that bolsters our faith as individual and as faith communities. Lastly, through the Eucharist communicants are united with Christ and one another. Holy Communion creates a reciprocal indwelling: Christ dwells in us and we dwell in Christ. The meal also nurtures our covenantal connectedness with one another through the Risen Christ whom we meet at the table.

The two antecedent resources examined from the Congregational Christian legacy offer numerous understandings of the Supper. Some of those meanings are reflected in the Evangelical and Reformed Church liturgies as well. As stated in *A Book of Worship for Free Churches*, the most comprehensive precursory resource from
the CC tradition, Holy Communion refreshes participants as a “memorial of thy love”; it has “granted to us the presence of thy Son”; it has “strengthened our faith in thee”; and it serves to “increase our love toward one another.”\footnote{A Book of Worship for Free Churches (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 109.} The Eucharist is a means of strengthening believers for their earthly sojourn. In sharing the consecrated symbols of the crucified One, the faith of believers is nourished. Also, reflecting Calvin's \textit{virtualism}, communicants achieve a spiritual union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit when they partake of the holy meal. Finally, along with the requisite biblical warrant for the sacrament, the Puritan tradition emphasized the qualifications of those who preside over the Supper. As is the case in the United Church of Christ today, ordained clergy are responsible for faithfully “preaching and teaching the gospel” and properly “administering the sacraments and rites of the church” among their other duties.\footnote{Book of Worship: United Church of Christ (New York: United Church of Christ Office of Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 405-406.} Although this was a given in some of the churches I researched, some found this too be too hierarchical for a church rooted in egalitarianism.\footnote{A theological argument supporting the role of the laity being equal to that of the clergy is found in the belief that through the sacrament of baptism we become part of the “priesthood of all believers.” The UCC acknowledges that any Christian can baptize. If this is one of the two sacraments recognized by the denomination, then why cannot any Christian officiate at the Eucharist?} These understandings are found in the liturgies in the 1986 \textit{Book of Worship} and those in \textit{The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ}, which had a direct influence on the former having been published only twelve years earlier.
Some of these understandings are already part of the sacramental consciousness of members of the United Church of Christ, the most common being the spiritual presence of Christ at the meal, the Eucharist as a means of strengthening one’s faith, and the ability the meal has of uniting communicants with one another and with Jesus. In fact, these meanings were articulated quite well by the laity in the five focus groups. Yet one of the primary meanings of the meal, which pervades the liturgies in the Book of Worship, is connected to missiology: the celebration of the sacrament is to move us “from meal to mission.” Yet, none of the groups that I worked with mentioned this crucial aspect of sharing.

One way to try to incorporate this understanding into congregational practice is through teaching and preaching. In fact, this is usually the first and last refuge of clergy. More often than not, a sermon series or a course offered during the six and a half weeks of Lent is the way that many pastors attempt to communicate new understandings to the churches they serve. Unfortunately, this blitz approach is just that: a one-time offering. This method is often critiqued, because it places “inordinate trust in concentrated presentations. These will not be without an effect, but greater effectiveness may be achieved through a more diffuse and extended approach.”431 If we are concerned with revised practices, and if we are true to Browning’s methodology, which sees this fourth stage of strategic practical theology

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as “a complex communal form,” then, I contend, the changes sought need to involve the entire church in a comprehensive, holistic approach. This includes a critical examination of the liturgy for the Lord’s Supper used in worship, because, as noted throughout this dissertation, the theology inherent in a Communion order is inseparable from eucharistic practice.

In the previous chapter, we looked at five comparative themes as we did the work of systematic theology: presence, faith, forgiveness, tradition, and justice. In this segment of this chapter, we look at three of these themes as we offer suggestions for revised practice: meal to mission (which is related to the previous theme of “justice”), reconciliation (or forgiveness), and tradition.

**Meal to Mission.** If the United Church of Christ sees the practice of Communion as moving “from meal to mission,” then the two cannot be separated. Boards of deacons and outreach committees need to collaborate to make this connection more tangible in their congregations. There is a concrete union between worship and service. Members of the body of Christ cannot come to the table and encounter the presence of Jesus without being engaged in mission work of various kinds, including seeking justice on behalf of those members of the body who are oppressed in any way, be it by poverty, disease, discrimination, or political repression.

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Robert J. Schreiter makes a similar observation in his text *In Water and Blood: A Spirituality of Solidarity and Hope*:

> When we offer the cup in the Eucharist, we are making some very strong commitments. Those who preside at the Eucharist and offer the cup, presenting it to the people during the Eucharistic prayer and offering to God in praise, must ask themselves: When we present this cup, can we stand worthily as individuals who can indeed sum up the sufferings of Christ’s living body today—the church—and offer them to God? And when eucharistic ministers and believers offer and receive the cup in communion, saying “the blood of Christ” and affirming it with Amen, they must ask themselves: Are we ready to take on the sufferings of Christ’s living body? Do we have the courage to offer that cup of suffering to one another, knowing that to follow Jesus will bring us into conflict and adversity? Holding up and receiving that cup is a commitment to sharing in deepest solidarity with the victims of this world—those who undergo pain, those who must await redemption.433

This reflects the heart of the UCC’s enduring stances for social justice. In her essay on missiology in the UCC, Bertrice Wood states that “We in the United Church of Christ share a long history of understanding our mission as being holistic, incorporating the individual and the corporate, the spiritual and the physical.”434 I agree with Wood, but would add that it incorporates the liturgical and sacramental. We cannot separate being fed at the table from feeding the hungry. We cannot divorce worship in the sanctuary from the prayerful work that happens when we serve God in the service of others. “The relationship between the inside activity of worship and the outside activity of mission is portrayed thus: worship nurtures the

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individual and sustains the community in its life before God and in its life together, and from there Christians go out to serve the church’s mission as proclaimers and doers of the word.”

I believe that the writers of Book of Worship would concur, but the liturgies in this text do not connect worship and service as strongly as they could, although they claim that these services move us “from meal to mission.”

So what would a practice of the Eucharist connected to mission look like? It could take many forms. I will mention two that I have encountered, though not in the focus groups with which I worked.

The First Congregational Church of Montclair (New Jersey) has a program they offer whenever there is a fifth Sunday of the month. It is called “Jesus Has Left the Building…And We Followed!” Instead of holding worship on that day, they hang a huge banner on the front of the church with the slogan just mentioned and they worship through selected community-wide service projects. According to their website,

On most fifth Sundays of the month instead of gathering in our sanctuary to praise God with music and prayer, we express our faith and love by working within the community of Montclair, Northern New Jersey and the Tri-State Area. Here at First Congregational Church we understand that the worship of God takes many forms and that ministry that engages the community and seeks to meet the needs of those around us is one of the most powerful ways to follow in the way of Jesus.436

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436 Taken from the “Peace and Justice” section at www.firstcongmontclair.org.
Members of the church sign-up for various outreach projects the week before and engage in them in lieu of worship four times a year. Actually, according to Mont Clair UCC, this is worship. While I do not disagree, I think a stronger connection can be made between the two. What if an abbreviated service of Holy Communion were offered on the fifth Sunday of the month (one is included in the 1986 Book of Worship) and then the congregation moved from the sanctuary to the streets? This would embody a theology that moves “from meal to mission” much better. Instead of heading to coffee hour, the benediction would call the congregation, who just shared the bread of the Eucharist, to share bread with the hungry. Instead of engaging in another committee meeting after worship, parishioners who just affirmed their covenantal connectedness would extend that community to the homeless or to the lonely confined to nursing homes. Such an approach to the Eucharist could easily be adapted into the full life of congregational worship and outreach.

The second example involves a UCC congregation in New Hampshire. Immediately before sharing Communion on the first Sunday of each month, a member of the outreach committee at The First Congregational Church of Wakefield, New Hampshire, United Church of Christ, offers a mission moment (a “sermonette”) that focuses on outreach work occurring in a specific country that

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437 Mont Clair UCC’s website also states that “Sunday morning is a time when we bring our whole selves—hopeful, faithful, and flawed—to the experience of worship, to remind ourselves that we belong first and foremost to God. We praise God and honor all God’s people through inclusive language, prophetic preaching, and inspiring music. While our sanctuary is impressive and historic, our worship is accessible, lively and relevant. Or, as we like to say, our faith is 2000 years old; our thinking is not!” Taken from the “Worship” section at www.firstcongmontclair.org.
their offering supports through the United Church of Christ’s Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM). Then, when it comes time to share the meal, the bread that is used is made by a member of the diaconate—the recipe for which is indigenous to the country that is the focus of the morning’s mission moment. After the pastor breaks the loaf, the halves are placed on the two trays that are distributed to the congregation. A concrete connection is made between meal and mission. Congregants share bread familiar to Christians in another country—a country with whom they are working to spread Christ’s Gospel of hope and reconciliation.

These are just two examples. The point is to offer eucharistic practices that better reflect the theology that is foundational to the United Church of Christ. There are certainly others that will point to the individual identities, contexts, and creativity of each UCC congregation. The idea is to incorporate the “Meal of the Kingdom” meaning of the meal, as Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry refers to it, with concrete congregational practices. That kingdom is not just pie-in-the-sky, an ethereal realm awaiting us when we die. The kingdom is among us, as Jesus proclaimed.\footnote{See Luke 17:21.} When we work to make justice a reality, we enable the kingdom to become a present reality. This happens through our mission work. It also happens in worship. A theology of the Eucharist that incorporates the two is more faithful to the Gospel and, for the United Church of Christ, it is more true to the theology it professes.
Reconciliation. Another theme pervading the liturgies examined in this dissertation, as well as in the focus group discussions, was the sense of forgiveness and reconciliation that occurs when participants share the bread and the cup of the meal. What would such a theology look like in practice?

In their current form, the liturgies in \textit{Book of Worship} include corporate acts of confession. Many local churches practice this act of contrition on Communion Sunday; some do so every Sunday. The prayer of confession is usually printed in the bulletin and members recite it together, led by the pastor or a lay leader. An example from the “Service of Word and Sacrament I” is:

Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with all our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and follow in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen.\textsuperscript{439}

When reciting this part of the liturgy, parishioners often stand with their heads cast downward to read the bulletins they are holding. While such an act is a crucial part of the Communion liturgy—it is one of the components recommended in the \textit{BEM} document and recognized throughout the wider Church—might the UCC add a more dramatic, intentional, and participatory practice to this act of reconciliation?

The prayer of confession, followed by the words of assurance, reconciles the corporate body to God and the members of the community to one another. Yet the

\textsuperscript{439} Book of Worship, 37.
body language during this part of the liturgy—heads turned downward instead of facing one another—seems to be a mixed metaphor. Although heads turned downward may symbolize shame, would it not make more sense for people to look at one another when engaged in an act of confession and forgiveness? What if, instead, the congregation stood and (whether or not they read a prepared prayer of confession) faced one another? What would that symbolize? Or what if the congregation faced the rear of the sanctuary for the prayer of confession—literally a *turning away* from the Communion table—but then *turned towards* the table, the cross, and the chancel during the assurance of pardon? The Greek word *metanoia* is often translated as “repent” or “repentance.” More accurately, though, the term signifies “turning around” as in turning away from one’s sin or “changing one’s mind” about one’s behavior. The physical act of the corporate body turning away from the front of the sanctuary before receiving Communion would illustrate a people who have turned away from God and one another due to the brokenness caused by sin. Yet, through the healing offered through the Eucharist, which is signified beforehand through the words of assurance, the people symbolize their reconciliation by turning back toward the table, or back to God and the sacrament that unites them with Christ and one another.

In his analysis of the prayers of absolution in the *Book of Worship*, Joseph A. Bassett writes, “the members realize forgiveness in terms of their encounter with
Christ who is among those who gather in his name on the Lord’s Day.”

This is true. But could that forgiveness be experienced more poignantly by incorporating one’s entire being in this liturgical act? Such a practice would reflect the feeling of “turning around” and being made right with God and one another that was expressed by many of the focus group participants in discussing the feelings they had when sharing the sacred meal.

**Tradition.** In her essay, “Let Them In: Children and the Lord’s Supper,” Vicki Kessler observes, “How is it that our children come to faith? Like us, our children are spiritually formed and nourished by the images of Christian tradition and scripture.”

One of those traditions is the Eucharist and the spiritual nurture it affords young and old alike. As Kessler also argues (as noted above), “If we really want our children to be Christians, how can we risk denying them the opportunity to experience the totality of the Christian life found at the Lord’s table?”

Although permitting children to receive the Lord’s Supper is still an ongoing topic of debate throughout the wider Church, Sidney Fowler reminds us that “Increasingly, children are welcome to communion at their parent’s discretion” in the United Church of

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442 Ibid., 32.
Christ. If we are going to invite children to the table, should we not let them participate as Communion assistants (or junior deacons) in the distribution of the bread and the cup as well? We saw intimations of this practice at Evangelical UCC in Webster Groves, Missouri. The pastor randomly selects Communion servers just before the sacrament is shared from those seated in the congregation. Sometimes she selects children. David Ng and Virginia Thomas also recommend inviting children to be worship participants in their *Children in the Worshiping Community.*

I suggest the same, but not just so that we can be more welcoming to children or so we can include youth in the liturgy. This has to do with handing our tradition onto the next generation. How can we expect our children to grow into the fullness of Christ that is experienced firsthand at the Communion table when we send them to Sunday school before the sacrament is shared, as many UCC congregations do? An equally important question is: how do we expect our children to eventually hand the Christian tradition onto future generations if we never pass it on to them, or if we do so only in part?

“The word ‘tradition’ literally means ‘that which has been handed down or over,’ although it can also refer to ‘the act of handing down or over.’” Recall the

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First Reformed Church in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. A member of that focus group lamented that they were losing their tradition due to their declining membership. Her fear was that eventually there would be no one left to which they could pass their tradition. Church membership grows one of two ways: by welcoming new members into the fold through evangelism efforts or by raising children in the faith. Might we retain more of our youth by welcoming them into the fullness of our practices?

Furthermore, if the faith we have received came through our participation in services of Word and sacrament, how can we expect children to receive the same faith if they do not fully participate in both?

The practice of the Eucharist in the United Church of Christ would be augmented by incorporating children into the service, not just allowing them to receive the meal. By so doing, we are ensuring the continuity of the faith.

III: Tradition and Contemporaneity

In a recent edition of *Prism*, the scholarly journal for the United Church of Christ, Peter Schmiechen states, after examining three traditional understandings of the meaning of the cross, “Once one recognizes that there are more than three interpretations of Christ’s saving power, new possibilities emerge. One is to think about liturgies for the Eucharist which would express in substantive ways all of the major themes of Christ’s saving work. This would contrast with the present UCC *Book of Worship*, where everything is compressed into one general liturgy, with one or
two variations.” Schmiechen proposes that the liturgies that are currently used in the UCC are “single minded,” to use his words. More comprehensive language and symbols need to be employed to expand the scope to include the full, saving work of Christ and to see the entire eucharistic action as consecratory. This is both a christological and a liturgical question.

In the first volume of his systematics, entitled The Christian Story, UCC theologian Gabriel Fackre outlines four models of Christ’s salvific work, which go beyond, but include, the cross. In sum, these models are:

1. Jesus as Example and Teacher  
2. Jesus as Substitute and Savior  
3. Jesus as Conqueror and Lord  
4. Jesus as Presence

The locus of the first model is Galilee and involves the bulk of Christ’s earthly ministry. Jesus is “the Teacher of the truth and the inspiring Example of its practice.” The second model involves the cross. This is the priestly office of Christ. In this model “the meaning of the Work of Christ consists not in what Christ shows to us, but in what Christ does for us.” Fackre subscribes to a more traditional understanding of the atonement. He maintains that on the cross Jesus paid the price for the sins of humanity through suffering love and substitutionary

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448 Ibid., 124.
punishment. The third model is the Easter story. “That God raised Jesus Christ from the dead signifies the victory over the powers of evil, and finally also victory over death in its deepest meaning, the death of hope for the world.” The fourth model is incarnational. Through Jesus, God became a person to experience the fullness of the human drama. Fackre refers to this as central to any theology of atonement, or “at-one-ment” as he accentuates it: the definitive, historical union of the divine and the human. “To see the presence of God as the Work of Christ makes it utterly clear that atonement is through and through a divine action.”

Fackre’s models, while expansive, do not deal with two pertinent aspects of Christology and its implications for a more comprehensive christological purview of the Eucharist.

Lacking from these models, particularly the first one, is Jesus’ healing ministry. Historically, this has to do with the biblical narrative, which is saturated with accounts in which Jesus restores sight, exorcizes demons, and raises the dead, among other curative episodes. In the contemporary context it relates to the healing that people find through the Christian ministry. This includes miraculous accounts of healing through prayer and the laying on of hands, but it goes beyond this. One thinks of the woman in the focus group from Evangelical United Church of Christ who mentioned that each time she receives the Eucharist she feels that she is “ok” the way she is.

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449 Ibid., 129.
450 Ibid., 132.
Healing has to do with recovery from grief, reconciled relationships, sobriety, forgiveness, and a host of other restorative practices. All of these are expressed in the Eucharist, yet require further incorporation into our liturgies to integrate the fullness of Christ. Historically, in both the East and the West, the Eucharist is referred to as a “medicine.” Might such language and symbolism be incorporated into UCC liturgies, where such images (at least in the extant liturgies) are utterly foreign? What would it mean for eucharistic thought and practice if they were?

Also lacking in Fackre’s christological system is the eschatological return of Christ. Although consummation is part of Fackre’s overall systematics (it concludes his text), it is not part of his christological model. Much of what the Eucharist symbolizes and points to is Christ’s return at the end of history. It is a foretaste of the great eschatological banquet where enemies and friends will break bread in Christ’s realm. This theme is certainly part of the Communion liturgies in the Book of Worship and one of the five major meanings lifted up in the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry convergence statement. BEM refers to this as the “Meal of the Kingdom”:

The eucharist opens up with the vision of the divine rule which has been promised as the final renewal of creation, and a foretaste of it. Signs of this renewal are present in the world wherever the grace of God is manifest in human beings work for justice, love and peace. The eucharist is the feast at which the Church gives thanks to God for these signs and joyfully celebrates and anticipates the coming of the Kingdom in Christ.451

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In the UCC’s official response to the BEM document, offered one year before the publication of *Book of Worship*, the former critiques the latter for its overemphasis on “the propitiatory nature of Christ’s death” which could be countered “by giving further attention to the biblical image of the eucharist as a meal of the Reign of God.” Clearly this is one of the emphases offered by BEM. However, with its focus on social justice, this is a predictable critique offered by the UCC, which, in turn, is often criticized for their aversion to substitutionary atonement by those inside and outside of the denomination.

To return to Schmiechen’s assessment of *Book of Worship*, the United Church of Christ is in need of eucharistic liturgies that reflect the breath of Christ’s life (which includes his words and deeds), death, resurrection, and exaltation. Schmiechen writes,

> [T]he liturgies abound with countless references to the many aspects of Christ’s saving power and also affirm a broad eschatological vision. Of course, all this is true, but note how these ideas are present in the liturgies. First, they are largely confined to the introduction and conclusion, whereas the middle section focuses on Jesus’ death, bread and wine, body and blood, for the forgiveness of sins. Second, these many ideas are presented in such rapid succession that only the theologically informed can be aware of the naming of these distinct ideas or comprehend what is inferred. If the beginning and end of the liturgies were a movie, the scenes would change every three seconds. As a consequence images of the fullness of saving power are not developed fully, nor are they related directly to the bread and wine, the body broken and blood poured out, as is the case with the affirmation of forgiveness of sins.  

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452 “A United Church of Christ Response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,*” available online at ucc.org.

453 Schmiechen, 71.
This is probably the major learning that came out of the focus group discussions. Their understanding of how Christ is present at the meal and what the meal calls for, in terms of the community’s response, goes beyond the bounds of Book of Worship. Furthermore, four of the five pastors that serve the churches with which I worked do not use the Book of Worship.454 Many of them use resources not even published by the UCC. Is this because they find Book of Worship outdated or is it that the liturgies contained in this resource do not reflect the spectrum of symbols and theologies found at the table? Does it mean that Book of Worship is not as normative for eucharistic faith and practice as many in the denomination suspect?

In an interview with The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey M. Gallagher, pastor of the First Congregational Church of Kittery in Kittery Point, Maine, I learned that his decision not to use Book of Worship was based on his assessment that the liturgies published in Seasons of the Spirit better reflect the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary (which is included in the UCC’s Desk Calendar and Plan Book and followed in many local UCC congregations) and the different seasons on the Christian calendar. Imani UCC does not use the Book of Worship, because they want their liturgy to be based more in Scripture (particularly 1 Corinthians 11) and they incorporate congregational responses from their cultural tradition (African-American). The Rev. Katherine

454 The Rev. Steven L. Craft, Pastor of First Reformed United Church of Christ, and his congregation use the liturgies in the front of The New Century Hymnal (1995), which are taken directly from Book of Worship.
Hawker of Evangelical United Church of Christ uses a liturgy that she wrote, a liturgy that is more reflective of the UCC’s evangelism efforts that offer an extravagant welcome to all people. Her “original” resource incorporates language from the Didache and, she states, it better reflects the unity that is experienced at the table. The Rev. Beverly Edwards uses what she calls “an eclectic combination of resources” that she has gathered over the years. She introduces the sacrament using words from the God is Still Speaking campaign to highlight the fact that all people are welcome to receive the sacrament. Rev. Edwards incorporates “the standard Sanctus and Words of Institution.” She feels that doing so connects the practice and experience of the Eucharist at First Christian to the historic and ecumenical Church.

At the end of the general introduction to Book of Worship the editors note that this resource “like all books of worship, is transitional literature. It seeks to provide a small span in the bridge that will traverse and link the worshiping church of the twentieth century with the church of the past and the church of the twenty-first century.”455 It is my contention that being a full decade into the twenty-first century and having seen tremendous ecclesial and cultural changes over the past twenty-four years since Book of Worship was published, it would behoove the United Church of Christ to draft new liturgical resources that more accurately reflect the theology embraced not only in local churches, but within the denomination itself. It was noted in the introduction that a call for new liturgical resources has been voiced by local

455 Book of Worship, 27.
churches since General Synod 24 (2003). It is time to engage in such a conversation again. One of the goals of this dissertation is to begin that dialogue. What would such a resource look like? It would need to be a carefully navigated union of tradition and contemporaneity.

Tradition. The UCC needs to embrace its traditions for various reasons. One of the defining characteristics of UCC history is ecumenism. Many refer to this united and uniting church as an experiment in ecumenism. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe have observed, “In the formal ecumenical dialogues presently taking place, it is often difficult for other denominations to comprehend how the United Church of Christ can maintain such diversity in worship and theology yet hold together.” The quest for global ecumenical alliances is a fundamental part of the UCC’s identity. Such partnerships currently exist with a number of churches and denominations in Chile, Zimbabwe, and Germany, among other nations. However, as Gabriel Fackre observes, “The challenge to the UCC to show that we do have a coherent ‘UCC belief’ and a ‘confessional heritage’ continues to this day. Isn’t there a slipped ‘i’ in our name, not the United Church of Christ, but the United Church of Christ?” Indeed, the UCC embraces a diversity of beliefs and practices. This is probably the denomination’s greatest strength and weakness. It is a

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strength because it allows (in fact it encourages) individual faith formation without necessitating conformity to specific doctrines. Similarly, practices within the UCC are augmented by the assimilation of the different practices that those coming into the denomination bring from their former churches. However, this same strength can be seen as a weakness. It is a weakness, because it can hinder ecumenical dialogue, as Fackre suggests. How do other churches seek consensus with the UCC when the former has no idea what the latter believes? Likewise, how does one construct a theology of any doctrine within the UCC if each practice and tenet of the faith is malleable? The latter is one of the guiding questions of this dissertation.

As this question relates to Communion, this study has illustrated that there is no singular theology of the sacrament in the United Church of Christ. Multiple theologies of Holy Communion infuse the antecedent literature as well as contemporary understanding and practice. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, whose theology of the Eucharist is inextricable from its history and identity, the UCC’s identity is informed more by the centrality of the Word in worship. Therefore, the UCC needs to embrace a dual dialogue: *an internal conversation and an external one.*

The internal is a conversation that uncovers and wrestles with the various meanings of the Lord’s Supper that exist across the denomination. By engaging in

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458 This study has not examined the various cultural and social influences that came to bear on the writing of the antecedent resources as well. This is certainly an area for further study.
such a discussion the UCC will embrace the fullness of the presence of Christ in its life and worship. Schmiechen claims that this is urgently needed. The survival of the denomination depends on it. In reflecting upon the notable decline in UCC membership over the past few decades, Schmiechen writes, “Conservatives claim that this resulted from being too liberal. But I have always felt it resulted from our inability (or unwillingness) to demonstrate conviction regarding Jesus Christ.” I concur. Although many embrace the theological openness and doctrinal freedom found in the UCC, many others thirst for a more pronounced articulation of “UCC beliefs.” A fuller “conviction regarding Jesus Christ” must include a fuller understanding of the diverse ways in which the UCC understands the Eucharist, for it is through this meal that Christ is made fully present to the community.

The external conversation relates to how this complex understanding of the Eucharist will inform the dialogues in which the UCC is engaged with the wider Church. As a conversation partner that is seeking further unity within the ecumenical Church, the UCC needs to be able to articulate what it believes, especially when each of those beliefs is multifarious. This relates to Fackre’s concern above which we already discussed. If there is an aversion to seeking union or dialogue with the UCC because of the denomination’s lack of uniformity in theology (due to the UCC’s autonomous polity), then the UCC runs the risk of being ostracized from the ecumenical unity it seeks. Therefore, the United Church of Christ has to be ever

459 Schmiechen, 69.
vigilant to state its beliefs and to enable those beliefs to correspond, *though not conform,* to ecumenical convergence statements. This is a delicate, though pertinent, theological endeavor.

**Contemporaneity.** A fresh liturgical resource would need to be sensitive to the language used throughout the ecumenical Church and the breadth of eucharistic practices and understandings. And yet, it would also need to have a distinctive UCC character. This raises the question, what do we mean by “a distinctive UCC character”?

All five of the focus groups lifted up common themes surrounding the Eucharist. Some of these themes are evident in the liturgies in the *Book of Worship* as well as the antecedent resources; some were expressed in nominal ways, and some were absent. The most common theme being the way in which the Eucharist creates and sustains *community.* Another central theme that arose from the discussions corresponds to recent denominational branding—that of *extravagant welcome.* We will look at both separately to see how they could be included into a new liturgical resource.

The antecedent recourses that we examined, as well as the UCC *Book of Worship,* refer to *koinonia* as a fundamental aspect of the meal. For example, the exhortation in the 1916 *Evangelical Book of Worship* states, “Whosoever eateth of this bread, and drinketh of this cup, firmly believing the words of Christ, dwelleth in
Christ, and Christ in him, and he hath eternal life.”

460 In reflecting upon this order, Theodore L. Trost, Jr. observes, “The unity of the Church in heaven and on earth is affirmed and communion occurs with the Living Christ as well as with other members of the Body of Christ.”

461 This theology would find similar expression in the Book of Worship. In the first Communion prayer in the “Service of Word and Sacrament I,” communicants proclaim, “we unite in this covenant of faith, recalling Christ’s suffering and death, rejoicing in Christ’s resurrection, and awaiting Christ’s return in victory.”

462 What would it look like, though, if the Book of Worship were to offer creative rubrics for expressing and embodying the communal bonds that unite those gathered at the table with one another and with Christ? Think of the Circle of Love at the Christian Church in Swansea. It is interesting to note that one of the principles guiding the construction of the Book of Worship, according to Thomas E. Dipko, its chief architect, was for the liturgies to be “the response of total persons to the loving initiative of God.”

463 Creative liturgical arts—such as liturgical dance, singing, poetic readings, theatrical skits, puppetry, and the like—are often an integral part of the worship services at General Synod and Conference annual meetings. Although Dipko notes that “The services in the Book of Worship make rich provision


462 Book of Worship, 48.

463 The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ, vol. 7, 189.
for touching, breaking and pouring, embracing, eating, washing, anointing, dancing and singing,” very little of this is included—aside from the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine—in the Communion liturgies. If community is such an integral part of the experience and meaning of the meal, this should be made more visible in the liturgies. Parishioners in some UCC congregations participate very little in the Communion liturgy and some not at all—and yet the communal bond with Christ and one another is how most lay people articulate their understanding of the meal. The exuberance with which members of the Swansea focus group spoke of the Circle of Love, and some of the members of Evangelical UCC described the votive candle lighting that follows the reception of the sacrament via intinction, tell me that there is a deep hunger for participation in the liturgy, for such involvement expresses the koinonia established and nourished there.

The other theme that every focus group discussed at length was the extravagant welcome their churches embody when it comes to the meal. All people are welcome to the table. Yet, more than one group observed that those who often chose not to receive the meal are visitors. Is it that newcomers feel uncomfortable receiving the sacrament if they are not members of the church they are visiting or may it be that

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464 Ibid., 190.

465 I am referring here to active and creative participation. Indeed, there are many ways that one can participate in a Communion liturgy: e.g. congregational responses, unison prayers, even silent participation.

466 One can argue that the candle lighting ceremony at Evangelical UCC is an individual act of devotion. Although there were members of the Evangelical UCC focus group who saw it as such, there were others who spoke of it as a communal act.
the message of extravagant welcome is not an integral part of the liturgy? It may also be that some guests find an open table to be theologically problematic: they may hold that the Communion table should be more restricted, even to them. The Book of Worship says very little about who can come to the table. Many pastors specifically invite “all people” to the table, some using the UCC’s recent mantra, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” as already noted.

Although this is a marketing slogan, it has been incorporated into the Communion liturgy by many pastors as an open invitation to the meal. (Might this be an example of how theology is shaped by practice, albeit a commercial catchphrase?) The only church with which I worked that had any restrictions as to who is allowed to receive the sacrament is First Reformed UCC. They require their children and youth to be confirmed (and therefore baptized) first. However, even at First Reformed baptism is not mandated for adults who come to the table. This raises the question of whether or not baptism should be a prerequisite for the reception of the Eucharist.

There are arguments on both sides. Those who feel it should be often argue that the Lord’s Supper is a meal that affirms the identity of a specific community—a covenantal community defined by baptism. Those who feel as if it should not be a stringent requirement cite the practice of hospitality. Are we being welcoming and hospitable if we exclude anyone from the table? These are pertinent questions. Here, however, we are concerned with the Communion orders used by the UCC and how
those orders can better reflect its quest to welcome all people into the membership and ministry of the church, whether baptism is a prerequisite or not.

The opening chapter of Sidney D. Fowler’s *What Matters to You? Matters to Us: Engaging Six Themes of Our Faith* is entitled “We Are People of God’s Extravagant Welcome.” In it he reflects upon a comment that some use to explicate the UCC’s identity: “‘We are multicultural and multiracial, open and affirming, accessible to all, and a peace with justice church.’ That’s a mouthful, yet the phrase sums up our commitment through the years.”467 It may be that visitors will receive the sacrament if they attend a local church for an extended period of time and become more familiar with the setting, the people, and the practices of the congregation. Some may choose not to receive the sacrament (regardless of their formal or informal affiliation to the church) for personal reasons—reasons other than not feeling welcome. In either case, an extravagant welcome should clearly make all people feel invited. If the UCC is truly a “multicultural and multiracial, open and affirming, accessible to all, and a peace with justice church,” then this needs to be reflected in its celebration of Holy Communion. Liturgies need to reflect a diversity of cultural practices and incorporate language that lets people of different races, sexual orientations, and social commitments known that they are welcome to partake. This objective governed the assembly of *The New Century Hymnal*, published less than a

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467 Sidney D. Fowler, *What Matters to You? Matters to Us: Engaging Six Themes of Our Faith* (Cleveland United Church Press, 2008), 13. By “through the years,” Fowler is referring to the UCC’s lengthy history, as well as the histories of its predecessor bodies. In both cases, that “history” is defined, in large part, by social justice advocacy.
decade after *Book of Worship*. In fact, the foreword to the former, written by Dipko, boasts that *The New Century Hymnal* is “boldly committed to a spirit of inclusiveness. It welcomes and celebrates the diversity of all people of God as surely as the mystery of diversity within God the Holy Trinity.”468 Should not the liturgies in the denomination’s *Book of Worship* strive for a “spirit of inclusiveness” in all its varieties as well?

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CONCLUSION

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Contrary to popular opinion, the UCC does have a theology of Holy Communion. In some respects, it is as diverse as the 5,500 congregations and 1.1 million members of this united and uniting church. On the other hand, common themes arose through interviewing approximately fifty-two lay persons from five diverse local UCC churches (and their pastors), analyzing several antecedent liturgies, and interpreting the 1986 *Book of Worship* — the denomination’s principal liturgical resource. At least three areas emerge for further study: the notion of covenant, the presence of Christ at the meal, and a question about who can officiate at and participate in the meal.

One question for further research is how can a wider, more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of Communion solidify the covenantal connectedness that members of local congregations share with those outside their congregation: in the United Church of Christ as well as in the wider Church? The most predominant understanding of the meal that surfaced in my research is that through sharing the bread and the cup of the Eucharist, Christians are united with Jesus and one another in community. At the root of this thinking is the notion of *covenant*. A covenant is a relationship of reciprocal love, support, and care. Each party to a covenant has the other person’s best interests in mind, as opposed to a contractual relationship, which people enter to protect their own interests. The theological concept of covenant is central to UCC thought.
Although local churches are autonomous, they co-exist in a covenantal relationship with one another. These two, co-equal marks lie at the heart of UCC ecclesiology. However, the understanding of covenant is often secondary to a congregational polity rooted in autonomy. Randi Jones Walker writes, “The dilemmas of covenant in conflict with congregationalism are almost notorious in the United Church of Christ.” There is a rich history of the evolution of covenantal thought in UCC history, theology, and polity, which Walker unpacks in the fifth chapter of her The Evolution of a UCC Style: History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ. The post-modern UCC, however, lives in the middle of a delicate tension between total sovereignty and being bound “in covenant [with] faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races,” as the UCC Statement of Faith declares. In his comprehensive text on the Statement of Faith, Roger L. Shinn argues, “The church is a covenant people. The meaning of the covenant has special importance in the United Church of Christ, because many of its local churches were established by Christians coming together and entering into covenant.” While this is true, it is also true that many of those churches suffer from near-sightedness: they have difficulty seeing beyond the covenant that unites them in local congregations in order to see the covenant that unites them as members of a National Church. Shinn reminds us that what is needed

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is a renewed understanding that such covenantal connectedness originates in God, not us. “The Christian covenant is not simply an agreement between consenting people, who are free to break it by mutual agreement. It is a covenant between people of faith and God, the Creator and Renower of the church.”

There were some focus group participants, particularly in the more liberal congregations (i.e. The First Congregational Church of Kittery Point, Maine and Evangelical UCC in Webster Groves, Missouri), who see Holy Communion as uniting Christians “of all ages, tongues, and races.” There was one person who even observed that “every Communion Sunday feels like World Communion Sunday.” Still, the main understanding of the meal in local churches, at least the ones with which I worked, had to do with their communal co-existence. If being baptized into the larger “body of Christ” assures an identity that is reaffirmed each time we gather at the table, then more further research needs to explore the wider connections found at the meal.

A second theme discussed at length in this study was the presence of Christ in the meal. Again, as the literature review and focus group findings demonstrate, this presence is spiritual and has more to do with what Christ accomplishes through the meal and where Christ is located within the community as opposed to where he is located in the elements. While the UCC encourages its members to form their own understanding of the various tenets of the Christian faith, there are some who argue

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471 Ibid., 83.
that the UCC is in the midst of a serious Christological crisis. This is not only being expressed by fringe movements in the UCC such as Biblical Witness Fellowship, who, in an essay explicating the main concerns of the movement, the late evangelical theologian Donald G. Bloesch stated, “the pressing need today in the United Church of Christ as well as in other mainline Protestant denominations is for purity of doctrine, without which our experience will invariably be misunderstood by ourselves and others, and our life will cease to be a shining witness to the glory of God.”

It is also expressed by moderate UCC theologians. Gabriel Fackre states that, “The United Church of Christ, often thought to be at the left end of mainline Protestant spectrum, is a showcase of the late twentieth-century struggle for a ‘church of the center.’” Fackre then quotes the work of the tenth Craigville Colloquy, of which he is a prominent leader. In the opening to the invitation to the tenth symposium, prospective attendees read, “We believe the future of our Church [the UCC] depends

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474 The Craigville Theological Colloquy is a grassroots movement that meets annually in Craigville, Massachusetts to discuss a variety of theological issues. According to their website, “The Colloquy is a wonderful opportunity and place for local pastors, denominational leaders, teachers, seminarians and laity to share a week studying critical Biblical passages relevant to the theme, find space for meditation, participate in Word and Sacrament, or just relax at the beach. The core of the Colloquy experience has always been the small groups where sharing and learning happens in the exchange of ideas and theological insights. We are foremost a theological colloquy.” This quote, and more information about the Craigville Colloquy, can be found at craigvillecolloquy.com.
on faithfulness to the one Word of the triune God, Jesus Christ, whom we are ‘to hear and which we are to trust and obey in life and death.’”

My contention is that if mainline denominations, such as the UCC, are in rapid decline, will our longevity depend, in part, on maintaining some uniformity when it comes to the core doctrines of the faith? The second paragraph to The Constitution and Bylaws of the UCC explicitly states two key points: “The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession,” and, “In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.” People who join local UCC churches are also asked, “Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” Who is Jesus Christ to us as a denomination? How does the presence of Christ in the Supper inform our faith? These are not purely academic questions. They have real pertinence to a denomination that is losing members and is seeking more theological clarity and homogeneity.

Lastly, the whole notion of who can receive the meal and who can officiate at the table are ongoing questions. This relates to the last point, in part. The congregations with

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475 Fackre, Restoring the Center, 37.


which I worked did not stress baptism as a necessary prerequisite for receiving the sacrament (save for a slight reference at First Reformed Church), and they were torn as to whether or not only ordained clergy can officiate at the meal. The argument that the Eucharist is reserved for “baptized Christians” sounds too restrictive to some. In a denomination like the United Church of Christ, which prides itself on being radically inclusive, setting limitations on anything sounds inhospitable. Yet part of what is affirmed at the table is our identity as Christians. We confirm that we are members of the body of Christ each time we share the body of Christ. How can we affirm an identity that is not ours or that we have yet to establish? Also, maintenance of that identity is one of the duties of ordained clergy. Because they have been trained in the meaning behind the sacrament and have sworn to properly administer it, the identity of the church is better ensured. By being too lax in terms of who can receive and who can serve, the very essence of the church’s identity is in danger of being compromised. Recall the member of Evangelical United Church of Christ who found that such “control” over the sacrament contradicted the egalitarian nature of the UCC. Gabriel Fackre offers a counter argument in favor of ordained clergy officiating at the meal. He argues that being “responsible for the kerygmatic and liturgical gifts does not mean their monopoly. Clergy are charged with responsibility for these organs functioning within the Body, not their exclusive exercise.”

danger is that without the responsible stewardship of Word and sacrament, the Church may fall “into amnesia.”

Clergy, who are servants not masters, “do not monopolize [Word and sacrament] but they do guard and facilitate them. Preserving the memories of identity, they remind the Church of who it is…and whose it is.”

This requires further study and the development of homiletical and educational resources for members of all ages in the United Church of Christ.

This dissertation opened with an observation made by Dr. David Greenhaw. He noted that the UCC needs to clarify its sacramental identity. He claims that the meaning of baptism, Holy Communion, and the relation between the two “are not incidental questions. They are constitutive and urgent questions for the United Church of Christ.”

Although we touched upon baptism in this dissertation, we have delved deeper into the practice and understanding of the Eucharist in the UCC. The diversity of meanings that surfaced, and the importance of the Eucharist in forming, informing, and transforming the church, illustrates that UCC identity is not just contingent on advertising campaigns and commercial branding. What the UCC believes as a church is crucial for the survival of the denomination. Beliefs, practices, and ecclesial longevity are inseparable.

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479 Ibid., 172.
480 Ibid.
481 David M. Greenhaw, transcription of telephone interview conducted by John Tamilio III, August 31, 2006.
I. Practical Theology, Methodological Resources, and Ecclesiology:


II. Sacramental Theology, Eucharistic Theology, and Liturgies:


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III. Systematic Theology:


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Saint Augustine of Hippo. *Contra Faustum*, Book XIX.


**IV. The United Church of Christ and its Traditions:**


Zikmund, Barbara Brown, ed. *Living Theological Heritage*. Multi-volume Series on the UCC: