

Belong: The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church

Lesson Plans

Dynamic —Participants' lives serve as the main curriculum. The focus should be on group dynamics with a lead learner. The other tools supplement the group's growth.

Session 1: Introduction to Holy Communion

Objectives:

- Build connections with one another through shared experiences of Holy Communion.
- Explore the theological and biblical foundations of Holy Communion as a means of grace in the United Methodist tradition.

Preparation for Facilitators:

- Review the video content, Foundations booklet ([*The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church – Foundations*](#)), Explore booklet ([*The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church –Explore*](#)), lesson plans, and other materials on Holy Communion.
- Be prepared to share personal reflections on your experiences with Communion.
- Create a welcoming space for participants to share personal experiences.
- Gather index cards and pens.
- Print out Covenant Guidelines examples.

Video Content (10 mins):

- *Our Stories of Holy Communion* video

Reading Assignment:

- Leaders: Read pages 1-2 in *The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church – Foundations*.

Session Outline (90 minutes - adaptable)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

- Welcome participants and open with a prayer.
- Briefly introduce the session's objectives.

Icebreaker Activity: "Communion Moments" (20 minutes)

- Objective: Help participants connect by sharing experiences related to Communion.
- Materials Needed: Index cards, pens, and a bowl or basket.

Instructions:

- **Step 1:** Distribute index cards and pens to participants.

- **Step 2:** Ask them to write down a memorable experience with Communion (it could be a profound moment, a first time taking Communion, or a tradition in their church).
- **Step 3:** Collect the index cards, mix them, and redistribute them.
- **Step 4:** Participants read aloud the card they received and guess who wrote it.
- **Step 5:** Allow the author of the card to share more details if that person is comfortable doing so.

Covenant Agreement (10 minutes)

Use one of the covenants or create your own covenant from ["Courageous Conversations: Sample Guidelines"](#).

Have enough copies of the covenant for each participant. Read and discuss the covenant with the group.

- The covenant should include, at a minimum, confidentiality requirements and expectations for the participants.
- Encourage buy-in from participants by asking for their input.

Facilitator Tip: Encourage buy-in for the covenant by asking participants what else might be needed or included in the covenant.

Video Content (10 minutes)

Watch *Our Stories of Holy Communion* video

Video Reflection (20 minutes)

- What did you hear that has you wondering or curious?
- What did you learn from the video?

Activity: Micro Group Breakout (15 minutes)

- Materials Needed: Index cards, pens, and a bowl or basket.
- Break participants into small groups and ask them to develop questions or reflections on the theological significance of Communion.
- Each group should highlight one or two key questions to share with the larger group. These questions will be added to a "parking lot" for later sessions.

Session 1 Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

- Summarize key points discussed.
- Remind participants to reflect on Communion during the week.
- Encourage participants who are using the workbook to continue using it.
- Reading Assignment: *The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church –Explore booklet*, pages 1-4.
- Closing Prayer

Session 2: Holy Communion and Grace

Objectives:

- Explore Holy Communion's connection with prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace.
- Reflect on how Communion shapes the ongoing process of discipleship and growth in grace.

Preparation for Facilitators:

- Review the video content and the next chapter in the Explore booklet and Foundations booklet.
- Be prepared to explain the connection between the grace we experience in Communion and Wesleyan theology.
- Although there are few reflection questions, they are designed to spark conversations for the facilitator to guide meaningful discussion. Phrases like "say more," "what else," and "can you expand on that" help participants go deeper in their reflections.

Video Content (10 mins)

- *What Is Holy Communion? Video*

Reading Assignment:

- Leader: Read pages 3-5 in the Foundations booklet.
- Participants: Read pages 1-4 in the Explore booklet.

Session Outline (90 minutes - adaptable)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

- Welcome participants and open with a prayer.
- Briefly introduce the session's objectives.

Opening Activity: "Understanding Grace in Communion" (20 minutes)

- Objective: Help participants grow in their understanding of grace.
- Materials Needed: Index cards, pens, and a bowl or basket.

Instructions:

- Divide participants into three groups, assigning each group one experience of grace: *prevenient*, *justifying*, or *sanctifying*.
- Ask each group to briefly define their assigned experience of grace in fifteen or fewer words, using examples from their lives or church experiences.
- Have the groups share their definitions and reflect on how each version of grace is experienced during Communion.

Video Content (10 minutes)

Watch *What Is Holy Communion?* Video

Video Reflection (10 minutes)

- What did you hear that has you wondering or curious?
- What did you learn from the video?

Reflection and Group Discussion (20 minutes)

- How might participating in Holy Communion help us experience God's presence?
- What role does grace play in your approach to the Communion Table?
- Discuss how participants feel God's grace working in their lives during and after Holy Communion. How might the understanding of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace give us language to describe our encounters with God during Holy Communion?

Session 2 Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

- Recap key points and remind participants to reflect on the grace experienced in Communion throughout the week.
- Encourage participants who are using the workbook to continue using it.
- Reading Assignment: Read pages 5-17 in the Explore booklet.
- Closing Prayer.

Session 3: Tradition and Holy Communion**Objectives:**

- Deepen participants' understanding of Christ's real presence in Communion, as understood in the United Methodist tradition.
- Reflect on the biblical and theological underpinnings of Christ's presence in the sacrament.

Preparation for Facilitators:

- Review video content and readings assignments from the Foundations and Explore booklets.
- Prepare discussion questions and reflection activities.
- Gather a whiteboard or large poster board, markers, a printed quote (provided below) on tradition and traditionalism, Bibles or printed copies of relevant scripture passages.

Video Content (10 minutes):

- *Our Tradition of Holy Communion* video

Reading Assignment:

- Leader: Read pages 6-14 in the Foundations booklet.
- Participants: Read pages 5-17 in the Explore booklet.

Session Outline (90 minutes - adaptable)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

- Welcome participants and open with a prayer.
- Briefly introduce the session's objectives.

Opening Activity: "Tradition versus Traditionalism in Holy Communion" (20 minutes)

- Objective: This activity will help participants explore the role of tradition in the practice of Holy Communion and understand the difference between upholding meaningful traditions and falling into traditionalism.
- Materials Needed:
 - Whiteboard or large poster board
 - Markers
 - Printed quote (provided below) on tradition and traditionalism
 - Bible or printed copies of relevant scripture passages
- **Step 1:** Introduction to Tradition and Traditionalism (5-7 minutes)
Start the session by defining **tradition** and **traditionalism**. You might say something like:
"As we think about Holy Communion, we often think of it in terms of tradition. But it's important to understand the difference between *tradition*, which is a living faith passed down through generations, and *traditionalism*, which may mean rigidly holding to practices that have lost their original meaning or purpose."

Then, read the following quote from theologian Jaroslav Pelikan:

"Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

Write this quote on the whiteboard or display it somewhere visible.

- **Step 2:** Reflection on Practice (5-7 minutes)
Write two headings on the whiteboard: **"Tradition"** and **"Traditionalism."**
(Note to the facilitator – these are not hard and fast distinctions. What is tradition in one setting might be traditionalism in another.)

Ask the group:

What aspects of our Communion practice are rooted in meaningful **tradition**?

(Examples: Connecting to the early church, participating in Christ's command to partake in Holy Communion, participating in the body of Christ, liturgy that connects us to other denominations and across time.)

What aspects of Communion might fall into **traditionalism**?

(Examples: Focusing too much on doing it a "certain way" without remembering why.)

Write their responses under the appropriate heading.

- **Step 3: Group Reflection (5 minutes)**

To close, lead the group in a reflective discussion using these prompts:

How can we keep the tradition of Holy Communion alive in a way that honors its deep meaning?

What might we need to reconsider if we find ourselves clinging to **traditionalism** rather than **tradition**?

Video Content (10minutes)

Watch *Our Tradition of Holy Communion* video.

Video Reflection (10-15 minutes)

- What did you hear that has you wondering or curious?
- What did you learn from the video?

Bible Study and Discussion (25 minutes)

- Read Luke 9:10-17 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.
- Discuss questions such as:
 - In the feeding of the multitude, what language do you notice that is also in our Communion liturgy? ("blessed," "broke," "gave")
 - In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul recounts the tradition of the Lord's Supper. This passage represents one of the earliest Christian traditions being passed down:
"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread..." (NIV)
- Ask the group:
 - Why do you think Paul emphasizes the importance of this tradition?

- How does this scripture help us connect to the roots of Communion as a tradition?
- How does this understanding impact how we approach the Communion Table?

2. Session 3 Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

- Summarize the key takeaways about Christ's presence in Communion.
- Encourage participants who are using the workbook to continue using it.
- Reading Assignment: Read pages 18-26 in the Explore booklet.
- Closing Prayer.

Session 4: The Holy Communion Liturgy in The United Methodist Church

Objectives:

- Explore the meaning of liturgy used in Holy Communion as a prayer that joins us with Christ and the larger body of believers.

Preparation for Facilitators:

- Review the video content and relevant readings in the Explore booklet and Foundations booklet.
- Prepare to lead a discussion on the communal aspects of Communion and the significance of the liturgy.

Video Content (10 mins):

- *Our Liturgy of Holy Communion* video

Reading Assignment:

- Leaders: Read pages 15-29 in the Foundations booklet.
- Participants: Read pages 18-26 in the Explore booklet. booklets

Session Outline (90 minutes - adaptable)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

- Welcome participants and open with a prayer.
- Briefly introduce the session's objectives.

Opening Activity: "Improvising the Great Thanksgiving" (15 minutes)

- **Step 1: Introduction to Communion Liturgy (5-7 minutes)**

Start by introducing the purpose of the Communion liturgy:

"The Communion liturgy is not just a series of words we say out of habit—it's a carefully structured prayer that walks us through repentance, forgiveness, thanksgiving, and remembrance. Each part plays a special

role in preparing us for the sacrament and sending us forth as the body of Christ."

- **Step 2:** Provide a brief overview of the key components of the Great Thanksgiving liturgy, highlighting the structure and flow:

Great Thanksgiving: The Great Thanksgiving is the prayer we pray together from the words "The Lord be with you..." until the "Amen." While the Great Thanksgiving is broken up into different sections, it is important to recognize that the whole liturgy is one prayer.

Sursum corda: Latin for, "lift up your hearts"; the opening dialogue of the Great Thanksgiving. Following the *sursum corda* are words of thanksgiving for God's mighty acts.

Sanctus: Latin for, "Holy"; the communal response that begins "Holy, holy, holy Lord."

Words of Institution: Words of thanksgiving for Christ's work that culminates in re-telling Jesus' introduction of the Lord's Supper with his disciples and the instruction to continue the practice regularly.

Memorial Acclamation: The communal response following the words of the institution.

Epiclesis: The petition for God to pour out the Holy Spirit among those gathered and on the Communion elements.

- **Step 3:** Introduce the improvisation activity.
"Within the Great Thanksgiving, there are parts of the liturgy that stay the same and parts that can change depending on the season in the life of the congregation. I want to invite you, then, to join me in the Great Thanksgiving (pages 21-24 in the Explore booklet). But be ready! When we get to certain parts, I will invite you to improvise the liturgy by shouting out an answer to a question. Remember, in improvisation, we take a 'yes-and' approach. There are no wrong or right answers or ways to say things. This is a liturgy or a prayer that we are building together."
- **Step 4:** Use the following guide for improvising the Great Thanksgiving in a small group.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Improvisation: What has the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—done for you?

And so,
with your people on earth
and all the company of heaven
we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.

Improvisation: How does Jesus show us who God is?

On the night in which he gave himself up for us,
he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread,
gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over, he took the cup,
gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Drink from this, all of you;
this is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many
for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it,
in remembrance of me."

And so,
in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,
in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.

Improvisation: How do we need the Holy Spirit to help us?

Through your Son Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father,
now and forever. **Amen.**

-- From "The Great Thanksgiving," Word and Table Service I, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, pages 9-10.

- **Step 5:** Reflect on the improvisation activity using the following questions:
 - How did it feel to improvise parts of the Great Thanksgiving together?
 - What did you notice about our Holy Communion liturgy that you had not noticed or given much attention to in the past?

Video Content (10 minutes)

Watch the video *Our Liturgy of Holy Communion*.

Video Reflection (10 minutes)

- What did you hear that has you wondering or curious?
- What did you learn from the video?

Interactive Liturgy and Discussion (25 minutes)

- Read the Communion liturgy together, with participants reading different sections.
- How does it change your understanding of the liturgy knowing that all the words are meant to be a single prayer?
- How might our participation in Holy Communion be an embodied prayer?
- Look at the words in the Sending Forth or Prayer After Receiving (page 25).
Where is this experience meant to lead us?

Commented [cac1]: Page 25 of what? Foundations book or ???

Session 4 Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

- Encourage participants to reflect on the unity of the church as they participate in Communion.
- Encourage participants who are using the workbook to continue using it.
- Reading Assignment: Read pages 27-32 in the Explore booklet.
- Closing Prayer.

Session 5: Holy Communion as a Call to Discipleship

Objectives:

- Understand how Communion calls us to live out our discipleship in the world.
- Reflect on the connection between Communion and ongoing sanctification.

Preparation for Facilitators:

- Review the video content and the readings in the Foundations and Explore booklet.
- Gather a vessel (bowl, cup, plate), markers or pens, and notecards or sticky notes in two different colors.

Video Content (15 mins):

- *Our Practice of Holy Communion* video
- *The Call of Holy Communion* video

Reading Assignment:

- Leader: Read pages 30-31 in the Foundations booklet.
- Participants: Read pages 27-32 in the Explore booklet.

Session Outline (90 minutes - adaptable)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

- Welcome participants and open with a prayer.
- Briefly introduce the session's objectives.

Opening Activity: "From Table to the World: Living as Disciples after Communion" (20 minutes)

Objective:

To help participants see how the grace received through Holy Communion empowers them to live as disciples of Christ; to explore how the sacrament connects to their daily lives and actions.

Materials Needed:

- Table with a vessel in the center (bowl, cup, plate)
- Markers, pens
- Notecards or sticky notes—two different colors

Set-up: Place the vessel at the center of the table. Around the perimeter of the table, place notecards or sticky notes (in one color) that have words on them reflecting what we take with us from the Holy Communion Table. Examples include grace, love, peace, hope, sustenance, connection, belonging, reconciliation, forgiveness, and mercy. Make sure you have as many cards on the table as you have participants in the group. It is okay if some words are repeated.

Instructions

- **Step 1:** Explain that after receiving Communion, we are sent as disciples to live out our faith. Holy Communion is a moment of receiving grace and being united with Christ, but it also empowers us to serve, love, and witness to others.
- **Step 2:** Pass out a notecard or sticky note (different color from the notecards/sticky notes already on the table) to each participant. Invite them to reflect and write down on their notecard what they bring with them to the Holy Communion Table (i.e., a need for peace, thanksgiving for God's saving works, seeking grace, etc.).
- **Step 3:** Ask participants to take their notecard or sticky note to the table, place it in the vessel at the center, and pick up one of the cards around the perimeter of the table.
- **Step 4:** After participants have come to the table, say: We bring many things with us when we come to the Communion Table. Some of those include: *(read what participants have placed in the vessel)*. Are there others? *(Wait for responses.)* The Communion Table is a table of grace. Whatever we bring with us, God responds to us with compassion and acceptance. God sends us from the Table to live as disciples. You each picked up a card from the table. Let's go around the room and share our words with the group. *(Have each person read their word out loud.)*
- **Step 5:** Take a moment and reflect on your word. What does it mean to you that God invites you to pick that up and take it with you from the Communion Table? *(Offer time for silent reflection, and then invite participants to share their reflections with the group.)*
- **Step 6:** Now, let's consider the community around us. What does it mean to you to take what God has given you at the Table and share it with your community? What does it mean to live as Christ's body in the world after being nourished at his Table?

Video Content (10-15 minutes):

Watch *Our Practice of Holy Communion* video

Video Reflection

- What did you hear that has you wondering or curious?
- What did you learn from the video about how we embody Holy Communion?
- How might the ways we practice Holy Communion influence the way we live as Christ's disciples?

Video Content (10-15 minutes)

Watch *The Call of Holy Communion* video

Video Reflection

- What did you hear that has you wondering or curious?
- How does Holy Communion shape your sense of belonging in the body of Christ?
- How might you share that sense of belonging in the world?

Activity – Parking Lot Questions

Bring back the "Parking Lot" questions from Session 1 to remind participants of the questions that they raised. Discuss the following:

- How have your questions changed since session 1?
- What additional questions would you add now?

Final Reflection and Group Discussion (15 minutes)

- How does Communion call us to live out our faith daily?
- What ongoing commitments will you carry forward in your discipleship?

Closing Ceremony: Reaffirming the Commitment to Communion (10 minutes)

- Reflect on the journey participants have taken through the sessions.
- Invite participants to participate in a brief time of table fellowship with a simple snack and beverage. Remind participants that any time we gather and share a meal, we remember that we belong to God, and through God, we belong to one another.

Final Wrap-Up:

- Summarize the key takeaways from the sessions.
 - Highlight how Holy Communion calls us into deeper discipleship and unity with Christ and the church.
 - Close with a prayer.
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