

SAMPLE PAGES FOR

LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS! EXPLORING THE EUCHARIST

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LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS!

Exploring the Eucharist

Introduction and Outline

In this program we will look at the place of the Eucharist in our spiritual journey, and how our pilgrimage can lead us to the challenge and refreshment of the Eucharist again and again. We will ponder, discuss and speculate; and at the end of our study we will make Eucharist together.

There has been a great deal of both heat and light generated over the years about the Eucharist, especially over the vexing question of what actually *happens* at the key moment, the Prayer of Consecration. In what way are the bread and wine changed? How exactly is the moment made part of that sacred moment? There is a wide range of opinions, some of them proposed and held very heatedly about what goes on here. At one end of the spectrum, some Christians believe that the bread and wine are precisely changed into Christ's flesh and blood, although we lack the sensory abilities to notice the change. At the other end of the spectrum, some Christians hold that nothing changes: that the communion is a memorial meal where we remember what happened once, and the bread and wine remain in their natures what they always were. This mysterious moment vexes us, for part of us wants to understand clearly, once and for all, what is going on.

However, the Anglican tradition has always been to avoid too-close definition of things that cannot be known clearly to human minds—how many days until the Rapture? How many angels on the head of a pin? How many prayers ensure a favorable response? William Crockett wrote of the intentions of Archbishop Cranmer, the chief author of the first Anglican prayer book:

Cranmer sought to reorient eucharistic doctrine around the act of communion, rather than around a change in the nature of the elements. In doing this, he broke with the dominant medieval tradition and took up a position more in line with that of St. Augustine and the Swiss Reformers. His doctrine can perhaps best be described as a doctrine of the real partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, rather than a doctrine of the real objective presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The sacramental signs are connected with the reality which they signify through their use rather than in an objective manner. Such a standpoint represents an attempt to retain sacramental realism in relation to the faithful believer rather than in relation to the elements.¹

The Anglican answer to “What’s going on?” is, to paraphrase Queen Elizabeth I on the subject, “Whatever Christ wanted to go on, that’s what’s going on.” And certainly, one comes much closer to understanding what is going on by participating in communion and observing the effect

¹ William R. Crockett, “Holy Communion” in Stephen Sykes and John Booty, *The Study of Anglicanism*, London: SPCK, 1988, pp. 273-274.

of living a communicant's life, rather than by trying to follow the complex theological musings on the subject. Following this line, we will concentrate most in this material on what happens relationally within and among Christians as they gather around the Table as guests of the Lord.

SUMMARY OF THE CURRICULUM

Lift Up Your Hearts! is divided into 21 sessions of an hour or ninety minutes each. If the realities of your schedule and your group require it, the sessions can be combined for fewer meetings of longer length. Or, if discussion really catches fire and Good News is flying to and fro, they can of course be expanded to cover more meetings.

Session Outline:

1. The Basics

This session begins our eucharistic journey together. The leaders lay out the process the group will follow, participants begin to learn about each other, and we begin to investigate what we know and don't know about the Eucharist.

2. The Community Gathers

We begin to explore why we gather for worship, and what aids or hinders us. We introduce the concept of the "Mystery Worshiper," and encourage participants to visit other congregations to see how Eucharist is done elsewhere and how they are received.

3. Sacred Space

We consider the "sacred space" where we worship, and what makes it more or less useful as a place to celebrate the Eucharist.

4. Hearing the Word: Lessons and Psalms

We consider the purpose and good use of the Liturgy of the Word. We meet "The Bible in 48 Words" and try our hand at making additions to it.

5. Hearing the Word: The Gospel

We look at how the Gospel is presented and heard. We compare Gospel accounts of the Last Supper.

6. The Sermon

We explore how to offer and receive the sermon, and work with the *What?—So What?—Now What?* sermon outline.

7. Responding to the Good News

How do we respond to the theme of the Eucharist, both within and beyond the service? Two short plays are included, in case the group wants to try its hand at chancel drama.

8. Claiming the Creeds

We look at the three great creeds of Christendom, as well as three others.

9. Common Prayer and Common Praise

We investigate common prayer and praise in the Eucharist, and the concept of “festooning.”

10. Petitioning

We consider prayers of petition, focusing on the Collects.

11. Interceding

We look at prayers of intercession, especially the Prayers of the People. With this meeting we also begin making plans for the Eucharist we will celebrate at the end of our studies. Participants will design the service and take as active a role as circumstances permit.

12. Confession

We consider the action of confession, its difficulties and opportunities.

13. Absolution

We consider the fact and consequences of forgiveness.

14. Sharing Peace

We look at the Exchange of the Peace.

15. Offering and Self-Offering

We ponder the offering of both real and intangible gifts, and play Talent Challenge.

16. The Remarkable Moment

This session focuses on the shape and story of the Eucharistic Prayer, and learning to create eucharistic prayers of our own.

17. Embracing Brokenness

In this session we look at the difference between sin and brokenness, and write clerihews about broken characters in the Bible. All plans for the community Eucharist should be finalized.

18. Giving Thanks

In this session we consider the Prayer of Thanksgiving, and the end of the service.

19. Taking Eucharist into the World

We consider how we take Eucharist with us out of the service and into the world. The service bulletin for the community Eucharist reaches its final form, and we rehearse any music we will be using.

20. Celebrating Eucharist

This meeting is given over to the celebration of Holy Communion, using the order designed by the group.

21. On Our Way Rejoicing

The final meeting serves to help the group end its existence on a joyful note, to identify what participants learned, and to consider how they might take that learning into their lives as eucharistic people.

Note to Leaders

On feedback: As you use these lesson plans, please take careful note of what works and what doesn't work and how you think these materials could be expanded, enhanced, and strengthened. LeaderResources and the authors are excited to hear from you, to listen to your successes and your struggles.

In addition, as you work the program, please remember that the authors hope you will consistently work to and with your own strengths. As you read the lesson plans, please consider what your own gifts, abilities and skills may be. Incorporate as much of your own wisdom into the process as you possibly can, and tell us about it. If you design a new exercise to teach some piece of the program, please let us know. As the program evolves, we would be grateful and excited to add your insights to this work. It is in sharing what we each have to offer that we build up the Body of Christ. This program is designed to allow for and encourage your participation and the addition of your signature touch to its implementation. We want you to know how very much we value your expertise and wisdom as you begin and as you end.

On each step of the journey which God has called you to, please know that we remember you in our prayers, asking God's mercy and presence. We celebrate with you in the diversity of the Body of Christ. We thank our Lord for your willingness to participate with us and with the whole of the Church.

Thanks be to God for you, your congregation and all your work in the world.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PREPARATION

We would never go on a trip without packing at least a few essentials in an overnight bag. *Lift Up Your Hearts!* is a journey, and before you begin, let us make a few suggestions for getting ready and getting started.

Getting Ready

- Establish when and where you are going to meet. Schedule all the meetings in advance, and do your very best to stick to the schedule. Everyone functions better in a group such as this if they can plan ahead and feel secure in the schedule. Last-minute changes, adjustments mid-stream and even relocation of a group from the church parlor to a home living room can cause real discomfort in a group. By setting up a predictable environment and a predictable time slot, participants are assured of a level of safety and security. Remember as you plan that you will need to break into small groups every so often and may want to send people into other rooms for part of a session.
- Prepare a schedule for all participants, indicating the times and the subject matter for each session.
- Decide on the size of the group. Between 16 and 20 persons seems ideal for a group like this. We want to be sure we have enough people to have a certain “weight” about it, but we also want to keep it small enough that people really do get to know one another over the course of the program. In choosing your meeting room, remember to consider the determined size of the group. If the room is too large, people will feel lost and distanced from one another; if it’s too small, they will feel cramped and unable to move and breathe. Look for a meeting space which is comfortable. Tables will not be necessary; all of this work could be done on the floor or sitting in chairs in small groups.
- Advertise the program in the church newsletter. Post a sign-up sheet in the church hall. Announce the program outline, including meeting times and places. Stress the expectation that participants will be present for *all* meetings, and give the undertaking that all meetings will begin and end on time.
- After the sign-up sheet is filled, contact each participant by mail, sending them the schedule and asking them to be sure to bring a small notebook (unless you provide Participant Books with extra blank pages) and a Bible to every session. If they have a Prayer Book, ask them to bring that as well.

Choosing the Number of Sessions

- Read the material carefully and decide what number of sessions best fits your group and the congregation’s needs, schedule, etc.
- Short sessions: If you will be using this course as part of your Sunday morning adult education program, you can probably use it “as is.” You will need a full hour, so urge participants to arrive promptly and start at the starting time even if not everyone is present. (The later you start, the later they will arrive!) If you only have 50 minutes, you

will need to watch your time very closely and trim minutes here and there. Remember the basic principles of timing:

- Use smaller groups (even one group of three will slow down ten other groups of two so make sure you do not have a group larger than the size indicated).
- Limit total group size to sixteen; if you have more than that interested in the course, divide into two groups. Two groups of ten will move much quicker than one group of twenty.
- Make sure all the small groups can meet in the primary meeting room or just around the corner—travel from one room to another is one of the things that adds a great deal of time to the session.

The shorter format makes it harder for participants to engage each other or the material in as great a depth. However, in some churches, it makes it accessible to many more people. Note, however, that the group will have to meet at a different time for the second-to-last session, to avoid conflicts with regularly-scheduled services.

- Longer sessions: If you will use it at longer sessions, simply combine two (or three) sessions into one. Schedule a break between the sessions and eliminate the extra closing and opening prayers. You will also need to remember to do the homework assignments for all the sessions you plan to cover at the next meeting.

Getting Started

- If possible, have two leaders for each group. Having a male and female leader is highly desirable. It may be useful from time to time to split the group into two based on gender.

Additional material is included here; omitted from sample.

- If you are using the longer sessions, make provision for a snack of some kind at every session. Have the participants share this responsibility. This kind of learning is hard work, and we will need nourishment along the way.
- Investigate a date for the next-to-final session which will allow you to have clergy present for the meeting. Remember that there will be a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, and you will need a priest for the celebration.
- There are extensive quotes from our wise predecessors in this program. Almost all of them are taken from J. Robert Wright's book, *Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church* (NY: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1991). This is a wonderful volume to have on hand, not just for this course but as a window into the world of the early Church. If you can obtain a copy and have it available, participants can investigate it and decide if they would like to get their own copies.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Here are some useful books for further consideration of the Eucharist and its place in the life of the Christian community.

The Book of Common Prayer, Church Publishing Corp. To order, call 800-242-1918.

Holy Eucharist, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Michael R. Becker, *About Confession*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Howard E. Galley, *The Ceremonies of the Eucharist: A Guide to Celebration*, Cowley Publications. Available through LeaderResources: 800-941-2218.

Jeffrey Lee, *Opening the Prayer Book*, Cowley Publications, 1999. Available through LeaderResources: 800-941-2218.

Samuel T. Lloyd II, *The Four Movements of the Eucharist*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Rebecca Lyman, *Early Christian Tradition*, Cowley Publications, 1989. Available through LeaderResources: 800-941-2218.

Herbert O'Driscoll, *Eucharist: the feast that never ends*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Charles Price, *The Prayer Book in the Church*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Joseph Russell, *Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary to the Episcopal Church*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Byron D. Stuhlman, *Eucharistic Celebration 1789-1979*, Church Publishing,. Call 800-242-1918.

Corrine Ware, *What is Liturgy?*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, Cowley Publications, 1989. Available through LeaderResources: 800-941-2218.

Clement W. Welsh, *How to Listen to a Sermon*, Forward Movement Publications. Call 800-543-1813.

SESSION ONE

THE BASICS

On the Lord's day, when you have been gathered together, break bread and celebrate the Eucharist. But first confess your sins so that your offering may be pure.²

Purpose

The purpose of this meeting is to survey the way we will investigate the Eucharist.

Preparation

For this session, you will need the following:

- Newsprint or white board, markers and tape
- Name tags
- Paper and pens
- Sufficient copies of participant books and course schedules
- Bibles and Books of Common Prayer

Opening prayer

God our Father, whose Son our Lord Jesus Christ in a wonderful Sacrament has left us a memorial of his passion: Grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of his Body and Blood, that we may ever perceive within ourselves the fruit of his redemption; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (BCP, p. 252)

How to proceed

The leaders lay out the schedule and distribute copies of the proposed meetings. The leaders reinforce that the meetings will start and end promptly at the stated times, distribute participants' materials, and take care of any other needed business.

Introductions

Even if every member of this group comes from the same congregation, we start with introductions. The leaders invite each person to identify him- or herself and take two minutes or less to tell a story beginning, "The strangest thing that ever happened to me at Eucharist was. . ." The leaders go first to model the style (keep it light) and brevity of the story they are looking for.

Reflection

If the group is large, you may want to break into smaller groups for this activity, and for similar work in future meetings. Read the following description with the entire group before breaking into smaller groups.

Justin Martyr, who died at Rome around 167 AD, was only two generations removed from those who had seen Peter and Paul. He left this description of the regular Sunday Eucharist:

No one may share the Eucharist with us unless they believe that what we teach is true,

² Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), quoted in J. Robert Wright, *Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church*, NY: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1991, p. 355.

unless they are washed in the regenerating waters of baptism for the remission of sins, and unless they live in accordance with the principles given us by Christ.

We do not consume the eucharistic bread and wine as if it were ordinary food and drink, for we have been taught that as Jesus Christ our Savior became a human being of flesh and blood by the power of the Word of God, so also the food that our flesh and blood assimilate for their nourishment becomes the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus by the power of his own words contained in the prayer of thanksgiving.

The apostles, in their recollections, which are called gospels, handed down to us what Jesus commanded them to do. They tell us that he took bread, gave thanks and said: “Do this in memory of me. This is my body.” In the same way he took the cup, he gave thanks and said: “This is my blood.” The Lord gave this command to them alone. Ever since then we have constantly reminded one another of these things. The rich among us help the poor and we are always united. For all that we receive we praise the Creator of the universe through his Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or in the outlying districts. The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us urging everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray.

On the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks as well as possible, and the people give their assent by saying: “Amen.” The Eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent.

The wealthy, if they wish, may make a contribution, and they themselves decide the amount. The collection is placed in the custody of the president, who uses it to help the orphans and widows and all who for any reason are in distress, whether because they are sick, in prison, or away from home. In a word, the president takes care of all who are in need.

We hold our common assembly on Sunday because it is the first day of the week, the day on which God put darkness and chaos to flight and created the world, and because on that same day our savior Jesus Christ rose from the dead. For he was crucified on Friday and on Sunday he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them the things that we have passed on for your consideration.³

Once the group has read or heard this excerpt, have them list the elements that Justin refers to, in the order they would take place. Record the list on newsprint or a white board. Then ask them to list events that take place regularly in the worship service they usually attend, but that are not on Justin’s list. What in Justin’s list does *not* happen in our congregations?

Bible study

Have participant’s look up and read Paul’s description and prescription for the Eucharist at Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

Discuss

³ Quoted in Wright, pp. 192-193.

How does the Eucharist Paul describes differ from what Justin describes, and from what you are used to? In what ways is it similar? Different?

For further discussion

What is the first thing you remember about going to the Eucharist?

What is the best thing you regularly experience during the Eucharist? What is the worst?

If a visitor were with you in church, what would you draw his attention toward? What would you like him not to see?

Preparation for the next session

Collect name tags for use at the next session, and ask for a volunteer to lead the prayer the following week.

Closing prayer

Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. *Amen.*

(BCP, p. 816)

Handout—Session One

EXPLORING THE EUCHARIST

In this program we will look at the place of the Eucharist in our journey, and how our pilgrimage can lead us to the challenge and refreshment of the Eucharist again and again. We will ponder, discuss and speculate; and at the end of our study we will celebrate the Eucharist together.

Your authors have provided you with material to spark your ideas and invite your responses, and hope you take what they offer and make it your own. This makes *Lift Up Your Hearts!* a very different experience from, say, a driver-education class. Let's explore this example a little further.

When you are learning to drive, you may think the instructor is a bit of a humorless tyrant who is far too quick to find fault with your least variance from "the rules." It doesn't matter: if you want to pass the course, you have to show that you have learned a series of fairly arbitrary rules and can produce, when asked, obscure information like the distance the car should end up from the curb when you parallel-park. Your reward, once you pass the driver's test, is a lower insurance rate and the right to take yourself where you want to go.

But in *Lift Up Your Hearts!* there is no reward greater than what you already have: the love of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal life. You have those now, and there is no earthly final exam ahead of you. Instead, the purpose of our exploration is to strengthen and enrich each participant's understanding and experience of the Eucharist and the Lord who makes it, not to dismiss or disprove all opinion aside from some infallible party line. There is far more in this eucharistic feast than any one point of view can do justice to.

We believe not just in a historical Jesus of long ago, the teacher who had a way with lepers and loaves and fishes. We believe in the living God who wills to be present with us, if we can just will to receive him. While it is interesting, and sometimes exciting, to learn what went on when Christians got together for the Lord's Supper in the first century or the fifteenth, it is even more exciting to explore what we are doing, and what may be happening, when we gather for the same purpose *now*.

Every person who has received communion is an authority on the Eucharist, because it is a living story in which that person plays a vital part, and not just the formal observance of a historical event. You have authority about the Holy Communion, the same way you have authority about what pleases you for breakfast or what is the best way to get from your home to work each day. Your observations and speculations are valuable, and will form a great part of the richness of this stage of our journey.

Assumptions about participants

We assume that the group sitting down together to work through this material is composed of people of good will and good worth. We assume that you are willing to hear opinions that may not agree with those you now hold, and to share your own views with charity and modesty.

We assume that each meeting will start and end at the times announced for it, and we will honor the fact that each person present has had to carve out this time from a busy schedule. We assume that, even though this is not a therapy group, personal anecdotes and revelations will stay within this group and will not be discussed with others in other settings. And, finally, we assume that all participants have some experience of the Eucharist on which to base their hearing, reflecting and speaking.

Why the Eucharist?

We are taking up this central event of Christian community because, even though we may have taken part in it many times, for many it remains an unexplored story and an untapped resource. For Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans and members of the Orthodox Churches, the most compact expression of the faith we share is when we participate in the Holy Eucharist. It is the Eucharist that “nourishes us with the grace needed for our transformation and our mission.”⁴ Although we may call it by many names—the Mass, the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion—each celebration of the Eucharist is a willed participation in that one event in which Christ is the host, the substance and the goal.

For members of the Reformed Churches, while the Eucharist is held in the highest regard, engagement with the Bible is the most compact expression of Christian faith. For some denominations, acts of mercy or making disciples may be the most compact expression of faith. We presume that this material is being used in a Christian community where the Eucharist is celebrated regularly, and where participants have an easy familiarity with it, but we have tried to keep in mind that this is not everyone’s expression of Christian community. Please forgive us if we have let unexamined assumptions sneak through.

The first Last Supper

What is this thing, the Eucharist? Where did it come from, and how did it get into the center of our lives as Christians?

The Eucharist springs from a specific Passover meal that Jesus Christ celebrated with his followers the night before he was crucified. And that specific meal took place in the context of all the Passovers that Jesus and the disciples had experienced all their lives.

The Passover specifically marks the release of the Hebrew people from captivity in Israel, so they could enter the Promised Land. Each element of the ritual feast carries heavy significance: there is salt for the tears the Israelites shed while in captivity, and *haroseth*, a sticky mixture of honey and nuts and fruit, to symbolize the mortar they used in their forced-labor projects. The youngest child asks a series of questions about the significance of the herbs, of the egg, of the leg of lamb, of the matzoh, of “why this night is different from any other night.”

⁴ *The Rule of the Society of St John the Evangelist*, Cambridge: Cowley, 1997, p. 34.

The Passover also celebrates the much larger story of God’s continuing to rescue and care for the Chosen People again and again. The readings rehearse the sacred history of being chosen in Abraham and guided through the lives of the patriarchs. A frequently used Passover song, “Dayenu,” has as its refrain after each verse about God’s mighty acts of mercy, “It would have been enough.” But then there is another verse followed by “It would have been enough,” and another, because God’s mercy does not give out or get used up, and indeed far exceeds what humans can imagine.

The third great element of the Passover is its emphasis on family and community. All are supposed to take part in the annual feast, and those too poor to prepare the Passover for themselves are supposed to share with neighbors. Even the youngest child has a role to play, for God loves and cares not just for the important people or the “good” people, but for all people who make community in God. In sharing the Passover meal with each other, the people emphasize that they depend on each other to understand what God is doing among them. The feast would be incoherent, incomprehensible, if one ate it on one’s own.

Jesus, in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, directed his followers to prepare for the feast (Luke 22:7-13). He sent them to a room where they seem not to have been before, where the benches, tables, plates and cooking equipment were all in readiness and the owner of the house was expecting them. Families are supposed to be together at Passover, so even if the disciples had been with Jesus since the start of his ministry, this would only be the third Passover that they had spent away from their homes and families. This would still be a new occasion, a break with habit as great as when James and John dropped their nets, left the family boat and business, and became fishers of men. So it would seem that for the disciples their fellowship had become their family. There was no more logical place to be for Passover than with Jesus and his followers, even if one was far away from home.

As they had come up to Jerusalem, Jesus had spoken more and more plainly about the confrontation he was going to have, and how he would defeat death (Matthew 20:18-19). It is pretty clear that the disciples did not understand him; certainly they got so upset at the mention of his death that they probably could not digest the rest of what he was saying. So as they approached this feast they seem to have been refusing to think about what might happen next. They did not know it was the *last* supper until much later.

Certainly, *during* the Passover meal the disciples acted very much as they always had: combining love and bickering, insight and dullness, focus and distraction. In Luke’s account, Jesus explains why this Passover will be different from any other Passover: “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:15-16) It is too much for his followers to take in, and they fall immediately to bickering about “which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (verse 24). Perhaps they are too fearful of what will come to acknowledge it; perhaps they could not understand the Teacher’s words until after the Friday horrors and the Sunday joy.

For Jesus, the Passover meal was a focus and lens for his teaching about God’s self-giving love. “Who is greater,” he asked, “the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27) He washes

their feet; he offers nourishment to the man who will betray him. (John 13)

There is a point in the Passover meal where the matzoh, the unleavened bread, is broken and a piece is put aside to be eaten at the end of the meal. This broken piece, the “afikomen,” symbolizes the Messiah, the anointed one who was to come from God to restore the people yet again; the meal is not considered over until the afikomen is eaten. At that moment in that feast, Jesus took the bread and broke it. Then he shared out the broken piece and said, “This is me.” Did a shiver run down every spine in the place, or did the disciples simply not get the reference until later?

Probably for the disciples the meal ended when they sang a hymn and then went out into the night. (Matthew 26:30) It was only later that they came to see the events of that night and what followed more as Jesus would have seen them: as one seamless event in which the Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. . . and then lived again!

Our Own Last Supper

We have a great advantage over the disciples: we know how the story comes out. We know about the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, about the disciples scattered in dismay; but we also know about the surprise beyond surprises of the following Sunday morning. We know that by his death Christ destroys the power of death. We know that he lived, and lives, and that nothing except our own determined follies can ever separate us from him.

Even knowing all this, however, we persist in our own blends of love and bickering, insight and dullness, focus and distraction. We go to church week by week, in the style of the first Christians; but the event can seem very far from the nourishing, liberating experience we would like to have. A multitude of distractions can seize us and spoil our mood: I realize suddenly that my socks do not match and conclude that everyone must be staring at me; you find someone using your favorite pew; none of the hymns are the ones we most like to sing. The priest rehearses Christ’s words—“This is my blood, shed for you”—and in the back of my mind I am calculating whether I can manage both a tennis game and mowing the lawn this afternoon, or whether I shall have to do just one; and, if one, *which* one? We begin to say the Lord’s Prayer together, and part of you is still seething over how the preacher said “between you and *I*” instead of “between you and *me*” in his very first sentence. As I go up to the rail to receive communion, I have the recurring, irrational premonition that the celebrant will take one look at me and then cry out, “Oh, not him! We know all about him! He’s not worthy to receive communion.” You dread that you have a sticky label stuck to the bottom of your shoe, and that when you kneel everybody will be able to read it: “50% Off!” or perhaps something worse.

All in all, it is a very good thing that Jesus loves us with a love that can stride past our barriers of distraction. However, part of the goal of this study is to learn how to lay distractions aside and be as fully present as we can for each phase of each Eucharist.

The shape of what we do

For all the differences between congregations, and indeed between denominations, we display a remarkable unity combined with interesting variances in the celebration of the Eucharist. We are able to do this because the community of the Eucharist, stretching down through history since

the time of Christ, is a living body which preserves its traditions and transmits its practices from generation to generation.

This is very different from, for example, the revival of the Olympic Games, where much of the practices and patterns of the original games were so self-evident to their participants and observers that much research and some outright guessing went into the creation of the modern series of the games at the end of the 19th century.

The community of the Eucharist, the community called “Christians,” has met in much the same way since the Resurrection. Our gatherings owe much to traditional Jewish patterns of study and worship, which we have wrapped around a re-enactment of the key elements of the Last Supper. What we do is “Eucharist,” which is from the Greek for “thanksgiving.” What we do is “liturgy”: the work of all the people of God.

SESSION TWO

THE COMMUNITY GATHERS

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.⁵

Purpose

In this session, we begin to explore why we gather for worship, and what aids or hinders us.

Preparation

For this session, you will need the following:

- Bibles if you plan to use the Bible study options
- Several copies of the “Mystery Worshiper” handout for each participant
- Prayer Books

Opening prayer

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for our parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(BCP, p. 817)

The community gathers

Present or use the information included in the handout.

Reflection

- In your worshipping community, what makes it easy for people to come to worship? What makes it hard?
- What has changed in the community in the years you have been attending church there?
- What has changed in the congregation?
- If you were new in your community, what would draw you to your church? What would make you tend to stay away?

Bible study

Have participants look up and read Luke 7:36-47 and James 2:1-6a. List what they teach about hospitality that a Christian community should follow. Consider: how would James and Jesus rate the hospitality your congregation offers to strangers?

“The Mystery Worshiper”

The “Ship of Fools” website (at <http://www.ship-of-fools.com>) is one of the more interesting Christian sites to visit on the Internet. There are collections of typos alleged to have found their

⁵ Acts 2:42

way into real church bulletins and signs (“Members of Overeaters Anonymous should enter by the double doors to the left”), Christian “Urban Legends,” and remarkable examples of overdone art and underdone thought.

Of all the features, though, the “Mystery Worshiper” may be the one most worth exploring. It is made up of hundreds of reviews of church services sent in by volunteers. The volunteer visits a new church and records who was there, how the visitor was greeted, what the sermon seemed to be about and “what happened when you hung about after the service looking lost?”

The reviews cover great cathedrals and tiny, rural chapels. Some of the experiences were strengthening and Spirit-filled; others were, in the words of the site, “like being in. . .er. . .the other place.” Answering the question, “Did anything distract you?,” one reviewer wrote, “The pianist remained in his piano seat right at the front during the whole service—one row in front of me. This wouldn’t normally be that distracting, except that he fell asleep during the sermon. He then rocked back and forth alarmingly for the next 20 minutes as he snored quietly to himself. What made this particularly amusing was the fact that the preacher kept using the piano and the pianist as an illustration in his sermon and kept gesturing towards the piano as he spoke. This drew even more attention to the slumbering musician!”

A reviewer has to be accepted by Ship of Fools in order to post a review at the site, and not all reviews can appear. However, there is nothing to stop you being a Mystery Worshiper during this study. Take a copy of the form below to a service in a church where you have never been before, and fill it in as honestly as you can. It may give you some insights you can take back to your own congregation about the treatment of visitors. For a real eye-opener, invite a friend who has never been to your own church to visit a service and fill in a form! You may discover that some “behavior modification” is urgently needed.

Bring the completed forms back to this group, and we will see what we can conclude about the welcome offered to strangers by the Christian community.

Closing prayer

God of hope, when Christ your Son appears may he not find us asleep or idle, but active in his service and ready. In Jesus’ name we pray. *Amen.*⁶

End of Sample Pages

**For more information or to order
call LeaderResources at 800-941-2218**

⁶ New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 550.