

EXTENDING COMMUNION (1984)

The matter was brought to our attention in a Division of Home Mission paper 'Action and Ideas in Mission', March 1981. David Bridge wrote as follows:

'Rev David Smethurst found himself in Ulverston as a parish priest ministering to a community that had, until recently, been served by five clergy. A particular problem concerned the celebration of Holy Communion. In addition to having responsibility for more than one Church, the priest wishes to take communion to other groups such as people in hospital, the sick and the housebound.

It was already the practice, when celebrating communion with a large congregation, for the priest to be assisted by duly authorised helpers in distributing the elements. What was the difference, it was asked, between taking the elements a few yards down an aisle or a few miles down the road? So developed the concept of 'extended communion', with the priest celebrating at one place in the parish (usually, but not always, in the parish Church) and the congregation being scattered over an area of many square miles. The elements are taken in suitable containers and appropriate additions are made in the orders of service in both sending and receiving churches to indicate that people are sharing in one service although separated by distance from many of their fellow worshippers.

Methodists should reflect on whether an adaptation of the same principle might not have great value for us. Some may have to overcome a prejudice against a practice which might remind them of the 'reserved Sacrament'. Yet the fact remains that we do have a problem which might be tackled in some radical manner like this. Many of our small country chapels do not have sufficient opportunities to share in Holy Communion. Our ministers do have difficulty in giving Communion to all who would like to receive it at the major Christian festivals. We value the concept of the Circuit yet regret that there are insufficient opportunities to give the concept substance. Further, we have in the order of Local Preacher, men and women who are already trained and qualified to conduct worship services. What prevents us from holding regular Circuit Communion Services at which the bread the wine would be taken from one church, not always the head of the Circuit, to the other churches; thus enabling our people to receive the Sacrament and to affirm their Circuit fellowship together?'

This is an ancient custom. The first evidence for it is found in the First Apology of Justin Martyr (c.AD 150):

' . . . when the President has celebrated the Eucharist and all the people have assented (i.e. by saying Amen), they whom we call

deacons give to each of those who are present a portion of the Eucharistic bread, and wine, and water; and carry them to those who are absent.'

Reasons are not given. The absent are not necessarily sick. They may have been prevented from attending by the demands of non-Christian society. They must have been baptised and fully initiated into the Christian Assembly. The implication would seem to be that there is but one Eucharist, and those who cannot be present should not receive from private celebrations but from the one true altar.

In times of persecution – before the 'peace of the Church' –the faithful were permitted to take the Eucharist into their own homes and give themselves communion. Reservation in the priest's house or in the Church was introduced for sick communion and regulated by the first Lateran Council of 1215 when it had already been the custom for many centuries. As the sacred species became increasingly objects of devotion, the cult of the reserved Sacrament became part of the life of medieval Christendom, to be abolished in the Churches of the Reformation.

Communion for the sick, however, was permitted by Lutherans, Anglicans and Calvin himself, though Calvinists and Puritans believed that it was unscriptural (not for instance mentioned in *James* 5:13ff) and unnecessary, for if a believer had been faithful to the ordinances in health, their efficacy would not need the additional tincture of communion in sickness or extremity. The Sacraments are Sacraments of the Church and belong to the gathered congregation. The Puritans opposed extended communion for the very reason that Justin admitted it – because the Sacrament was the sign and seal of unity and there was but one table.

The Wesleys believed that sick communion was an important part of pastoral ministry, and conducted celebrations in the homes of the sick and dying. 'Extended communion' might not have been practicable, owing to the hostility of some parish priests, but Wesley also used sick communions to enable the participation of Methodists who might otherwise be deprived of the Sacrament. On one occasion at least, as many as forty persons were present and received the Sacrament. In his revised Prayer Book of 1784-8, Wesley included the office for the Communion of the Sick. He made some editorial changes as was his wont. There is an introductory Collect, Epistle and Gospel, and then the Prayer Book service from the General Confession; but Wesley omits all the rubrics except:

At the time of the distribution of the Holy Sacrament, the Elder shall first receive the Communion himself, and after minister unto them that are appointed to communicate with the sick, and last of all to the sick person.

This tradition has remained in Methodism and although recent service books have not included an order, there was published circa 1955 an authorised office. This was in the style of the 1936 *Book of Offices* and the Book of Common Prayer.

The practice may not seem of the Methodist ethos, though there are interesting Primitive Methodist parallels in 1841 and some ministers have communicated the sick from elements consecrated at say the Easter Communion. This has been confined to the sick, those in hospital and the house-bound.

It is impossible to condemn the practice, not only because the precedent is so old, but because its theological justification is very strong. It preserves the unity of the Church, and means that there is no danger of communion of the sick being a private mass, or – as could be a danger in our time – an act of schism.

The unity of the celebration takes precedence over the needs of the deprived. They are not to go without communion but the full rite takes place in the congregation. The importance of this cannot be over-estimated. Were there to be celebrations in groups throughout a neighbourhood, there might be a danger of rival Eucharists and people might gravitate to their best friends or those of like opinions. It is understandable that meetings for fellowship should at times wish to have the Lord's Supper for themselves, to express their life in Christ and the intimacy of their union, and to give thanks for its blessings. They will often say that the Sacrament is more real to them than in the larger numbers and greater formality of the Sunday worship. This is good, but it has its danger of cliquishness, if not worse. It is even more necessary that these gather sometimes, in their groups, for a celebration in Church – that they may realise their nearness with the greater company in that place. Then the unavoidably absent might be included in the ancient way.

The argument against extended communion is that the Eucharist action is a **whole** and that is not satisfactory for those absent through sickness or any other cause, simply to receive communion and not share, however briefly, in the Church's total thanksgiving and remembrance. It is vital for our people to understand that **communion** is but a part of the Eucharist action and that it needs to be placed in the context of the work of God in Christ which the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist 'brings to every thankful mind'.

It is doubtful if extended communion is a satisfactory way of dealing with deprivation, or one which would commend itself to the majority of Methodists. Our custom is to solve the problem by giving dispensations to probationer ministers, deaconesses or lay persons. There is division among us as to whether this is a regrettable necessity to be adopted with the greatest caution, or whether it is a way of asserting the priesthood of all believers; but it is not our brief to discuss this. There is also the matter of how widespread is a sense of deprivation in our far flung chapels. Has the recognition of the centrality of the Eucharist so established itself among our rural churches that there is desire for it on more frequent occasions than the Minister's monthly visit? Is not the Word wanted as the regular weekly diet with the Sacrament, though a solemn obligation, less frequently?

Our conclusions are as follows:

1. Extended communion should usually be confined to those who cannot attend the Church's celebration, e.g., the sick and housebound. If it is at all possible, the infirm or disabled should be transported to Church. For some of them this could have great benefits.
2. There may be something to be said for an occasional extension of communion as a symbol of the unity of the Church, but this would require careful preparation and preliminary teaching. It does not seem to us to be the kind of symbolic action which would immediately appeal to our people or to be the best way of uniting scattered societies. It would also need to be

hedged about with many safeguards to avoid irreverence on the one hand, or an almost superstitious regard for the elements on the other. If it is practised we would suggest it be done as follows:

- i. The elements should be taken from the table in Church in appropriate containers.
- ii. Communion should be in both kinds, though in some cases intinction – the dipping of the bread in the wine – may be advisable.
- iii. Those who take them should be given some instruction beforehand.
- iv. The order of Service in the house should be as follows:

A greeting.

A sentence of Scripture and the giving of the Peace.

Prayer

The words of delivery: The Body of Christ given for you OR The Body of Christ keep you in eternal life. Similarly over the cup.

A short concluding prayer (extempore but including thanks for the fellowship of the Church in Christ and for the anticipation of the feast in the Kingdom of God).

The Grace.

3. House communions, as distinct from sick communions, are appropriate in the following circumstances.
 - i. Where it is impossible for people to attend the Church's celebration. This certainly should restrict House Communion on Sundays.
 - ii. As a supplement to Sunday Worship in Church where communion is desired during the week and where there is no midweek celebration in Church. These should always be open to those not in a particular group or neighbourhood and should appear in the Church's weekly announcements. The Communion Service in the Methodist Conference, at marriages, or in teams of ministers or in colleges fall into this category.
4. **Nothing must diminish the proper sense that the Eucharist is the act of the whole Church in obedience to Christ's command and in celebration of the Gospel of God.**

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this statement on Extending Holy Communion.

(Agenda 1984, pp. 28-31)