

## WHATS INSIDE



## WELCOME

This edition we're discussing communion; why we do it, how we do it, and what it means to us as individuals and as a community.



## **COMMUNION REFLECTIONS**

David reflects on the meaning and significance of communion as Christians living long after Jesus' resurrection.



## THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Monica explores how the way we perform communion can affect how we experience God.



## **IN COMMON**

John looks at how church differs between cultures and the role that communion plays in uniting us all.



### A MEAL TO REMEMBER

A poem by Monty Edwards reimagines the original communion.



## **SPINNING PLATES**

Ryan discusses how communion grounds us when the chaos of life threatens to distract us.



## **DON'T WASTE MY TIME**

Peter has some firm words for churches who downplay the importance of communion in our walk with Jesus.



## **CHILDREN'S COMMUNION**

Tania uses her childhood experiences to question why we tend to restrict communion to adults.

Thank you to everyone who submitted their thoughts on communion for this edition. We have some really diverse perspectives that we're hoping will prompt discussion in our churches. Due to the number of articles submitted, we've decided to upload some articles to our website (http://www.cocwa.com.au/articles/), where we will continue the conversation. We'd love you to visit the website, read and leave comments. In case you missed it, our first edition of On Mission Journal came out in March. You can read it here.

# ON THE TOPIC OF COMMUNION...



One of the things that I most love about our Movement is that it started with people, who had strong and oftentimes opposing views on doctrine, gathering together for the purpose of laying their convictions aside save one; that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. Together, they shared in bread and wine and believed that their unity in Christ was essential to their proclamation of the Good News.

When we retell this story at our orientation retreats, we try to help people understand how fragmented and rigidly defined the denominations were. We talk about how people had to produce a token or certificate to prove that they were Christians before they could take communion. In an era where people worship where they choose, when they choose, this is hard for us to relate to; it's hard to relate to a religious landscape where there was such a strong emphasis on communion as an essential part of worship.

Most often, our practice of communion is efficient. We acknowledge its sacredness but, in the passing of trays from hand to hand, rarely do we look face to face.

# WE ARE UNITED IN OUR PARTICIPATION BUT ARE WE UNITED IN OUR CONVICTION THAT IN CHRIST, WE ARE A BODY?

When my friend Josh Nipps leads communion, he sometimes talks about communion as a means by which we remember with one another. What he means is that we go our separate ways out into the world from one gathering to the next, but each time we share communion together, we are remembered to Christ and to each other. We are joined in unity in a tangible way that reminds us that we are not alone and we are not our own. We are joined together in the Body of Christ with all of the joys and challenges that this entails.

These days I find that I have a deep longing for communion. I find that I crave the space of sharing bread and wine with fellow Believers. I love to hear people speak about what communion means to them and what it means for them to walk week to week with Christ. I love to deliberately look at the faces of the ones who pass me the trays of bread and juice and whisper to them a "Bless you" as they do. "I need these people" I think as I look at them, "I need this remembering to these people and to Christ" I pray as I eat and drink.

Lately, I've noticed some churches inviting people to get up out of their seats to receive communion either from servers or from tables. These are all good things, I think, not because we crave novelty, but because the physical act of moving reminds us that Christ's redeeming act means life for every aspect of what it means to be human: body, soul, spirit, mind, heart. In these ways, communion engages all of our senses and captures all of our attention.

As our Movement grew, the weekly practice of communion became a defining characteristic. For the most part, churches of our association continue this practice, but there are changes. Some churches encourage people to share communion in their homes as families and in small groups. Whilst some churches invite people to prepare communion remarks, others invite people into personal quiet reflection.

# ALL CHURCHES MAKE AN EFFORT TO WELCOME TO THE TABLE ALL WHO ARE WILLING TO ORIENT THEIR LIVES TOWARDS CHRIST.

Communion may not be an identifying characteristic in the same way that it once was for Churches of Christ but the practice of communion has lost none of its importance and meaning amongst our churches. We have dedicated this edition of On Mission Journal to the topic of communion because, despite our diversity of convictions, we continue to assert that our unity is based upon Christ who incorporates us into His Body.

Tania Watson



# COMMUNION REFLECTIONS

Dave Bardsley

## "NOW WE MOVE INTO A TIME OF COMMUNION..."

Do these words set our hearts and minds on fire in anticipation of a glorious celebration of the Almighty God's personal interaction with us?

Am I alone in suspecting it sometimes falls short of the vitality it was designed to have?

Whilst familiarity may not have bred the contempt that so enraged Paul in the delinquent Corinthian Church, I wonder if we are really experiencing all the wonderful dimensions of this aspect of worship. Have repetition and routine robbed us of its lustre and glory?

Communion sits at the very heart of Christian faith, and it's our practice to come to the Lord's Table on more or less a weekly basis. To bring it back to life, I go back to scripture and refresh my understanding of the context. The Passover meal was of course a well-established family Jewish custom, each of the 15 steps loaded with significance for God's chosen people. The disciples would have been familiar with all its conventional connotations and nuances. But they would have been floored at least twice during the meal as Jesus reloaded two elements of the Passover meal: the Yachatz (breaking of the matzo early on in the meal) and the drinking of the last cup of wine. He declared, "this is my body..." and later, "this is my blood...". The new symbolism Jesus introduced would have added to - not replaced - the disciples' existing understanding.

In two thousand years of Christian history, common knowledge of the original symbolism has faded and, with this, perhaps some of the richness too. For instance, there would have been significant preparation before the Supper was taken. Yet how much do we prepare for Communion today? Further, we have become accustomed to taking the two elements one after the other without much pause. Yet there would have been quite a gap in time on that first occasion as other parts of the Passover meal proceeded. The impact would have come in two body blows instead of the condensed version we observe today. And consider the Matzo bread which Jesus broke. It was unleavened hard tack which some of us still use today. But for the disciples, lack of yeast signified humility and freedom from contamination. Bread itself was the symbol of freedom and redemption. Jesus himself often associated bread with life, not death. Shouldn't these considerations say something to us today?

And what of the cup that was shared? It was the fourth cup at the end of the meal. Clearly sacrifice, the outpouring of the paschal lamb's life blood, is in view in the wine, and Jesus' substitutionary death will always be remembered in this way. Coming at the end of the meal would later resonate with Jesus' last words on the cross, "It is finished."

But it wasn't the end. Jesus said he was instituting a new covenant and that would come into being as his "blood is poured out for you." The boundaries and limitations of the old covenant were being blown sky high; a new, glorious age was imminent. What turmoil of emotions the disciples would have experienced! What do I feel today as I continue to break bread and drink together with brothers and sisters in Christ?

One further thought - whenever we eat the bread and

drink the wine we are consuming elements which Jesus declared are his body and blood. In the 12th century, literal interpretation developed into what is known as the Transubstantiation error. But maybe in correcting the doctrine, we have thrown out some of the intended meaning. Maybe Jesus is saying to us that, when we eat the bread, we need to remember we are taking on board the commitment to be the present living Body of Christ. Have we stripped away some of the impact of that aspect, leaving us solely with a figurative ceremony celebrating the memory of what Jesus did for us on the cross? That's pretty awesome in itself of course but, in the context of Communion, is there a place for another symbolic step which sees me function as Jesus incarnate today, picking up the cross myself whilst I am still very much alive?

Communion is a time when those who love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ join together in remembrance, emerging assured, refreshed, invigorated and empowered – may it be so until the Lord returns!



About the Author

#### **Dave Bardsley**

David has been in ministry and mission since 1993, retiring from full time work at Roleystone CoC in 2012. He and his wife Hilary (CoCWA head office 2007-2012) now live in Bridgetown. They are both in leadership at the Bridgetown Church of Christ.



# THERE AND BACK AGAIN, A TALE OF COMMUNION

Monica O'Neil

My first communion. Grade three. Dressed in a white dress, socks with frills and pretty shoes.

A real encounter with Jesus was looming and the formalities were fitting for the enormity of the moment ahead. I had attended practice sessions and preparation classes to prepare my heart for this amazing new experience. I was about to receive the actual body and blood of Christ - wow.

Now, I have a big word for this experience - transubstantiation: a mystical understanding that the elements of communion, unleavened bread and wine, were transformed into grace elements, ushering in a mystical encounter with my living Saviour. It was not hard for me to believe that an all-powerful God could choose something so strange to make himself present to mortals.

We proceeded forward, the priest announced "the body and blood of Christ", and I poked out my tongue, in a far more reverent way than usual, for the priest to place the wafer on my tongue. It had begun. Next, I had the wine which was warm and silky. I returned to my seat feeling holy and shrouded in mystery and talked to God in my pew. Every Sunday communion was a vital encounter moment.

At 18, I experienced a different kind of encounter with God. Out went communion and in came the gifts. Worship and teaching were the 'new and better ways' to encounter the living Christ. There was adventure and encounter in these new spiritual practices and we even took communion together occasionally. Small pieces of broken up cracker and grape juice were handed out in little thimbles while we sat in rows. It was a bit awkward and not very grand. This communion was explained as a time to remember Christ until he comes again. So I remembered.

The awkwardness of this communion meant that we rarely practiced it, relegating it to a vague practice,

even though Jesus did say to 'do this until I come again...each time you meet'. Frankly, done this way, it seemed too odd and meaningless to be included in every service.

# TRANSUBSTANTIATION: A MYSTICAL UNDERSTANDING THAT THE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNION, UNLEAVENED BREAD AND WINE, WERE TRANSFORMED INTO GRACE ELEMENTS

How strange that in my dutiful obedient family of faith, communion was a grace encounter; intimate and holy, totally personal and fully community. In my evangelical family it was an act of obedience; disconnected and ritualised. The command to take communion was heeded, but the way we practiced it seemed bereft in some way I could not articulate.

Lately, I've been fortunate to be in a church where communion is valued. We take communion together every week and we ponder the goodness of God as we pause over scripture and tales of encounter. We remember the death, burial and resurrection of our Saviour and we dare to expect to encounter Him as we count ourselves 'in'. The charismatic, the emerging theology nerd and the old mystic in me have realised that it's my favourite moment in worship as I talk to God and I am shrouded in mystery in my row. Communion is a moment when we pause, we remember, we count ourselves in, we face the holy and we give thanks. And we encounter the grace that comes from the Spirit of God, living within us and among us.



About the Author

Monica O'Neil

Monica is the Director of Vose Leadership. She holds a Masters in Ministry.



## IN COMMON

John Gilmore

What is it that joins the people of Jesus and builds unity when we gather as a body?

Around the world there are many differences in how people experience unity in this setting; through songs, atmosphere, the length of sermons preached, language, the style of preaching and even the buildings themselves. In each situation scripture is read and those listening seek to hear the words of God.

However, when I do not share the same language I am not confident about what is being sung or said. I can follow the words in my bible, however my pace of reading is not linked to the reading of scripture in the service. The style of preaching may be loud, long and the songs will differ in rhythm and energy. All of these differences can be unsettling.

I see set on a table at the front of the place of worship the symbols of Christian identity that have special meaning. Their presence is a reminder to all who gather that in the service we will remember the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the foundation of our identity as Christian people.

The elements used differ around the world. In Papua New Guinea, the flesh of the coconut and coconut milk. In South Sudan, orange juice and sweet biscuits, while in Zimbabwe, bread and red juice. In Bangladesh there are three communion cloths – red (shed blood), black (death) and white (new life). These cloths are removed one at a time and folded with great care. In South Sudan, where there are usually more people than communion glasses, vessels are washed and refilled during the service. In some settings people are served in their seats, while in others they come to the front and are served.

Some of these differences are interesting. In each place someone has usually lead with words of reflection, a time of prayer, and some scripture. It is during this time that something else changes as people quieten and focus on this celebration. In most environments, there is little or no background music. It is the people of Jesus gathered together in relative silence around simple reminders of the presence of Jesus.

Out of this something that I deeply value emerges and for me it is a rich part of having shared in the Lord's Supper. A real communion of the people of God gathered with Jesus. There is unity based on what has been shared and remembered. In the breaking of bread we have identified – as people for whom acknowledge Jesus Christ died for us – cultural differences having faded and a rich oneness coming to the fore.

I think this is the heart of communion. A unity so deep and strong that differences mean little as that which unites us is more important. When together we pause at the Lord's Table and all of us gather sharing in this common action, a bond of faith is affirmed and celebrated.

This unity has a spirituality that is drawn from the gift of God's life and grace in our midst. It is the product of self-sacrificing unconditional love and is, at its heart, the love Jesus speaks of in John 13:35 and prays for in John 17:20-23.

This form of communion is not structural, behavioural or humanly planned. It is powerfully an expression of our common life in our relationship with Jesus and therefore with each other.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper has the potential

to remind us of our communion in Jesus Christ and our call from this to the world. Both John 13 and 17 link the experience of people with Jesus to the impact that the same people have as they step beyond the intimacy of celebrating being loved and forgiven, to live in the midst of others. The witness that was hoped for and prayed for by Jesus speaks to a depth of spiritual and relational unity. A communion of being known by that very unity, and so identified as disciples of Jesus that words and labels are not needed.

After a worship service in Zimbabwe the whole congregation forms a line and all greet each other – it takes time and relationships are affirmed. After worship in South Sudan people gather outside the building to talk and share, and the energy of the worship continues. After a service in Bangladesh people gather to share in a meal. There is often a warmth and an energy of revived relationships that is infectious and attractive.

This communion is rich, warm and inclusive.



About the Author

John is the Executive Officer of Global Mission Partners.



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In worship of our risen Lord, who suffered in our stead.

No condemnation now we dread. Our flawless Lamb is he! As we, assembled, heed his words and bread and cup we share,



Look at this picture. Does this remind you of something? Your schedule? Your life? How you feel when you walk into your local church service?

Truth be told, we all feel like we are spinning plates. We jump from one potential disaster to the next, hoping that we can just keep moving long enough to get to that next, wobbly looking problem at the end of the day.

Oh, and let's not kid ourselves, we can often feel like this when we are supposed to be spending time with God. We struggle to pause and reflect on the deeper, more spiritual aspects of our walk with the Lord because every time we quiet down and start to listen to the Lord, we can hear the faint sound of one more plate getting dangerously out of control.

What we need is some forced reflection. We need the Lord to give us something to do that will help us focus and train our busy minds and ears on what is real and true in our faith. We need something more substantive than a song, something more hands on than a sermon, and something that speaks loud enough to get our attention in the midst of a busy world.

This is where the gift of communion steps in. When we participate in the gift of communion during a time of purposeful worship and reflection, we find a point of connection that is tailor- made for our modern world.

The physical act of holding the bread and the cup in our hands does wonders for our ability to stop spinning plates, juggling schedules, and fidgeting with nervous energy. When we have the opportunity to pause during a gathering of other like-minded Christ followers so that we might work through the meaning and the message of this God-given act of worship, we are able to do something that is not found anywhere else in our world.

During the few precious moments that we celebrate communion, we are able to focus on the symbols of the bread and the cup to the exclusion of all other influences. We are given the freedom to focus on what we are holding, tasting, and consuming. The physicality of the bread and the cup force us to be present with the Lord in that moment.

When we hold the bread, we are reminded of so many truths. As this bread is real and physical, so was the Son of God. As the bread has been broken for us, so was the Christ. As the bread feeds us, so Jesus reminds us that he is the Bread of Life (John 6:35) that the Father has sent to all who call on his name.

When we take the cup in our hands, we are able to see the sacrifice made for each one of us. Jesus shed his blood on the cross, the greatest gift ever given and we cannot ignore this message while we are trying not to spill it down the front of our shirts.

There are a million amazing truths and points that can be said about the value and the meaning of our shared times of communion but the one that I need the most is this...

I need my times of communion to help me stop focusing on all that is moving and chaotic in life so that I can, for a few moments, focus on the one reality that actually matters for the rest of eternity.

I hope that we all experience this gift during our next opportunity to feel that bread and hold that cup. I hope that the physical stuff of communion will draw us into the present, the now, this moment with God. We all need to experience this gift as often as possible.



About the Author

Ryan Laden

Board Chairman, Churches of Christ in WA Senior Pastor, Warnbro Community Church



I have identified three things that waste my time: telemarketers, Facebook and churches that gather for worship but don't celebrate communion.

Now, my phone has a 'block this caller' feature, and I have given up Facebook for Lent, so there is only one thing left to address; the pointlessness that is a worshipping church that skips over sharing bread and wine.

Ten years ago I probably would have questioned the need for church services at all. So, it has been a significant part of my journey to come to understand the role of the church worship service as central to Christian life practice.

In my experience, and from what I have observed, the church worship service has often served as a catch all to provide a number of functions for the Christian community. These functions are teaching, motivation and relationship and they're delivered through music and a talk, or worship and a sermon.

The problem is that all three of these functions are better realised through other activities. As a teaching method, the sermon is probably as effective as trying to fill a number of bottles of water by lining them on the ground, grabbing a hose and attempting to spray the water into the bottles from two metres away.

Extrinsic motivation is, at best, short lived; at worst, it creates a culture of externally motivated behaviour and actions (think Ananias and Sapphira).

If people are willing, the time after church can be a great time for relationship building. But, our forward facing non-interactive church services do not provide any opportunity to start or build relationships.

A worship service with functions that are poorly served by the very design of the service has left me uninspired and seeking other ways to do church. And as I have sought, I have attended churches where Communion is central to all their services and I have found a different perspective. When it's the centrepiece of the Christian worship service,

# COMMUNION SHAPES THIS SERVICE INTO IT'S TRUE FUNCTION, THE POLITICAL FORMATION OF PEOPLE WHO FOLLOW JESUS.

Politics is the way we form community. At worst, most politics is formed around violence. But a better way to do politics is to develop systems and practices that hold violence at bay for a time. History suggests that this holding time is always only a season until civil, regional and global violence erupts again.

The politics of Jesus is based around love. Jesus practiced love and, where violence was present, Jesus named and revealed it and then once again practiced love. Violence rallied and Jesus was killed, but God raised Jesus from the dead and, in doing so, the fear that fueled violence was emptied of its power.

Jesus then invited people who follow him to practice his politics of love. Our practice of Jesus' politics is formed and strengthen by the celebration of communion because it reminds us that by passing through death and resurrection, Jesus' politics of love triumphed.

This realisation was the shift I needed to put church back at the top of the list of my priorities. But not just a church - one that has communion at the centre of worship. For I know that when I celebrate communion I am training myself in the politics of Jesus and the hope of being good news for all creation. And a church service that doesn't do that is useless.



#### About the Author

#### **Peter Barney**

Peter is the COCWA Ministry and Mission Developer. You can find more writing by Peter at www.cocwa.org.au



On Sunday mornings my Mum used to pack a quarter of a granny smith apple and a milk arrowroot biscuit for me and my sister into her big white "Sunday bag". We sat in the back of the chapel of the Kalgoorlie Church of Christ with the other families. Here, the pews were set into a U shape so that the kids could sit on the floor and draw during the service.

Like most kids growing up in church, my sister and I begged to take communion. We could not understand why we weren't allowed. "It's for grownups who believe in Jesus," my Mum would say. "I believe in Jesus," I would say back. "When you're twelve," she insisted in reply. I was nine at the time and turning twelve seemed like something I would never attain.

I can't quite remember how it started but my sister and I invented our own communion service. While the announcements were being made, Mum would open up her bag and we would each receive a quartered apple and biscuit. The adults wouldn't let us share communion with them so, using what we had, we improvised. We would wait until the ushers were two rows away from the family pews before taking a bite of the biscuit and chewing slowly, just like the adults, with our eyes closed.

# THE ADULTS WOULDN'T LET US SHARE COMMUNION WITH THEM SO, USING WHAT WE HAD, WE IMPROVISED

The juice was trickier to improvise because everyone held their cups of juice and drank together. We figured out that if we took a bite of apple when the ushers were half way along the chapel and we chewed slowly, we could get enough juice and saliva stored up in our mouths to get a good gulp down when the words "Do this in remembrance of Me" were said.

After church the kids all ran round the back of the chapel and up the rickety wooden steps into the vestry where the ladies washed the glasses. We all loved counting the 'used' cups and watching the Deacon carefully recording the number of communicants into the spiral bound notebook. The boys loved to drain the full glasses as they stacked them near the bowl of soapy washing up water. The best job was picking up the larger pieces of left-over matzos, placing them into the pretty biscuit tin with its scratched and worn floral lid. If we got away with it, we could crush up some of the larger pieces so that there were more crumbs left. Then, like seagulls at a picnic, we would descend upon the silver plates, licking up crumbs with our fingers.

This whole routine raised some deep theological questions for my nine-year-old self. Why could I eat the bread and drink the cup in the vestry but not in the church? "When you're twelve," said Mum. That seemed to be her standard doctrinal answer for everything.

Later, as a Children's Pastor, and as a Mum myself, I often reflected on my own experience of communion as a child in the church as I considered the question of children and communion. I applauded the audacity of two little girls who found a way to participate in the Body of Christ, with the Body of Christ and I pondered the story of Jesus welcoming children, helping them to bypass convention (Matthew 18).

So I welcomed my own children to the Table as they began to ask questions about the bread and the juice and what these symbols meant. As I did so, I welcomed their participation into the Body of Christ as children and rejoiced in their inclusion into the life of Christ. I welcomed their learning that each act of eating and drinking is an occasion to remember that Jesus gave his life and rose again so that we can be welcomed into life with Christ.

All children turn into adults and all adults make choices to continue or not to continue their walk with Christ. My conviction is that memory and participation in the worship of the church are as important as teaching them biblical truth as we raise our children to know Jesus.





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