

RECONCILING MINISTRIES CLERGY (RMC)

*...is comprised of persons called to ordained or pastoral ministry within The United Methodist Church who summon the church to a deeper level of spiritual and theological integrity in relationship to **persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities** and their full inclusion in all aspects of the church's life.*

“THE SACRAMENTS”

We give thanks for this resource by which we as United Methodists can share the means of grace with one another in Jesus Christ. Please use “**The Sacraments**” as a tool for reconciling ministry within your UMC congregation, community and annual conference.

Developed by RMC Steering Committee, 2005

RECONCILING MINISTRIES CLERGY is an extension ministry of the **Reconciling Ministries Network** -

a national grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and in practice.



To learn more about RMC and RMN, go to www.RMNetwork.org or call (773) 736-5526

Reconciling Ministries Network 3801 N. Keeler Avenue Chicago, IL, 60641

Rev. Troy Plummer
Executive Director
Susan Laurie, MDiv.
Outreach Coordinator

RECONCILING MINISTRIES CLERGY

THE SACRAMENTS

Sources of Equality, Liberation and Justice

by
Rev. Dr. Gayle Carlton Felton

RMC is an extension ministry of the **Reconciling Ministries Network**





THE SACRAMENTS: *Sources of Equality, Liberation, and Justice*

by Gayle Carlton Felton

There is an old evangelical expression that proclaims, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." We all come to Christ with the same needs; we all can receive God's grace freely. Likewise, the ground is level at the baptismal font and at the communion table. The sacraments belong to God who graciously offers them to all who will receive. Human distinctions are washed away in the waters of baptism; prejudice and discrimination dissipate when the sacramental body and blood are truly received. **Our understanding and practice of the sacraments determine the place of GLBT persons in the church.** Nowhere else is the love of God for all God's people more clearly manifested.

For the last few decades United Methodism has been working to clarify and enrich its theology and practice of baptism and Holy Communion. The rituals for the sacraments in the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal are dramatic expressions of what the sacraments involve. In these rituals it is very clear that infant baptism is much more than a service of parental dedication, that Holy Communion is far greater than a memorial of Christ's death. In 1996 and 2004, the General Conference approved *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism and This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*, respectively, as official interpretive and teaching documents for the denomination.ⁱ In these official statements of the church, the full inclusion in the body of Christ of all who seek saving grace is powerfully affirmed.

By Water and the Spirit states plainly that, "There are no conditions of human life that exclude persons from the sacrament of

baptism."ⁱⁱ The church does not – must not – set itself up as a judging, critical dispensary, deciding who is worthy to receive divine grace. Baptism is a gift of God to be utilized in the church to initiate persons into membership and to have them claimed by God's love. Because baptism is an act of God, it does not require the fulfilling of human criteria of worthiness. All are worthy who are in need.

"The church does not – must not – set itself up as a judging, critical dispensary, deciding who is worthy to receive divine grace."

God's grace comes to us –all of us – as pure gift. It can never be earned or deserved. In the baptism of a baby, we see with startling clarity that all of us come to God as helpless beings, wholly dependent upon God's gracious love, and unable to do anything to save ourselves. Nowhere else is the radical nature of grace more richly portrayed. **God loves and values those whom the power structures of society have too often viewed as nonpersons.** In our present society, and especially within the church, we need reminding of this truth, not only as it applies to infants, but even more as it applies to GLBT persons and others who are marginalized and oppressed.

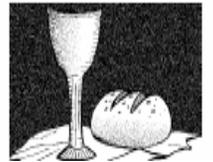
You may know the African-American spiritual "I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table." It includes the line, "Here all the world will find a welcome." The table of Holy Communion is the welcome table; it is open to all who come seeking God. ⁱⁱⁱ This Holy Mystery states, "The invitation to the table comes from the risen and present Christ....All who respond in faith to the invitation are to be welcomed....Christians come to the Lord's Table in gratitude for Christ's mercy toward sinners. We do not share in Communion because of our worthiness; no one is truly worthy. We come to the Eucharist out of our hunger to receive God's gracious love, to receive forgiveness and healing."^{iv}

The "open table" at Holy Communion has become a beloved hallmark of American Methodism since the nineteenth century. We acknowledge that our practice is not in

accord with that of most parts of the Christian church, which often require prior baptism and sometimes other qualifications. Our practice is also not in accord with that of John Wesley, our founder. I believe, however, that the open table is in accord with Wesley's theological emphasis on the free availability of God's grace to all. *By Water and the Spirit* is clear on this point: "Because the Table at which we gather belongs to the Lord. It should be open to all who respond to Christ's love, regardless of age or church membership. The Wesleyan tradition has always recognized that Holy Communion may be an occasion for the reception of converting, justifying, and sanctifying grace."^{iv} It is a potent expression of United Methodism's unwillingness – even refusal – to get into the dangerous business of judging the spiritual conditions of other people.

This theological presentation based on the official documents of our church should answer many of the questions about sacramental practice in relationship to GLBT persons. Certainly such persons are fit candidates for baptism as are their children, natural or adoptive. Like everyone else, they become baptized members of the church upon receiving the sacrament and professing members when they profess their faith and are confirmed. Of course, GLBT persons are eligible to receive Holy Communion and to participate in the worship and ministry of the church.

The justice, liberation, and equality that we pray and work for are grounded in God's good gift of baptism and Holy Communion.



i. Felton, *By Water and the Spirit*, p. 24.

ii. William K. McElvaney's *Eating and Drinking at the Welcome Table* is a beautiful and helpful exposition of the relationship between the Eucharist and issues of justice.

iii. Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, pp. 25-26, 30.

iv. Felton, *By Water and the Spirit*, p. 43.