Recovering the Eucharist in the United Methodist Church: How the understanding of the Real Presence impacts perceived value of the Lord’s Supper

by

Wade Alan Powell

Date: 4/10/19

Approved:

Lester Ruth, Advisor

William H. Willimon, Second Reader

William H. Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The Lord’s Supper has long held a position of high esteem in doctrinal statements of the United Methodist Church and the Methodist movement. John Wesley advocated for “constant communion,” and expected Band Society members to, “be at church, and at the Lord’s table, every week.”¹ Yet, across the denomination today, despite the official position since 2004 encouraging the weekly celebration of Holy Communion,² many do not partake of Holy Communion on a frequent basis.³ Congregational practices vary, with some celebrating Communion once per month, and others quarterly or even less frequently.⁴ While infrequent celebration does not necessarily imply a lower view of Holy Communion, I am interested in discovering the prevailing attitudes and views of today’s United Methodists regarding the Eucharist, with a focus on the Wesleyan understanding of the Christ’s Presence.

After The United Methodist Church approved an official interpretive document on baptism, a survey conducted by the General Board of Discipleship concluded that a

₂ Gayle Carlton Felton, This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources), 34.
₄ Ibid.

iv
similar resource for Holy Communion was needed.\textsuperscript{5} The result was \textit{This Holy Mystery}: a comprehensive document adopted in 2004 with the goal of enhancing the appreciation of Holy Communion among United Methodists. The document acknowledges that many United Methodist churches have, “strayed far away from the rich liturgical and sacramental heritage of Christian tradition.”\textsuperscript{6} The intention of my research is to identify current “on the ground” understandings and regard for Holy Communion in comparison to a Wesleyan understanding of the Eucharist.

It is not enough for the General Conference to issue a document stating what the United Methodist Church believes about Holy Communion. \textit{This Holy Mystery} is subitled, “A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion.” And, indeed, this document articulates the doctrinal standards for Holy Communion through an exploration of principle, background, and recommended practice. However, it does not articulate the principles and practices of the people in the pews, which are not always congruent with official doctrinal standards. In order to draw United Methodists into a richer sacramental life in line with our rich Wesleyan heritage, we must understand how they view the sacraments. It is not enough to explore history and official documents; it is also necessary to include human research, interacting with today’s United Methodists. My research will be designed to answer three questions: How do United Methodists

\textsuperscript{5} Felton, \textit{This Holy Mystery}, 5.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, 7.
understand Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist? How did they come to their beliefs? And, what impact do these beliefs regarding his presence have on the way they value Holy Communion? I believe answering these three questions will be vital in moving toward a Eucharistic renewal in United Methodism.

In United Methodism, there seems to be a wide disconnect between contemporary understandings and practices regarding Holy Communion. While I have seen speculative articles and anecdotal accounts of why Methodists may not view Holy Communion as an essential element of worship, I have not uncovered any documented qualitative or quantitative research. If the church is serious about enhancing “appreciation of the sacrament of Holy Communion,” then it is important to understand how Methodists understand the Christ’s Presence, and to develop a better understanding of how that collective understanding has been shaped.

In order to determine what United Methodists believe about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, how they came to their beliefs, and how that affects their perception of value in Holy Communion, I conducted an ethnographic study based on qualitative interviewing techniques, and a quantitative survey that served as a comparative backdrop to those interviewed. I found United Methodist have an understanding of

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7 Ibid, 7.
Christ’s presence that illuminates their perceived value of Holy Communion, and that their understanding has been shaped primarily by experience.
This work is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Cindy.
# Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 13

A word about “Real Presence” ....................................................................................................... 25

Literature Review............................................................................................................................ 26

   Sacraments and Discipleship: Understanding Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in a United Methodist Context. Mark W. Stamm......................................................................................... 27

   Wesleyan Eucharistic Spirituality. Lorna Khoo .......................................................................... 31

   This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion. Gayle Carlton Felton ......................................................................................................................... 34

   The Duty of Constant Communion. John Wesley. Edited by Albert Outler. ......................... 40

   Introduction to Christian Worship. James F. White .................................................................. 42

Methodology.................................................................................................................................... 45

   Quantitative Survey ..................................................................................................................... 46

   Qualitative Interviews ................................................................................................................ 47

   Ethnic Considerations ................................................................................................................ 49

   Age Considerations .................................................................................................................... 50

   Church Size ................................................................................................................................. 50

Research Site .................................................................................................................................. 51

Sample Participants ......................................................................................................................... 53

   Ron ............................................................................................................................................... 53

   Javier ........................................................................................................................................... 54
Six Metaphors ................................................................. 67
Beliefs shaped by ............................................................ 68
Frequency ................................................................. 68
Renewal ................................................................. 68
Sorting ................................................................. 69
Local Integration ............................................................ 69
Inclusive Integration ............................................................ 70
Findings ................................................................. 72
Quantitative Survey ............................................................ 72
Interview findings ............................................................ 75
Christ’s Presence ............................................................ 75
Six Metaphors ................................................................. 85
Thanksgiving ................................................................. 85
Fellowship ................................................................. 87
Commemoration ............................................................ 89
Sacrifice ................................................................. 91
Presence / Mystery ............................................................ 92
Work of the Holy Spirit ............................................................ 93
Shaped By ................................................................. 94
Frequency ................................................................. 97
Renewal ................................................................. 99
Discussion ................................................................. 101
**Introduction**

“While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” Mark 14:22-24

“Sacraments ordained of Christ are not only badges or tokens of Christian men’s profession, but rather they are certain signs of grace, and God’s good will toward us, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm, our faith in him.” Article XVI, The United Methodist Articles of Religion

I grew up on a cotton farm in West Texas. I lived between two small communities. The town of Wall, Texas had a Catholic Church, a cotton gin, and a general store, while the town of Eola had Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist churches, a cotton gin, and a general store. For school, I went about ten miles west to Wall, and for church and groceries we went three miles east to Eola. The small United Methodist church my family began attending when I was in about the second grade worshipped about fifteen people on a good Sunday. Four of those came from my immediate family, and five from my cousin’s that lived down the road. Our families took turns taking care of the church property, doing things like mowing the acre of grass burrs surrounding the building, vacuuming and picking the grass burrs out of the carpeted entrance to the sanctuary,
and fixing plumbing problems related to corroded lead pipes. Then, about six times a year, on the Saturday that we did our church work, my mom would buy a box of saltine crackers and a tin can of grape juice. My job was to fill the little “shot” glasses with the juice and break the saltines into quarters and arrange them on a plate. These sacred elements would be placed in the church refrigerator for use in the Communion service the next day. This was my favorite job, because it didn’t cause bleeding from my fingertips like pulling grass burrs, and I usually woofed down a handful of crackers and chugged the remaining juice. Little did I know that my favorite church job as a boy would be so closely tied to my favorite church job as an ordained United Methodist pastor.

The 1970s were a time of ecumenical outreach between Catholics and Protestants coming out of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, as a kindergartener, I began going to catechism by mistake when I got off the school bus at the wrong time. I was accepted by St. Ambrose Catholic Church and began my journey of faith. My parents were quite panicked when I didn’t come home on the bus that first Wednesday of kindergarten. All my friends got off the bus at the church, so I decided that I should too. When they finally figured out what happened, my mother picked me up at the church and allowed me to continue going each Wednesday until we became involved in the Methodist church closer to my home. However, from that point, I remained involved with the youth group at St. Ambrose, and attended Mass quite often with friends. As I got older,
I noticed a distinct difference in my Methodist church, and the Catholic Church I visited. The Catholics had their juice and crackers every week, and there was a very different feel to the way they approached this mid-worship snack. Children didn’t take Communion until they graduated from their third grade catechism class. Of course, I had stopped going to class and was never able to take Communion in their church, but the wonder of it, and the way they approached it compared to the way we partook on the first Sunday of the month at First United Methodist Church, Eola was the difference between night and day. I was spectacularly drawn to the way the Catholics took communion with what looked to me like the expectation of a divine encounter. At home I would take my dinner roll and smush it into a flat round disk that looked like the communion wafers at St. Ambrose, hold it up to the level of my forehead then put it in my mouth as I closed my eyes hoping to experience what I had clearly seen at Mass. My parents just thought I was being silly.

Eventually, I was confirmed a United Methodist, graduated high school and college, got married, had children, and began to take my faith seriously again. I never left the church, but now with a family, I started paying attention like I did when I was a child. The constant talk of John Wesley annoyed me: I wondered if we were worshipping John Wesley or Jesus! So I began to study John Wesley. I read his sermons, and I read about his life and his role in the Methodist movement. As I studied, I felt a renewed sense of who I was as a Christian. My childhood self, a Catholic-inspired sacramentalist
worshipping as a Methodist, found a distinct kinship with John Wesley, who appeared to be a sacramentalist himself.

John Wesley is largely considered the father of Methodism, though his brother Charles was highly influential as well. John, the itinerate that never slowed his zeal for spreading the gospel, was balanced by Charles, the more content and serene parish priest.¹ Their influence on Eucharistic theology in the Methodist movement is very evident in the sermons and hymns they wrote.

When it came to the Eucharist, Wesley felt that it should be received as often as possible. In his sermon “The Duty of Constant Communion,” Wesley made clear his feeling that the Eucharist should hold a prominent place in worship. Furthermore, he advised that it should be attended to on every Lord’s Day (as the early Christians did), or even more frequently, perhaps almost every day.² His opening remarks lay out the plan for the sermon to, “show that it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can; and secondly, answer some objections.”³ Drawing upon Augustine’s views of a sacrament as well as the Church of England, Wesley described sacraments as, “an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the

In Wesleyan spirituality, Holy Communion is as important to Christian living as breathing is to life. This commitment is rooted in Wesley’s adopted Augustinian understanding of a sacrament, as well as his interpretation of Christ’s directive. His lifelong desire to grow closer to God, expressed when he was younger through disciplines of the Holy Club, included weekly reception of the Eucharist. I never forgot the way my Catholic friends approached the Eucharist with anticipation of something special. And, I was certainly intrigued by Wesley’s writings on the subject. I believed that Wesley had experienced what the people of St. Ambrose experienced.

I wanted this more devotional experience to be my experience, but I wasn’t sure that the Methodist church offered much more than juice, and by this time, King’s Hawaiian bread in a ceremony of remembrance. Then, on a spiritual retreat, I found myself encountering the divine in an unexpected way. On day three of the retreat, there was an hour of free time after lunch. I was drawn to the make-shift chapel where I noticed the bread and cup had been left untouched on the altar table after morning worship. Without thinking, I walked past the rows of metal folding chairs to the wooden table that held the uncovered elements. I placed my right hand upon the broken loaf and my left hand rested on the rim of the ceramic chalice. I stood there silently with my eyes

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closed focusing on the only sounds I heard which were the beating of my heart and the faint chirping of birds outside.

After a moment, I heard the sound of weeping coming from the rows of chairs that I had walked past. Weeping is not uncommon for those on spiritual retreats, so I tried to ignore the sound and return my attention to the symbols of Christ that I felt with the palms of my hands. The weeping continued and curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to know who was in the chapel with me. I wanted to comfort the person I heard crying, but hadn’t noticed when I walked in. I also thought it might be rude of me to stand there blocking the view of the cross on the table. Slowly I released the grip I had on the elements and stepped to the side of the table with a glance over my shoulder to find out who was sharing this space with me. I saw no one.

The chapel was only about four hundred square feet with cinder-block walls and a concrete floor. It would have been impossible for someone to come or go without me knowing. Not only could I hear my heart, I could feel it thumping my sternum. In an effort to prove to myself that I wasn’t crazy, I moved back to the table and placed my hands upon the bread and cup once more listening. This time I heard the deep breaths of someone composing themselves after weeping. I felt a smile stretch across my face. My heartbeat slowed as peace washed over me. Never again did I approach the Table of the Lord with the expectation of feasting on mere bread and grape juice. Now, I approached the table confident of the encounter John Wesley spoke of and that I
witnessed thirty years before.

I knew that what I would come to understand as the presence of Christ wasn’t reserved for Catholics; Christ was present in my United Methodist church, albeit with a different understanding. Unfortunately, it seemed that other Methodists were as ignorant of this fact as I was weeks earlier. Once a month I approached the Table with a lump in my throat and joy bursting forth from my heart.

I became a student of the Great Thanksgiving liturgy in the United Methodist Hymnal. The liturgy echoed the sentiment of John Wesley in his writings and what I had experienced on that retreat, “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and upon these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ.”6 These words from The Great Thanksgiving felt heavy with meaning. These were not words that simply pointed to a past event to remember, but instead seemed to draw us into an ongoing reality of salvation in which Christ meets us at the table. Not only was Christ present in an extraordinary way in the Eucharist, as I had witnessed and experienced earlier, but now I saw that even our liturgy spoke to that reality.

I had experienced Christ’s Presence. I had studied John Wesley’s views on Holy Communion and his insistence of frequent reception, advising clergy in America to administer Holy Communion every Sunday.7 Further, the words of the official United

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Methodist Eucharistic prayer seem to affirm the idea of the presence of Christ in the celebration of Holy Communion. My early experiences observing Holy Communion and recent investigations into Methodist history and liturgy were beginning to come together to form my understanding of the Eucharist.

As my understanding of the Eucharist was coalescing, I perceived a deficit in Eucharistic understanding among the people called Methodists. Though I was a layperson, I had memorized The Great Thanksgiving, and noticed changes when I heard them. Most of the changes related to how we praised God in the early parts of the prayer, but I also heard some substantive changes. I was startled to hear, “Pour out your Spirit on us gathered here, and upon these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us symbols of the body and blood of Christ.” The addition of the word “symbols” altered the meaning of the liturgy. I do not disagree that the bread and wine are symbols of Christ’s body and blood; however I believe the bread and wine are so much more. Calling upon the Spirit to make them into symbols diminishes both the power of the Holy Spirit and the comprehensive nature of the consecrated bread and wine.

It is no wonder that Holy Communion has lost a place of prominence among Methodists, when clergy shy away from the mysterious sacramental nature of the Eucharist. When a pastor presides so as not to prolong the service, or when leftover bread is pitched in the waste-basket, and juice rinsed down the sink without even a nod to the sacred, it becomes clear that, for many Methodists, Communion has no meaning
beyond the symbolic meaning, and so the symbols themselves become empty.

Although my experience at the Lord’s Table and the witness of the United Methodist church seemed to be a significant distance apart, God never stopped showing up. As a licensed local pastor serving my first appointment, holding the loaf in my hands with a lump in my throat, and peering into the cup to see my reflection helped me to embrace Christ’s promise to be with us always. We speak often of being a church of radical hospitality, as coined by Robert Schnaze in The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.⁸ Hospitality is a hallmark of Christian witness, and Will Willimon upholds the tie between Eucharist and hospitality best when he writes, “Just as an invitation to someone’s table is the supreme sign of human hospitality, so is it seen as the supreme sign of God’s hospitality to us.”⁹

I am interested in discovering the prevailing attitudes and views of today’s United Methodist regarding the Eucharist with a focus on the Wesleyan understanding of the Christ’s Presence. In 2004, the General Board of Discipleship developed a comprehensive document called This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion, with the goal of enhancing the appreciation of Holy Communion among United Methodists. The acknowledges that many United Methodist churches have, “strayed far away from the rich liturgical and sacramental heritage of Christian

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tradition.”10 The intention of my research is to identify current “on the ground” understandings and regard for Holy Communion in comparison to a Wesleyan/Methodist understanding of the Eucharist.

It is not enough for the General Conference to issue a document stating what the United Methodist Church believes about Holy Communion. *This Holy Mystery* articulates the doctrinal standards of Holy Communion through an exploration of principle, background, and recommended practice, but it lacks contemporary understanding of the principles and practices of the people in the pews. In order to draw United Methodists into a richer sacramental life in line with our rich Wesleyan heritage, first we must understand how they view the sacrament. That is not done through an exploration of history and official documents; it is done by including human research, interacting with today’s United Methodists. My research is designed to answer three questions: How do United Methodists understand the presence of Christ in the Eucharist? How did they come to their belief? And what impact does their belief in the Christ’s presence have on the way they value Holy Communion? I believe that the answers to these three questions are vital in moving toward a Eucharistic renewal in United Methodism.

In United Methodism, there seems to be a wide disconnect between

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contemporary understandings and practices regarding Holy Communion. While I have seen speculative articles and anecdotal accounts of why Methodists may not view Holy Communion as an essential element of worship, I have not uncovered any documented qualitative or quantitative research. If the church is serious about enhancing “appreciation of the sacrament of Holy Communion,”\(^\text{11}\) then it is important to understand how Methodists understand Christ’s presence and to develop a better understanding of how that collective understanding has been shaped.

For the purposes of this thesis, an ethnographic study was conducted based on qualitative interviewing techniques, together with a quantitative survey that provides context for the interviews. First hand investigation is required in order to determine what United Methodists believe about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, how they came to their beliefs, and how that affects their perception of value in Holy Communion. The body of this thesis consists of a comprehensive look at the methodology of the research, and results and analysis, together with theological reflection on these findings.

How can the lived beliefs of United Methodists be understood alongside what the United Methodist Church as a body professes? At times, it reads like a documentary that goes through the steps of research in order to put the findings in perspective, and other times it is narrative, in style, in order to convey the human aspect of the research. Ultimately, this thesis attempts to put the research in conversation with relevant

\(^{11}\) Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, 7.
literature to encourage Eucharistic renewal based on the impact of the Christ’s Presence in Holy Communion.
A word about “Real Presence”

The term “Real Presence” is a technical term used in Eucharistic theology that describes, rather ambiguously, Christ’s presence in the sacrament. It is not often that a term could be described as both technical and ambiguous. However, “real presence” has evolved to mean whatever the one using the term wants it to mean. For Catholics, the term may describe the Eucharist as the physical manifestation of the literal body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. Various other denominations and theologians may use the term to mean that a spiritual presence of Christ is among the believers at the Lord’s Table, or possibly even a physical presence that can be found among the elements.

The reality is that the term “Real Presence,” which has its origins as a descriptive term tied to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, has become a general term that seems ecumenical in nature, but has done little to actually resolve real differences in Eucharistic theology. Instead, it has become a term that easily morphs from denomination to denomination precisely because it no longer provides a clear and concise definition. It is for that reason that the term appears in the title of this thesis, but nowhere else in the body. My hope is that through the exploration of what actual United Methodists believe about Holy Communion, the ambiguity of the term will be replaced with a more comprehensive understanding.
Literature Review

Much has been written on United Methodist understanding and practice of Holy Communion. Likewise, many scholars have attempted to offer analysis of what the Wesleys believed and taught about the Eucharist. What is lacking is research devoted specifically to what contemporary United Methodists believe about Holy Communion. What is their understanding of the Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist? What impact do they believe this understanding has on their faith? How was that understanding formed?

I believe the research conducted specifically for this thesis is unique. However, in order to understand the impact of the research, it is important to develop a Wesleyan understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist as well as official and interpreted United Methodist doctrinal standards on the understanding of the presence of Christ. The following literature review explores concepts related to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist from a Wesleyan perspective, a United Methodist perspective, and an evolutionary perspective that the Church universal has wrestled with for centuries. That is not to say that each of these contexts, Wesleyan, United Methodist, and universal, are vastly different. In fact, there is much overlap. But review of the literature concerning Christ’s presence in the Eucharist will help us interact with the ethnographic data later in the analysis, discussion, and theological reflection portions of this thesis.
Stamm’s book provides a comprehensive discussion of the two sacraments recognized by the United Methodist Church, baptism and Holy Communion. It is a doorway into understanding the sacraments through an experiential discovery rather than a doctrinal unpacking of various scriptures that point to what Jesus meant when he spoke. That doesn’t mean that Stamm doesn’t rely on scripture as a basis for discussing the presence of Christ in the sacraments. In fact, the most in-depth chapter on Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is based primarily on Luke 24:13-35. It is the story of two disciples walking to a village called Emmaus. They were walking and talking about Jesus’ crucifixion, when a stranger approached and began walking and talking with them. The stranger, who was in fact Jesus, took them deeper and began to reveal the scriptural significance of the crucifixion. As they approached Emmaus, the disciples invited the stranger to stay with them.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has
appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Stamm begins the chapter by differentiating between knowledge and belief. In the Emmaus Road story, the two disciples walking with the unrevealed Jesus know the story of the resurrection. It isn’t that they had not been presented with the facts. But, in spite of knowing the facts, they still found it difficult to actually believe without having experienced Christ being made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

One of the interesting things that Stamm notes about the Emmaus story is how the two disciples heard scripture selectively.1 The disciples had preconceived notions about the Messiah that didn’t line up with what the “undisclosed Jesus” revealed to them. Stamm urges the reader to be open to the experience of Holy Communion in order to more fully understand it. The walking and talking in the Emmaus story is important, but I believe its primary purpose is to set up the experience the disciples had in breaking the bread with Jesus. The experience is what informed their understanding beyond the facts.

The Emmaus story reflects our journey with Jesus as well. To emphasize remembrance of Christ in Holy Communion above the presence of Christ in Holy Communion relies on our imagination.2 As Methodists, our Communion liturgy and

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2 Stamm, Sacraments and Discipleship, 92.
official position calls us to believe that Christ’s presence is not contingent upon our memory, nor the power of our minds to redirect our thoughts to Jesus’ sacrifice. We call upon the Holy Spirit to be at work in the bread and wine that is affecting a change in us when we say, “Pour out your Holy Spirit on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, so that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” These words reflect the notion that we are not as concerned about what happens to the bread and wine as much as we are that the Holy Spirit uses these gifts to elicit change in us. In the Emmaus story, the disciples were not left contemplating what happened to the bread, but rather were astounded at their eyes being opened to the presence of the Lord, immediately prompting them to proclaim the good news of Christ’s resurrection.

Stamm continues with a discussion specific to the Great Thanksgiving Communion liturgy. He addresses the issue of remembrance. As noted, remembrance has played a significant role in shaping the understanding of Christ’s presence in Holy Communion. It construes our ability to remember as the primary act which renders Holy Communion sacred. However, Stamm redefines our contemporary understanding of remembrance with an understanding that remembrance involves more than recalling facts about an event. Remembrance, taken from the Greek word anamnesis, is to “lay

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hold of events so significant that in their retelling and symbolic reenactment they reach forward and touch us in the present, sometimes in quite vivid, profound, and life-changing ways.”

The Sunday after my mother passed away after a long battle with leukemia, I sat in church at the age of twenty-four. The first hymn we sang that morning was called Hymn of Promise. I was touched in ways that I could never recreate on my own as we sang. Now, over twenty years later, when I hear Hymn of Promise, I experience the same feelings, emotions, and indeed presence of God. The act of listening takes me back to a time of profound connection where God and my mother are immediately revealed. This happens not because I sought to evoke these emotions: anamnesis, the act of remembering that goes far beyond remembering, has stirred this connection within me.

Stamm puts Christ’s presence into a mystical but not metaphysical reality. He makes no attempt to describe or explain how Christ is present, but is prone to accept that Christ is present. Because he doesn’t wade through the centuries of debate littered with terms such as transubstantiation or consubstantiation, or references to the writings of Justyn Martyr, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, he opens the door for remembrance to be an encounter rather than a construct of the mind, and for presence to transcend physical manifestation.

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4 Stamm, Sacraments and Discipleship, 97.
**Wesleyan Eucharistic Spirituality. Lorna Khoo**

Lorna Khoo presents a comprehensive view of Wesleyan Eucharistic spirituality. Her book covers John and Charles Wesley’s influence on how the Lord’s Supper is practiced and understood in the past and present. She also speculates about how their influence might shape the future of Methodist Eucharistic practice and theology. While I am most interested in the “presence” aspects of her research and observations, the Wesleyan understanding of Christ’s presence has the greatest influence on the entirety of Khoo’s writing.

Khoo discusses the Wesleyan belief that the Eucharist is primarily a dynamic encounter. In doing so, she contrasts Wesley’s view with contemporary Catholic perspectives, as well as with the theology of such Protestant thinkers as Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin. For instance, Khoo points out that Wesley referred to the Zwinglian position as, “a bare Memorial only.”⁶ By contrast, Wesley expected to meet and encounter the Lord at the Table. Khoo uses Wesley’s writing from 1745 to explain, “I want and seek my Savior Himself, and I haste to his Sacrament for the same Purpose, that SS Peter and John hasted to his Sepulcher; because I hope to find Him there.”⁷ In both John and Charles’ writings, she finds recollections of worshippers experiencing

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⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid, 56.
visions of Christ’s suffering, auditory responses of hearing Christ’s voice, and even music that couldn’t be explained. Of course, upon reading this I was immediately taken back and affirmed in my own encounter discussed in the introduction section of this work.

Focusing on this theme of encounter, Khoo turns to contrasting Luther and Calvin with the Wesleys. While Luther, Calvin, and Wesley all agreed on the reality of the encounter, there were differences in their understandings of the nature of that encounter, and in the way the presence was manifested. Luther, emphasized the incarnational Christ as the same that dwells with the elements, while Calvin, emphasized the “whole Christ” received by the believer, “through the Spirit of Christ, who lifts the believer up to heaven to partake of his life.” Khoo notes that because Calvin often spoke of the Presence as believers receiving the “power” of Christ, it could give the impression that he was talking about a “quasi-physical matter linked to Christ rather than the person of Christ himself.” By contrast, Khoo contends that, for the Wesleys, the Christ encountered in the Eucharist is the same Christ who walked the earth, seen from a post-resurrection perspective.

Khoo sums the differentiation in this way:

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8 Ibid, 56-57.
9 Ibid, 63.
10 Ibid, 65.
11 Ibid, 64.
12 Ibid, 66.
Mindful of the same concerns as Calvin, the Wesleys were able, without resorting to Calvin’s solutions, to affirm the integrity of Christ (without giving the impression of separating the natures, as Luther did) and avoid the danger of locating his presence in a way which downplayed divine transcendence. They did it in two ways: by the use of Trinitarian images and terms and by the utilizing of time-transcending rather than spatial language. Unlike Calvin, they were also able to avoid the impression that the encounter was with a power or some quasi-physical matter by the use of personal pronouns and focusing on the person of Christ.\footnote{Ibid, 65.}

Khoo suggests that the influence of the Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology on the Wesleys was mostly a “negative contribution.”\footnote{Ibid, 130.} By that, she means that the Wesleys’ theology was shaped, in part, by what they perceived as Roman Catholic errors in Eucharistic theology. As priests in the Church of England, both Wesleys rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, with John writing, “...it is not said, ‘This is changed into my body’ but, ‘This is my body’; which, if it were to be taken literally, would rather prove the substance of the bread to be his body. But that they are not to be taken literally is manifest from the words of St. Paul, who calls it bread, not only before, but likewise after, the consecration.”\footnote{Ibid, 128-129.} Because of this understanding, the Wesleys were against praying to the bread and wine or viewing them as objects to be adored. The similarities that exist between Wesleyan Eucharistic theology and Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology, again, are rooted in the encounter with Christ, but the metaphysical interpretations of that encounter is clearly where they diverge.
Khoo concludes her book with an observation of current Eucharistic observance, and the future of Wesleyan Eucharistic spirituality. Wesley’s Eucharistic piety that insisted on the Eucharist only being made available through ordained clergy, coupled with and an itinerant system that included organized circuits, meant that the infrequency of the administration of the sacraments was tied to the established rhythms of Methodist life. In the context of the rise of non-sacramental societies such as the Salvation Army and the Quakers, many were led to question if the sacrament was so important to spiritual life.\(^{16}\)

Khoo contends that there are signs of hope for a renewed emphasis on Wesleyan Eucharistic spirituality throughout the world. She points to the rise of sacramental spirituality in many places that have embraced deeper change as opposed to church entertainment. Some aspects of worship are being recognized as being communicated and experienced best through “concrete, visual and acted symbols rather than through words.”\(^{17}\) It is possible, in Khoo’s perception, that sacramental spirituality could be spurred in Methodism through more charismatically oriented churches.

**This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion. Gayle Carlton Felton**

In 2004, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* as its official interpretive

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 216.
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 220.
statement regarding Holy Communion for the church. Four years prior to this
document’s adoption, the General Conference created a study committee of laypeople
and clergy to interact with United Methodists throughout the world and draft a
document in the process. Eventually, the drafts and revisions shared through the
General Board of Discipleship’s website culminated in the final version adopted in 2004.
Felton asserts that, “for the first time in our history, the denomination has an official,
comprehensive statement of the practice and theology of the Lord’s Supper.”

The document states that the goal of the study is, “the renewal of worship in United
Methodist congregations though enhanced appreciation of the sacrament of Holy
Communion.” The document is comprised of two major parts. Part one is focused on
defining various aspects of Holy Communion from a relatively technical perspective. It
discusses historical understandings of Communion, particularly the diverse
understandings of Christ’s presence, including transubstantiation in Roman
Catholicism, Luther’s notion of Christ’s presence (often described as consubstantiation),
and the views of other Protestant Reformers. However, part one does not specifically
describe a Wesleyan understanding of the Christ’s presence; it simply states that these
various views were available to the Wesleys for adoption as their own.

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18 Felton, This Holy Mystery, 5.
19 Ibid, 7.
20 Felton, This Holy Mystery, 10.
Much of the theological explorations of part one help set the stage for a more in-depth discussion of the experiential aspects of Holy Communion discussed in part two. Section one provides a snapshot of grace, and how Holy Communion works as a “means of grace.” There is also a section on sacramental theology, which at its core is a continuation of the discussion of grace.

Part two shifts the focus to the presence of Christ as experienced at the Lord’s Table. It seeks to link practice and experience as a way to better explain the encounter with Jesus in the sacrament of Holy Communion. The document states that for many United Methodists, the memorial aspect of the Eucharist is “the sole, or at least prime, meaning that they recognize.” This is as close as This Holy Mystery gets to discussing an understanding of Christ’s presence among United Methodists, but it neglects to offer any research or documented evidence to support the statement. However, with that statement as a baseline assumption, Felton goes into the explanation that Holy Communion involves much more than mere remembrance. She offers a concise interpretation of Christ’s presence by explaining that it is not physical, but certainly perceptible.

In Holy Communion, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is truly present with and for the church. Christ’s presence is not limited to particular words or actions or objects; it is in the totality of the experience. The presence is not physical; Christ cannot be seen or

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21 Ibid, 23.
touched, but Christ can be perceived and experienced by those who come to the Table.\textsuperscript{22}

As much as we may want science and philosophy to converge and offer a concrete doctrine of temporal and spiritual presence, the truth remains a mystery. \textit{This Holy Mystery} offers opinions on what Holy Communion is \textit{not}. Exception is taken with the concept of Roman Catholic transubstantiation, explaining that the divine presence is not in the elements of bread and wine.\textsuperscript{23} It also objects to the idea of receptionism, which depends on the faith and belief of the person receiving Holy Communion. As a mystery, Christ’s presence in Holy Communion neither depends on physical change nor recognition of spiritual change. The truth is not dependent on perception, however the truth is capable of being perceived even if not fully understood.

Christ’s presence informs the entire Methodist approach to celebrating the sacrament. Within the Communion liturgy, the words of invitation say, “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.”\textsuperscript{24} These words imply that Christ is present. It is not the pastor’s invitation to the congregation to come forward and remember an event through participation in a recreation of the event. Instead, it

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 23.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} The United Methodist Hymnal, 7.
is Christ who offers the invitation to join him and the body of believers at his table. In Luke 22:15, Christ says, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” According to John Wesley’s *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, this indicates Christ’s desire to not only institute the Eucharist, but to reveal himself further to the disciples.25 Christ’s invitation to the Table in our liturgy mirrors Christ’s statement to the disciples before the Last Supper. Christ desires to reveal himself further to us, indicating the reality of his presence.

“Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.”26 These are the words typically said during the breaking of the bread in the Communion ritual. This emphasizes the reality that Christ is present through the assembly gathered together in worship.27 The presence of Christ is more than the recognition of what is going on with the bread and wine. The presence of Christ is realized throughout the celebration of the Eucharist, which begins with the gathering of the people. The idea of Christ’s presence in the assembly is underscored in Paul’s rebuke to the divided Corinthian community.28 He tells them that because of the way they have neglected to

26 The United Methodist Hymnal, 11.
27 Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, 23.
28 1 Corinthians 11:17-22
recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, what they are partaking in is not the Lord’s Supper. It is clear that Paul understands the assembly as a manifestation of the presence of Christ. As such, United Methodists do not consider individual celebrations of Holy Communion as appropriate, except in the case of the home-bound or individuals that are unable to join in the assembly.

The Eucharistic prayer, The Great Thanksgiving, is shaped by our Trinitarian understanding of God. The prayer offers thanks to the Father as creator of heaven and earth, and then moves to recall the ministry of salvation by proclaiming the works of Jesus Christ, and then invokes the work of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon the congregation and the elements of bread and wine. The prayer points to a comprehensive divine presence that extends beyond our ability to fully understand or explain, rather than a prayer that calls upon a specific metaphysical change in the common elements of bread and wine.

As the title suggests, This Holy Mystery allows for Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper to express a reality that may be ill-defined, but is real nonetheless. It is clear that the official United Methodist interpretive document on the sacrament extols the reality of Christ’s extraordinary presence in Holy Communion, but does not narrow the presence to a definition that can be

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29 Felton, This Holy Mystery, 35.
quantified. Rather, it allows for the reality of the presence to be perceived and experienced throughout the celebration of the Eucharist.

**The Duty of Constant Communion. John Wesley. Edited by Albert Outler.**

While Wesley’s sermon, “The Duty of Constant Communion,” is celebrated as his most complete statement on Eucharistic doctrine, it must be mentioned that much of it is borrowed from Robert Nelson, whose writing Wesley originally extracted for use with his students at Lincoln College. In its final form, it is neither a totally original work by Wesley, nor can it be attributed fully to Nelson. However much the words themselves may be attributed to Wesley, at the very least they represent Wesley’s views on the sacrament. It is clear that Wesley believed Holy Communion to be of great importance in the life of all Christians. The purpose of the sermon is two-fold: firstly, to convey that it is “the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can; and secondly, answer some objections.”

Wesley first proclaims that it is the duty of every Christian because Jesus said so. He calls it “a plain command of Christ.” Further, he explains that these are the dying words of Christ. As Christ gave his life for the salvation of the world,

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31 Ibid, 428.
32 Ibid.
he gave us the command to receive the bread and wine in remembrance of his
death until the end of the world. If doing it because it is a simply command of
Christ is not enough, Wesley also upholds the benefits of Holy Communion.
When we are overtaken by sin, what better way for us to be assured that we are
forgiven than for us to participate in the showing forth of Chris’s death? The
grace of God received through the sacrament assures us of our pardon.

For those that choose to ignore or reject the Lord’s Supper, Wesley asks,
“why do you not accept of his mercy as often as ever you can?” Wesley
identifies the Lord’s Supper as a means of infinite mercy, that we may obtain
holiness on earth and glory in heaven. Wesley objects to excuses people use in
not receiving the sacrament such as being unworthy. Looking at the Eucharist as
an offering of mercy, Wesley asks whether people would reject all mercy. He
views the Eucharist as a means through which Jesus delivers us from death, but
we reject it because we do not feel worthy. It seems as though Wesley has
pointed out a “catch 22” in which people who need God’s mercy the most reject
it, because they are in need of God’s mercy. This fallacy befuddles Wesley, who

33 Ibid, 429.
34 Ibid, 432.
35 Ibid.
continues his rhetorical questions, “What can God himself do for us farther, if we refuse his mercy, even because we are unworthy of it?”

For Wesley, constant Communion is a command ordered by God, and one that he has commanded for our own good. The sermon is not as concerned with the properties of the bread and wine so much as with Christians making the most of the opportunity that Christ has made available. The Lord’s Supper is an encounter with the living Christ who offers himself for our salvation, Wesley implores Methodists to accept Christ’s invitation to the encounter.

**Introduction to Christian Worship. James F. White**

White’s book goes through the entirety of Christian worship analyzing historical aspects as well as liturgy, art, music, prayer, and sacraments. Word and Table are the first and second parts of the worship service. White explains that the first part of the Eucharist is the service of the word, while the second half is the acted sign: what we call Holy Communion.

White discusses the scriptural institution narratives, orienting the Last Supper within the roots of Jewish worship. He notes that Jesus transformed the Passover meal, which was a festival anticipating the arrival of the Messiah, into

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36 Ibid.
an act of remembrance that insists on the transcendent presence of the Messiah. The Eucharist, as instituted, would re-present the salvific work of Jesus Christ, allowing those who partake to experience the presence of Christ himself.³⁸

Perhaps most important to my thesis is White’s appropriation of Brilioth’s New Testament metaphors of the Eucharist: thanksgiving, communion fellowship, commemoration, sacrifice, and mystery or presence.³⁹ Each of these metaphors conveys a deeper understanding than presenting metaphysical definitions. These are rooted in scripture, but also are key to experiencing and encountering Christ in the Eucharist.

In each telling of the Last Supper in the Gospels, Jesus gives thanks. And, as White notes, Acts 2:46 contends that the early church broke bread, “with glad and generous hearts.”⁴⁰ Thanksgiving is very much a part of celebrating and receiving the Eucharist.

Paul draws upon communion with Christ and each other in his first letter to the Corinthians, “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”⁴¹ The one bread is Jesus Christ, and we who share in the bread are made one with Christ and each other. There is community and fellowship in the Eucharist.

³⁹ Ibid, 249.
⁴⁰ Ibid, 249.
⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 10:16-17
Luke’s Gospel records Jesus as saying “do this in remembrance of me,” in reference to the taking of bread and wine. It is clear that remembrance is a big part of the Eucharist, but as White and others contend, it is not the only aspect of the Eucharist. White also points out that remembrance is an inadequate translation for the Greek word *anamnesis*, which points to a much deeper sense of recollection.

Jesus points to his sacrifice in the institution of the Eucharist as he proclaims his body and blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. When we eat the “flesh” and drink the “blood” of our Lord, we remember his death as we experience his resurrection.

A clear connection is made between Jesus and the elements of bread and wine. Jesus says that the bread is his body and that the cup is the new covenant in his blood.42 We can debate the specifics of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, but Christ is present.

Methodology

As I began researching the Eucharistic understanding of the “people in the pews,” regarding the presence of Christ in Holy Communion, I had a very hard time finding anything more than opinions published in non-academic articles. There were theories and anecdotal evidence shoe-horned within articles about how often Holy Communion should be celebrated, but nothing that offered an orchestrated effort to discover actual practice and understanding within the laity. I found countless articles and books that covered the official teaching of the United Methodist Church when it comes to Christ’s Presence, and pages and pages of bibliographical references to the Eucharistic tendencies of the Wesleys, but missing from these writings were the contemporary thoughts of actual United Methodists on the presence of Christ in Holy Communion. This lack of research is what, ultimately, led to the desire to discover, through my own research, just what it is United Methodists believe, how they developed their beliefs, and the impact of those beliefs on their spiritual lives.

In Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies, Robert Weiss asserts, “We can learn also, through interviewing, about people’s interior experiences. We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their
perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. This is the heart of my research process and methodology. I am interested in learning not only what people believe about Holy Communion, but also their experience at the Table, their interpretations of their experience, and how the experience affects their thoughts and feelings. The bulk of my research and analytical work was done through qualitative interviews.

While qualitative interviews will constitute the “meat” of my research and provide the greatest insight into the understandings and perceptions of United Methodists, I also conducted quantitative research that helped to inform and guide interviews as well as provide support to the legitimacy of the qualitative interviews by surveying a larger pool of respondents. This helped in looking for potential anomalies within the interview group.

**Quantitative Survey**

When setting up the quantitative survey, I wanted to establish some baseline information for the interviews. Because it is not feasible to conduct hundreds of interviews, nor affectively analyze those interviews, I needed to develop a way to ensure that the selected subjects for interviews represented an accurate cross section of United Methodists. By opening up an online survey to a large number of participants, I was...
able to not only gauge United Methodists’ basic thoughts about Holy Communion, but also compare the responses to the interview subjects.

The questions posed in the online survey are not designed to provide a great depth of understanding. However, the questions have been designed to quickly and accurately assess how United Methodists understand the Christ’s Presence, i.e. as a spiritual presence, transubstantiated presence, or unknown reality. Further, the questions seek to determine how important United Methodist believe Holy Communion is to the spiritual health of the congregation, to the individual, and to the denomination as a whole.

The survey was set up on the Qualtrics platform through Duke University. An email was sent to two United Methodist Episcopal areas with links to the online survey. The episcopal areas are the Rio Texas Annual Conference and the Great Plains Annual Conference. The link remained active and open until all interviews were concluded. At that point all data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, was complete, and analysis of the data began.

**Qualitative Interviews**

Qualitative interviews give access to people’s interior experiences. We can learn what people perceive and believe as well as develop insight into how they have come to their perceptions and beliefs. In contrast to quantitative surveys that seek to reveal

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44 An “Episcopal area” is made up of several United Methodist districts with the oversight on a bishop.
statistical information, a qualitative interview that employs fixed questions with open responses makes it possible to report experiences and meanings to supplement the quantitative survey’s proportions and correlations. In order to best hold together the qualitative data with the quantitative data, interviewees were selected only from the area surveyed, specifically from the Rio Texas Annual Conference.

It is not feasible to conduct hundreds of in depth interviews, nor to adequately analyze so much data. Therefore, choosing respondents for research is important in order to get an accurate representational sample. Because I was only able to work with about twenty interviewees, it was important to maximize the range of respondents so that it might more closely resemble the population of United Methodists as a whole. However, the research did not “weigh” ethnic, sex, or age requirements in proportion to the population within Methodism. According to the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, ninety percent of United Methodists identify as Euro American or Caucasian. I did not seek to adhere to a ninety percent Caucasian respondent ratio. Instead, I was intentional about including a diverse group of respondents.


**Ethnic Considerations**

In the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, research was done to determine demographic make up of the United Methodist Church. Four ethnic groups were identified as growing populations within United Methodism. However, among those identified groups, only African Americans and Hispanic Americans make up more than one percent of the total population of United Methodists living in the United States. African Americans represent 6.11%, and Hispanic Americans represent 1.03%. The other two groups that showed an increase in church membership are Pacific Islanders at .19% and people identifying as multi-racial at .78%. It should be noted that the researchers identified some inconsistencies in the multi-racial data that creates doubt in the accuracy of the results.

I chose to include research subjects from three ethnic groups in the interview portion of the research. Because the United Methodist church is ninety percent Caucasian, they were represented in the interview sample. I also chose to include African Americans because they represent the second largest population and show growth in church membership. Hispanic Americans are the fourth largest group, and also show growth in church membership. All other ethnic groups identified in the Finance and Administration study show either a decrease in membership or represent less than one percent of the United Methodist population.
Age Considerations

Age did not play a significant role in our study; however, I was aware of age throughout the analysis process. I was intentional about selecting respondents from multiple adult age ranges. Selected respondents were all between the ages of nineteen and eighty. Children and those under nineteen were not considered for interviews. It is possible that further research using subjects eighteen and under could prove useful in future studies as an interpretive comparison to determine the direction of Eucharistic understanding, but the scope of this research is most interested in current understandings of adult United Methodist members.

Church Size

Interview participants were selected from churches of varying sizes. Some churches represented are small rural congregations, and others are large urban congregations, as well as moderately sized churches in suburban areas. It is important for the integrity of the research to select participants from a cross section of churches, rather than focus on a single congregation, when attempting to study denominational understandings. While I only interviewed participants within the Rio Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, I had a rich diversity of congregations from which to choose participants. Specifics of the churches represented are included in the chapter describing the sample participants.
Research Site

In research where human interaction is the basis for study, it is important to select a research site that does not interfere or elicit false testimony from the subjects. For instance, because this study deals with participants’ thoughts on the Eucharist, I would not want to conduct interviews in a church parlor with depictions of the Last Supper in artwork or among banners with text that emphasize one aspect of Holy Communion over another such as, “Do this in remembrance of me,” or, “This is my body.” Given the nature of interviewing subjects from different churches, in different areas, and different schedules, I was not able to select only one research site to which all subjects might come. Further, I was intentional about conducting interviews on different days and at different locations so that subjects would not have the opportunity to discuss the Eucharist among themselves and so influence each other.

In each case, I was able to schedule the interviews either at the participant’s home church or at the church I currently serve. I worked with the pastors of each church to select a private room for the interviews. In most cases these were rooms that were used for church council meetings. The rooms were often large with a series of folding tables butted against each other to form a conference table. Most of the rooms were filled with bookshelves and utilitarian equipment such as paper cutters and unused coffee pots. One of the rooms included an old upright piano that likely had not been played in decades. The interviews that were conducted at the church I serve were done in a large
Sunday School room. The church is a new building with large rooms. There is a large television mounted on the wall, and a storage cabinet in addition to the two large folding tables where I conducted the interviews.

In each interview, no matter the location, the rooms were in areas where we would not likely be interrupted, and far enough from church offices that the interviews would not likely be overheard by clergy or staff. This was important so that the potential for others to hear would not influence the responses. All interviews were conducted at the corners of the tables with the subject on one side of the corner, and me on the adjoining corner. This allowed for us to be close, but also created a comfortable barrier between us in order to facilitate a safe space for honest responses.
Sample Participants

The people that I interviewed formed a cross section of United Methodist adults in the Rio Texas Annual Conference. They are male and female, Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American, ranging in age from their late 20s to mid 80s. Some grew up United Methodist, while others came to Methodism from other denominations. They attend small churches, large churches, and mid-sized churches. The following are brief descriptions of each interview participant. Including short biographies helps set the table for the chapters on findings and discussion. All of the participants were given pseudonyms.

As with any interview pool, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn. That is why it is important to include these thumbnail sketches of each participant. All of the participants come from a small geographical area in comparison to the global United Methodist Church. It is also true that participation in these interviews was voluntary and no compensation was given for their time, so the fact that they agreed to participate indicates that there is already an inherent interest in Holy Communion on the part of the participant. Therefore, including these brief biographies helps to put the findings and reflection chapters of this thesis into better context.

Ron

Ron grew up in Florida and has been a life-long Methodist. He is married and in his early 60s. He arrived at the church in a Hawaiian aloha shirt very eager to discuss Holy
Communion, but a bit hesitant that he would have any good insights to share. He attends a church of about two-hundred members and plays the guitar in the praise band. He has been on an Emmaus Walk and considers it the peak of his spiritual journey. He was defiant in his faith as a young person. He described himself as a young contrarian. Though he is a life long Methodist, he was part of a Lutheran Youth Group as a teenager, and remembers fondly taking Holy Communion on the beach and using “real wine” in the sacrament.

**Javier**

Javier is a tall, quiet Hispanic man in his late sixties who attends a church of about one hundred fifty members. It is an English speaking church, but most of the members are fluent in Spanish, as is Javier. Spanish is Javier’s native language, but he had no difficulties communicating in English. He is a native of San Antonio, so he is as fluent in English as I am, but Spanish is the primary language of the area of San Antonio that he grew up in. He is retired and enjoys volunteering at the church.

**Gloria**

I met Gloria while visiting a church for another interview. Gloria is an administrative assistant at a church who helped arrange for a conference room. She knew the purpose of my research and told me that she thought it was very interesting, so I invited her to become one of the participants. Gloria brings an Assemblies of God background to the conversation. Growing up, she attended a Spanish speaking
Assemblies of God church, but became a United Methodist as a young adult. Our interview was cut short, slightly, as she needed to pick up her granddaughter from school. Her granddaughter spends a couple of hours with her at the church each day after school.

**Sue**

Sue is a Methodist preacher’s kid. She is seventy-eight years old and attends a church of about one hundred members. She grew up in East Texas, but moved around the country as an adult. Sue enjoyed talking, and could easily get side-tracked in our discussions. It seemed she had almost as many questions for me as I had for her. I tried to avoid answering most of her questions in order to maintain the integrity of the interview. Sue is a widow, and also endured the death of her adult son. She is Caucasian.

**Tina**

Tina is a very animated African American woman in her early 30s. She is single with a penchant for theatrics. She smiled through the entire interview. Tina attends one of the larger predominantly African American United Methodist Churches in the conference. She sings in the choir and enjoys working with the children. Tina is single and very committed to church fellowship. Much of her social life revolves around being involved in the church, from participating in small groups to being involved in justice issues supported by the church. You get the feeling that Tina has never met a stranger.
**Alan**

Alan is in his late 30s, married with two children. He is a business man, but also active in church leadership. He became a United Methodist while attending college, and before that sporadically attended church. He did not hold any previous denominational affiliations. Alan is Caucasian and the member of a small-town church. The town has a population of about three thousand, and the church has a membership of about two hundred. Alan is a certified lay speaker for the United Methodist Church.

**Ann**

Ann is a Caucasian woman, approximately 40 years old. She is a stay at home mother. She and her husband have three children. Ann is not a life-long Methodist. She grew up Presbyterian, then joined a Church of Christ congregation before finding a home in the United Methodist Church about five years ago. Ann is a member of the United Methodist Women and volunteers as the church treasurer in her small congregation of less than one hundred members. Ann is active in the community and regularly volunteers at her children’s school.

**Yolanda**

Yolanda grew up a preacher’s kid. Her father was an ordained Methodist pastor in Mexico. When she was very young her family was able to move to Texas, and that is where Yolanda grew up. Yolanda recently retired as the music director for her church after thirty years of leading the choir. The church she attends has about two hundred
members and has blended, English-Spanish worship. Much of the liturgy and music is a mix of Spanish and English, while the preaching is all done in English. Yolanda is married and in her early seventies.

**Sandra**

Sandra has moved around with her husband all over the country. She is in her late 50s. They do not have any children, but have been very active in youth ministry in every church they have attended. Sandra has been active in the United Methodist Church all of her adult life. Most of the churches she has attended have been churches of around one thousand members. The churches she has been drawn to have both traditional and contemporary services, and she prefers the contemporary services. Sandra is Caucasian.

**Juliet**

Juliet is single and raising her teenage grandson. She had not been active in church until about two years ago. She says that she has always been a believer, and was raised a Christian, but life got in the way of going to church. Juliet is an African-American woman in her early sixties. She attends a church of about two hundred members, mostly Caucasian. It is a contemporary church, and she came to United Methodism because the church was “pretty close to her house,” so she decided to try it. She didn’t really pay much attention to what denomination it was; just that it was Christian and close.
Peggy

Peggy is sixty-two, married and very involved in her church, although she wants to slow down a bit. She has been a children’s Sunday School teacher for more years than she can remember. She has held various leadership roles and served on a wide variety of committees. She currently attends a mid-sized church of about two hundred members, but has been a member of churches that range in membership from only about fifty to well over one thousand. Peggy says that she is pretty conservative in her religious views, but has softened some over the years. Peggy’s children and grandchildren attend the same church as she and her husband.

Dean

Dean is forty-seven years old and a fairly recent convert to United Methodism. He previously attended a non-denominational church and a cowboy church.¹ His switch to Methodism was the result of getting married about three years ago. Dean does not have children, but gained a grown step-daughter with the marriage. He attends regularly, but has not held any leadership positions in the rural United Methodist Church he attends that boasts a membership of around forty people.

¹ Cowboy churches often meet in barns or rodeo arenas and are casual in style with Country Gospel singing. They are often independent or affiliated with non-denominational churches.
**Troy**

Troy is an African American man in his early fifties. He grew up in the United Methodist Church, and both his grandfather and uncle were United Methodist clergy. Troy is an avid outdoorsman who loves to connect with God through nature. Fishing is his sport of choice, but he loves anything related to nature. He is a very friendly man who laughed through much of the interview, expressing that he was enjoying our time together. It was clear that he enjoyed sharing his experience and love of God through conversation. Troy is married and attends a church of about one hundred attendees.

**Linda**

Linda is a semi-retired Caucasian woman. She is in her early sixties and leads the United Methodist Women’s group in her congregation of about one hundred twenty five. Linda has held various leadership positions at her church, but was not serving as a leader at the time of our interview. She is married and has grown children and six grandchildren. She attends a rural church of about one hundred members, but came from a “county seat” type church in a different part of the state that had about three hundred members. Linda has a Presbyterian background, and thinks the Methodist Church “looks” a lot like the Presbyterian Church. She would likely describe herself as not extremely religious, but very active in the church.
Sean

Sean is a member of a mid-sized church of just over two hundred people. The church is in a small town of about two thousand people. Sean is in his late 50s and openly gay. He is the lay leader of his traditionally conservative church. Sean is unmarried and spends much of his time volunteering in his community. Sean was raised in the United Methodist Church, and attends the church he grew up in.

Katherine

Katherine is not originally from Texas. She is a California transplant whose sister is a United Methodist pastor. Katherine is a stay at home mom in her mid thirties, and her husband is in the military. They are the parents of three small children. Katherine is involved with global mission opportunities, especially in Africa. She is also the outreach committee chair, and has been for a few years. Katherine is Caucasian and attends a church in the suburbs with about three hundred members. She maintains some online business opportunities.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a high school teacher in her early fifties. She is married with grown children, but she and her husband are guardians of a niece that came to live with them about five years ago. They attend a church of about two hundred members. It is the only United Methodist Church in their small town. She grew up in the Lutheran tradition, and her great-grandfather was a Lutheran pastor. She attended a Methodist
Church in college, and her husband grew up Methodist. She has attended her current church for almost thirty years. Elizabeth is Caucasian.

**JoLynn**

JoLynn grew up in the Catholic Church in a large Texas city. She is fifty-four years old and has been married for about eight years. She became a United Methodist after marrying her husband, a United Methodist pastor. They were introduced by some mutual friends, and JoLynn resisted converting to Methodism until about two years after they married. She still loves the Catholic Church, her mother is still Catholic, and there have been no family issues when it comes to religion. Her mother attends their United Methodist Church on occasion and will even receive Communion there. JoLynn is African-American, and attends a rural church of about one hundred people.

**Michael**

Michael is sixty-six years old and grew up in the Church of Christ. He is candid about still carrying much of his religious upbringing into the United Methodist Church. He became Methodist when he got married to a life-long Methodist woman. They have four children, and have attended various sized Methodist Churches because they have made several moves in his career. Michael is very concerned about the LGBTQ issues that the church was considering at the time of the interview. Michael expressed the possibility of moving to a Southern Baptist Church if the church makes changes to their standards that he does not agree with.
Kelly

Kelly is a fifty year old Caucasian woman who did not grow up in the United Methodist Church, or any other church. She always believed she was a Christian, because, “that’s just what everybody was growing up.” It was not until she married and had her first child that she began to attend church. She attended a “Bible Church,” which I took to mean a conservative, evangelical church. After her divorce, she found her way to the United Methodist Church, and raised her children in the church. Her two children are grown, and she has married again. Both she and her husband are active in the music ministry of the church.
**Ethics**

All human research was done in compliance with Duke University IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval. Further, a copy of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “Protecting Human Research Participants” certificate of completion is attached in the appendix. Training was completed January 26, 2016; certificate number 1971398. Subjects were not placed at risk of harm by participating in these interviews or surveys.

As noted, formal interviews and an online survey are the primary research methods. Audio recordings were made of each interview. After each interview, field notes were written based on the interview, and later on the audio recordings. While these are not transcripts, they are detailed summaries and first impressions along with quotations that had the potential to be used in analysis and reflection. Notes have been kept in a locked file cabinet, and recorded interviews are kept in a password protected recording device. Audio recordings will be deleted upon final thesis approval.

Some identifiable information may have been collected on the subjects. Although the information could lead to direct identification, much of the information obtained such as: age, sex, former denominational affiliations, and current description of their congregation is not exclusive to them and should not be sufficient to lead to identification without disclosure of the participant’s name. All subjects were assigned a pseudonym when identified in the “participants” section, and when quoted or referred to elsewhere in the thesis.
All survey subjects were required to consent to the following, before they were able to continue to the survey:

The purpose of this research is to better understand what United Methodists believe about Holy Communion and how those beliefs impact their perceived value of it. Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may skip questions, and you may withdraw from the survey at any point. The survey consists of eight questions and should take less than 10 minutes to complete. All responses will be confidential in that you will not be identified or connected to your responses in any way. You may contact me via email at wade.powell@duke.edu. Duke IRB may be contacted at campusirb@duke.edu Please continue to the next page if you agree to participate in the survey.

A similar script was prepared and read to each interview subject prior to interviews.

Consent was given verbally and recorded.

The purpose of this research is to better understand what United Methodists believe about Holy Communion and how those beliefs impact their perceived value of it. The information gathered from interviews will play a role in my doctoral thesis. With your permission, I would like to interview you for about 45 minutes. The questions I will ask are not about private matters. I am interested in your thoughts and opinions about Holy Communion, how you developed your opinions, and what you believe the value of Holy Communion is.

I would like to record the audio of our conversation so that I do not need to take notes during this interview. After the interview, detailed notes will be created, and kept in a locked file cabinet in my office. The audio recording will be deleted upon approval of the thesis. During the interview I will ask for your name so that I can organize my data for analysis, but I will use pseudonyms in the thesis so that your name will not be connected to this project. If you do not want to answer a question, it is perfectly fine to tell me that you do not wish to answer it. I will move on. It is also perfectly fine for you to terminate the interview at any point. I will give you a card so that you can reach me with any
further questions. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?
You may ask questions at any time during the interview.

Information gathered from the interviews will only be used in connection with this thesis and any future publication tied to the thesis. Neither the audio nor the accompanying notes will be distributed for any purpose outside of this research.
Analysis

The purpose of the analysis was not to dig into the Eucharistic understanding of any particular subject, but instead to learn about the attitudes toward Christ’s presence in the Eucharist as a whole. At its core, the purpose of this research is to determine what United Methodists believe about the presence of Christ in Holy Communion, how they came to their beliefs, and how those beliefs impact the value they place on the sacrament. I used a four-fold process in order to analyze the data gathered in the interviews: Coding, sorting, local integration, and inclusive integration.

Coding

In the coding process, I created five headings for each set of codes: Christ’s Presence, six metaphors, beliefs shaped by, frequency, and renewal.

Christ’s Presence

As the interviews and field notes were reviewed, participants were placed in specific categories based on the answers they gave in relation to their beliefs about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Because I anticipated that participants would not likely give clear-cut answers that fit neatly into one of the following five categories, I tried to match them with the category that most closely matched their understanding. I found that some of the participants articulated their understanding in close relation to one category, but eventually determined that their true understanding was a better fit with another category. The five categories are: Memorialist, Spiritual Presence, Consubstantiation,
Transubstantiation, and unknown. After the interviews I eliminated the unknown category, because I did not believe any participant fit the category. The category of Spiritual Presence is most closely aligned with a Wesleyan understanding\(^1\) and affirmed in the official United Methodist teaching.\(^2\) Although there is an element of memorialism in Wesleyan/Methodist understanding, I have associated the memorialist category with the belief that the bread and wine are purely representative of Christ’s body and blood, and as such, memorialism does not encompass the fullness of Wesleyan understanding. Consubstantiation and Transubstantiation are associated with metaphysical transformations of the bread and wine, and are more fully articulated in the “findings” chapter.

**Six Metaphors**

There are six metaphors of the Eucharist that each make up a category within the metaphors code. Those categories are: thanksgiving, fellowship, commemoration, sacrifice, presence or mystery, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Christ’s Presence code, I allowed for the interviewees to fall into multiple categories within this code. It is certainly possible for a participant to discuss Holy Communion as both a sacrifice and commemoration. So, as I read through the field notes and listened to the recorded interviews, I tallied the statements that indicated which category they alluded

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\(^2\) Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, 25
to. For instance, after all of the interviews were analyzed for this code, there were four
that spoke of the Eucharist as thanksgiving, twelve as commemoration, twenty as
sacrifice, zero as presence or mystery, twelve as fellowship, and eight as the work of the
Holy Spirit.

**Beliefs shaped by**

In this code, I pre-selected four categories that I anticipated would be the most likely
to influence the beliefs of the participants. The categories were: scripture study, church
education, sermons, and parents/exemplars. Interestingly, I needed to add two
categories during analysis, because experience was by far the most influential in shaping
the understanding of Holy Communion, followed by music or hymns.

**Frequency**

There were simply three categories within this code: more often, less often, and the
same frequency. The purpose was not to determine the frequency that United
Methodists Churches should celebrate the sacrament. Instead, it was to identify how
frequency may or may not relate to the other codes such as Christ’s Presence. My intent
was to look for patterns of alignment with desired frequency and belief in the presence
of Christ.

**Renewal**

This code should be tied directly to the concluding interview question that asks, “Do
you think the United Methodist Church would experience renewal if there were a
renewed emphasis on the value of Holy Communion?"  There were simply two categories, yes or no.  I anticipated this question would reveal whether there was a correlation between varying degrees of Christ’s Presence and value when compared to other codes. Through the analysis process, I ended up altering the categorizing for this code. It became apparent that there were two viewpoints for renewal. One was a sense of church renewal, and the other was a sense of self-renewal. In order to accurately portray this category I needed to distinguish between the two.

**Sorting**

Sorting is a process of extracting quotes and specific discussions from interviews and placing them within the three areas of interest of this thesis: understanding, shaping, and impact. Further, the use of field notes and quotations were placed in each of the coding categories as relevant for support of the findings within the analysis. While coding helped to quantify the information received in the interviews, the process of sorting continued the process of analyzing the interior understandings by putting voice to the categorizations. This is where personal stories make their way into the analysis. Through this process I was able to visualize and personify the quantified data that would emerge in the findings and discussion chapters.

**Local Integration**

Local integration is where the parts begin to come together. Coding and sorting compile the data in an organized fashion, while local integration connects the dots
within the data. For this process, I read through my field notes once more and revisited the coding and sorting structures, taking additional notes. I used a very low-tech approach of printing selected quotations and notes on large newsprint and posted them on a wall to be able to look at them as one collective and comprehensive data mine to analyze. At this point, I began to make summary judgments about the material relevant to each area of interest and outlined my findings. It was this point of the analysis that I began to note meaning behind material: here is what is being said, and here is what I believe it to mean.

**Inclusive Integration**

As with local integration, inclusive integration further connects the dots by looking at the local integration materials in a way that helps complete the “story.” Inclusive integration seeks to tie findings together in a way that moves logically from one area to the next, culminating in a general conclusion. In short, this portion of the analysis is like the completion of a jigsaw puzzle. Previous areas of analysis may develop a corner or middle portion of the puzzle, but inclusive integration connects all of the areas without leaving any pieces out or inserting pieces that do not fit, so that the material may be looked as a collective whole. I began to identify things that were surprising to my expectations. I saw areas that opened up additional questions. Inclusive integration is where I began to ask, “Where do we go next?”
The process of analysis that I chose was not one that relied heavily upon quantitative data. Of course, during the analysis of the interviews, I continued to refer back to the quantitative data from the survey to see if there were any major inconsistencies. Most of what I learned from the interviews either supported or provided explanations for the data compiled in the survey. Information gathered from the survey is included in the chapter on findings, but no attempt was made to integrate it with the interview subjects.
Findings

Quantitative Survey

The quantitative survey was open to members of the Rio Texas Annual Conference as well as the Great Plains Annual Conference. Individuals were not tracked in the survey, so it is not possible to follow any respondent from answer to answer. A total of three hundred and two people responded to the survey. The following information is a summary of the findings of the eight online survey questions.

The first question simply asked, “Do you believe that Holy Communion is purely symbolic?” They were given only two choices: yes or no. It was important to force the respondents to choose one or the other rather than allow an ambiguous “maybe” from the start. It appears that United Methodists are relatively closely divided on this question. Forty three percent believe that Holy Communion is only a symbolic representation, while fifty seven percent believe that Holy Communion is more than a symbolic representation.

Logic would suggest that the next question, “Do you believe that Christ is present in a spiritual manner in Holy Communion,” would elicit a similarly close divide, however, it is clear that to United Methodists, Christ is spiritually present in the Eucharist. When given the choice ranging from definitely not to definitely yes, an overwhelming ninety four percent agreed that Christ is spiritually present. Eighty three percent selected “definitely yes,” while eleven percent selected “probably yes.”
The next question in the survey was interested in the physical state of the bread and wine. It is a question meant to gauge whether United Methodists are open to the doctrine of transubstantiation similar to a Roman Catholic understanding. “Do you believe that the bread and wine (or juice) are transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ?” Almost half, of the respondents answered, “definitely not.” And, a full sixty-six percent answered either “probably or definitely not.” Twenty one percent affirmed transubstantiation with an answer of “probably or definitely yes.” Sixteen percent of those answered “definitely yes” to the question. So, it seems that a symbolic understanding of the Christ’s Presence does not require a physical transformation of the bread and wine for most United Methodists.

The next question dealt with how vital Holy Communion is to the spiritual health of a Christian. This question was posed on a scale of one to ten, with ten being most vital to the spiritual health of a Christian. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents answered with an eight or higher. Interestingly, over forty-seven percent, the largest percentage of respondents, gave the vitality of Holy Communion a ten. That information is consistent with the next question, which was designed to elicit a more personal evaluation of the value of Holy Communion. Respondents were given five choices in answering the question, “How much would you say that you value Holy Communion?” The choices were: A great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, and none at all. Sixty-nine percent responded “a great deal,” seventeen percent responded “a lot,” to total eighty-six
percent; while eleven percent responded “a moderate amount,” and three percent responded “a little,” and no one responded “none at all.”

The largest number of respondents, seventy-six percent, reported that they usually attend a worship service that includes Holy Communion once per month. Eighteen percent attend a weekly service of Holy Communion. Others reported that they attend services of Holy Communion at various times including quarterly and monthly in addition to special occasions. One respondent reported Holy Communion as an annual observance, and two respondents reported alternating between services that offer weekly and monthly Communion services.

In an effort to determine the correlation between perceived value of Holy Communion and frequency, respondents were invited to indicate if they would prefer to receive Holy Communion more often, less often, or the same as their current level of frequency. Forty-one percent would like to receive Holy Communion more often, fifty-seven percent would like to receive Holy Communion at the same level of frequency that they do now, and two percent would like to receive Holy Communion less often.

The final question in the online survey asked, “Do you think the United Methodist Church would experience renewal if there were a renewed emphasis on the value of Holy Communion?” Possible answers were: Definitely yes, probably yes, might or might not, probably not, and definitely not. My expectation based on the responses indicating that Holy Communion was not only valuable, but vitally important to the
spiritual health of a Christian, led me to anticipate that the answers would land firmly in
the “definitely yes” column. However, the single largest response, at forty-three
percent, was an ambiguous “might or might not.” Twenty percent responded definitely
yes, twenty-six responded probably yes, while ten percent responded probably not, and
one percent responded definitely not.

**Interview findings**

**Christ’s Presence**

While understandings of the presence of Christ can be very nuanced, there were four
basic categories of the understanding of Christ’s Presence in which I wanted to be able
to classify the interview participants. I did not come right out and ask them which
definition of the Christ’s Presence they believed and why; rather I asked them how they
would describe Christ’s presence in Holy Communion. From the ensuing discussion, I
classified their understanding as either: memorialist, spiritual presence,
consubstantiated presence, transubstantiated presence, or a combination of
understanding. I also, tentatively, included a category of “don’t know.”

Memorialism is often associated with Ulrich Zwingli, who rejected the Roman
Catholic concept of transubstantiation, instead teaching that the bread and wine are
symbols to help believers remember Jesus’ passion and death. The function of the
bread and wine are to help worshippers to contemplate salvation through Jesus’

1 Laurence Hull Stookey, Christ’s Feast With the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 54.
sacrifice. For the purposes of this research, I am less concerned with assigning a the label “memorialism” only to those expressing a precisely Zwinglian view, but applying it more generally to any interpretation that concludes Holy Communion is nothing more than a cerebral recollection, and that therefore the elements are merely symbolic.

Consubstantiation is a term that many assign to a Lutheran understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Laurence Hull Stookey quotes Luther as saying, “I believe the Lord is particularly made known in the breaking of the bread; since I cannot accept transubstantiation, I will explain the Eucharistic Presence in another new way.”\(^2\) Rather than stick to a purely Lutheran definition of consubstantiation, I am using this term as a way to explain Christ’s physical presence in the bread and wine as being, “in, with, and under.” Consubstantiation is classified as the “also” definition. The bread is truly bread, but Christ is present, also. The wine is truly wine, but Christ is present, also. Christ is separate from the elements, but also connected.

Transubstantiation is a term that describes the Eucharistic doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. It is the understanding that the substance of bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Christ, while the “accidents” of taste, smell, and texture of bread and wine remain. The Eucharist is quite literally the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ as understood by the doctrine of transubstantiation.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Stookey, *Christ’s Feast With the Church*, 58.
\(^3\) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374.
A Spiritual Presence is a bit more difficult to describe. To be sure, there is a broad range of Spiritual Presence understanding. For my purposes in this research, I am taking the official United Methodist position on the Christ’s Presence as a plumb-line for Spiritual Presence. *This Holy Mystery* states:

United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ’s presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord’s Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God’s saving gift for the whole world.⁴

As I began this quest to better understand what United Methodists believed about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, I did so with the expectation that I would find most have a low understanding of the Christ’s presence. By “low,” I mean that I assumed most United Methodists would have a non-sacramental understanding that rejects mystery in favor of memory. Mark Mann agrees with my pre-research assessment, writing, “Meanwhile, many of those who call themselves Wesleyan have embraced a memorialist doctrine of the Eucharist, which we practice relatively infrequently (once a month at best), while emphasizing what Jim Fitzgerald has called a

⁴ Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, 25.
'preaching centered' worship and piety that has generally led to the marginalization and denigration of the Eucharist in worship.”⁵

I was surprised to find that Mann, Fitzgerald, and myself were quite misguided in our assessments of what United Methodists believe about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. However, without specific research into the actual beliefs of the people called Methodists, I believe most people would come to the same conclusion. Recalling the survey results, forty-three percent of respondents affirmed that Holy Communion is purely symbolic. The vast majority of the subjects I interviewed often used terms like “symbols” and “remembrance” in their descriptions of Holy Communion. Included in my field notes from Jason’s interview, I was certain at the beginning of the interview that he held a memorialist understanding; however as the interview went on, I realized that he simply had a memorialist way of speaking about Holy Communion, while his actual understanding affirmed a spiritual presence. He recited for me his favorite hymn, I Come With Joy to Meet My Lord, and paused for dramatic effect as he came to the fourth verse, “And thus with joy we meet our Lord. His presence, always near, is in such friendship better known, we see and praise him here.”⁶ As he concluded the hymn, he told me that he worries about the affect our liturgy has on people because “body and blood” seem so morbid, and then spoke plainly his belief, “It’s not the literal body and

blood; it’s a deeper meaning; it’s a spiritual meaning.” For Jason, the mystery is not in what happens to the bread and wine, as he says, it is “deeper” than that. As we talked, it became apparent that he believes in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist; however, defining it is of little concern to him. Experiencing it, on the other hand, is everything.

Each person I interviewed had at least some level of confidence in a spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some walked closer to a transubstantiated presence, but were careful not to cross that line, while others walked nearer a symbolic understanding, but were unwilling to accept that the Eucharist was simply our remembrance of a past event. No one offered any definitive metaphysical explanation to what happens to the bread and wine, affirming Mark Stamm’s assertion that the Eucharist is experiential rather than technical.7

Yolanda, whose father was a Methodist pastor in Mexico before coming to the United States, was one of the interviewees that came closest to the idea of transubstantiation. She was adamant that she did not accept the Eucharist as a strictly symbolic or memorialist view. In fact, during our time together, I began to wonder if, through her upbringing, there was more of a Catholic influence on her understanding of the Christ’s presence than a Methodist influence. According to a 2010 study, eighty-three percent of those living in Mexico identify as Roman Catholic, and only eight

7 Stamm, Sacraments and Discipleship, 90.
percent as Protestant. Interestingly, Yolanda was very careful to do her best to distinguish her understanding from that of the Catholic Church. She said, “I think the bread and wine are His body and blood, though not like the Catholics. The way I take communion is very similar to the way the Catholics take it, but different.” I began to see that she had a difficult time wrestling with the concept of the bread and wine representing Christ, versus the bread and wine becoming Christ. It reminded me of something Robert Stamps once said in recalling how his mother described how Methodists view Holy Communion. She said, “Methodists believe more than the Baptists, but less than the Catholics.” Though Yolanda did not articulate her understanding in the specific terms that are typically used to describe Christ’s presence, I believe her understanding was that of a spiritual presence experienced through representative elements of bread and wine.

Sue was at the other end of the spectrum from Yolanda. As we discussed Christ’s presence, she was clear in her statement, “It represents the last night Christ was on earth.” Of course, what she was saying was that our observance of Holy Communion is a commemoration of the Last Supper. Like many others that I interviewed, if I had left the conversation there, I would have missed her actual understanding of Holy Communion, which delves into the reality of a spiritual presence. Sue spent a good bit

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8 Institute of National Statistics and Geography, Panoramas de las Religiones en Mexico (Mexico: Secretary of the Interior, 2010)
9 Robert Stamps made this statement during a course on Sacramental Theology that he taught at Asbury Theological Seminary in the summer of 2010.
of time contrasting her understanding to a Catholic understanding. She went on a trip to Italy with a group of Catholics, and this seemed to shape how she framed her discussion of Holy Communion. She said that the Catholics described transubstantiation to her, but she believes that it is a representation. Not being able to receive the Eucharist on the trip seemed to cause a spiritual rift between her and the rest of the group: if not on the surface, at least in how she felt. Sue is in her eighties, and the anti-Catholic bias was a stream that ran through the entire interview. It was not just her recollection of the trip to Italy, but also a sentiment that was expressed as she described her upbringing in the Methodist Church. This distinction seemed to magnify her expression of what she said she believed about Holy Communion as a representation. She said that she felt looked down upon by Catholics, and added, “I wonder what God thinks about y’all leaving people out of Communion? In the Methodist Church we feel like everybody; from the wealthiest to the poorest, probably even a serial killer could come and we’d invite him because, who knows when it might be a time when that person is touched and it turns their life around?” This touches on the notion of John Wesley’s “converting ordinance” discussion in a letter responding to the Moravian Fetter Lane Society that takes issue with believers abstaining from Holy Communion because of insufficient faith.\(^\text{10}\) While Sue and many other Methodists have taken this to

\(^{10}\) Dawn Chesser, “World Communion Sunday 2013 and Communion as a Converting Ordinance,” Equipping Disciples: A Discipleship Ministries Blog (September 10, 2013): accessed February 17, 2019,
mean anyone and everyone should be offered the Eucharist, Wesley was likely only addressing those baptized Christians that had been instructed to abstain by fellow Moravian Phillip Henry Molther. Still, being denied Holy Communion in the Catholic Church seemed to reaffirm her commitment to distinguish her beliefs regarding the Eucharist from Catholicism.

Based on our conversation, I do not believe that she would ever admit to a belief that used the word “presence” as a descriptor, simply because it may sound too Catholic, but what she described was an understanding of Christ’s presence. She spoke of Holy Communion being a direct line to God. And, then she unknowingly spoke of her self-described memorialist understanding in terms that describe anamnesis,11 bringing together a remembrance and representative quality that painted the picture of a reenactment that goes beyond an act of the human mind and body. Sue is a widow that had also lost a son. She connected Holy Communion to entering her son’s room after his death. It was more than just remembering him; it was encountering him in a way that was different than when she simply thought about him. Realizing that she had just described something much closer to an understanding of Christ’s presence than simple

11 Anamnesis is a Greek term for remembrance that means, “to lay hold of events so significant that in their retelling and symbolic reenactment they reach forward and touch us in the present, sometimes in quite vivid, profound, and life-changing ways.” Stamm, Sacraments and Discipleship, 97.
symbolism, she softened on her Catholic stance by adding, “When you get down to the basics of it, whether you believe it’s the actual body and blood or a representation of it, it still stands for the same thing.”

To my surprise, each person I interviewed expressed a belief of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. While their initial reaction may not have been to articulate it as Christ’s presence, every one of them described a spiritual presence. Although it wasn’t until some conversation about Holy Communion exposed their belief in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, there were several whose instant reaction was a firm and well articulated belief in a spiritual presence. None was more complete and self-assured than Ron. Every word he used to describe Holy Communion had the word “presence” in it: guiding presence, spiritual presence, omnipresent. He said, “In taking communion, we are inviting Christ’s presence. Not that he isn’t always present, but we are supplicating him to be in our conscious presence.” Ron was raised in the church, but admitted being a bit agnostic in his younger years. I asked Ron if his understanding of Holy Communion changed through the years, considering his dance with agnosticism. He answered me by saying that his ideas about Holy Communion didn’t really change over the years. He said, “I had the same ideas back then, but I didn’t necessarily believe it. My experience has changed, but my ideas haven’t.” Ron expressed several times that he has not really been a student of what the church teaches about Holy Communion, but his experience at the table is what has primarily shaped his understanding. In fact, he
has studied Holy Communion in scripture, and said that he finds himself in agreement with the disciples mentioned in John’s Gospel in relation to Holy Communion, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” In Ron’s explanation, he looks to these disciples and agrees that the teaching of eating actual flesh and drinking actual blood seems unlikely, but believes that Jesus is true to his word in that, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” This also agrees with his experience at the Table. He is adamant about experiencing the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, but says that he cannot accept the idea of transubstantiation, therefore he concludes, “Christ is definitely spiritually present.”

Thomas Kempis writes in The Imitation of Christ, “You should guard against curious and useless prying into this most profound Sacrament if you do not want to sink into an abyss of doubt.” He continues, “Submit yourself to God and rely on your faith, and you will receive all the knowledge that you need.” This, I believe, is a close description of what I saw in the people I interviewed. They did not develop their beliefs about Christ’s presence based on deep research into what John Wesley, the church, or scripture teaches about Holy Communion. Instead, their understandings were shaped by their experience, which led them to accept the reality of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist without needing to be able to clearly define it.

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Six Metaphors

Yngve Brilioth identified five New Testament metaphors of the Eucharist in 1926, and James White added the work of the Holy Spirit to include a sixth.\textsuperscript{13} By associating the responses of the interviewees with the six metaphors, we are able to get an even better sense of what United Methodists believe about Holy Communion. In addition to the work of the Holy Spirit, the metaphors are: thanksgiving, fellowship, commemoration, sacrifice, and mystery or presence. Interview subjects were not asked to choose one of the six metaphors, nor rank the metaphors. In fact, I did not reveal anything about the metaphors to the research subjects. Instead, I listened to their explanations of how they felt when taking Holy Communion, and their responses to questions about the liturgy of the Great Thanksgiving for clues about how they saw the Eucharist in relation to each of the six metaphors. I did not limit my field notes to select the metaphor that the individual emphasized the most; instead, I noted each of the metaphors that emerged within our conversation.

Thanksgiving

The word “Eucharist” is derived from the Greek word meaning thanksgiving. The institution of the Lord’s Supper in each of the synoptic Gospels includes Jesus giving thanks before breaking the bread.\textsuperscript{14} The Emmaus encounter in Luke’s Gospel shows

\textsuperscript{13} White, \textit{Introduction to Christian Worship}, 249.
Jesus giving thanks before breaking the bread at the moment the disciples recognized him.\textsuperscript{15} As Paul recounts the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians, he recalls that Christ gave thanks before breaking the bread and giving it to the disciples. There are parallels of the Eucharist in the Gospel accounts of the miracle of Jesus feeding the multitudes with only a small bit of bread and fish. In each of these accounts Jesus blesses and gives thanks before the breaking of the bread. Indeed, our Holy Communion liturgy is titled, The Great Thanksgiving. Further, the opening dialogue includes the directive and affirmation to give thanks to the Lord, and follows with the declaration, “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you.”\textsuperscript{16}

Because there is such a strong emphasis on thanksgiving, I was surprised that only one of the twenty people I interviewed included thanksgiving as a reaction to Holy Communion. In addition to thanksgiving, Rita spoke of fellowship and sacrifice. When asked how she felt when she received Holy Communion, Rita simply said, “thank you,” which she repeated several times for emphasis. I believe her response of, “thank you,” is a result of her understanding of Holy Communion as a sacrifice. Rita was one of the interviewees that skewed more toward a literal interpretation of the presence of Christ, though not accepting transubstantiation. She recalled a service of Holy Communion

\textsuperscript{16} The United Methodist Book of Worship, 36.
alongside a Tenebrae service\textsuperscript{17} that helped tie her understanding of the Passion of Christ to the Eucharist, after which she repeated again, in a whisper, “thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord Jesus.”

**Fellowship**

Just as Paul recounted Christ giving thanks upon breaking the bread in his letter to the Corinthians,\textsuperscript{18} he also emphasized the importance of community within the breaking of the bread. There is a strong emphasis on fellowship as Paul admonished the Corinthians in their oligarchic approach to convening the Table of the Lord. He wrote, “I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.” (1 Corinthians 11:18-19) It seems that Paul was very disturbed that the people of Corinth are excluding some believers of a lower social class and indulging themselves without, “discerning the body.”\textsuperscript{19} It may seem that Paul was referring here to Christ’s literal presence in the Eucharist, asking if the participants understand that the bread and wine are the literal body and blood of Jesus. However, an argument can be made that Paul is actually referring to the community of believers as the Body. Put in context, Paul is not excoriating the Corinthians for an improper understanding of the physical

\textsuperscript{17} A Tenebrae service is usually held on Good Friday, and is done in candle light with a gradual extinguishing of candles until the service ends in total darkness.

\textsuperscript{18} 1 Corinthians 10-11.

\textsuperscript{19} 1 Corinthians 11:30.
properties of the bread and wine; instead he is ridiculing them for not recognizing the fellowship of community as the Body of Christ while partaking in the Holy Meal.

There was a strong sense of fellowship among the people that were interviewed. Twelve of the twenty participants included fellowship as a major theme in Holy Communion. Some saw Holy Communion as a place to unite the world, as in World Communion Sunday. Another tied the words of the Communion liturgy, “By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,” to a conviction that he doesn’t always see others as being one with Christ as he should. One of the participants noted that in her church, communion stewards make an effort to speak the name of the person receiving the bread or cup, saying, “Esther, this is the blood of Christ shed for you.” She said that this type of personal connection helps emphasize, to her, that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and that we are all united at the Table as a family that knows one another. She acknowledged that the stewards don’t always know the name of everyone coming forward, but that they try to make an effort to connect in a personal way by saying, “friend, or beloved,” when addressing the communicant. Though Sue was discussed in the previous section on Christ’s Presence, the exclusion she felt as a result of not being permitted to receive Holy Communion with her Catholic friends is further evidence of the importance of

20 World Communion Sunday is celebrated on the first Sunday of October by several different denominations in an effort to promote unity.
21 The United Methodist Book of Worship, 38.
22 Communion stewards are people that assist in serving Holy Communion.
community as a metaphor for the Eucharist. While Sue’s discussion tended to lean more toward sacrifice and the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the six metaphors, the hurt she felt as a result of being excluded cannot be missed as an indicator of the importance of fellowship and communion in the Eucharist.

**Commemoration**

There were twelve interview participants that included commemoration as a metaphor for the Eucharist. When talking about the liturgy of the Eucharist, I found that the participants were much more inclined to talk about Holy Communion from a contemporary understanding of remembrance. However, while reviewing the comprehensive field notes of the entirety of the interviews, I was interested to find that commemoration was more connected to the anamnesis understanding of remembrance that seems to transcend linear time. It was noted by several of the participants that the Great Thanksgiving tells us that Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Further, the most impactful and dramatic part of the Great Thanksgiving, according to the interviewees, is the reenactment of the Last Supper. At this point, the pastor recalls the night that Jesus gathered with the disciples in the Upper Room and shared the Passover meal with them. The prayer continues as the pastor lifts both the loaf of bread and cup at appropriate moments saying, “On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, and said:
'Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."^{23}

Both the lifting of the elements and the spoken words play important roles in the aspect of remembrance.

While preparing for the research for this thesis, I did some informal polling within my own congregation. One Sunday, I neglected to lift the bread and cup as I prayed the Great Thanksgiving; neither did I gesture much during the prayer. After the service, I asked the congregation to give me their impressions of how Holy Communion was celebrated. The majority of those that responded said that they did not like that I skipped the part about the Last Supper. As a matter of fact, I did not skip any part of the Great Thanksgiving, but without the gestures and movement, the commemoration aspects of the prayer were reduced in their perceptions to an insignificant level. When most of the interviewees discussed the Great Thanksgiving, it was the recollection of the Last Supper and institution of Holy Communion that they felt was most significant about the prayer.

One of the things that seemed to be missed by the people I interviewed was that the entirety of the Great Thanksgiving as a commemoration or recollection of the salvific works of God through Jesus Christ. When speaking of remembrance they tended to focus primarily on the command to, “do this in remembrance of me,”^{24} which they

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^{23} The United Methodist Book of Worship, 37

^{24} Ibid.
surmised was aimed directly at the eating and drinking of the bread and wine. The expanse of the Eucharistic prayer begins with creation, followed by an acknowledgement of our sin and redemption through the new covenant in Christ’s blood, before recounting the events of the Last Supper. Indeed, the Eucharist is a commemoration of salvation through Jesus Christ as the liturgy explains, “by the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.” While none of the participants discussed Holy Communion as a commemoration of salvation, I am inclined to believe that the works of Jesus Christ are commemorated internally by United Methodists.

Sacrifice

United Methodists do not call the service of Holy Communion a sacrifice, unlike the Roman Catholics, who refer to their services of Holy Communion as the sacrifice of the Mass. However, it must be noted that there is much sacrificial imagery in the Methodist liturgy, and that seems to have influenced the perception of those I interviewed. Every person I interviewed included some sort of sacrificial language when discussing the Eucharist, particularly the Great Thanksgiving. I do not believe, however, that any of the interviewees believed there was an actual sacrifice occurring on an altar table in the church. Instead, they spoke of sacrifice in terms of Jesus’ sacrifice that is re-presented in the Great Thanksgiving. I would submit that of the six metaphors, commemoration and
sacrifice are tied closely together in the minds of United Methodists. Holy Communion brings to mind his sacrifice as a moment in history that has endured as a present reality.

One of the respondents watched the movie *Passion of the Christ*, and mentioned that after watching that movie she has “never taken Communion that Christ’s sacrifice didn’t hit home with me.” Another speaks of sacrifice in terms of cleansing. She sees Holy Communion as a cleansing tied to Christ’s sacrifice as atonement for her sins. I pressed her in order to determine if she was suggesting that the bread and wine were sin-cleansing agents to which she replied, “no, no the bread and juice don’t do anything. Jesus cleansed me of my sin, the bread and juice just connect me with my savior.” This further supports that United Methodists do not see Holy Communion as a sacrifice separate from Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, but rather a commemoration of that sacrifice that links us to Christ’s enduring sacrifice. Yet another mentioned that when he takes Communion, he receives Jesus as he offers his “spiritual burdens,” to Christ. I took this to mean that through Holy Communion he receives grace, and his response to grace is to offer his burdens to Jesus who sacrifices himself for our sins.

**Presence / Mystery**

We have discussed “presence” thus far at length, but while every interviewee spoke of the Eucharist in a way that would affirm Christ’s presence, none of the respondents

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25 The Passion of Christ is a movie directed by Mel Gibson and produced by Icon Productions and released in 2004 based on the passion narrative of the New Testament.
offered any type of “presence” or “mystery” language when discussing the Great Thanksgiving. As mentioned earlier, most of the respondents avoided that type of language when discussing the presence of Christ, but upon further examination it became clear that the presence of Christ was a reality for United Methodists, it is just difficult for United Methodists to comfortably articulate. It could be that their reluctance to clearly define metaphysical interpretations of Holy Communion emphasizes their openness to accepting a reality that they are not able to define, as long as they are not compelled to define it.

**Work of the Holy Spirit**

The epiclesis of the Great Thanksgiving specifically invokes the work of the Holy Spirit. “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine,”26 implies that there is a certain change in the elements that invoke the presence of Christ. The Spirit is further invoked to bring the communicants into union with Christ and each other.

For those that I interviewed, the work of the Holy Spirit is not only implied through the Great Thanksgiving, but it is the driver of the divine encounter. If the presence of Christ is the gift of Holy Communion, it is the Holy Spirit that delivers that gift. As one of the participants puts it, “The Holy Spirit reaches out through Holy Communion to save us.” Another looks at Communion through the work of the Holy Spirit as an

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26 *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 38
invitation, “for the Holy Spirit to come and take command of my life.” These two participants combine to reiterate the epiclesis that calls for the Spirit to redeem us through the blood of Christ, and to lead us to greater unity and ultimate victory.  

**Shaped By**

For the people interviewed, experience is the leading factor in what shaped their understanding of Holy Communion. There was no other factor that even came close to the significance of actual experience. Liturgy and music were a distant second and third, while sermons, intentional scripture study, and church education did not make the list. One person noted observing how her father approached the sacrament was an influence on her understanding, and another noted how teaching her granddaughter about how to receive Holy Communion helped shape her respect for the Eucharist.

Tammy recalled her experience on the Walk to Emmaus\(^\text{28}\) retreat, which was “the most beautiful and spiritual weekend [she has] ever had.” On a four day Emmaus Walk, Holy Communion is celebrated each day. While there is a brief discussion of the means of grace that includes the Eucharist, there is no lengthy explanation of theological or doctrinal teachings about Holy Communion. Instead, pilgrims are given the opportunity to participate in and experience the Eucharist daily as a way to intimately encounter God. Tammy has carried that experience with her each time she receives

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\(^{27}\) *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 38

\(^{28}\) The walk to Emmaus is an experience of Christian spiritual renewal and formation that begins with a three-day short course in Christianity. It is an opportunity to meet Jesus Christ in a new way as God’s grace and love is revealed through other believers.
Communion, and also as she takes the sacrament to the homebound. “Once your eyes are opened to what the Lord’s Supper truly is, you can’t help but love everything about it. That’s why I volunteer to take Communion to the shut-ins. It makes a difference. I know it does. I’ve felt it; I’ve seen it.”

Javier also attributed his current beliefs and understandings of Holy Communion to experience. He told me that things tend to get clearer as you get older. He grew up in the church, and has taken Communion all of his life. He was not able to point to any specific incident that taught him about the sacrament. He did not recall ever hearing a sermon preached about Holy Communion in over sixty years; however he was quick to point out that he doesn’t remember every sermon he’s ever heard. The experience Javier spoke of went beyond consuming bread and drinking wine. Javier’s described experiencing God through the entire ritual. Yes, receiving the elements were a big part of his experience, shaping his understanding, but he noted that he had also been formed through singing the Eucharistic hymns and feeling the presence as a result of the open table practiced by United Methodists. He offered the parable of the wedding banquet29 as he concluded, “You come as you are, and in the process there is repentance.” Javier had clearly experienced the loving forgiveness of Jesus Christ in the sacrament, and was amazed at God’s invitation to everyone to receive him through the Eucharist.

When speaking about how she came to understand Holy Communion, Esther got very emotional as her mind seemed to take in all of the influences, and she whispered with a slight crack in her voice, “It is a way of life.” She paused and smiled and told me that her very favorite hymn is “El Senor Nos Ama Hoy”, which tells of Christ’s salvific work and love for us with the chorus, “Es mi cuerpo: tomad y comed, es mi sangre tomad y bebed; pues yo soy la vida, yo soy el amor. Oh Senor, conducenos hasta tu amor!” (This is my body: take and eat, this is my blood take and drink, for I am life and I am love. Lord, lead us to your love.) As we talked, I got the impression that she was not necessarily shaped by the hymns so much as she loved the hymns that tended to articulate what she had experienced at the Table.

It was clear that there has been a lack of teaching in the United Methodist Church about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. However, the lack of teaching has not kept Christ from being experienced in the sacrament. Since there has been no clear teaching, there has also been no teaching that excludes the presence of Christ. I believe there has been a natural tendency for Protestants to reject a Catholic understanding of Christ’s Presence, so without a clearly defined way to articulate what United Methodists believe, they speak in terms of symbols and use memorialist language, while holding views of a spiritual presence based on their experience.

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Frequency

The official position of the United Methodist church encourages weekly celebration of Holy Communion, but, again, the question is not, “What does the United Methodist church say?” Rather, “What do United Methodists say and why?” Although weekly celebration of the sacrament is encouraged, many congregations do not include Holy Communion on a frequent basis, with many celebrating once per month or less. None of the people I interviewed advocated for celebrating Holy Communion less frequently than monthly, neither did they advocate for weekly celebration. Most of them preferred to continue taking Holy Communion without any change to their current pattern, however some indicated that they would not be opposed to more frequent Communion.

Ron grew up Methodist, and has always taken Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month. That pattern has been engrained in him, but he also believes it adds to the service when it is included on special occasions such as weddings, Christmas Eve, Easter, and other “significant holy days” as he called them. Likewise, Gina wants to continue taking Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month because that is what she grew up with, though she could not imagine taking Holy Communion less often. And, if she ever isn’t able to make it to church on the first Sunday of the month, “she feels very bad for weeks.” I took this to mean that she is spiritually and emotionally

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31 Felton, This Holy Mystery, 34
low, and not ill for weeks. However, the prospect of having Holy Communion more often as a way to avoid “missing” Holy Communion Sunday was not enough to overcome her nostalgic pattern of monthly reception.

Gloria lived in another state for a few years, and the United Methodist church she attended offered Holy Communion every week. Gloria is one of two people I interviewed that grew up as the child of a Methodist pastor. She said that she did not particularly like Holy Communion each week, explaining, “I don’t know why. I just wasn’t used to it because that’s not how daddy did it. But, I don’t think it is bad to do it weekly.”

One of the participants, Jason, mentioned earlier, discussed his hesitancy to increase the frequency of Holy Communion by pointing out that he believes, “Our human nature is that if we do it more often, like our Catholic brothers and sisters, it starts to lose its meaning.” Jason had expressed his objection to the use of the terms body and blood for Communion as something that might hinder others from receiving, but he also held a “deeper” understanding of the sacrament than a simple physical transformation. His fear of increasing frequency may indicate a receptionist view of the Christ’s Presence in that Christ’s presence is dependent on our ability to appreciate its reality.

Over all, United Methodists are content with taking Holy Communion on a monthly basis. Some do not object to more frequency, but each one I interviewed objected to less
frequency. The most common reason given was because, “that is the way we have always done it.” At least, that’s the way all those I interviewed have always done it.

Renewal

Participants were asked, “Do you think the United Methodist Church would experience renewal if there were a renewed emphasis on the value of Holy Communion?” To my surprise, the overwhelming response was, “no.” After spending the better part of an hour with each of the people I interviewed, my closing question centered on renewal. Even after spending quite a bit of time explaining to me why they believed Holy Communion was vitally important to the spiritual health of Christians, none of them were confident that a renewed emphasis on Holy Communion would have a great effect on the church. Many seemed almost apologetic in their responses, but were candid with their answers. There were no tangible explanations as to why they did not think there would be much effect on renewal. A common response was, “I just don’t think it would have much effect.” The few that expressed a moderate amount of hope for renewal still tempered that hope by suggesting that there were other things that might have a greater impact on renewing the United Methodist Church. One said, “It would probably renew it, but what concerns me more is the low attendance numbers. If there’s no one there to take Communion, how can it renew the church?” Another thought that the renewal would come as a result of better education of the Eucharist.
His concern is that some people do not feel worthy to take Holy Communion, but if they understood it better, that might change, and the result would be a stronger church.

Clearly, the participants believe that Holy Communion has a strong effect on individuals, and all of them agreed that it is vital to spiritual health, but they did not connect individual spiritual health to the health or renewal of the church. Rita said, “Holy Communion impulses me to go out and do what I do,” but it seems that the sentiment stops with Rita’s response to Communion, without consideration of how individual responses impact the whole church.
Discussion

As I began research on Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church, the idea was to “recover” the Eucharist. I was convinced that Holy Communion had largely been neglected by both lay and clergy persons in much of United Methodism. I suspected that there was a chasm where the theology of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist should be. I speculated that United Methodists would want to center worship and their spiritual lives around the Eucharist if there were a rich understanding of Jesus’ extraordinary presence in the sacrament. Although I wanted to remain objective in my research, the underlying motivation was my perception that United Methodists undervalued the Eucharist, and therefore, neglected its importance and relegated it to something we do once a month that often causes the worship service to go long.

My perceptions were based first on my experience, and second on unscientific internet searches. There were a few basic thoughts that continued to crop up in Holy Communion discussions online. Among those arguments that seemed to denigrate Holy Communion: It takes too long to do it very often; if we do it every week it seems too Catholic; it won’t be special if we do it every week. These all have to do with the frequency or infrequency that people want Holy Communion to be celebrated. I initially thought frequency was a decent gauge of perceived value, especially since two of the three arguments for infrequent celebration did not seem to have much to do with spiritual gratification. The first was a matter of convenience that the service would take
too much time, and the second was a somewhat bigoted fear that United Methodists could be compared to Catholics. Only the third seemed to hold any real merit that it could become less special, but I wanted to dismiss it as well, because it did not line up with my personal preference. If United Methodists understood Christ to be truly present, how could anyone be fearful that His presence would become less special? I surmised that the only answer could be that United Methodists’ under-appreciation of the Lord’s Supper was a result of the denial of Christ’s presence in the holy meal. What I found in my research, however, is that United Methodists actually value Holy Communion more that I thought, and they have a much better understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist than I thought.

As I analyzed the initial survey results, I saw a divide between how United Methodists understand the presence of Christ and how they express that understanding. It appeared that Holy Communion was viewed as only a symbolic gesture by almost half of the people that responded. This was actually lower than my expectations, as I anticipated at least two-thirds of the respondents to affirm a memorialist point of view. Then, given the opportunity to express Christ as spiritually present, ninety-four affirmed a spiritual presence. I was taken aback by that revelation, and quickly found the results of the survey that overwhelmingly affirmed United Methodists value Holy Communion a great deal. Could it be that Methodists, indeed, value Holy Communion and have a theology of the Christ’s presence in the Eucharist?
The interviews certainly affirmed what the survey initially revealed. United Methodists believe in the presence of Christ, and view Holy Communion as sacred and valuable. I believe that, if the question were asked to the average United Methodist, “Can you explain what Holy Communion is,” the majority would speak in terms of symbolic remembrance; however, if pressed to go into greater detail, they would begin to reveal an understanding closely aligned with a Spiritual Presence interpretation. The people I interviewed gave examples of how Holy Communion impacted their lives. And, when it comes down to it, the people I interviewed were much more interested in telling me how Holy Communion transforms them, than how the elements themselves were transformed. Many years ago, I read Sunday Dinner by Will Willimon, and it became one of my favorite books about Holy Communion. I think what set it apart was that it didn’t seek to explain doctrinal understandings of the Methodist Church or espouse Wesley’s teachings on the sacrament. Instead, Willimon emphasizes the experience of Holy Communion, woven through stories from life and scripture that reveal the realities of Christ’s presence. In the introduction, Willimon writes, “We cannot say everything that could be said about this experience, nor should we try. The command of Jesus is, ‘Take, eat,’ not, ‘Take, understand.’ At times our church has been guilty of giving people mere explanations about God when what they want most is an experience of God.”33 I would argue that although United Methodists may have been

33 Willimon, Sunday Dinner, 11.
given explanations about God, what impacts their understandings the most is their experience.

Any teaching that is done on the Eucharist should include a comprehensive exploration of The Great Thanksgiving. One of the things that I found, as stated in the findings chapter under *commemoration* was that participants were quick to grasp the directive to, “do this in remembrance of me,” but did not seem to respond to the entirety of the Eucharistic liturgy. In doing so, it may be easy to miss Holy Communion as a means of grace through the larger context of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Further, the liturgy incorporates participation from the communicant beyond simply consuming the bread and wine. While much of what United Methodists seem to understand about the Eucharist is derived from experience and encounter, would experience and encounter be enhanced through significant teaching or preaching on The Great Thanksgiving? As noted in the findings, some of the interviewees cringed at the mention of “body and blood” in the Eucharistic liturgy. Opportunities to clarify and discuss, contextually, the use of these terms may actually lead to a better understanding, which may help bridge the gap that causes many to recoil when those terms are used.

As I prepared for this research, I watched numerous celebrations of Holy Communion through online media. I was somewhat disturbed by one such service in a contemporary worship setting at a United Methodist Church. Multiple plates were set out with communion wafers along with multiple cups of juice. A brief prayer was
offered in which Jesus was thanked for the blessings of life. Following the “amen,” the congregation was urged to come forward and receive the bread and juice as a token of remembrance. There was no apparent liturgy used that gave thanks for the saving works of Jesus Christ; no acknowledgement of our sinfulness or redemption in Christ; no words of epiclesis calling upon the Holy Spirit; and no mention of our union with God and the rest of the Body. My fear is that this means of encounter could lend itself to Holy Communion being our action, rather than the work of God who meets us at the Table. Without the guidance of liturgy, taking and eating may be considered a dutiful reenactment rather than an encounter with the Risen Lord.

In comparing how contemporary United Methodists approach the Lord’s Table with how early American Methodists experienced Holy Communion, I can see a continuation of the same sacramental desire. The common thread is not the adherence to Wesleyan sacramental doctrine, but the presence of God in their experience.

According to Lester Ruth, Methodists in the late 1700s had a strong desire for the sacrament as a result of evangelical Protestantism.34 Ruth’s description of early Methodists contrasted doctrine and experience by writing, “Rather than saying early Methodists had a ‘high’ doctrine of sacramental presence, it is more accurate to say they had a ‘high’ sense of it,”35 falls right in line with what I discovered about contemporary

35 Ruth, A little Heaven Below, 138.
United Methodists. Those that I interviewed were clearly in love with God, and sought opportunities to grow in their faith, but did not have a clear way to articulate, doctrinally, their understanding of Christ’s presence in Holy Communion. However, through conversation it was clear that they had a definite sense of Christ’s presence in Holy Communion. Perhaps this is why the anecdotal evidence that I began my research with led me to the preliminary conclusion that Methodists do not have a high theology of the Eucharist, when in fact, Methodists simply do not have the doctrinal vocabulary to express their theology.

Though United Methodists have difficulty expressing their beliefs about Holy Communion, there is a rich Wesleyan hymnody that offers great artistic expression of the Eucharist. J. Ernest Rattenbury describes the Wesleys’ contribution of the Hymns on the Lord’s Supper: literae scriptae manent as, “the authoritative Methodist doctrine which was preached and sung probably for the first seventy years or more of Methodist history. Negatively, they repudiate mere memorialism; positively, they were sung by people who sought for Christ Himself and found Him at the Eucharist.”

Previously, hymns had not been a part of Holy Communion. Congregational singing offered an expression of actual participation in Holy Communion by the entire community, rather than limiting Communion to something that the priest offered on their behalf.

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36 Rattenbury, The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley, 147.
37 Ibid.
would be near impossible to analyze the Eucharistic hymns of the Wesleys and their effect on United Methodists’ understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist without devoting an entire new work to the exploration. There is no doubt that artistic expression of the Eucharistic encounter helps illuminate the experience to the participant. Several interviewees expressed their love of Holy Communion through recalling some of their favorite hymns. I am by no means a scholar of hymnody or contemporary worship music, but through the research I have done, it is important that the church continue to lift up and magnify Christ and his sacraments through media that is able to express the encounter of Holy Communion in ways that mere words of teaching and preaching cannot.

Much has been written about Methodist understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The same can be said of Wesleyan sacramental theology. As noted, in 2004 the United Methodist Church approved *This Holy Mystery* as the official document regarding doctrinal standards and teaching of Holy Communion.38 There is not a void of resources for educating United Methodists about the Eucharist. However, according to those interviewed, there has not been a movement to teach Holy Communion either through preaching or intentional corporate study. I am impressed that United Methodists have a strong belief in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist in spite of the fact that there seems to be a lack of teaching. Has the lack of teaching forced Methodists

38 Felton, *This Holy Mystery*, 5.
to develop their understanding through experience? It is possible that the lack of teaching on the subject has allowed United Methodists to come to the table with a hunger bred from prevenient grace rather than an obligation to receive. These Methodists experienced Christ in a way that could not have been explained to them, so an explanation may only impede their ability to fully develop an experiential understanding of the Eucharist. However, we should not be content with United Methodists experiencing Christ without a means for reflecting and developing their understanding in a way that helps them articulate their experience.

It is clear to me that Holy Communion is considered by United Methodists to be extremely important to the spiritual health of the individual as well as the church. But, I am not so convinced that most United Methodist recognize that reality within themselves and the church without an ensuing conversation. The highest response to the question of renewal in the church as a result of renewed emphasis on Holy Communion was an ambiguous “might or might not.” Likewise, with those that were interviewed, most did not think a renewed emphasis on Holy Communion would have much effect on the church. I am led to believe that, in theory, United Methodists would not notice if Holy Communion were eliminated from worship services, but would likely feel the effects of the elimination of Holy Communion. I do not believe that educating United Methodists will ever take the place of experience at the table as the greatest influence on United Methodist understanding of Holy Communion, but I do believe the
church can influence understanding by outwardly displaying the high regard for the Eucharist that the people in the pews have but often do not express. The church can serve as not only the channel through which Christ offers the sacrament, but also the channel through which the experience of the people is affirmed.
Conclusion

United Methodists believe in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. United Methodists place a high value on the Eucharist. Through the discussions we had about Christ’s presence, described by United Methodists as a Spiritual Presence, there is a strong correlation between understanding Christ’s Presence and the perceived value of Holy Communion. One of the women that I interviewed was surprised to hear that some denominations hold a strictly symbolic understanding. She responded with, “Oh, my,” with a touch of sorrow in her voice. She wanted to know which denominations held that belief so she could pray for them to experience God the way that she does.

Ultimately, it is not something that United Methodists have discerned through opening up scripture, nor has it been an understanding they have learned through teaching or preaching. The Eucharist is something that must be experienced to appreciate fully, and United Methodists truly experience the presence of Christ in Holy Communion.

Of course, Holy Communion is not the only way that United Methodists experience the presence of Christ. Further study might explore additional means of grace in comparison to Holy Communion. If the goal is Christian perfection through experiencing Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, a comprehensive approach to sacramental living would certainly include the study of scripture, prayer, and fasting, as
well as Holy Communion. How do these disciplines work together to enhance the Christian life?

Another avenue of study could be to explore the impact of Holy Communion on fresh expressions of worship. There is an outreach movement within United Methodism that seeks to develop unique worship opportunities that do not occur in churches or in traditional formats. These are worship and fellowship services that may happen at a local restaurant, or at the soccer field, or cater to a particular group of people such as bikers, cowboys, or an after work crowd. Rather than rely on attractional models of church, these models go where people gather, and take on unique worship styles. If United Methodists experience Christ through the Eucharist, would a study that compares the impact of the Eucharist in fresh expressions of worship further support the importance and value of Holy Communion in the lives of Christians?

So, what is the impact of this study? I began this thesis with the perception that United Methodists have a low understanding of Holy Communion and needed to be better informed about our doctrinal understandings regarding the Eucharist, but that is not the case. What has been revealed is that there is a high awareness of Christ’s presence through the sacrament of Holy Communion, though articulating and expressing that reality is difficult for most United Methodists. How can this new information benefit the Body of Christ, the Church?
My personal experience in discussing the Eucharist with other United Methodist pastors has revealed that many of them held the same perception as I previously did. Initial reactions are to hold a class, or preach a sermon on Holy Communion to explain the importance of Holy Communion. However, the research showed that these are largely ineffective, and often not remembered by the laity. Those that have offered classes remarked that a low percentage of the congregation actually attend classes. If the duty of the church that is found in the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age,” then we must be effective in our teaching and disciple making.

The Holy Spirit has provided understanding through the encounter people have at the Lord’s Supper; it is our responsibility, as the church, to offer opportunities for people to convey the depth of their encounter to others. Methodists hold fast to the quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. It appears to me that where Holy Communion is concerned, experience is the primary means through which God is revealed. We must use this knowledge to help bring about a Eucharistic renewal in the United Methodist Church.

39 Matthew 28:19-20 NRSV
40 Often referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that demonstrates what Wesleyans identify as the primary factors that illuminate the core of the Christian faith.
Though the participants in this study didn’t seem to have a strong opinion on whether an emphasis on Holy Communion would bring about renewal in the church, their stories revealed how important Holy Communion is to the spiritual health of the individual. Spiritually strong individuals make for a spiritually strong church. At a time in United Methodism when there is great strife and division, might the work of the Holy Spirit through the Eucharist unite us as a church? Is it possible that a greater awareness of the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist is what the church needs to be less agenda driven and more encounter and relationship driven? I do not want to advocate for abandoning preaching and teaching on the Eucharist, that is still a vital avenue for explanation, however it cannot be the only avenue. United Methodists need opportunities to express their encounters with Christ at the Lord’s Table without judgment. Pastors should not be afraid of having conversations about difficult to define experiences, nor of creating safe spaces for those conversations to occur. We might just find that when some open up about their experiences, others will identify with them, or be affirmed in their experience where they had previously harbored doubts. It is comforting to know that we are not alone in our encounters with Christ. Pastors should preside at the Table expecting the encounter that research reveals their parishioners are experiencing.

It seems that we would be wise to avoid the narrow approach to Eucharistic expression of Christ’s presence in spatial terms that discuss issues of substance of bread.
and wine. United Methodists seem to be more comfortable discussing the Eucharist in terms of temporal presence that express Christ’s presence through experience. Wesleyan Eucharistic theology is much more closely aligned with discussions of encounter than with the discussion of categories that divided the Medieval and Reformation era churches and coined terms such as transubstantiation and consubstantiation.

For me, the hoped for result of this thesis is the future development of a resource that helps United Methodists articulate their encounters and understandings of Holy Communion. I plan to take the information from the research and present a study guide that may be used in small groups or Sunday School classes with the intention of helping participants discuss the Eucharist in a way that draws out their experiences, revealing their belief in the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. The hope is for these conversations to be the catalyst that drives Eucharistic renewal and spiritual growth in the people called United Methodists.
Appendix A

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Wade Powell successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 01/26/2016.

Certification Number: 1971398.
Bibliography


