A definition: The *ecclesiology* of the Church engages and addresses its questions and understandings of its history, nature, and functions of the Christian community.

The United Methodist Church traces its understandings of Holy Communion from Jesus’ institution of the sacrament as described in the Gospels. It is in the gathered community of his disciples that Jesus breaks bread and offers the cup to those closest to him and his ministry. His words and actions are placed within the context of the larger backdrop of the Jewish Passover Meal and within the context of the gathering storm of reaction to Jesus’ ministry, his words and actions. Yet, his specific words and actions are directed to his disciples—his gathered community.

As early as the Emmaus journey recorded in the 24th chapter of Luke’s gospel, followers of Jesus have recognized the presence of Christ in the breaking of bread. According to the Biblical record, this recognition occurred when the community was gathered. As the gospels were written later and as the church was organized, this context of the gathered community coming together around the Table has continued to be recorded and passed to believers who recognize this community ritual as the Church’s central act of worship. This recognition of the gathered community traces from the earliest of Christian communities to the ones of this present day.

As with all of Scripture, the intended recipient of the words, stories, history, and commands found in the Bible is the gathered community. It is to the community that the Scripture is given. Understanding and reflection upon Scripture is placed within the gathered community who ratify the interpretation and meaning of what is found in the holy text. While individuals throughout history have read and/or heard the words of the Bible, the practice of interpretation of Scripture is given to the community of faith. It is the community that holds that responsibility and not individuals alone.

When the practice of Holy Community is considered in this day, the context for the celebration of the sacrament must be considered. The first meal was celebrated in gathered community – Jesus and his disciples. Thus, by extension of this first meal, by recognition of the community’s role in Biblical interpretation, and by the continued practice of Holy Communion throughout the centuries, the gathered community is the assumed context in which the meal is celebrated.

This assumption of the gathered community is continued as John and Charles Wesley crafted their understandings of faithful living and practice. It was through the bands, classes, and societies that people were held accountable for their personal and communal faith formation. These spiritual practices and disciplines included regular participation in Holy Communion and worship. The Wesley’s assumption of the gathered community in which Holy Communion is practiced is documented through their writings, hymns, and worship practices. The language of ‘we’ and ‘our’ is constantly used. While individuals and their faith practices are addressed, the context of the ‘you’ and ‘me’ is held within the larger scope of how John and Charles Wesley understood the gathered community of ‘we’ and ‘us’.
The Wesleys and the early Methodist movement understood the Christian church as a sacramental body – a place where the continuing work of Christ is made known. The sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion, were understood as having been chosen by God as a particular means in which the grace of God is made known in and through the Church. The history of the Methodist movement describes this understanding of the gathered community. In the early history of the Methodist movement, circuit riders rode the circuits offering preaching, the sacraments, and other practices of faith. The community waited until the return of Wesley’s preachers in order to participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion or Holy Baptism. That understanding continues to this day. Thus, the sacrament of Holy Communion is the best understood within the community or the communion of the Church. Continuing in this historical tradition, the language used within the liturgy of service of Holy Communion uses the words ‘we, us, or our’ rather than ‘I, me, or mine’. This language is reflective of the text from 1st Corinthians 10:17 (NRSV) “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (Note the language used in the United Methodist Church’s “Services of Word and Table” / See The United Methodist Hymnal).

While the context for the sacrament of Holy Communion is assumed to be the gathered body of the Church, it is also assumed that the sacrament itself is received so that the people recognize that they are claimed by God and sent out into the world to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. This sending from the Table of Holy Communion is a sending of the “we, us, and our”. Yes, individuals (the “I, me, and mine”) go into the world; however, they go as the body sent as one into the world. This body of those sent is formed at the Table who gather together to be strengthened as a body in order to live faithfully as individuals in the world. The sacrament of Holy Communion gathers the people in and sends the people out. Thus, the sacrament itself is never an individualized act of receiving nor does it contain an individualized act of sending.

Throughout its life as a community of faith, United Methodists have recognized that there are times when persons are unable to attend public worship and to participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Thus, the Church has created ways in which the consecrated elements can be taken by the clergy (or laity designated by the clergy) to those who are unable to attend due to illness, age, or geographic location. (See The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, paragraphs 340 and 1116.9).

The Church’s teaching regarding Holy Communion (See This Holy Mystery) is clear that self-service communion, drop in communion, administration of the elements of communion to a limited number of people within services of the church (e.g., to the bride and groom and not to the larger witnessing body), or in other ways that ignore or exclude the entire gathered community is not appropriate.

Yet, the Church insists that it much reach out to those who are unconverted, excluded, unworthy, oppressed or otherwise find themselves outside the body of the Church. The Church has responsibility as a gathered body to seek out those who do not participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

While the original body of Jesus’ disciples, the writers of the Gospels, the early Church, John and Charles Wesley, etc. could never have imagined an online world in which the discussions of access to the Holy Table might be had, the questions of inclusion of those seeking to participate in worship services through an online world likely would have been seen as appropriate.
However, those persons probably would have drawn a line to say that the sacrament of Holy Communion cannot be offered to online worship participants. We, as the present inheritors of the teachings, doctrines, understandings and traditions of the Church, must engage in the essential question: Can we as United Methodists extend the Table of Holy Communion to those who seek to participate through online means?

If we believe that the inclusion of online participants in worship is an appropriate response, the prospect of providing Holy Communion via an online means causes enormous concerns that cross the spectrum of the Church’s theological, ecclesiological, sacramental, historical, etc. teachings, doctrines, understandings, beliefs and practices. From an ecclesiological view, such a discussion invites these types of questions:

- In this day, how do we now define the ‘Body of Christ’? What does the ‘gathered community’ mean? Thus, how do definitions of the Body of Christ and the gathered community shift in order to include those who might participate in online worship experiences?
- Is it ever appropriate to offer online worship experiences that offer the sacrament of Holy Communion to online participants?
- When does the Body of Christ fracture beyond repair? Would the inclusion of persons in online practices of Holy Communion break the Body of Christ and its gathered community beyond repair? What are concerns expressed within and across the ecumenical community? How might the Church’s connectional responsibility to its own doctrines, understandings, commitments, beliefs and practices be altered, and should such alterations occur? How is the ecumenical community engaged in conversations regarding similar areas of concern and interest?
- How does the Church understand online communities? Should and/or how does the Church create excellent online worship and spiritual formation experiences? How are persons participating in online worship invited to a physically gathered community in which the sacrament of Holy Communion is offered?
- How does the Council of Bishops (and how do individual bishops in their episcopal areas) engage clergy in learning about and practice of online worship experiences? How are John Wesley’s essential questions to his preachers engaged regarding ‘what to teach, how to teach, and what to do?’ as those questions relate to online worship experiences? Particularly related to the sacrament of Holy Communion, how are clergy helped to invite online worship participants to attend physically gathered worshipping communities in order to participate in services of Holy Communion? How do clergy engage their teaching roles in similar manner?
- How are delegates to General Conference engaged in conversation about the Church’s teaching regarding Holy Communion so that they may make informed decisions?
- (Note any decision that changes the Church’s present understanding of Holy Communion could affect its authorized teaching document. If so, the Church’s teaching document on Holy Communion, *This Holy Mystery*, would have to be revised and adopted at a future General Conference. Additionally, whenever this teaching document is revised, immediate questions about revision of the “Word and Table” liturgies found within *The United Methodist Hymnal* must be addressed.)
These and other questions must be engaged from the view of the United Methodist Church’s ecclesiology—its self-understanding and thus its questions and understandings of its history, nature, and functions of the Christian community.

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