Cyber Disciples: A New Theological Subject
and Online Communion

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What Is the Real Issue?

The question whether the United Methodist Church should practice online communion is about more than whether the practice itself is theologically right or wrong; it is a question of ecclesiology—what it means for United Methodists to live out their faith in a technologically transitional, diverse, and global context. The global context is our reality today where the church interacts with historical, social, political, and cultural diversity, as well as rapidly evolving communication technology.

The Methodist movement itself enacted a newly emerging ecclesiology in a transitory period of 18th century England with the rise of the Enlightenment. John Wesley responded to the rapid cultural, social, and economic shifts of the time from an ecclesiological perspective by paying attention to particular human experiences that had been largely ignored by the Church of England, such as poverty, child labor, slavery, and the inaccessibility to education by common people.

Like Wesley, we are also living in a transitional time with important consequences for what it means to be a church and for what the role of a church should be when it comes to tending to the spirituality of people. Ecclesiology is a fluid concept that is shaped by communal practices of members of a faith community in a changing context. These members bring cultural, social, political, and economic diversity into the faith community; therefore, the church is never either-or but inclusive of human experience that reflects the signs of the time. This is why human

experience is a critical source of doing theology, just as Scripture, tradition, and reason are essential as sources.

Ecclesiology evolves over time and is influenced by these changing contexts, all of which are shaped by human experience. The challenge for the church to reimagine its vision based on an ever-expanding human experience has been historically consistent, and the Christian church has been faithful to this call. From this perspective, a theological reflection on practicing online communion as a church at this time of human history coincides with Wesley's inclusive and inquisitive spirit.

One of the pertinent issues within the UMC at the present time is the formation of an ecclesial identity in a global context. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* describes the Church as a constant "redeeming" organic community that interacts with the world:

> The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic, and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world. The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.[1]

According to this statement, a church is a community where the Word of God is preached, the sacraments are administered, and it strives for edification of believers by encouraging them to practice their faith. My question is, "Should all three key elements of being a church happen in a physical form of a faith community? Can disciple-making happen in

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[1] *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 23.

cyberspace? Is it possible for Christians to experience cohesiveness and fervent spirituality over the Internet?

A New Theological Subject

As of January 2014, 74 percent of adults are using social networking sites. Of those, 78 percent are earning $75,000 or more annually and 89 percent are between the ages of 18 and 29, so these are largely upper-class young people who have a pretty good income.[2] The number of social networking users has doubled since 2008. The PewResearch Internet Project also researched the correlations between online experiences and social impact in 2010, especially the use of technologies related to "trust, tolerance, social support, community, and political engagement."[3] They found that the average user of a social networking site has closer community ties and is much less isolated than the average American. Particularly, Facebook users responded that they trust their online friends more, get more support from them, and are socially and politically better informed within that realm. They also appreciate social networking because it allows them to form a community with those they could not be as easily connected otherwise, such as high school friends or distant family and relatives.[4]

In *CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online,* Elena Larsen identified 28 million Americans in 2001 as "Religion Surfers"; these are people who are seeking religious and spiritual information online and who want to build relationships with those who have the same interests. To my surprise, more people (25 percent of Internet users in 2001) were seeking

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[2] According to the PewResearch Internet Project, women (76 percent) use more social networking sites than do men (74 percent). "Social Networking Fact Sheet," *PewResearch Internet Project*, last modified January 2014, accessed September 2014, http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/.

[3] "Social Networking Sites and Our Lives," *PewResearch Internet Project*, June 16, 2011, accessed September 2014, http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/06/16/social-networking-sites-and-our-lives/.

[4] Ibid.

religious and spiritual information than doing any other activities online, such as online banking, trading stocks, and making phone calls.[5] Actually, the majority of Religion Surfers (50 percent) were seeking the information about their own faith. The data show that Religion Surfers become more engaged if there is a cause to support each other spiritually; for example, right after the September 11 tragedy, 41 percent of Internet users connected with each other as a praying community, 23 percent of them educated themselves about Islam, and 7 percent contributed to relief charities.[6] The seekers, those who feel that they do not belong to a mainstream religion, especially appreciate online religious activities, with 77 percent in 2001 claiming to find religious materials more easily online, as well as more easily finding opportunities to volunteer for activities online, which means that the Internet actually gave them opportunities to practice their faith.[7]

In terms of forming a close Christian community, the research found that spiritual support among congregation members is much greater online (42 percent) than among non-members (12 percent). Interestingly, those who are active in their local churches are the ones who are the most active in online Christian community. I call them "Cyber Disciples" apart from Religion Surfers. Cyber Disciples are Christians who respond to Christ's love as they seek to live a new life; they take their discipleship formation to another level, in this case to the cyberspace. Cyber Disciples include those who are seeking alternative ways of practicing their faith, such as listening to online/mobile sermon, participating in live online worship, and simply seeking ways to be

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[5] Elena Larsen, *CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online*, Dec. 23, 2001, accessed September 2014, http://www.pewinternet.org/2001/12/23/cyberfaith-how-americans-pursue-religion-online/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., "Part 4: Religion Surfers Evaluate the Impact of the Internet," Dec. 23, 2001, accessed September 2014, http://www.pewinternet.org/2001/12/23/part-4-religion-surfers-evaluate-the-impact-of-the-internet/.

connected to a Christian fellowship online. Among these Cyber Disciples, 62 percent said that

the Internet has actually enhanced and encouraged their spiritual life as a supplemental tool. Of

the survey respondents, 83 percent said that the use of technology has actually tightened the

bonds within existing faith communities by connecting with inactive members, facilitating

difficult discussions that might not happen otherwise, and expanding their missions to a global

scale.[8] Larsen found no proof that an online option removes the faithful from churches or

physical religious communities.

Therefore, when we learn that 89 percent of adults who are using social networks are the

younger population (18-29)—those whom the UMC is desperately trying to reach, when we

know that the Internet enhances and encourages the religious and spiritual life of an individual,

when we learn that online technology actually brings an existing faith community closer, what is

it that United Methodists are missing as a church? Is our evangelism and disciple-formation at

stake by not providing an alternative especially to Cyber Disciples? If one of the key elements of

being a church is administering sacraments, how can the UMC provide opportunities to those

who yearn to practice their faith, including receiving Holy Communion from a distance, apart

from a physical faith community? How can the UMC be faithful to its call to evangelism in the

21st century? These are pertinent questions to 21st century evangelism and what it means to be a

church in the era of peri-postmodernism.[9]

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[8] Ibid. Of Religion Surfers in 2001, 81 percent responded that their faith was "Very Strong," 74 percent attended religious services once a week, and 84 percent prayed at least once a day. These numbers are much higher than for the general public.

[9] The word *peri-postmodernism* stands for a threshold going from postmodernism into post-postmodernism. Postmodernism has been criticized for its relativism, ambiguity, and fragmentation by a fundamentalism that maintains the unyielding construction of a set of identities. Peri-postmodernism resists intellectual hegemony and values different ways of understanding God and the church. Through colonization and now globalization, the hegemony of the Eurocentric way of theologizing the church has repelled consideration of the different

Wesleyan Theology of Sacraments

The United Methodist accepts two sacraments that are ordained by Jesus Christ and given to the church: baptism and the Lord's Supper.[10] Baptism is the non-repeatable rite of initiation of persons into the body of Christ by giving them identity and mission; the Lord's Supper is the regularly repeated rite that sustains and nourishes Christians in the journey of salvation. According to John Wesley, sacraments are "outward signs of inward grace" and are "sign acts that both express and convey God's grace and love."[11]

The Lord's Supper has six major meanings in the New Testament: thanksgiving (Acts 2:46–47a, "A Service of Word and Table I," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 9–10); fellowship through sharing and bonding as a community (1 Cor. 10:17); remembrance (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24–25); re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ and presentation of Christians as a sacrifice to be used for the redemptive work of God in the world (Heb. 9:26; Rom. 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5; *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 10); action of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8, "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us": *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 10); and eschatology ("Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again": *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 10).[12]

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ways Christians understand the church. Robert J. Hill, "Troubling Adult Learning in the Present Time," in *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 119 (Fall 2008): 83–92, accessed September 2-14, www.interscience.wiley.com

[10] I use the terms *Holy Communion* and *the Lord's Supper* interchangeably in this study. *Holy Communion* reminds of us of God's self-giving to humanity, and *the Lord's Supper* reminds us of participating in a meal at which Jesus Christ is the host. (Acts 2:42) ("This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion," in *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* [Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012], 946).

[11] The Committee to Study Baptism, "By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism" in *The Book of Resolution* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012, 928; *The Works of John Wesley*, Jackson Edition CD-Rom, Vol. 5, "The Means of Grace," (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1995.), 188.

[12] "This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion," 949-51.

In Wesley's words, the Lord's Supper is "the continual remembrance of the death of Christ, by eating bread and drinking wine, which are the outward signs of the inward grace, the body and blood of Christ."[13] It is the grace of God available in and through the sacrament, equipping and replenishing Christians in conviction, repentance and conversion, forgiveness, and sanctification[14]; the United Methodist Church believes in neither transubstantiation nor consubstantiation. For this reason, Wesley was adamant about having frequent communion, four or five times a week[15]: Wesley understood that it is Jesus' command ("Do this in remembrance of me"—Luke 22:19 KJV), so "it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he [or she] can."[16]

The question, when we consider contemporary Christians, then becomes, "Since most United Methodist churches serve communion once a month, what is an alternative way to receive Holy Communion for those unable to attend a physical service? What would be the responsibility of the church to nurture spirituality of Cyber Disciples so that they may be equipped and nurtured as faithful Christians?

A New Paradigm of Being a Church

How significant is the role of a physical community of faith at the time of receiving Holy Communion? God in Jesus Christ rose from the midst of grassroots people rather than God's coming down from above. The embodiment of God in Jesus represents the humility and solidarity of God within the human experience. The ministry of Jesus is a prime example of that:

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[13] "The Duty of Constant Communion," in *The Works of John Wesley, Jackson Edition CD-Rom,* vol., 7, 149.

[14] This understanding is from Wesley, who described the Lord's Supper as "the grand channel whereby the grace of His Spirit was conveyed to the souls of all the children of God." Ibid., Vol. 5, "Sermon on the Mount," 338.

[15] "The Duty of Constant Communion," 147–57.

[16] Ibid., 147.

The future of God begins within the people of God; the reign of God is found from the subversive side of society, not from any traditional sense of leadership. The theology of incarnation challenges the church to be relevant to each generation by ushering a solid theological understanding towards hope in the practical life of the church. The church expresses its servanthood by responding to the needs of the people of the current generation.

There is no doubt that within the Christian physical faith community, a local church is the threshold of bringing hope of a new reality. However, Leonardo Boff criticized a "theology of tranquility," which led the conventional church to be institutionally organized and historically rigid.[17] The term *ecclesiogenesis* means the birth of a new church, the church from the grassroots, a church born of the people through the Spirit of God.[18] It means the emergence of another form of being a church based on the Word, the sacraments, and the practice of faith. The *ecclesiogenesis* is about building a living church, a "new type of institutional presence of Christianity" generating "a new ecclesiological experience."[19] Boff argues that building a faith community based on the need of people is the fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus where the focus of evangelization should happen. Even though Boff was alluding to formation of a new physical Christian community, his concept of *ecclesiogenesis* can be well taken for a new form of a Christian community in the cyberspace if the conventional institutional church acknowledges the community of Cyber Disciples as a church. Here again the question is whether an institutional church could imagine a birth of a new church in the cyberspace, which includes Word, Sacraments, and discipleship formation.

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[17] Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1986), 55.
[18] Boff, 35.
[19] Ibid., 1-2, 32.

The reign of God has universal understanding that embraces all human reality, including a faith community that has been formed over the Internet. The rise of a new theological subject, Cyber Disciples definitely presents an opportunity of theological imagination to ways how Christians worship, practice their faith, and exercise evangelism. The eschatological church always presents the hope of building a living church understanding that it is not yet fully realized but surely exists among the people. The risen Jesus is eschatological hope personalized, and this opens up the possibility of a continuation of the realization of the Holy Spirit upon all people, including Cyber Disciples.

Call to Discipleship Formation in the 21st Century

The catholic spirit, the universal love of God is well expressed through connectionalism in the UMC as an ecclesial practice. Connectionalism has served the UMC well by bringing the church together as a strong institutional church with high structural efficiency. However, connectionalism is truly about building a community of love; openness and adaptability mark connectionalism.[20] This aspect of connectionalism is based on a missional principle, "to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land" to fulfill ecclesial vision.[21] A question about online communion is then how this missional principle of connectionalism can be manifested into practice in the 21st century as a way of discipleship formation.

Here are some practical suggestions that the church may consider:

1. A few pilot churches should be allowed to practice online communion with Cyber Disciples as an alternative to serving in person.

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[20] Russell E. Richey, with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 25.

[21] "Minutes of Several Conversations," in *The Works of John Wesley Jackson Edition CD-Rom*, vol. 8, 299; Richey, et al, *The Marks of Methodism*, 34–35.

2. "An ordained elder or a person authorized under the provisions of the *Book of Discipline*"[22] should bless the elements for the sacrament with individually packed portable elements. Once they are blessed, these should be mailed to individuals who have requested them.

3. "An ordained elder or a person authorized under the provisions of the *Book of Discipline* " should use a video web conferencing tool (WebEx, GoTo Meeting, Google Hangout, etc.) to serve the sacrament over the Internet. The same liturgy should be used for the Great Thanksgiving in *The United Methodist Church Hymnal*, and members should take the communion elements that are already blessed in unity following the instruction of the clergy. The presiding of "an ordained elder or a person authorized under the provisions of the *Book of Discipline"* is important to uphold the order of elder's priestly ministry of serving sacrament.

4. Each local church should be encouraged to post the schedule for the Communion Sunday on their church website so that if those who are away from their home church or those who intend to live a new life in Jesus Christ want to receive Holy Communion in person may go and join them by using our connectionalism.

5. Consequently, the education and training for serving online communion need to be done for clergy and laity alike throughout the denomination. For example, the General Board of Discipleship may provide a brochure about online communion and eventually may develop a more appropriate liturgy for online communion, the

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[22] "This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion," in *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church, (*Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012, 973.

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry may offer training for clergy about

how to minister sacrament over the internet, and the United Methodist

Communications may assist local churches become equipped with proper technology

and have a church website.

Conclusion

The questions about online communion challenge the church to step outside of traditional

structures, calling for ecclesiastical transformation. First, the questions about online communion

call for prophetic denunciation *of* power and authority of an institutional ecclesiology, asking

who is the church and for whom does the church exist rather than what is a church. Second, the

questions around online communion call for United Methodists to be more creative in how we

utilize our connectionalism as a tool for discipleship formation and evangelism.

Cyber Disciples are a new theological subject of ministry. It is clear that having the

experience of receiving Holy Communion is not only an essential part of Christian sanctification

but also a significant responsibility of a church to strengthen their souls: Wesley described the

benefits of the Lord's Supper this way: "We shall be insensibly strengthened, made more fit for

the service of God, and more constant in it. At least, we are kept from falling back, and preserved

from many sins and temptations."[23]

People emerge as primary creators of ecclesiological values in each generation, such as

Cyber Disciples. How should the church respond to this new theological subject and feed their

spiritual hunger? To be an evolving church means it needs to see itself as evolving in its

practices of faith. The UMC created connectionalism because its priority has been reaching

out to all people based on the Catholic Spirit. When the church practices locating people

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[23] *"*The Duty of Constant Communion," 155.

and their needs in the center of being a faith community, the church becomes space for change, transformation and innovation for healing and unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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