

**“Extending the Table”**  
**1 Corinthians 12:12-26**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**October 4, 2009**

Fifty years ago an elder in a Presbyterian congregation approached the governing body of his local church with an unusual request. He wished, quite simply, to celebrate communion apart from his congregation, apart from *any* congregation, in fact, apart from just about anyone else. Normally, this would have been a no-brainer for the session of any Presbyterian Church. You can't share communion by yourself. Communion always happens in community. It normally happens with a minister officiating.

Yet the session gave its blessing, and shortly after the congregation in Webster, TX received the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, Elder Buzz Aldrin shared it with them on the moon.<sup>1</sup> The Book of Order was a lot smaller in those days, but I admire this session nonetheless. They cut through the theological red tape, extending that table a quarter of a million miles, making sure that anyone who wanted to be at the table was able to be there.

I'm not sure that Aldrin and his Session could get away with their missional impulse today. Knowing the climate of our Presbyterian Church and others like it, I imagine that somebody would probably charge Aldrin and his session with violating the Book of Order. A trial might ensue, with highbrow appeals to our theological tradition, charges leveled – charges of heresy or of selling out to the culture, lawyers engaged, opinions written, with a final decision claiming that the Session of the Texas Church erred in its decision to allow communion by violating the rules. The sad truth in our Church is that we have become more obsessed with guarding the rules of our institution than in extending ourselves and Christ's table into the world.

Maybe we shouldn't be startled to have arrived at this destination, given the route that our tradition traveled to get here. The church has been fighting over this meal for a long time. Fights over whether Christ is in the bread, or over, under, and behind the bread, or made present to us through the meal, or not present to us at all in the meal are deeply ingrained in the Christian tradition. The feast of Christ that is supposed to bring us together from east and west and north and south, is, in fact, the feast where our divisions are most transparent. We've been fighting over this meal for a long time.

Even the early church at Corinth was fighting over the meal. Yet Paul doesn't seem to be interested in arguing over doctrines or dogmas. He doesn't pound the congregation into submission with juridical statements. He doesn't seek a uniform understanding of how the community should understand what is happening in this meal. Paul seems concerned with one thing - making sure that anyone who is part of the body of Christ, anyone who wants to feast at that table, is able to be there. They are a body – they are part of the body of Christ – a living organism sent into the world to inhale God's grace, to exhale God's love, to heal, and hold, to

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Richard Mouw for reminding me of this event in “Moon Supper,” *The Christian Century*, October, 2009. (I do not have the original copy and do not remember in which issue this article appeared.)

walk and speak, to laugh and cry, to eat and feed, to imagine and create; a living organism, a body made up of members who together reach out to receive the grace of Christ so they can turn around and give away again.

I don't think the church in our nation looks much like a body anymore. Viewed from some angles, we look more like an archaic institution, saddled with crumbling buildings, guided by doctrines that some are twisting around to exclude, weighted down with a reputation for hypocrisy, exclusion, homophobia, and hate.

I met with a group of pastors from across the country this past week and we lamented this reality. We lamented the fact that some polls show that 38% of young people between the ages of 16-29 are hostile to the church.<sup>2</sup> They're okay with Jesus - they just don't like the church. We lamented the fact that the church continues to obsess itself probing theological questions that not too many people are asking. We lamented the fact that Presbyterians used to be known for education and hospitals, and social justice, and the life of the mind, and now most people know us only as another church arguing over sex. We lamented the fact that we're not the body, we're not the organism that is called to extend Christ's table into the world, a quarter of a million miles if necessary.

And then somebody asked the question, what does that connectional church that we long for look like? After some thoughts were shared, Scott Black Johnson, the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in NYC told us a story. He reminded us of the military coup that took place in Madagascar back in March. During the coup, the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Madagascar called on Christians in the military not to kill, not to commit acts of violence. In a story that reminded me of Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, Rev. Lala Rasendrasahina's appeal was broadcast nationwide on the radio station owned by the church. For his courageous words, Scott told us, this church leader was tortured and his family detained.

But something stronger than violence was already at work. The Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar is part of a ten year partnership with our church. We are part of the same body. An appeal went out, money was raised, and after some delicate negotiating Rev. Rasendrasahina and his family were on a plane to New York.

"Here's this guy, a member of the body of Christ," Scott told us, "who's been tortured 48 hours ago and now he's standing before the congregation, giving thanks that we are part of the same body, giving testimony about what it means to be a Christian in a violent world." And Scott said, "That's the church my people want to be part of. That's the church I want to be part of."<sup>3</sup>

That's the church many of us want to be a part of, too. The living, breathing organism – the one that went to work this summer when our El Salvador delegation sent urgent word that an anti-mining activist – part of our body - had been disappeared and murdered. Our church organized with the larger body and less than six months later Senator Cardin – our Senator - co-sponsors a bill that would require mining companies to publish what they pay to local

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<sup>2</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity. . .and Why It Matters*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 2007. Thanks to Tom Are, Jr., pastor of the Village Church, Prairie Village, KS, for reminding me of this study.

<sup>3</sup> This quotations reflect my memory of the conversation.

governments for rights to mine. It's that living breathing organism that went to work to raise \$10 million dollars in private money and millions more in public funds to rebuild Oliver in east Baltimore. It's that living breathing organism that helps us extend our own tables to those of the poor through Our Daily Bread, that brings adults to students at Eutaw-Marshburn Elementary and students to adults back in our building, extending our body wide into the city. It's that living breathing organism that has enabled the Dakota Partnership to bring some of the most liberal and some of these most conservative churches in our presbytery together in partnership with the native peoples of our land to build a future that we cannot yet see. It's that living breathing organism that will extend the table to the homes of some of our homebound members this very afternoon, breaking down barriers of time and space by the grace of God. It's that living breathing organism that nurtures our children in the faith, preparing them to be healers, and teachers, and witnesses for peace in the world.

That is the church I want to be a part of. Not some ancient institutional bureaucracy. Not some clubby group of people who think the same thoughts as me. Not some group of contestants, competing for the title of most conformist. Not some institution known for exclusion, homophobia, and hate. But the body that makes sure that everyone who wants to share in Christ's mission has a place setting at the meal that Christ provides.

And it's not that I no longer believe the confessions of our church are guides for our faith and life together. It's not that I reject the theological traditions that brought us here. It's not that I refuse the value of examining what it is that we say we believe together. No. It's that I've come to see that the best our tradition, the best of our theology, the best of our claims to truth, grow out of our mission in the world; the mission that begins when this body is alive to pain and possibility, alive to suffering and salvation, alive to heartache and hope; alive to the mission that begins right here at the table.

Worrying less about the legalese of the Book of Order and more about sharing this bread with anybody called to receive the grace of Christ so we can turn around and give away together is good theology. Worrying less about whether I can pinpoint Christ in the bread, over the bread, under the bread, or behind the bread, and more about sharing bread with anybody who's trying to receive and to give the grace of Christ is faithful theology. Making sure that anyone who wants to share in this feast has a place at this table is proclaiming the Lordship of Christ. Extending that table out the door, down the street, across the continent, around the globe, even to the moon is being faithful to the call of Christ.

And it may just be that if we continue to focus on that mission, the Book of Order will fall into line. The confessions will guide us like they were designed to do. The body will stretch and grow just as Christ promised. And people from east and west and north and south will say to each other again, yes, this is the body I want to be a part of. The healers, the and teachers, and witnesses for peace around the world, the young and the old, the gay and straight, the rich and poor, everyone who longs for a world of healing, hope, they will want to be part of that church, too.

The church that is constantly extending itself into the city, around the world, to every corner where Christ is already teaching, to every ghetto where Christ is already organizing, to every heart where Christ is already healing. We will all want to be part of this living, breathing organism, so filled with love, so filled with hope, so filled with Christ, that we will extend ourselves wherever Christ calls, as far as is required. As far as it is from here to say, the moon.