Holy Communion in the time of COVID19

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On Saturday, March 22, Bishop Jimmy issued the following statement regarding online communion:

United Methodist licensed local pastors and ordained elders in the Oklahoma Annual Conference may celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion through a recorded or online worship service to which people are invited to gather as a congregation from a distance. It is recommended that an order from the United Methodist Book of Worship or United Methodist Hymnal be used. The Words of Institution and Epiclesis (“Pour out Your Holy Spirit…” ) are essential to the service.

This unusual way of consecrating and receiving this sacrament is being allowed during the COVID-19 pandemic because congregations are being gathered electronically by necessity. The elements of bread and preferably some form of juice need to be used by the congregants wherever they are.

Clergy are strongly encouraged to use the Lord’s Prayer either before or after the community receives the elements. Congregations that are led by supply pastors should join with a congregation that is led by a licensed or ordained clergyperson in order to partake of the sacrament.

There are a variety of resources which can be used as you consider how to accomplish this.

The United Methodist Book of Worship offers a “Brief Great Thanksgiving for General Use” on page 80. It includes the parts which Bishop Nunn outlines above. Of course, there are many other resources available both in written form as well as online.

Love Feasts

An alternative to online Holy Communion is the Love Feast in the Wesleyan Tradition. Some call this “Communion light” but there is nothing “light” about it. It has a rich tradition in our tradition. Please read the background to it in the United Methodist Book of Worship, pages 581-582. There is a model outline for the service following that on pages 582-584.

Marcia McFee has also produced a piece called “Comfort Food: A Feast of Love,” which she subtitles, “For use in this time of sheltering in place as people are not able to gather in community for Holy Communion.” You can access it here, but you will need to give her proper credit if you use it.

Discipleship Ministries also put together a thoughtful overview of the dilemma regarding online communion along with links to their Love Feast examples. Find the article here.

Baptismal Renewal

Churches have also been doing baptismal renewal services which can also be a powerful way to connect in the days following Easter. There is a liturgy for this in the United Methodist Hymnal (pages 50-53) and the same appears in the United Methodist Book of Worship (pages 111-114).
Discipleship Ministries also has a version called “New Service of Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant,” which reframes the structure and vows of the current Baptismal Covenant in fresh imagery and a more interactive style. You can access it here.

Reminders
Regardless of what sort of service you do, here are some helpful reminders:

- Always set the context for the service you are doing. Make sure you discuss the exigent circumstances and why you choose to do it.
- Do not disparage colleagues who are doing things differently than you are. We are all trying to do our best in these unusual circumstances.
- Tell people in advance what they will need for participating in the worship service – elements of communion or a bowl of water, for example. This can be done in social media posts, advance emails or newsletters. It allows people to fully participate in the service.
- Make sure and set the context for all ages who may be worshipping. While children may not regularly be present in your worship services, during this time of worshipping “safer at home” means that families are together and may be online at the same time.
- During the Great 50 Days following Easter, you might want to plan a service specifically around one of these services. Invite people at home to engage in the ways they can, but allow the focus to remain on the embodied nature of what you are doing. Be creative!