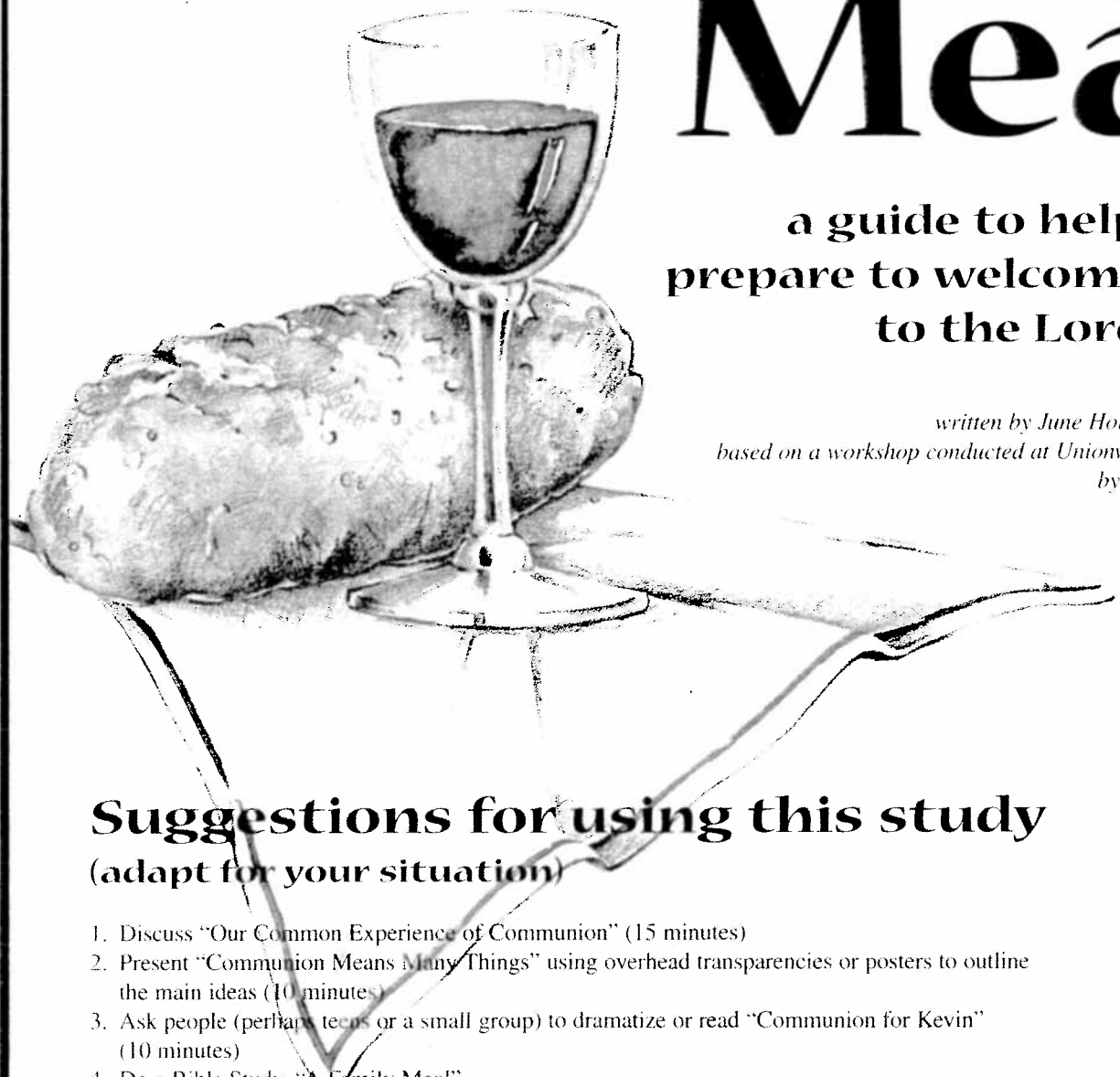


A Family Meal:

a guide to help sessions
prepare to welcome children
to the Lord's Supper

*written by June Holohan and Glenn Cooper,
based on a workshop conducted at Unionville Presbyterian Church
by Stephen and Patti Farris*



Suggestions for using this study (adapt for your situation)

1. Discuss "Our Common Experience of Communion" (15 minutes)
2. Present "Communion Means Many Things" using overhead transparencies or posters to outline the main ideas (10 minutes)
3. Ask people (perhaps teens or a small group) to dramatize or read "Communion for Kevin" (10 minutes)
4. Do a Bible Study, "A Family Meal"
 - (a) Leader's Introduction (5 minutes)
 - (b) Group reads and discusses the five Covenant passages (30 minutes)
5. Depending on the size of the group, "What Children Can Understand about Communion" can begin as a lecture. Then, ask participants to talk about which of the six points are most significant in their faith. There may be other points that people want to mention. (20 minutes)
6. Read aloud Section 7.5 (Sacraments) and 7.7 (Holy Communion) from *Living Faith*.

Used as printed, this study will take approximately 90 minutes. It is possible, however, to use the study in three parts: #1 and #2 (30 minutes), #3 and part of 4 (30 minutes) and the remainder of #4, #5 and #6 (30 minutes).

1. Our Common Experience of Communion

Think about what Communion means to you. A time of thanksgiving for God's grace? A time to come together with the church family? A time of repentance? A time of sorrowful remembering that Jesus died? A time of celebration, remembering that Jesus was raised from the dead? A comfortable and comforting ritual? A time to anticipate a joyous meeting with Christ in the coming kingdom? It can be all these things and more.

Write down what Communion means to you.

Discuss:

- ◆ What you think about before and while taking communion?
- ◆ How old were you when you first took communion?
- ◆ Have you participated in communion in different ways at different churches?
- ◆ Have you celebrated communion outside a church — at summer camp, in the hospital or someplace else?

2. Communion Means Many Things

Those of us who grew up in The Presbyterian Church in Canada have probably heard the following words at Communion more often than any others: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor 11:26). The result is that we have generally seen Communion as a very solemn event that directs our attention to the death of Jesus and to his sacrifice on the cross. Because it has traditionally been a solemn time, we have been reluctant to consider opening the table to children. What if they disrupt the seriousness of the moment? What if they cause a disturbance and break our concentration?

In recent years some of us have heard celebrations of the Sacrament begin, "Friends: This is the joyful feast of the people of God." It may have been a surprise, but it has also allowed us to recover some other aspects of Communion that have been neglected.

1) Communion is a celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

- ◆ Read Luke 24:1-35. It describes the experience of two disciples traveling to Emmaus who are joined by a stranger. They invite the stranger to stay with them because the day is getting on. They recognize that the stranger is Jesus when "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." Note the characteristic gestures we associate with Communion: taking bread, blessing (God), breaking the bread and giving it.
- ◆ Luke 24:42, 43 speaks of the risen Christ eating with the disciples.
- ◆ John 21:1-14 tells of their risen Lord preparing a meal for the disciples.

2) Communion can also help us recall the feeding of the multitude.

- ◆ The feeding of the multitude shows the same characteristic gestures of Jesus taking the bread, blessing, and distributing it (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16).
- ◆ Notice that one account of the feeding of the multitude has a child playing a most significant role — providing the five loaves and two fish (John 6:9).
- ◆ Another account clearly indicates that children participated in the meal (Matthew 14:21).

3) Communion is also, in the words of a favourite hymn, a “sweet foretaste of the festal joy.” (“Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face”).

◆ Isaiah 25:6-10 gives a picture of the last days as a great feast, a celebration of the victory of God over all that can hurt or harm. This, too, is reflected in our celebration of Communion.

The meals of the early church, including the breaking of bread and sharing the cup, were happy celebrations of the risen Christ that looked forward to Christ’s return. But in at least one church, the note of celebration seemed to be carried too far. The familiar words of 1 Corinthians 11: 26 that talk about “proclaiming the Lord’s death” were written to a church that was sharing communion in a way that dishonoured Christ: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk” (11:20, 21). Paul’s words to remind the Corinthian Christians of the connection between their meal and the death of Christ was to correct that one situation.

As the Corinthian Christians needed to recover the solemnity of the meal, many of us need to recover the joy.

3. Communion for Kevin

Kevin looked around the church at all the people. He wondered why there always seemed to be more people when they had Communion. Must be because it’s special. This morning the ushers even had to put extra chairs in the aisles.

The table at the front was ready for Communion, with special things on it. There were two piles of trays that had little glasses of wine or grape juice, and there was a lid on the top of the pile. There were also several plates of little pieces of bread, and the plates were covered with white napkins. There was also a big wine glass. Kevin remembered the other name for it — a chalice.

When he was little, Kevin didn’t know what Communion was all about. A couple of years ago his church had started to invite children to stay in the service when there was Communion, instead of going to Church School classes. Now he ate the bread and drank the grape juice just like the older people.

Kevin’s parents had talked with him about Communion. They told him that Communion is a special meal. He knew that already. They also said it’s a family meal, kind of like going to Grandma and Grandpa’s for dinner, except this is the church family. When they go to Grandma and Grandpa’s, his mom always tells him to be extra polite, not to interrupt when someone else is talking, to try to sit quietly. That’s sort of how he tries to behave at Communion.

Kevin’s mom and dad said that Communion is a time when we can thank God for Jesus. We can remember all the things that Jesus does for us. Kevin knew that Jesus and his disciples did the very same thing at the Last



Supper. It's kind of hard to understand when the minister holds up the bread and says "This is my body." But Kevin thinks about the time he saw a very old picture and his dad had said, "That's my grandfather. He died long before you were born." Kevin knew that the picture was just a piece of paper with some markings on it. But his dad was also right when he said that the picture was his grandfather.

Uh oh, here he was thinking about old pictures, and his mother was passing him the plate of bread. She said, "Remember that Jesus loves you." He took a piece of bread and held it in his hand for a moment. Then he ate it.

He knew that in some churches everyone would wait until the minister held up his piece of bread and said, "My body, which is for you". Then they all ate the bread at the same time.

His father said that after he gets his piece of bread he closes his eyes and thinks about all the good things that Jesus has done. Just as he is eating his bread, he says to himself, "Thank you, God".

Just then the wine and grape juice were passed. Kevin knew that the purple was the wine and the clear was the grape juice. His mother took the wine and his father took the juice. Kevin took juice and his father said, "This is the new covenant." That was another big word he had just learned: covenant. His parents said that it's a promise that God will always love us. Kevin had asked, "Even when we do bad things?" His dad said, "Even then."

His mom and dad told him stories about other covenants in the Bible. He remembered the story of Noah because he thought of it every time he saw a rainbow, but he hadn't known it was called a covenant. God promised Abraham he would have children even though he was an old man. That was a covenant.

Kevin remembered that just a moment ago the minister had lifted up the chalice and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

Kevin drank his juice and prayed, "Thank you, God, for Jesus."

(Communion for Kevin was written by June Holohan, Unionville, Ontario)

4. Bible Study — A Family Meal

One of the special things about celebrations such as Christmas or Thanksgiving is the opportunity to have a big family meal where grandparents, children, aunts and uncles and cousins may all join at the same table. In many families this time is spent recounting family stories, "Remember Susan and Doug's wedding when the ring bearer wouldn't give up the ring . . ." or "Remember when we went to grandma's house and she'd make chocolate chip cookies and we ate them when they were still warm . . ." or "When I was a child, I had to walk five miles through the snow to school. . . ." Repetition of family stories helps bind the family together, as well as to tell new members about the family.

The church, too, has many stories.

Read Deuteronomy 6:20-25. It is about Moses telling the people that, in the future when their children ask about the meaning of the laws of God, the parents are to tell them the story of having been slaves in Egypt, of the miracles and plagues, of God bringing them out of Egypt. In other words, they were to tell their story to their children.

Read Deuteronomy 26:1-9. At the time of entering the promised land when the people were to make an offering of their harvest, they were again instructed to tell the story: Their ancestor was a wandering Aramean who went down into Egypt and settled there, and was ancestor to a great nation.

Children are an important part of Passover meals, with the youngest child present asking, "Why is this night different from the rest?" The father then tells the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

We need to tell the story of our faith to our children. Because the Lord's Supper is such an important part of our faith, we consider how we might include our children in this sacrament. We do not wait until our children are 10 or 12 to allow them to eat because they do not know how the digestive system works. Nor do we withhold love from an infant because the baby can not yet understand what love is.

But how do we know when our children are ready to celebrate Communion? There's no faith thermometer that beeps when our faith maturity reaches an acceptable level.

Communion is a family meal. Communion is not really a declaration of our love or faith in God; it is a declaration of God's love for us, a declaration of God's grace, giving us undeserved favour or love. Communion is a time of celebration, remembering God's covenant with a whole people.

Read the following Scripture passages, and note how they talk about God's covenant:

1. **God's Covenant with Noah:** Genesis 6:18 when God told Noah to go into the boat he had made, and Genesis 9:8-17 when God promised that never again would a flood destroy all living things.
2. **God's Covenant with Abraham:** Genesis 15 and 17 when God promised many descendants and the inheritance of the promised land.
3. **God's Covenant with Moses** (The Sinai Covenant): Exodus 19:5 records God's promise that if the people of Israel obey God and keep God's covenant, they will be God's chosen people. Exodus 20 includes the Ten Commandments. Exodus 21-23 stipulates laws and responsibilities. Exodus 24 describes the rite of the covenant.
4. **God's Covenant with David:** 2 Samuel 7 records the prophet Nathan's discussion with King David, telling him of the Lord's promises to David.
5. **A new Covenant in Christ:** Read in the Bible four accounts of the Lord's Supper:
Matthew 26:26-29
Mark 14:22-25
Luke 22:14-20
1 Corinthians 11:23-32

Each of these passages refers to a new covenant that God establishes. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of that covenant. We become part of the covenant family when we are baptized. Communion is a time to nourish our faith and remind us of the covenant.

There will still be a time for a formal public statement of faith. Our Church calls baptized members "covenant members" of the church. After a formal, public profession, the term is "professing members" of the church, and it follows a time of study and preparation. Professing members participate fully in the life of the congregation including, for instance, voting to call a minister and to elect elders.

5. What children can understand about communion

1. Communion is a family meal. Think of special meals where you might go to visit a relative where the white table cloth is spread and the good china, silverware and crystal are used. You know it's special, and you practice your "company manners." You don't sit down at the table just to eat, but because you have been invited to that person's house to visit.
2. Communion is the church's thanksgiving to God. It is a special time to thank God for Jesus.
3. Communion shows that we belong to the church family.

4. Communion is a way to remember. Some families have photo albums, video recordings, Christmas tree ornaments made by the children in kindergarten, and other keepsakes that remind them of who they are. When we celebrate Communion, we do the same things Jesus and the disciples did at the Last Supper, and we remember God's promises. We remember who we are — and whose we are.
5. Christ is the host at Communion. He invites us, welcomes us, gives us food. At Communion, we are all guests. We show respect.
6. During Communion we think of the future kingdom with Christ. We don't just look back at Jesus' death, but ahead to the future. An important feature of the covenant is promise and expectation.

Everyone in church can encourage children to pay attention, by paying attention ourselves.

Explain the Pattern of Communion to Children

Children will be more comfortable in the Communion service if teachers, elders or parents explain the pattern of Communion prior to the Communion service. This may need to happen each time the children take Communion.

Every congregation has a slight variation in the Communion service, but the following practice is customary in most Presbyterian churches. The bread and wine and grape juice are on the Communion Table at the front of the church. Some churches may use a common cup or a whole loaf of bread, but others use individual cups and pieces of bread. Sometimes wafers made of bread are used.

It is usually the elders — though it does not need to be — who go to the front of the church and take the plates of bread and wine to serve to the other people. As adults serve children (or other adults) they may say a brief one-sentence statement, such as,

- “Remember that Jesus loves you”
- “The bread of life”
- “Thank God for Jesus”
- “We are part of God's family”
- “The cup of hope.”

Some churches hold the bread until everyone has been served. An older Presbyterian tradition is to have people eat it as they receive it. So with the wine — some churches have people wait to take it together; others encourage worshippers to drink it as they receive it. In some churches, people come forward to receive the bread and wine. In others, people dip the wafer (bread) in the wine and then eat it. And some churches will use different ways at different worship services.

Adults don't need a complete understanding of the covenant and grace to come to the Lord's Table. Neither do our children. It is beyond understanding. We come to celebrate, to thank, to anticipate.

6. Sacraments, *Living Faith* 7.5

In obedience to our Lord's command and example
we observe two sacraments,
Baptism and Holy Communion.
These are visible expressions of the Gospel
given as means of entering and sustaining the Christian Life.

In Baptism and the Lord's Supper,
there is a sacramental union
between the sign and the thing signified.

Water signifies forgiveness and new life in Christ;
bread and wine, the body and blood of our Lord.

The grace effective in the sacrament
comes not from any power in them
but from the work of the Holy Spirit.
Rightly received, in faith and repentance,
the sacraments convey that which they symbolize.

Holy Communion 7.7

In breaking bread and drinking wine
Jesus told us to remember him.
In this action
called Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, or Eucharist,
Christ offers himself to us
and we present ourselves to him
in worship and adoration.

In Holy Communion
Christ places his table in this world
to feed and bless his people.
The Holy Spirit so unites us in Christ
that in receiving the bread and wine in faith
we share in his body and blood.

The Lord's Supper is a joyful mystery
whereby Jesus takes the bread and wine
to represent his atoning sacrifice,
deepening our union with himself
and with each other,
giving us of his life and strength.
Here Christ is present in his world
proclaiming salvation until he comes —
a symbol of hope for a troubled age.

The Eucharist is thanksgiving to God.
We pray for the world
and with gratitude offer our lives to God.
We celebrate his victory over death
and anticipate the joyous feast we shall have
in his coming kingdom.
We pledge allegiance to Christ as Lord,
are fed as one church,
receive these signs of his love,
and are marked as his.

Those who belong to Christ come gladly to his table
to make a memorial of his life and death,
to celebrate his presence,
and together as his church offer him thanks.

"At Communion we thank God for Jesus."



Suggested Resources

Congram, John, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours*, Wood Lake Books, 1995 (Chapter 9 — The sacraments: The family gathers around table and font).

Cooper, Glenn, *Children of the Covenant: a book for adults about children and Communion*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

Cooper, Glenn, *Jesus Welcomes You: a book for children about Communion*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

DeWolfe, Laurence, *Welcome in the Family*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1989.

Halverson, Delia, *How do our Children Grow: Introducing Children to God, Jesus, the Bible, Prayer, Church*, Abingdon Press, 1993.

Henderson, Dorothy, *Glorifying and Enjoying God: The People, Practice and Promise of The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1996 (Chapter 4 — Presbyterians celebrate Baptism and Communion).

Henderson, Dorothy, *45 Ways to Involve Children in Worship*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

Henderson, Dorothy, *Jesus is With Us: a 3-part congregational study to help adults and children prepare for communion together*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

Marrocco, Nancy, *Homemade Christians, A Guide for Parents of Young Children*, Wood Lake Books, 1985.

Milton, Ralph, *The Family Story Bible*, Northstone, 1996, "The Last Supper," page 246.

Sandall, Elizabeth J., *Including Children in Worship: A Planning Guide for Congregations*, Augsburg Fortress, 1991 (a good resource for ministers).

If your church has a library, some of the books listed above may be in it. If not, most are available from The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 50 Wynford Drive, North York, ON M3C 1J7, tel (416) 441-1111 Outside the local calling area 1-800-619-7301, fax (416) 441-2825, e-mail bookroom@presbyterian.ca

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