

Can it help unify the church?

By Deborah White



UMNS photo by Deborah White

The Rev. Daniel T. Benedict Jr. presides at Holy Communion in Wightman Chapel of the Scarritt-Bennett Center during a conference about the sacrament in Nashville, Tenn.

Benedict said that even if styles of ministry are different, there should be unity in the practice of Holy Communion. "It's when we trivialize it . . . when we are excessive about innovation and creativity, we're on thin ice," he said.

During the workshop, the Rev. Jim Doepken, pastor of Girdwood (Alaska) Chapel United Methodist Church, said Holy Communion in his one-room church is informal, but he uses the full liturgy. "You can be liturgical but down home or laid back as well," he said.

United Methodists are interested in the sacraments, but are also confused by them, said the Rev. Gayle Felton, principal author of "This Holy Mystery."

"The purpose of this week is to try to help us move from confusion to clarity," she said. "We have a lot of the former and not a great deal of the latter."

The intent of "This Holy Mystery" is not to lay down an authoritarian formula, but to provide guidance and direction, she said. "Also it might move us from apathy to enthusiasm. We have de-emphasized sacraments. The road to recovery is to recover our heritage – become Wesleyan again."

In a panel discussion about moving to a richer and more frequent communion, retired Bishop Kenneth Carder advised participants to have patience as congregations increase the frequency of Holy Communion from every month or every quarter to every week. "It involves creating a new culture," said Carder, now a professor at United Methodist-related Duke Divinity School, Durham, N.C.

The Rev. Joseph Daniels, pastor of Emory United Methodist Church in Washington suggested, "Jump into it and teach as you go." He led his congregation into offering Holy Communion on a weekly basis last summer. The impact has been profound, including a more unified congregation and an increase in attendance, he noted.

"The very act of communion, the sacrament itself, forces us to break down the bar-

riers," Daniels said. "It's all because we have placed emphasis on the table."

Clergy have taken an active role in moving churches to weekly communion, noted the Rev. Mark Stamm, a professor at United Methodist-related Perkins School of Theology, Dallas. Stamm is involved with the Order of Saint Luke, an organization dedicated to liturgical study and education.

The Rev. Valerie Bridgeman-Davis, a professor of preaching and worship at Memphis (Tenn.) Theological Seminary, called for prophetic leadership. "We often are so scared about pushing people. People are willing to do more than we give them credit for," she said.

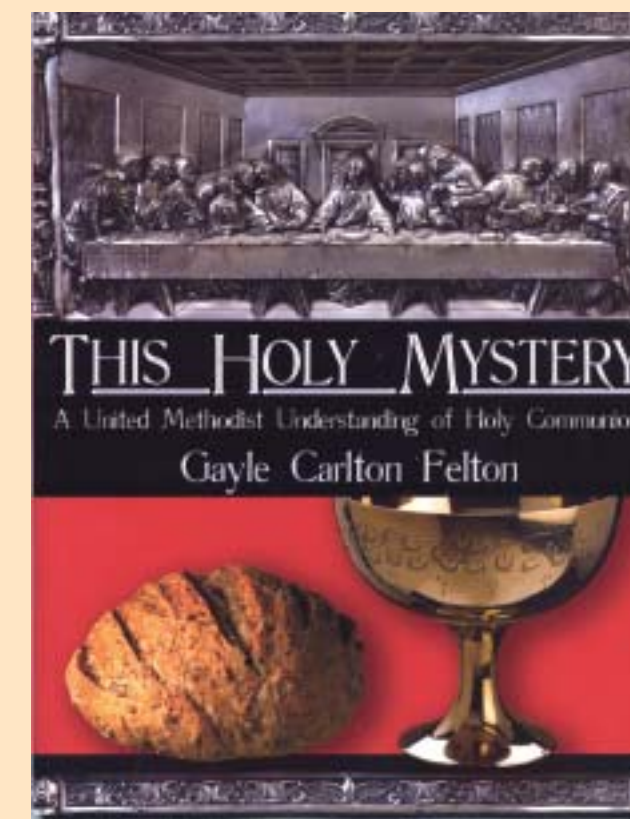
In the closing session, Carder said there is a connection between Holy Communion and accounts in the Gospel of Luke about Jesus eating meals. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners," Carder said. "Jesus' life around the table is a challenge . . . and a source of help. God's justice, generosity and joy are prevailing values. That new world dawns at the table, is celebrated around the table, nurtured at the table and empowered around the table."

"This Holy Mystery" Carder said, "seeks to respond to critical issues raised in Luke about who is in charge, who is host, who is invited and how we are to behave."

The Holy Communion table is a continuation of the many tables Jesus and the disciples shared, he said. "What He said about other tables comes to fruition at this table. Look at all the dinners Jesus attended and see how he turned the tables," Carder said, sparking an enthusiastic reaction from the participants.

Carder emphasized the importance of including poor people at Holy Communion. "You can't have sacramental renewal if the poor aren't present," he said. "When we gather at the table, it is the meal in the new order of things, especially when we are coming with all of God's children." ■

White is associate editor of *Interpreter Magazine* and *Interpreter OnLine*.



Study guide promoted as tool for improving Holy Communion

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) – A new study guide about Holy Communion will help local United Methodist churches improve the practice of the sacrament.

Developing and promoting the guide is the primary strategy for spreading the message of a 16-page document adopted by the 2004 General Conference as the denomination's official, interpretive statement on Holy Communion. A conference held April 26 - 28 in Nashville, Tenn., introduced the study guide and served as a discussion, teaching and worship forum for more than 100 clergy and other church leaders.

"How can we take this back to our local churches?" asked the Rev. Gayle Felton, primary author of "This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion," the title of both the 16-page document and the study guide.

"I hope you will be stimulated to continue your efforts in a variety of ways to teach and spread the truths that this document and the church have put before us," Felton told conference participants.

The 79-page guide includes the church's official statement about Holy Communion as the main text plus commentary and discussion questions. It is arranged in a seven-session study guide format and includes recommendations for many other resources to aid in-depth studies.

"Our primary strategy is to get this and use it in the local church," said the Rev. Daniel T. Benedict Jr., staff executive of the United Methodist Board of Discipleship's worship section. "We're hoping for widespread use across the church of this resource in clergy groups, annual conferences and in local churches."

Felton has also developed guidelines for a three-session or a single-session event for clergy to explore Holy Communion. The guidelines are available at www.discipleshipresources.org or from the board's worship resources office at (615) 340-7070 or by e-mailing jmusterman@gbod.org.

The study guide of "This Holy Mystery" is available for \$12 per copy from the United Methodist Board of Discipleship. It may be ordered at www.discipleshipresources.org or by calling (800) 972-0433. The guide is also available at Cokesbury Bookstore.

-- Deborah White

Stroud, continued from page 1

court's verdict and penalty because of legal errors and reinstated Stroud to clergy standing.

In a May 3 telephone interview, Stroud told United Methodist News Service she had met with Matthews that morning. She said the bishop returned her ordination credentials and offered to reappoint her to her former position, but she declined the appointment until her case is concluded.

"I thought the right thing for me to do was to turn it down," she said, explaining that she did not want to be a "political football" for various parts of the denomination. "That could just trivialize what ordination is and means."

Stroud said she would be placed on voluntary leave of absence as a clergy member but would continue her work as a lay minister at First United Methodist Church.

"While losing my credentials in the trial was

painful for me and for my family and for the whole congregation, it has also been for me a time of healing and reconciliation," she said.

Stroud characterized the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference as a "close little family" that she's been involved with for years, and she has appreciated the opportunity to be open and honest with people about her committed relationship with another woman, Chris Paige.

Although she has received some "very negative messages from people that I don't know," Stroud said that all who do know her "have been very loving and very respectful . . . and have wanted to know about my journey and learn from it."

The entire experience, she believes, "can teach and model a way of talking about this issue that is more honest, more open, more Christian and more respectful." ■