

Holy Communion Over the Internet: *Reflections on an Experiment in Sacramental Practice*

Rev. Gregory S. Neal

History of Grace Incarnate Ministries:

I am an ordained Elder and a member in Full Connection of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church. I have been serving in ministry as the pastor of churches in North Texas since 1992, when I returned home following graduation from Duke Divinity. Prior to that I served as the Student Pastor of a multi-point charge in the North Carolina Conference.

The online extension of my pastoral ministry began in the mid-1990s during the early years of the world-wide-web. I had developed a website for my then-congregation, Beverly Drive United Methodist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas. On this website, hosted on the GBGM servers, I placed many of the common features one will find on a church-related website; additionally, I began adding my own theological writings, newsletter articles, academic papers, poetry, and sermon transcripts. As the years progressed and the volume of material grew, I determined that – due to the itinerate nature of the UM ministry – it would be wise for me to divide my own presence on the Internet from my congregation's, creating what we would today call a "blog." This happened in 1998 when I founded "Grace Incarnate Ministries" and purchased a domain name, www.RevNeal.org. On this website I placed theological articles, papers, poetry, written sermons, photos, and other features of interest to me and my ministry.

It soon occurred to me that I could offer not only written papers and sermons, but also audio sermons. The church was already recording my Sunday morning messages for our tape-ministry, so all I had to do was learn how to digitize, prepare, upload, and serve my sermons in audio format for on-demand streaming and download. This, along with my writings, became the core of my website. As an extension of my parish-based ministry, Grace Incarnate began to grow as I added more features and expanded its scope. Content is always important in growing and maintaining a website, and keeping things fresh is critical to maintaining an audience. In addition to my audio Sermons, I began adding audio Bible Studies, which quickly became very popular in several circles (the Trucking community and the United States Armed Forces, to name two). It wasn't long before my regular weekly on-line listenership surpassed my average Sunday-morning attendance; my online ministry didn't really take off, however, until iTunes developed their podcast indexing system in mid-2005 and my audio sermon podcast feed was given prime billing as one of the earliest Religious podcasters. It was then that my weekly listenership went from several hundred to a several thousand ... and it has continued to grow.

Parallel with the growth in popularity of my online audio Sermons and Bible Studies was the growth of a Prayer Wall on my website. My congregation at the time had a strong prayer circle, and so I created a prayer-request feed from my website where people could send in their requests and, if they provided their e-mail, could receive a prayer-response from both myself and my prayer team. This element on my website is no longer live, however I do still receive occasional

prayer requests via e-mail ... some from people who have been following my online ministry since those early days.

As my ministry presence on the Internet grew, so also grew my interest in sharing other aspects of my pastorate. One week I had a church member videotape the service with an eye toward uploading sermons in video format. However, in late 1999 (six years prior to the inception of YouTube) the technology and Internet resources simply were not up to the task – oh, it was possible to upload a few video sermons, and I did, but processing them took a long time, the online storage and bandwidth costs were enormous, and most of my audience was then-g geared toward listening, not watching. Another aspect of my ministry that drew considerable interest was the Communion service, which I had also digitized and uploaded alongside the text of the liturgy (Word and Table I) and links to some of my theological articles about the sacrament. Third parties quickly linked these videos to several different online discussion forums, and the conversations about the liturgy, my vestments, my celebration style, and other aspects of the service were quite interesting to read. Almost immediately I began receiving emails from people who told me that, while viewing the communion video, they had joined the congregation in the responses and had prayed as the music played and the people were receiving communion. One person who shared this with me even asked if it would be okay if she got bread and wine and partook of communion while watching the video.

I was horrified by the concept: there wasn't any way for me to get the consecrated elements to her, she had never attended my church nor was she part of any church anywhere. In my response I thanked her for her response, and for being a regular listener to my online sermons; I also offered her help in finding a local church where she could become part of the congregation, attend worship, and receive the sacrament.

Within the year, however, my perspective on this subject would be radically changed. Personal illness caused me to recognize and understand – like never before – the extraordinary need for providing Communion to people who cannot attend worship. In 2000 I suffered a pulmonary embolism and, while homebound on medical leave, and with few adequate options available for me to receive communion, I felt as though I was starving for the sacrament. When I came off medical leave and was appointed to a new church one of the first things I did was establish Eucharistic Ministry teams that would extend the Table on Sunday mornings, taking consecrated elements to those in hospitals and nursing homes, shut-ins, and others who were incapable of making it to church. It was in the process of doing this that it also occurred to me that some of those who are shut-in, sick, or otherwise incapable of coming to church, but who had access to the Internet, were already listening to my sermons on a regular basis. I had done a survey of my listenership and had discovered that nearly 30% of those who listened on a regular basis didn't attend church anywhere. While I continued to encourage people to find a church home, it became clear that in some instances there were substantial physical impediments to doing so. And, so, I was thankful that God was using the Internet and my preaching ministry as a means of grace to those who were far-removed from the worshipping life of a church.

It was this situation which occasioned the question: was there any real reason why the means of grace in preaching could be conveyed over the Internet, but the means of grace in Holy Communion could not? My prior objection – that the elements couldn't be conveyed to someone

on the other side of the Internet – seemed a major stumbling block, but then I remembered that I had already participated in at least a few worship services (Annual Conference and other large United Methodist services) where the celebrant had been at a great distance from the elements that were being consecrated: the Communion Table and celebrant were on the stage, but most of the Communion elements were at receiving stations spread throughout a convention center ... and, indeed, even in other rooms (and in other buildings) where participants were watching via big-screen TVs! Proximity to the celebrant didn't seem to have a bearing on the ability of the elements to be consecrated. Likewise, I had been present in an Emmaus service where we were clearly about to run out of consecrated elements; more bread and grape juice were obtained, but I observed as these elements were simply brought in and given to the servers ... no consecration was prayed to set apart these additional elements as the sacrament. I struggled with this, but quickly concluded that God knew that those elements were going to be needed, even if the celebrant hadn't a clue. While I would have paused to offer a short prayer over these additional elements before using them in Communion, such clearly wasn't absolutely necessary. Other theological issues were real and caused me pause, however I'll not address them here but, instead, include as an appendix a paper I wrote addressing these and related matters.

An “Experiment in Online Sacramental Practice”:

Setting aside these objections I decided to find out if there was any way in which the Means of Grace in Holy Communion could be extended from my worshipping congregation through the Internet. In 2003 I began what I called an “experiment in online sacramental practice.” I developed a discrete section of my website devoted to the sacrament of Holy Communion and, specifically, to the receipt of the sacrament over the Internet. I included written and audio sermons on the meaning of the Lord's Supper as well as several texts of the of the Great Thanksgiving, photos of sacramental celebration, and audio and video recordings of Eucharistic services. And, for any who might be interested, I invited them to prayerfully participate along with the congregation and, thereby, receive whatever measure of Grace God might have for them. I provided directions on how to prepare the elements, play the video, follow along with my congregation in offering the responses as guided by the written liturgies, and so participate in the service. I also uploaded a questionnaire for those who had participated in the service, asking them questions regarding what worked, what didn't work, what features would be helpful, and what changes might be made to make the experience more meaningful.

Over the course of 3 years I received a significant amount of feedback, much of it very positive, on the experiment. In addition to numerous personal accounts of how God had been present to them through partaking the sacrament with us, from these individuals I also received advice on needed adjustments to the site, including webpage configurations and features that they thought would be helpful in presenting Holy Communion online. In response to requests from several clergy, I developed a celebration guide and tutorial, offering advice on how to develop a clean and meaningful presidential style. Most of these clergy admitted that they didn't use the resources for partaking the sacrament, but rather for improving their own approach to presiding at the Table of the Lord. Unfortunately, I also received a great deal of negative feedback; while some of it was constructive, a much was bitter, angry, nasty, threatening, or otherwise disturbing in the extreme. Some people simply didn't like the idea of offering Communion on line; others, mostly United Methodist clergy, were so troubled or offended by it that a few went so far as to

issue threats of charges or suggestions that my bishop punish me for daring to “go beyond the church” in this way.

While the positive responses encouraged me to accept that something real was going on with my online experiment, the negative responses – and, especially, the threats – were quite disappointing. While I considered the experiment a success, I determined that it was not a good idea to keep the reception of Communion front-and-center on my website. Taking a cue from what some of my fellow clergy were telling me about the helpfulness of my Communion videos, liturgies, papers, sermons, and tutorials, in 2007 I made a significant change to the Communion section. While leaving the directions for how to take the Lord’s Supper over the Internet in place and unchanged, I greatly expanded the scope of the Communion area of Grace Incarnate Ministries to focus more on providing theological, liturgical, and multi-media resources for worship planners and/or clergy. By 2009 the furor had died down, somewhat, with far more attention being given to style, practice, and theology, and so I proceeded to redesign the “Holy Communion on the Internet” section, streamlining the directions and de-emphasizing even more the online reception of the Eucharist in favor of “prayer with” and “learning from” the theology and practice of others. I promoted the section as a resource and guide for the congregational celebration of the Eucharist, making it clear that if one still wished to participate in the online Communion experiment they really needed to do so in conjunction with participation in a local congregation’s sacramental life.

Conclusion:

Today, I believe that something meaningful and transformative was going on in my online Communion experiment. I still receive occasional emails from individuals who have partaken of the Eucharist, along with my congregation, through the use of the Communion videos and the many versions of our Word and Table liturgy. While many have questioned the validity of the act as the sacrament, most still express appreciation for my offering a worshipful and informative experience in an online setting ... accessible to those who might never darken the doors of a church. I believe that such experiences can be, in and of themselves, means of grace that serve a useful purpose. Is it the Lord’s Supper? I don’t know; I’m sure that, in many instances, it’s not. In other instances, however, I believe that it can be an effective means of grace. In other words, I am not willing to put God into a box by saying that God “cannot” move through such an online worship experience and convey grace to those who participate.

More recently, I’ve been asked if I believe that the practice of online Communion should be encouraged in the life of the church. Should it be offered as a nominal method for receiving the Lord’s Supper in situations where it may be impossible, or at least very difficult, to either attend worship in-person or have Eucharistic ministers visit in a timely fashion following worship? Surprisingly, my short answer to this question is a resounding “no.” I do not believe that online Communion should become a “normative” practice. While I believe that God’s grace can and does function through such online Communion experiences, and while it might even be properly called the Eucharist when one’s faith-response discerns the Lord’s real presence in the act, I don’t believe that it should ever be *normative* in the life of the church – even in the life of a church’s online ministry with local church members who are limited in ability to attend worship. This isn’t to say, as the church seeks to reach those of the millennial generation, that online

worship and, perhaps, even communion-like experiences can't play a role as an extraordinary, non-threatening, introduction of Methodist sacramental practice. Millennials, and others closely tied into the internet, often view relationships and communities in the virtual realm as being as real as those in the physical realm, and hence for these people aspects of a "virtual church" may have at least some authentic validity. More than just a "here's what you can expect if you visit this church," online video communions could possibly offer someone an opportunity to move into, and experience, the particular dynamic of a congregation's sacramental practice. Such online experiences might offer spiritual insight and a zone of comfort for those who are inquiring about a church's worship life but are, otherwise, reluctant to visit a brick-and-mortar church.

This has been my experience in multiple facets of my online ministry. The largest single group among the 31,100+ subscribers to my Video Sermon Page on Facebook are those who only rarely attend a brick-and-mortar church and who do not self-identify as "religious" but do view themselves as "spiritual." These people frequently involve themselves in cyberspace-based religious communities for discussion, learning, and support. While the videos linked to this Facebook page are almost always my sermons, preached weekly in my current congregation, on occasion (and especially-so when the message has been about Communion) I'll add the Eucharistic liturgy at the end of the sermon. Frequently, the responses to these messages have been greater than to those sermons without a Communion liturgy at the end. Such videos have given those who, otherwise, might never encounter Christ in the Eucharist an opportunity to taste the grace of Jesus in a way that speaks to them in their digital world.

.....

The following paper was written 7 years ago during the midst of the "controversy" over my online communion experiment. It was an attempt to address some of the salient arguments against the experiment, offer some theological thoughts in favor of the practice, and offer a defense of the "why" and "how" of online communion as it was then being offered on my website. It can be found online in its original format at:

<http://www.revneal.org/Writings/onlinecommunionremarks.html>

Since I wrote this article some of my thinking has shifted (see my paper above), but for the most part I do still stand by the theological musings in the following article.

.....

**Online Holy Communion:
Reflections on the Internet and the Means of Grace**

By: Rev. Gregory S. Neal
2006

Throughout the history of the Church the Means of Grace have been offered and received within the context of the localized, worshipping community. While preaching has sometimes been done in the open fields, prayers offered at home, hymns sung at work, and Holy Communion taken to shut-ins and to those in hospitals, for the most part the Means of Grace have usually been reserved for celebration within the Church as an expression of that particular community's spiritual life. Given such a traditional, safe, and controlled setting for their conduct, it is not at all surprising that many are uncomfortable when the Sacraments and the other sacramental acts of the Church are offered outside what has become their normative realm. This sense of ill ease is nowhere more acutely felt today than when the Means of Grace are offered through the media of the Internet.

“Is Virtual Church possible?”

“Can Christian Community be established via dial-up?”

“Is it possible to offer the Sacrament of Holy Communion over the Internet?”

Questions like these, and many others, have been shot my direction by friends and fellow Christians, by clergy and laity, by interested individuals and by those who are highly skeptical of the Internet as a viable means of communicating the Gospel and conveying God's Grace. Indeed, several pundits have expressed significant disagreement with my theology and practice of offering Holy Communion through the Internet. One of these authors, the clergy blogger at Padre Complex, has offered up some thought-provoking remarks which merit consideration:

I am all for a healthy understanding of the Communion of Saints and the ‘Great Cloud of Witnesses’ but isn't there something lacking in the total absence of a community? Rev. Neal is avoiding the prohibition against “self-service” communion. Rev. Neal appears to have a very individualistic approach to sacraments and worship. There is something crucial to the experience of communion in a community. To eat with others is to require a set of relationships that an individual does not have to consider. As an individual I can sit in front of the TV and watch The Simpsons while eating dinner. But if my family is home it is better for us to sit at the table so that we can learn of each others day, share in the hopes and dreams of life together. Communion is just not an individualistic experience. Even Jesus encouraged community - two or more.

The Covenant Community:

The “Complex Padre” is, of course, correct in his observation that Holy Communion should be experienced within community. Indeed, I entirely agree that the Eucharist is most perfectly celebrated within the context of the worshiping Church. As I have clearly stated in sermons and papers that can be found elsewhere on my website, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a Means of Grace in and through which the believer receives the nourishing, life transforming Real Presence of Jesus. Through faithfully partaking of the Sacrament Christians are brought together within the mystical Body of Christ and are empowered for mission and ministry through our Lord’s sanctifying grace. As such, Holy Communion can never be thought of as an “individualistic” experience, even if one is physically alone when partaking the elements. While perhaps being somewhat unconventional, I certainly do not have a “very individualistic” approach to the Sacraments nor to worship. While one can worship God “by oneself,” as I have done many times during morning and evening prayer at home, one is never really alone in the worship of God. “Where two or three are gathered together” is, truly, a powerful promise of our Lord’s Real Presence, but it is not in any way a limitation on the ability of Jesus to be present; in other words, there is no physical “quorum” required for Christians to worship or for the Means of Grace to be true and effective in all their marvelous manifestations.

Do I consider it immeasurably better for one to partake of the Means of Grace — and, most especially, Holy Communion — within a physically localized community of believers? *Absolutely!* I have never encouraged anyone to “forsake the gathering of the saints together.” Indeed, just as my audio sermons on the Internet should never be thought of as an alternative to listening to the preached Word within a localized Congregation, so also my offering of the Lord’s Supper over the Internet should never be thought of as an alternative to partaking the Sacrament within a localized Congregation. Indeed, I have never intended for anyone to receive any of the Means of Grace through my ministry to the exclusion of receiving them within a Church. Rather, they are being offered in addition to, and in supplementation of, the normative experience of the Means of Grace within a gathered, physically localized, worshiping Congregation. True, there are times and places in which it may be impossible, or at least very difficult, for someone to attend public worship, hear the preached Word, and receive the blessed Sacrament. In such cases my offering the Means of Grace over the Internet serves a useful purpose, standing in the gap that one’s circumstances have created. But such are exceptions to the rule. In most cases it is my conviction that the vast majority of those who receive the Means of Grace offered through my ministry do so in order to supplement and amplify that which they are already receiving within their localized community of the faith. Whichever the case may be, in any given circumstance I believe that when one is partaking of the sacrament via the internet, one is actually partaking within the extended ontological community of the Church gathered not just where I am celebrating at the Table of the Lord, but – indeed – within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of which all Christians are a part. I can and do make the argument that, even through the Internet, when one partakes of the Means of Grace one is doing so within the mystical Body of Christ ... the Church.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is the preeminent spiritual expression of the Church; regardless of its size, shape, place, date, name, denomination, or style, all Christian congregations are nevertheless part of the Universal Body of Christ as exemplified in the Eucharist. Thinking of the Church as being bound to a single local congregation or a particular group of people in worship comes dangerously close to denying not just the doctrine of the

“Communion of the Saints” but also the very idea of the “catholic Church” as understood and articulated by Protestant Christians. To put this simply: the worshipping community which I pastor, and within which I preside as celebrant at the Table of the Lord, is metaphysically interlinked with, and ontologically indistinguishable from, the faith-communities within which all other Christians partake of the blessed Sacrament ... we are all part of the One Body of our One Lord Jesus Christ. If this is true – and, by faith, we do believe that it is so – then why is it any more difficult for the Holy Spirit to extend the Real Presence of Christ from multitudinous localized congregations to Christian believers who are joining, in faith, with such congregations by means of the internet? Put another way, if the Body of Christ is not confined by temporal or spatial limitations, why do we – in our human dogmatism – feel the need to limit the Body of Christ and the Means of Grace to just those who can be physically present in a worshipping community? Are Christians only part of the Body of Christ when they are temporally and spatially present at Church? Of course not! Likewise, I believe that the Community is also present with a lone believer who is worshipping Christ and receiving the Means of Grace even by long-distance, over the Internet. Temporal and spatial limitations may limit us, but they do not limit God or the Holy Spirit’s ability to convey Grace to a believer.

The Eucharistic Elements:

Another impediment to online Holy Communion is the impossibility of transporting the consecrated elements through the Internet. Some day it may well become possible to “beam” the bread and the wine through the Internet to communicants, but as of today this is still beyond our technological capability. Many critics have focused upon this deficiency, asserting that it seriously – if not completely – undermines the ability of the Eucharist to function through the virtual media; *and they are correct* ... this is a critical issue. Breaking the bread, smelling the wine, and tasting each is both a physiological and typological experience of God’s gracious provision; just as the bread and the wine brings nourishment and refreshment, so also Christ Jesus enters our lives to nourish and refresh us. Hence the elements, as instruments conveying the Real Presence of Jesus, are central to the Sacrament of Holy Communion. While most obvious relative to the Sacraments, the centrality of physical instrumentality is true for all of the Means of Grace. Preaching requires voice and hearing and/or the ability to read and write; prayer requires voice (inner or outer); service requires physical action; the reading of Scripture requires the Bible; fellowship requires interaction with others; ordination requires the laying on of hands, and so forth. This characteristic of instrumentality is not something ancillary to the Means of Grace but, rather, is central to each – the affirmation of catholic Christianity is that God’s Grace comes to us through instruments. Indeed, this is the principle difference between the catholic conception of Sacramentology and the Zwinglian conception of Ordinance Theology: in Ordinance Theology God’s Grace is understood as falling directly upon the believer, with no mediation between the person and the deity; in Sacramental Theology God’s Grace is understood as being conveyed to the believer through many various instrumentalities. Being a United Methodist and Anglican in my Sacramentology I affirm the catholic conception of instrumentality: God’s Grace is conveyed via means.

So, how can the Eucharist function through the internet where the bread and the wine cannot be physically conveyed to the communicants? Put another way: if, in the Lord’s Supper, the Real Presence of Jesus is conveyed to the communicant through the instrumentality of the consecrated

bread and wine, how can the Sacrament function over the internet where the physical elements cannot be conveyed to the receiver? Audio preaching requires the communication of sounds, but current technology enables the transmission of sound and, indeed, even of video, hence this means of grace can function in the virtual realm without too much difficulty. The same cannot be said for the Eucharist. Or ... can it? What is to keep the internet-based participant from having the elements prepared and ready for receiving on their end of the world-wide-web? Must the bread and wine be in close spatial and temporal proximity to the celebrant at the Table? If so, how close must it be ...or, stated in reverse, how far away can the bread and the cup be before it is no-longer considered “consecrated?”

As I have considered this issue the most surprising discovery I have made is that we – the church – frequently have what amounts to a magical understanding of consecration. Yes, I said magical ... for that is how many actually treat the process and the elements which have been consecrated. It’s a misunderstanding of the Christian conception of holy consecration, but it is nevertheless one which runs rampant within the thinking and acting of many Christians. For example, in the photo which begins the current section of this article I am pictured consecrating the bread and the cup; my hands are held over the elements as I pray the words:

“Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine: make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.”

This epicletical prayer, or one similar to it, has been part of most Eucharistic liturgies throughout the history of the Church. The symbolic acts – hand motions, the lifting of the elements, the formal breaking of the bread etc. – are all features of an historic celebratory style which I was taught in Seminary, and from which I draw great personal meaning in my own spiritual life.

These consecrated elements are then received by believers as Means of Grace, and are treated with the respect they are due as instruments through which the Real Presence of Jesus is transmitted. But is it just these elements – just this loaf and just this cup under the hands of the celebrant – which are consecrated? Is the Eucharistic consecration only a spatially and temporally localized action, or can the prayer consecrate elements which are not present under the celebrant's hands, nor even within close proximity to the celebrant?

Consecration is not a magic act, nor is it superstition, it is a prayerful liturgical act of the Church in which the celebrant calls upon the Holy Spirit to bless the elements, wherever they are. This is true for the elements localized underneath the celebrant's hands, elements resting elsewhere on the Altar, elements placed at stations around a large congregation, and even elements in Fellowship Halls or auxiliary buildings where an overflow congregation is participating in the worship service via large projection screens. While certainly not conventional, nor even normative, I have become convinced that this also holds true even through radio, television, telephone, live streaming internet transmissions, audio and video recordings, and even on-demand streaming downloads. Human conceptions and limitations of time and space are never an impediment to God’s ability or desire to grant divine Grace. Every celebration of the Eucharist which has ever occurred or will ever occur, has taken place at the exact same moment for God ... in God’s eternal “now.” Likewise, every celebration of the Eucharist, held anywhere in the universe, occurs at the exact same place for God ... in God’s omnipresence. Hence, it

doesn't matter if the bread and the cup are not in close physical or temporal proximity to the celebrant – God is present, and God knows the intent and the faith of the communicant, even if they are receiving through the internet and with elements that are on their own side of the connection. If the intent is to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, and if their faith is focused upon Christ Jesus while partaking, then what we have is certainly a Means of Grace and, I am convinced, a true expression and experience of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion Among the Means of Grace:

I don't believe that it is wise, or even possible, to confine God within a paradigm of our own creation and assume that such is “all that God must be,” or “the only way that God’s Grace can be received.” Indeed, I believe that we must take great care to not limit the functionality of any of the Means of Grace to just the temporal and physical locality of a church sanctuary or immediate congregation. We don’t do this with prayer: although the gathered “prayers of the people” are of great value, we don’t deny the efficacy of the prayers of a lone person. We don’t do it with the reading of Scripture: while public reading is important, personal reading and study is equally a Means of Grace. Likewise, if preaching is a Means of Grace — and it is — and, yet, through preaching God’s Grace can be communicated over the internet, why can’t the same be said for Holy Communion? I believe that this is a good question, one that is worthy of serious consideration and not just cursory dismissal. Just because people listen to my audio sermons in the privacy of their homes and on their iPods while working out at the Gym or driving in their cars, this doesn't make them any less a Means of Grace. Likewise, just because a believer is partaking the Sacrament via the Internet, this doesn't make it any less a Means of Grace. Perhaps the functionality of the Means is different in kind, process, or even quality, but it is not different in its ontological substance; it is not any less the Grace of God because of the setting in which it is received or the means by which it is conveyed to us. If this is true for preaching, it’s true for the other Means of Grace.

In 1998 I began uploading audio sermons to the internet. Long before it was common place, I had a small collection of sermons available for streaming play on my website. My first attempts at this were laughable (by today's standards of quality), but it worked. To this day on my website I have a significant catalog of audio sermons, going all the way back to January 1999, available for streaming play. In 2005 I added Podcasting via iTunes to my means of serving sermons on the internet. Over the years my weekly listenership has grown from just a small handful to several thousand. It continues to amaze me that such is the case, but it is ... people do listen to sermons, regularly, over the Internet. My website statistics demonstrate this fact, as do my bandwidth excess charges. The emails I have received thanking me for providing these messages are such a return blessing to me that I would continue this aspect of my ministry even if not a thin dime came in to help support it. On any given Sunday morning I'll have between 100 and 120 in worship at Church; by the next Friday night more than 3000 additional internet listeners will have heard that same message and, I pray, have been touched by God’s Grace in so-hearing. Would it have been better for these people to have been in the service itself and have received all the various Means of Grace that come with being a part of a worshipping community? Yes. But that they were not there doesn't make it impossible for them to receive something from the message. I have seen it happen time and time again; God’s Grace is active in many ways ... particularly in ways that are beyond the narrow confines of our myopic expectations. This is

certainly true and evident in the scriptural accounts of God's interaction with God's people! God often chooses to work through the least likely offspring, the least likely couple, the least likely people, the least likely instrument, the least likely girl, and frequently in the least likely places and times. God majors in blowing away human conceptions of propriety and human expectations of "how things ought to be done," preferring to use ways and means and vessels that occasion surprise and rejection from the established "religious leaders," and an unexpected response from the last, the least, and the lost. Should we be surprised that God still works this way, still calls those whom the Church would never call, and still functions in ways that defy ecclesiological rules and regulations?

A few years ago -- long before the United Methodist Study Commission report on Holy Communion was published -- I began asking the question, again, regarding the sacraments. Preaching is a Means of Grace; is it the only Means of Grace that can be communicated to people over the Internet? I couldn't accept a "yes" answer to that question. I simply cannot believe that human limitations in any way limit God's Grace and the ability of God's Grace to be communicated. Hence, I began offering sermons on Holy Communion, the text of the Eucharistic rituals, photos of sacramental celebration, and audio and video recordings of Eucharistic services on my website. And, for any who might be interested, I invited them to prayerfully participate via the Internet and to receive whatever measure of Grace that God would have them receive through such participation. I was not the first to do this, nor will I be the last. Indeed, our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers have had webcams focused upon the Reserved Sacrament for the adoration of the faithful almost from the very beginning of webcam technology. If God's Grace can somehow be communicated to a faithful believer when they "pray with the Sacrament" via the Internet and a webcam, how else might God's Grace be conveyed? I decided to find out.

Since I began offering Holy Communion on my website in 2003 I have received many dozens of e-mails concerning it. Some have been caustic, accusing me of rank disrespect for the Sacrament. Others have thanked me for providing a visual guide to the celebration of the Sacraments, often expressing surprise that Methodists can and do wear vestments, or stand behind the table to celebrate, or even use a Great Thanksgiving that is much like the Catholic Mass. I've had United Methodist clergy write to thank me for demonstrating a celebration-style that is both clean and appealing, and others thank me for my writings, audio sermons, and other teachings which communicate a sound Methodist/Anglican understanding of Sacramental Theology. And, I've had many who have written to thank me for bringing the Eucharist to them over the Internet in a way that has touched their lives and given them a new experience of the Real Presence of Jesus. In most cases they have indicated a renewed interest in attending church and, in more than one case, I have helped them to find a church in their local community to attend. In short, while there have been some who have either not understood or not appreciated the "Holy Communion On the Web" section of my website, most have been very positive about it in one way or another. And, for this, I give God thanks.

Originally published online in 2006,
<http://www.revneal.org/Writings/onlinecommunionremarks.html>