

Theologians' statement on open Communion reignites debate among Episcopalians ahead of General Convention

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Deputies' and bishops' committees to hear public testimony June 27

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The wine stands on a large credence table behind the altar in the worship space in July 2018 for the closing Holy Eucharist at the 79th General Convention in the Austin, Texas, Convention Center. Photo: Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episcopal News Service.

Editor's Note: On June 5, an Episcopal group of lay and clergy leaders, a majority of them from the Diocese of Northern California and other dioceses in California, released a statement defending Resolution C028 in response to the statement a week earlier from 22 seminary theologians. The latest statement [can be read here](#).

[Episcopal News Service] The long-simmering debate over the topic of open Communion – allowing anyone to receive the Eucharist, regardless of whether they have been baptized – has reignited among Episcopalians in recent days, particularly on social media.

The practice, though restricted by the church’s canons, is common in many Episcopal churches. A newly proposed General Convention resolution seeking to repeal the canon in question, coupled with a statement from 22 seminary theologians expressing concern about its implications, has sparked arguments for and against such a change.

“I’m not surprised by the passion, because it cuts deeply into how we understand God and what the church is about,” Fond du Lac Bishop Matthew Gunter, who also serves as bishop provisional of Eau Claire, told Episcopal News Service. Gunter is the secretary of the General Convention bishops’ committee on Prayer Book, Liturgy and Music. “There are people on both sides who feel pretty strongly about that. So trying to listen to one another is also something we need to do.”

The resolution proposed by the Diocese of Northern California, C028, received a hearing on May 3 and is currently before the bishops’ and deputies’ committees on Prayer Book, Liturgy and Music, which will meet again on June 27 to hear testimony for or against it one final time before the 80th General Convention, July 8-11 in Baltimore, Maryland.

The 22 theologians did not testify at the May 3 hearing but submitted their joint statement May 31 to the committee chairs. The statement asserts that the link between the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist is crucial and that it should not be portrayed as “exclusive or inhospitable,” as it has been described by some who favor repealing the canon that restricts the Eucharist to baptized people.

The Rev. Robert MacSwain, the professor of theology at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, who wrote the statement, told ENS in an email that “while C028 (and its accompanying explanation) was the initiating cause, the main impetus was a more pervasive sense that The Episcopal Church needs to do a better job of clarifying and communicating its understanding of Baptism and Eucharist and their intimate relationship.”

Crafting the statement

MacSwain said that by writing the statement, he hoped to bring more theological depth and context to the question of open Communion.

“Episcopalians actually have a pretty sophisticated and substantial sacramental theology that has been honed over the past several decades in liturgical scholarship and ecumenical dialogues, but for some reason this vital work doesn’t seem to be informing these conversations at any profound level,” he said. “So, while duly acknowledging the current controversy, we wanted to make a more positive statement about baptism and Eucharist, however tersely, in the hope of kickstarting a fresh conversation in the church about our sacramental theology.”

MacSwain said he reached out to liturgists and theologians who represent “the really impressive range of Episcopal scholars who serve our church faithfully in various ways and who have strong convictions on these matters.” The signers – all but three of whom are clergy – work at 11 seminaries and include the Very Rev. Ian Markham, dean and president of Virginia Theological Seminary, and the Rev. Juan M. C. Oliver custodian of the Book of Common Prayer.

When asked whether he personally supports C028, MacSwain wrote that he is “less concerned about either canons or resolutions (important though they are) as I am about the quality of theological education in The Episcopal Church, among both clergy and laity.”

One of the signers, the Rev. Matthew Olver of Nashotah House in Wisconsin, shared the joint statement on Facebook, adding, “there is no theologically coherent argument to remove baptism as a prerequisite for reception of the Eucharist.” Another of the 22 signers of the statement, the Rev. Dan Joslyn-Siemiatkoski of the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, responded to a comment on Olver’s post by saying he thought the resolution “has no chance of passing. But the issue requires addressing.”

Open or closed?

The resulting debate on social media has encompassed the theology of open Communion, the specific resolution that would authorize it, the points made by the theologians and their method of addressing the topic.

“It has already generated a vigorous online conversation in both agreement and opposition with hundreds of comments, so that’s good!” MacSwain said. “It’s a conversation-starter, not a manifesto.”

The fundamental mistake in this Episcopal theological insider baseball statement is to discriminate between "all people" and "God's people."

That distinction is the source of the greatest evils in the history of Christianity:<https://t.co/HrAsx6ndCE>

— Diana Butler Bass (@dianabutlerbass) [June 2, 2022](#)

Theologians who did not sign the statement have offered a wide range of reactions. The Very Rev. Gary Hall said he supports open Communion. Hall is former dean of Washington National Cathedral, former dean of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary and current interim dean of Bloy House, The [Claremont School of Theology in California](#).

“Open Communion is the clearest signal the church can send in this moment that we are open and welcoming to all,” he told ENS. “It is true that baptism has traditionally been the prerequisite for Communion, but there are good reasons to change this practice.

“The advocates of closed Communion are right that there is a close link between Eucharist and baptism. Every church I know that practices open Communion does so as an invitation to baptism.”

Gunter agrees with the theologians’ statement, but does not see it as a question of “open” versus “closed.” The current canon, he said, does not require closed Communion – as the Roman Catholic Church and other denominations do – because it is open to any baptized Christian, regardless of denomination or doctrinal belief.

“The invitation [to Communion] is actually traditionally pretty open, compared to some other [denominations],” he told ENS. “I’m fairly convinced that the tradition is right.”

Unlike Baptism, Holy Eucharist is therefore not intended for “all people” without exception, but is rather for “God’s people” understood above as a common body united by a common faith. <https://t.co/hghRK7OrUZ>

— Scott Gunn 🇺🇸 (@scottagunn) June 1, 2022

Gunter said he was pleased and surprised to see an expression of unity from an array of respected theologians who “on other topics might disagree.” It’s important, he said, to hear detailed theological arguments before changing church teaching at General Convention, including from those who disagree.

“If nothing else comes of this, I hope it provokes a more robust – not just a conversation but an informed and theologically grounded conversation,” he said.

Why now?

Regardless of where they stand on open Communion, some Episcopal leaders have questioned why the 22 signers of the statement chose to focus on this topic at this time.

“My gut response is: Really? This issue? Now?” said Miguel Escobar, executive director of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary in New York. “As a lay person and person of color, it isn’t open Communion that’s worrying me. It’s white supremacy, climate change, poverty, gun violence, women’s right to choose... And so while I don’t wish to negate the importance of this issue, I do wish that the same level of energy and cross-seminary organizing was extended in these other areas of life.”

It’s moments like these where I feel out of step with the Church. Why legislating what are pastoral and formational issues, and codify what might live in Anglican ambiguity? There are other ways of addressing issues than putting them to a vote.

<https://t.co/ksGU77dgQ0>

— Miguel Escobar (@miguelnotes) June 2, 2022

Hall, despite his support for open Communion, said that as a former seminary dean, he found the statement odd.

“Given the current membership and financial crises in the church, I’m surprised that so many seminary faculty members have chosen this of all issues to become exercised about,” he told ENS.

Origins of Communion for the baptized

The connection between baptism and Eucharist dates to the early Christian church, and it has been documented as early as the late first century, in a catechism known as Didache: “Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord.”

In 1979, The Episcopal Church approved and first issued the current edition of the Book of Common Prayer, which introduced references to a “Baptismal Covenant” among Christians. The new prayer book also marked a shift in the church’s worship practice, making Holy Eucharist the principal service on Sundays.

General Convention also passed a resolution in 1979 establishing standards for eucharistic sharing with Christians from other denominations: “They shall have been baptized” was the first of the resolution’s five requirements.

Today, the Episcopal Church’s baptism requirement for receiving Holy Communion is specified in Canon I.17, which pertains to “regulations respecting the laity.” The canon defines baptized members as “all persons who have received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, whether in this Church or in another Christian Church, and whose Baptisms have been duly recorded in this Church.”

Canon I.17.7 further states: “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.” That language was added to the canons in 1982, reflecting The Episcopal Church’s growing understanding of baptism as one’s entrance into the life of the church. (In many other parts of the Anglican Communion, confirmation is required before receiving Communion.)

20 years of legislative debate

The Episcopal Church has frequently grappled in the past 20 years over whether to study and possibly ease or lift the baptism requirement, but such proposals have been consistently rejected by General Convention.

In 2003, the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations proposed a resolution to the 74th General Convention that would have created a task force “to study the matter of the increasingly common practice of open communion.” The standing commission, in its report,

acknowledged that the practice was not allowed by canons or the 1979 guidance on eucharistic sharing, but the report asserted it was “time for this matter to be addressed by the larger church.”

“This conflict between official position and widespread practice raises questions and concerns in our ecumenical dialogues, in which agreement on the nature of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist is necessary to moving toward the full communion to which this church is committed,” the standing commission said.

Its resolution on open communion, however, was never considered for approval by either house. Instead, bishops and deputies referred the matter back to the standing commission.

In 2006, a Central Florida deputy proposed and the 75th General Convention approved a resolution intended to “uphold baptism as a requirement of receiving Holy Communion.” It also asked the House of Bishops’ Theology Committee and the Standing Commission on Liturgy to summarize the “pastoral and theological understanding of the relationship between Holy Baptism and eucharistic practice.”

Then in 2012, the Diocese of North Carolina proposed a resolution that would have created a special commission to study the issue and, as it deemed appropriate, recommend changes to the canon that limits Communion to the baptized.

The House of Deputies rejected that idea, instead substituting language that affirmed the link between baptism and Communion. The deputies’ vote on the substituted resolution was lopsided, with 85 out of 110 lay deputations voting in favor and 70 out of 110 clergy deputations voting in favor.

After a round of amendments, the final resolution approved by both houses called baptism “the ancient and normative entry point to receiving Holy Communion and that our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to go into the world and baptize all peoples.”

The issue came up again at the 78th General Convention in 2015, when the Diocese of El Camino Real proposed a resolution that would have added language to Canon I.17.7 allowing for an exception to the baptism requirement: The unbaptized person must have “the intent of beginning or strengthening a relationship with Christ and eventually being baptized,” and the congregation must be incorporating open Communion into an evangelistic plan to “welcome all people to Christ’s table.”

The House of Bishops rejected the resolution, so it never made it to the House of Deputies for consideration.

Where it stands now

The Diocese of Northern California proposed the resolution that now is before the 80th General Convention. It calls for the outright repeal of Canon I.17.7. The diocese listed several justifications for that action, including the lack of such a requirement in the Gospels and the church's principle of "welcoming all."

"We all believe that all people are God's people, so it's not just the gifts of God for just baptized people," Martin Heatlie testified May 3 on behalf of Episcopalians in Northern California who researched the issue.

Heatlie was one of eight people who spoke about Resolution C028 at an online hearing held by the bishops' and deputies' committees on Prayer Book, Liturgy and Music. Nearly every other voice was in opposition.

The resolution "contradicts 2,000 years of church teaching and practice," Kevin Miller, a Massachusetts alternate deputy, testified. "The church universal, which we claim to be a part of, has taught that baptism is the entranceway into the church."

If C028 were to come to a vote in the House of Bishops, Northern California Bishop Megan M. Traquair told The Living Church that she would vote against it. She previously voted against open Communion when it was proposed in the Diocese of Northern California's November 2021 convention and was narrowly outvoted in the clergy order, and more decisively in the lay order, The Living Church reported.

"I have a great deal of respect for those who voted for it," she told The Living Church. "Hospitality and pastoral welcome are a good instinct."

The committees have scheduled a final online hearing June 27 on 55 resolutions it is considering, including C028, before voting on which resolutions it will forward to the full House of Bishops and House of Deputies for consideration.

Those interested in signing up to testify or observe may do so online.

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