

# Episcopal News Service

Baptism before communion is still church's norm

**Convention debate shows practice doesn't always follow canons**

By Mary Frances Schjonberg | July 25, 2012



The seeming disconnect in some parts of the Episcopal Church between the theology and practice of admission to communion became newly apparent to the Rev. Canon Beth Wickenberg Ely on a recent Sunday morning. Ely, canon for regional ministry in [North Carolina](#), who was presiding at [St. Martin's Episcopal Church](#) in Charlotte, had to consult her notes to remind herself exactly how to describe who was welcome to receive communion.

"I didn't know whether they say 'everybody come' or 'baptized Christians'," she recalled during a July 23 interview with Episcopal News Service. "I go with what the church does, and it varies." For Ely, who chaired the diocesan deputation to the recently concluded 77th General Convention, that moment at St. Martin's epitomizes why her diocese proposed (via [Resolution C029](#)) that the Episcopal Church spend the next three years studying its theology that underlies access to Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Convention rejected both that suggestion and one from the Diocese of Eastern Oregon ([Resolution C040](#)) that would have allowed the church's congregations to "invite all, regardless of age, denomination, or baptism to the altar for Holy Communion" by eliminating [Canon 1.17.7](#), which says "no unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church." Instead, the convention passed a substitute for C029 in which the Episcopal Church "reaffirm[ed] that baptism is 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 substitute resolution came out of the convention's [legislative committee on evangelism](#) to which C029 and C040 were assigned. "The committee worked very hard with the two original resolutions and it was very clear that even those who would be leaning more towards the open-table idea were not ready to change the canon at this time," the Rev. Canon Dennis Blauser, the Northwestern Pennsylvania deputation chair who also chaired the deputies' Evangelism Committee, recalled during a July 25 interview with ENS.

Blauser said the committee heard from nearly 50 people during its hearing on the two resolutions. Some witnesses voiced concern over East Oregon's proposal to do away with the baptismal requirement while others gave personal or second-hand testimony of people "who had had this powerful call to go to communion — to receive communion — and [how that experience] brought them into a new relationship with Christ and with the church, and eventually being baptized into the body of Christ," according to Blauser. In the end, the committee members sensed from the witnesses and amongst themselves that "there was really no strong pull" to abolish the canon, but they wanted to acknowledge that unbaptized people were receiving communion in the Episcopal Church.

Thus, when the House of Deputies first considered the committee's substitute resolution on July 9, it included a second sentence saying: "We also acknowledge that in various local contexts there is the exercise of pastoral sensitivity with those who are not yet baptized."

That sentence remained in the version of the resolution the deputies passed, despite an attempt by the Rev. Canon Dr. Neal Michell, chair of the Dallas deputation, and others to remove it. He told the deputies that accepting the sentence would give clergy permission to violate the canons of the church. The Very Rev. Canon James Newman of Los Angeles, who opposed removing the sentence, said those distributing communion do so amidst a tension between deciding what to do when someone puts out his or her hands to receive the sacrament and knowing what Canon 1.17.7 says. In the end, the House of Deputies passed the committee's resolution on a vote by orders, by 77 percent in the lay order and 64 percent in the clergy order. The resolution then went to the House of Bishops.

When the bishops took up C029 on the morning of the last day of convention, they eventually rejected the "pastoral sensitivity" sentence after first considering rejecting the entire resolution or referring it to their theology committee, which convention had done in 2003 (via [Resolution A089](#)) at the bishops' behest. Missouri Bishop Wayne Smith told the House of Bishops during its debate that the issue is "an ongoing concern" for the house's theology committee and so "whether you tell us to or not we will keep addressing this matter." Bishop Duncan Gray III of Mississippi, chair of the bishops' legislative committee on evangelism, said that the bishops and deputies' committee chose to rewrite C029 (and eventually discharge C040) because the former "was a more appropriate vehicle for what the committee wanted to say." Northern Indiana Bishop Ed Little told his colleagues that "we don't need to tell clergy in the parish to be pastorally sensitive, and this will be read as opening the door to communion of the unbaptized and will put a resolution of General Convention in conflict with the canons of the church, so I urge a no vote."

Bishop Geralyn Wolf of Rhode Island, who converted to Christianity from Judaism and was baptized as an adult, said that when her priest invited her to consider being baptized, "I had to deal with my identity. I had to deal with what it meant to make a public affirmation of faith." "And for those who have found their faith through communion I say 'Wonderful, I'm happy for you. I'm not going to turn you away if you come up to the altar rail.' But I also want to say I've written a

little banner here for myself that says 'open baptism'," she said "I rarely ever see the invitation to adult baptism expressed in our churches and if we're talking about identity and if we're talking about faith and mission I believe this is where it begins." New York Bishop Mark Sisk moved that the bishops strike the "pastoral sensitivity" sentence but approve the rest of the resolution because doing so "communicates clearly where we are."

Blauser said the deputies' committee then faced in the "last minute on the last day" whether to recommend that the House of Deputies concur with the amended resolution, of which he said "we thought that it really gutted the resolution as we intended it." The committee did recommend concurrence and the one-sentence resolution was accepted by the entire house.

The Rev. Anna Carmichael, who helped write the Eastern Oregon resolution, told ENS on July 23 that she wished convention had accepted the entire substitute resolution because she found it to be a "really great example of how we try to find a middle ground and work together in this church even when we don't necessarily always agree theologically or even pastorally." Carmichael, for whom this was her first foray into General Convention resolution drafting, said she was glad C040 "sparked a lot of conversation both online and actually at convention." "We should be proud as a church to be willing to engage in these kinds of dialogues," she added.

Ely admitted she was "very frustrated with the disconnect that I see between the interest in the particular topic and the unwillingness of some people to have a church-wide discussion on it," which she said was "all we were trying to do with what we sent" to convention. "There were many people at the hearing that wanted to talk about this particular thing and I think when people show up to give their input and they show up in such numbers it's irresponsible of the church to basically shove it aside," she said. "It's time for a conversation."

Blauser told ENS that the committee rejected the idea of a study, "which was going to cost money and we felt that we did not to have another committee set up to do this [because] the study will be done by the reality that this practice has been in the church and will continue in the church at some level, and we will continue the discussion."

Both Carmichael and Ely agree that the question of what is variously called open communion, open table and communion of the non- or unbaptized is not going to go away. "I think we go back to meeting it head-on with a resolution in three years, again saying we're doing one thing and we're saying another," Ely said.

Carmichael said she was not entirely surprised that the committee's resolution was amended in the House of Bishops, "but I think it gives us some food for thought and an opportunity to reflect on how we could better present a resolution like this in the future."

"This discussion is ahead of us and we're not going to be able to avoid it forever, particularly if we re-vision ourselves," Ely said, referring to convention's [decision](#) to re-imagine the work of the Episcopal Church in the 21st century. She said that future decisions about open communion will inevitably be "a by-product of the way we're going to be church in the future."

Meanwhile, Carmichael says she will not change her practice of inviting all people to receive communion at [St. Mark's Episcopal Church](#) in Hood River where she is rector. "While I understand that as a priest I have taken a vow to uphold the rubrics of the prayer book, I feel that sometimes pastoral care and pastoral sensitivity are equally as important as our theology behind what we do," she said, adding that the Episcopal Church is always striving to extend its welcome to all people "and I hope that at some point our welcome will include unbaptized at the communion rail."

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## Communion resolutions open the table for discussion

### At issue: unbaptized people receiving the Eucharist

By Mary Frances Schjonberg | May 15, 2012



The young woman who called [St. Mark's Episcopal Church](#) in Hood River, Oregon, was upset and asked if the church offered communion. "I really need some support right now and I feel like it starts there," she told the Rev. Anna Carmichael, the parish's rector. The wrinkle was that while the woman had attended various churches she had "never formally been baptized and yet somehow this needing to be in community and needing to be supported, in her mind, had something to do with communion as well," Carmichael recalled.

"I just couldn't tell her no, I'm sorry we can't offer that to you," the [Diocese of Eastern Oregon](#) rector recalled during a recent interview.

There is a tension, Carmichael said, between "the theology behind the importance of baptism," something she said is "incredibly significant to me," and "the very lived reality that people need to be supported in their community." Therein lies an example of the thinking behind Eastern Oregon's proposal that General Convention allow the church's congregations to "invite all, regardless of age, denomination, or baptism to the altar for Holy Communion." Eastern Oregon's Resolution C040 would pave the way for this invitation by eliminating [Canon 1.17.7](#), which says "no unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church." It is one of two resolutions on this topic the convention will consider when it meets July 4-12 in Indianapolis. The Diocese of North Carolina has proposed a longer-term look at the issue. Resolution C029 calls for a special commission to conduct "a study of the theology underlying access to Holy Baptism and Holy Communion" and recommend to the 78th General Convention any amendment to Canon 1.17.7 it believes is needed.

The texts of both resolutions are available [here](#). Eastern Oregon's is accompanied by a diocesan statement explaining its stance. This will be the second time in recent years that what is variously called open communion, open table and communion of the non- or unbaptized has come to convention. In 2006, the General Convention affirmed Canon 1.17.7 (via [Resolution D084](#)) and asked for the [House of Bishops Committee on Theology](#) and the [Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music](#) to provide to the 2009 meeting of convention "a pastoral and theological understanding of the relationship between Holy Baptism and eucharistic practice." In its [report](#) to the 2009 convention, the SCLM said it had been in contact with the bishops' committee and "stand[s] ready to cooperate with them on this important issue in the future." The bishops [reported](#) that a study was "on-going." In June 2009, the committee circulated "Reflections on Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist: A Response to Resolution D084 of the 75th General Convention," which was later [published](#) in the *Anglican Theological Review*. The committee called it a "promissory note" because "we do not assume this is our last word on these matters." "It is essential to understand the doctrinal and liturgical connections between baptism and eucharist, especially in a church that has been rediscovering the centrality of baptism," the members wrote in their conclusion. "We invite the church into this work."

This year, the bishops' theology committee reported in the Blue Book (beginning on page 51 [here](#)) that it is "undertaking a renewed engagement with the theology of the Eucharist." They noted what they call "the continuing (and controversial) practice of inviting the un-baptized to receive communion" and suggested what is needed is "a renewed and fundamental understanding of the eucharistic assembly and of eucharistic celebration as the quintessential gathering of the people of God." Carmichael said Eastern Oregon began discussing what she called this "issue of practice versus theology" during its 2010 convention and agreed to submit a resolution to General Convention. "For many of the folks out here in the diocese we have already started living into the practice, which I know gets us in a sticky situation but it's reality," she said, adding, "we don't check ID at the door" and strangers who come up to receive communion are not asked if they have been baptized. "We feel like it's been a lived reality for us and we imagine that that may be true in other dioceses as well," Carmichael said.

The Rev. Canon Beth Wickenberg Ely, canon for regional ministry in North Carolina and chair of that diocese's convention deputation, echoed that sentiment. "Our gut reaction is that we're not the only ones facing this," she said in a recent interview. "We think that this is probably true for every single diocese." "Every Sunday we face this," she said. "It's not just a Christmas and Easter thing. If something is that much part of our lives together, we really need to bring this out in the open and talk about it."

Hence, the diocese's proposal that the church study the issue.

Deputy Joe Ferrell, a professor of public law at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, championed his diocese's resolution not because he opposes an open table, but because "we have a canon that specifically prohibits it and my view has always been we don't get to pick and choose the laws that we will obey unless we're impelled by a higher moral authority, and I don't think this issue is compelled by higher moral authority, so we need to do something about the canon." Ferrell said that if he "could wave my magic wand" the canon would be repealed. "We'd be left with rubrics of the Prayer Book, which I think are perfectly adequate," he said in an interview. Reminded that the Book of Common Prayer is silent on the issue, he chuckled and replied, "that's right, that's right." Having been raised in the Episcopal Church, Ferrell, 73, remembers prior to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer when Eucharist was not the principal service each Sunday and when communion was rarely a part of weddings and funerals. "Now it's commonplace and, particularly at weddings and funerals, you've got severe pastoral problems if you attempt to restrict who is going to be welcome at the altar," he said. "And you have it to some extent on Sunday mornings." His "bottom line" is this: "clergy who feel that this is important from a pastoral point of view should not be put in a position of knowingly violating a canon that could not be more explicit."

The Episcopal Church's canons have contained a version of Canon 1.17.7 only since 1982, even though baptism as a pre-requisite for Holy Communion is rooted in the earliest part of the early Christian church. It appears that explicitly stating the tradition in the Episcopal Church canons happened due a legislative compromise between two competing resolutions. At the 1982 meeting of convention in New Orleans, deputies and bishops faced two resolutions dealing with the canon titled "Of Regulations Respecting the Laity" (then numbered Canon 16 of Title I). Resolution A48 (submitted by the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations and available beginning on page 60 [here](#)) was prompted by a mandate from the 1979 convention that it show how the church could implement the then-six-year-old ecumenical statement, "Toward a Mutual Recognition of Members," which called for an understanding that baptism initiates people into the entire Christian church, according to the 1989 supplement to Edwin White and Jackson Dykman's classic *Annotated Constitution and Canons* (available via a link [here](#)).

Resolution A78 (submitted by the Standing Liturgical Commission and available beginning on page 154 [here](#)) was based more specifically on the understanding that the Episcopal Church now considered baptism to be one's entrance into the full life of the church. (In many, if not most, parts of the Anglican Communion, confirmation is still required before receiving communion.)

"The two resolutions reflected specific persuasions and purposes that differed sharply," the supplement's authors wrote. "Deputy [Charles Crump](#) of Tennessee, sensing the problems inherent in these proposals and the vast legislative time and debate which would be consumed on the floors of each House, crafted [Resolution A048](#) as a compromise." The changes reflected in all three resolutions felt revolutionary to many. Allowing unconfirmed people to receive communion was a major change, as was the accompanying implication that children did not have to reach an undefined "age of reason" before coming to the altar rail.

The age tradition lingers in some families and in some parts of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church is still working to rewrite its canons to conform to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer's baptismal theology. A summary of some of that work done by the Standing Commission on Lifelong Christian Formation and Education begins on page 153 of this year's Blue Book.

Still, the requirement of baptism before Eucharist remains and hearkens to the early church. For example, the [Didache](#), a catechism dating from the late 1st or early 2nd century, tells Christians, "... but let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord ...". And scholars suggest there is evidence from early church liturgical sources, including [The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome](#) that non-baptized members of the Christian community had to leave the eucharistic liturgy altogether after the proclamation of the word. Carmichael would hearken to an even earlier source. "This is our construction around this issue because Jesus never said you have to have baptism before you have dinner with me," she said. "So, this is our mess that we've created and sometimes I wonder in the grand scheme of all things how much this really matters. When we get to heaven is Jesus going to be more excited that we invited people or is he going to be more excited that we said you can come, but you can't?"

Wickenberg Ely in North Carolina places at least part of the issue against the question of diversity. "I think we've had the diversity conversation ad nauseum but, I don't think we've had it in the context in the open table," she said in an interview. "To me that's about diversity, so who are we going to leave out? The answer, the biblical answer to that is: [leave out] nobody who wants to come." The open-table issue is also part of the Episcopal Church's struggle "about who are we as a church in the 21st century," she said. Wickenberg Ely noted that many people who come to church are often "looking to be welcomed wherever they go and whatever they believe." Yet, there are some churches that say "if you are to be a member of our community in Christ this entails discipline and commitment, so that belonging is not just by virtue of being a child of God, but it is by virtue of being willing to pledge yourself to this way of being of a child of God," she said, adding that this is the stance of the Roman Catholic church.

The Episcopal Church could be "known as a church that is welcoming of anyone at the Lord's Table, willing to entertain questions, willing to dialogue with people of all beliefs and no beliefs — a generous stance as a church," she suggested. "Do we want to be known as a church like that going into the future? Or do we want to be known as a church that has some boundaries, [legal and canonical] expectations, also with [practice] and educational expectations, or do we want to be in the middle?" she asked. "I mean, who are we going to wind up being? This is just one of the things about that big discussion in my mind."

Those questions frame up an even larger context for the communion issue. Removing the baptismal requirement for participation in communion would undoubtedly have major ecumenical implications. In 2008 the [Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations](#) rooted its opposition to an open table in the once-revolutionary recognition of a common baptism, noting that that acceptance "has made ecumenical ventures possible." In [The Vision Before Us](#) the commission warned that "a move toward the official communion of the non-baptized undercuts, threatens, and in the end denies basic ecumenical tenets." The members also noted that Anglican credibility in ecumenical conversations is threatened when Anglican texts say one thing, but practice suggests another.

"The practice of admitting non-baptized people to the Eucharist overthrows a century of ecumenical insight and growth," they conclude. The women who called St. Mark's looking for support has been coming to the parish regularly, and Carmichael said the two of them have "regular conversations about how she can become more involved in the community and that that includes, when she's ready, the decision to be baptized." "It's not a

prerequisite to being able to participate in community life, but that it is an adult decision about her faith and that I am happy to walk in the journey with her when she's ready," Carmichael said.

### **Read more about it**

Here is a selected list of additional resources (beyond those linked to above) about the issue of unbaptized people receiving communion:

["Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry"](#) (Faith and Order Paper No. 111, the 'Lima Text'), World Council of Churches Faith and Order commission (1982)

Open, the journal of the [Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Music](#), essays

- ["Baptism and eucharist: challenges,"](#) now-Diocese of Upper South Carolina Bishop Andrew Waldo (2000)
- ["Baptism and communion,"](#) the Rev. Dr. Stephen Reynolds (2001).

Anglican Theological Review essays

- ["Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of 'Open Communion,'"](#) the Rev. James Farwell (2004)
- ["In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell,"](#) Dr. Kathryn Tanner (2004)
- ["A Brief Reflection on Kathryn Tanner's Response to 'Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus,'"](#) the Rev. James Farwell (2005)
- ["Opening the Table: The Body of Christ and God's Prodigal Grace,"](#) the Rev. Stephen Edmondson (2009).
- ["Who May Be Invited to the Table?,"](#) the Rev. Dr. Ruth Meyers (2012)
- ["Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission,"](#) the Rev. Donald Schell (2012)
- ["Following Jesus Outside: Reflections on the Open Table,"](#) Diocese of Ohio Bishop Thomas E. Breidenthal (2012)

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