

# Going to Church in the First Century

*One Community's Exploration of its Ancient Eucharistic Roots*

by Jamie Howison



Inspired by a form developed by Marion Hatchett for a contemporary celebration of a pre-Nicene liturgy, and borrowing a title from a little book by Robert Banks, over the autumn of 2007 our church community offered a series of four home-based communions we called “Going to Church in the First Century.” Saint benedict’s table is a fairly young worshipping community, designated a mission of the Diocese of Rupert’s Land of the Anglican Church of Canada. After discovering Hatchett’s very helpful resource, I decided that for several reasons saint benedict’s table was particularly ripe for this home-based format. On a very practical level, we have found that after just over three years of life as a worshipping community we still have some distance to go in forming as a people together, and I suspected that some smaller gatherings in homes might help in this regard. Secondly, as a Eucharistic community with a majority of its members drawn from church traditions of a less Eucharistic focus – predominantly Anabaptist, Salvationist, and Baptist – it seemed important to demonstrate the ancient roots of our liturgical spirituality and current practice. Further, the very name of our community – saint benedict’s table – signals the centrality of Eucharist, and also indicates our mission to relate the communion table to all of the other tables of shared food and hospitality in our lives. Intuitively, our community knows that Eucharist is a meal; not only is our communion bread Indian naan – which one actually chews and tastes – but people take a real swallow from the cup, which means that weekly we consume twice the amount of wine as any other parish I have ever served!

We arranged for four different households to host one of these evenings, scheduling two for weeknights and two for weekends. The hosts were asked to set what they considered a manageable maximum number for their home (which ranged from 14 to 20 participants), and people were encouraged to sign up to attend one of the gatherings. Parents were encouraged to bring their children, though we were quite clear that this was not meant to be narrowly a “family” event. Participants all signed on to bring something to share at the meal with bread, wine, cheese, olives and hummus as the options. The evenings were set to begin at 7:30pm, though taking a cue from John Koenig’s reading of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 – “Those who arrive later (11:33) are probably slaves, women married to nonbelievers, and others who cannot make independent decisions about their personal schedules” and thus most vulnerable to exclusion – we always waited until everyone had arrived before beginning. In fact, by sharing Koenig’s insight, that period of waiting actually illustrated something of the oftentimes socially scandalous inclusiveness of the early church.



While there were some variations based on the design of each home’s living space, essentially the gatherings had the same set-up. Participants gathered seated around a central table, and once everyone was in place a reading from the Old Testament was shared, followed by a reflection by the presider. A second reading followed, this a fairly long excerpt from 1 Corinthians 11 on worthy reception and on discerning the Body. A second reflection by the presider followed, a teaching very much indebted to the work of Koenig and of Michael Welker on these texts. While we tried to avoid any sense that we were play-acting the parts of early Christian worshippers, an attempt was made to be sensitive to the interpretive habits of the early church writers.

Prayers of intercession followed, with one person assigned to take the role of a deacon in offering the biddings, and space left for others to offer their own prayers and petitions. Following the intercessions was the exchange of the Peace.

At the offertory the table was set with all the food and drink which had been brought to share, with some of the bread and wine placed in front for communion. A simple piece of music was sung at this point, drawn either from the psalms or from one of the New Testament texts generally recognized to have been an early church hymn or confessional statement. In the style of the music of Taizé, these songs were sufficiently simple and repetitive to require no printed copies. In fact, aside from the two readings and the presider’s copy of the Eucharistic text, these were paper-free evenings.

At the Eucharistic prayer, the gathered assembly stood and everyone adopted the *orans* prayer position, with hands raised. The Eucharistic prayer itself was something of a hybrid, combining much of the Eucharistic material of *The Didache*, from the late first century, with elements of a second or third century rite as outlined by Hatchett. Specifically, these later additions were the *sursum corda* and a blessing of cheese and olives from the late second century Syriac liturgy, *Addai and Mari*. This latter addition was extremely useful in demonstrating the fundamental integrity of the Eucharist as a shared meal. In the style of the prayer from *The Didache*, a repeated refrain was used, but because we chose not to vary the content of the refrain, it was not necessary to distribute printed copies.

The prayer in the *The Didache* does not include the words of institution, which have long been considered an essential part of a valid Eucharistic prayer. In addition, the normal order for the blessing of the bread and wine is reversed, with prayers over the cup preceding those over the bread. Further, as noted above, we inserted elements of later rites, which, I suspect, some liturgists will see as a butchering, rather than as a more innocent hybrid. While I

am not about to take a primitivist stance and defend a prayer based on *The Didache* as being superior simply because it is old, I do think that in an extraordinary context such as a home-based gathering—one with an explicitly instructional component—the use of this prayer is justified. The addition of the texts from *Addai and Mari* has been addressed above, while the use of the *sursum corda* offered both a point of community participation and a familiar structure by which to anchor the community's prayer.

The one section from *The Didache* not used was the caution that only the baptized are to receive communion. Because all who took part in these gatherings were regular communicants in our church, this warning seemed unnecessary. Further, as Banks has argued, the earliest first century practice may have included an extension of Eucharistic hospitality to all in attendance.

We remained standing for the sharing of the consecrated bread and wine and for the prayers after communion, and after singing another song we shared the rest of the food on the table. There was no blessing or dismissal, but rather just an invitation to share food, drink and company together. Typically, this part of the evening extended until after 9:30 pm, and in one case people stayed on well past 11:00 pm.

Were these gatherings successful? All four evenings were fully subscribed, and numerous requests have been made to hold a second series over the winter months. In real terms, this meant that a total of 60 people took part over the course of the four gatherings, this in a community that averages 125 people at its weekly Sunday liturgy. Roughly 50% of participants were people who had come to saint benedict's table within the past 12 months, many of whom commented that they welcomed the opportunity to worship and socialize in a smaller and more intimate setting.

In terms of the educational aims of these evenings, several people did comment that they could see the connections between our current practice and its roots in the early church. Several also commented that the clear connection between the Eucharistic meal and the community's shared meal made a deep impression.

Ultimately, to draw together circles of people for the sake of offering worship and prayer is always life-giving to a Christian cocommunity. On that level alone "Going to Church in the First Century" was a most valuable thing in the life of what is a twenty-first century church.

## Liturgy Outline

### 1. THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

- reading from the Old Testament
- homiletic response
- reading of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34
- homiletic response
- intercessory prayers, with biddings led by someone designated as "deacon"
  - I invite you to offer prayer for the church
  - I invite you to offer prayer for the nations and peoples of the earth
  - I invite you to offer prayer for all who suffer and are inflicted in body and mind
  - I invite you to offer prayer for those who have not yet received the gospel of Christ
- exchange of the Peace

### 2. THE LITURGY OF THE TABLE

The Lord be with you.  
And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them up to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy Vine of your servant David, which you have made known to us through your servant Jesus.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge you have made known to us through your servant Jesus.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may your church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

Now sanctify this cheese—milk which has solidified—and solidify us in your love, and let now your sweetness depart from this fruit of the olive tree, which is a type of your mercy which you caused to flow from the Tree for life to those who hope in you.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

Glory to you, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit in the holy church both now and always and world without end.

**Amen.**

### 3. THE COMMUNION

Thanks be to you, holy Father, for your sacred name which you have caused to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and everlasting life which you have revealed to us through your servant Jesus Christ.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

You, O almighty Lord, have created all things for your own name's sake; to all people you have given meat and drink to enjoy, that they may give thanks to you, but to us you have graciously given spiritual meat and drink, together with life eternal, through your servant. Especially, and above all, do we give thanks to you for the mightiness of your power.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

Be mindful of your church, O Lord; deliver it from all evil, perfect it in your love, sanctify it, and gather it from the four winds into the kingdom which you have prepared for it.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

Let His grace draw near, and let this present world pass away.

**Glory to you for ever and ever!**

Whosoever is holy, let that one approach. Whoso is not, let that one repent. O Lord, come quickly!

**Amen.**

## Sources

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