Most United Church congregations have seen a significant increase in the number of times communion is celebrated each year. What was once a quarterly phenomenon now takes place, on average, eight or more times a year. A few congregations make provision for weekly communion, thus restoring the ancient Word and Table structure of Christian worship. But a meaningful and vibrant celebration of Holy Communion remains a challenge for many of our congregations. Simply celebrating it more often will not necessarily renew its meaning for us.

The Great Thanksgiving prayer is to the communion table what storytelling is to the campfire. It is the ritualized telling of the story of salvation from creation to resurrection, to our vision of God’s coming reign. In the early church, the main criterion for leadership at the community’s table was the gift of telling this story with integrity. The communion resources in Celebrate God’s Presence invite worship leaders to engage the classic structure of the eucharistic prayer creatively, to learn its components, and seek ways of telling the story at table in our time.

Let the Symbols Speak
Aidan Kavanagh, the renowned orthodox liturgical theologian, was once lecturing on the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and was asked by an incredulous student, "Do you really believe that the bread is the body of Christ?" "What I find much harder to believe," replied Kavanagh, "is that those wafers are really bread!" It often seems that there is more beauty, meaning, and symbolic integrity in the bread at the neighborhood bakery than on many of our communion tables. We need some of that bread on our tables: bread made and offered by known human hands, bread from other cultures to remind us of the global dimensions of our faith, bread that is worthy to be lifted up with our prayers and savoured in our mouths, bread that speaks volumes.

Gather Gladly
Often our celebrations are more like funerals than feasts of resurrection. Some of this we inherit from medieval penitential piety, where the story of the Last Supper (the “Institution Narrative”) was all that was said at table. While reverence can be a measure of respect and meaning, it need not be devoid of deep joy. Many of our newer communion hymns help us: we are called to "gather gladly" (“All Who Hunger” VU 460) and “I Come with Joy” (VU 477).

Expect To Be Changed
In using the stuff of this world in sacraments, God connects us to the work of the Spirit in the world. Sacraments are not other-worldly exercises. They are incarnate and embodied enactments of the way we are called to be in the world. The table of communion reminds us of the tables around which people gather daily with too little (or too much) food; it reminds us of how Jesus’ table fellowship with all the ‘wrong’ people challenged the values of his day. Aidan Kavanagh has also been quoted as saying, “I’m more concerned about the change in the people than the change in the bread and wine.”

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