

# Who is welcome to partake of communion?



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Columnist

Back in jail chaplaincy days, I led seven interfaith services each week. These were very informal, of course, since they were held in locked cells, through steel bars, in courtyard cages made of bladed wire or concrete hallways.

Yet now and then I would put on my Christian minister “hat” and let inmates know that our gathering that day would have a decidedly Christian flavor. Sometimes it meant we would be discussing a Bible passage or theme. Other times I would invite any who wanted to join us to “celebrate communion” (Eucharist, Lord’s Supper, Last Supper, breaking bread).

I made it very clear that everyone was welcome; no one was required to be a Christian to share “The Meal.”

One evening I brought in some crackers and white grape juice. A woman in a yellow jumpsuit joked that maybe God would turn the juice to wine. A man in a green jumpsuit wondered why I didn’t bring a loaf of warm fresh bread. I wish I could have. Jail staff were strict about what could and could not be brought inside. We made the best of it.

On this night, Bob, a young Jewish man, asked if he could join. “Good to have you,” I responded. We all had a very lively discussion about the meaning of the “sacrament,” sang a few folk songs and shared a brief prayer.

I gave each prisoner a cracker and poured juice into little cups to drink. “This is God’s body,” I would say, or, “You are a part of God,” or something similar.

The point was: No one was left out; everyone was included no matter what. Who was I to tell someone they couldn’t celebrate life, have a taste of “grace” or feel a part of the “community of faith” or any community at all?

We finished the celebration and stood around chatting. While a young tattooed guy strummed my guitar. Bob



Nature’s open table: Beaverdam Valley from Elk Mountain Road. CHRIS HIGHLAND



A chalice is taken for Communion during the celebration of a mass.

KELLY WILKINSON/INDYSTAR

asked if he could drink the last of the grape juice I had poured in the wooden chalice. I handed it to him. He told me they never had a drink in the mess hall that tasted that good.

Afterward, as I carried my guitar and

nonbeliever, a person who doesn’t believe that Jesus was more than a human being, would even want to share the Supper.

It seems to me we ought to consider the deeper meaning of a final meal among friends and whether Jesus of Nazareth intended it to be anything more than a dinner shared “in remembrance of Me.”

I don’t have to accept everything he said as true for me, but I can honor and respect his life given in service of others, especially those who are poor, treated unfairly, excluded (irony alert).

At times, I’ve sat with family members in a service and chosen to take a piece of bread. Other times I choose not to (though that can be pretty awkward to be the only one).

During seminary I attended a Catholic mass every Sunday. Oddly enough, it was part of my job. As an instructor at a private school with developmentally disabled students, I would walk down with them to the “Gym Mass” held in a Catholic school. These remarkably hospitable services were led by young priests.

Learning that I was a seminary student, a priest would sometimes invite me to hold the chalice or bread during The Eucharist. I felt honored, respected. A few of my students sometimes held the chalice and bread — a radical gesture of welcoming.

Communion never meant more than when I shared it with those who felt the most excluded. When I felt welcomed, it was natural to welcome others. If a person feels this inclusiveness offends Jesus, I wonder: How can we turn anyone away from a table when the host is Love?

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com)*

the empty box of crackers out into the night air, I smiled and shook my head thinking of how many in the Christian world would be aghast at what I’d done.

Surely there have to be rules for those who partake! This “sacramental” experience is only for “God’s people,” right? We can’t allow just anyone, can we?

The ironic image struck me — a Jewish person at The Last Supper!

Have you ever been excluded from Communion? I have. My wife has. Some churches are very strict about who can “partake” of the “elements” (bread and wine). The language used by the officiant can be clear: “Don’t touch this if you’re not a believer like us!”

I once saw an elderly woman turned away by a priest when she came forward for the elements. I never returned and I doubt she did either.

You might be asking yourself why a