

Concerning Online Communion

The debate over “online communion” would not even be occurring except that we in the ELCA have realized the benefit of regular (in many congregations weekly) participation in Holy Communion. Our desire for the sacrament is to be celebrated. Leaders on all sides of the issue of online communion are motivated by love, pastoral concern and the desire to provide this means of grace for God’s people. Further, our conversations about this matter should be governed by the fact that we belong to the one body of Christ, the church, and thereby to each other; this suggests that disagreements should be stated with respect and honor for one another, as we strive faithfully to navigate the extraordinary situation in which we find ourselves.

The church is the assembly in which the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered (Augsburg Confession VII). During this situation in which congregations are practicing physical distancing, we have been encouraged by the Presiding Bishop and the ELCA Worship team to refrain from sharing the Lord’s Supper together for the sake of our neighbor.¹ Since then, increased public health concerns have led to the suspension of public worship services in many—perhaps most—of our congregations for an indefinite period of time. To this point, see also the Rev. Dr. Dirk Lange’s blog post on the Lutheran World Federation website.²

We feel the absence of our physical gathering together and our common participation in our Lord’s body and blood, and this is something to be grieved. However, it is important to remember the **abundance of grace available to us**. The forgiveness, grace, mercy, and spiritual sustenance offered so abundantly at the Lord’s Supper is also available to people through other means. In the *Smalcald Articles* (Part III Article IV), Luther talks about the various means of grace: the preached Word, the absolution, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the mutual consolation of our brothers, sisters, and siblings in Christ.³ The God of abundant love and mercy does not deny grace and forgiveness to those who earnestly desire to receive the Lord’s Supper but must refrain for a time. The grace we received at baptism is still at work in us, with abundance. Those able to join online worship services, live-streamed or recorded, can listen to the Word preached and forgiveness announced. We are surely uplifted by the consolation of our siblings in Christ manifested through phone calls and other forms of support. We have the Scriptures, which individuals can read and study daily.

Some congregations and synods are considering or already practicing what is being called virtual or online communion, wherein members watch a live-streamed service and participate in Holy

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19,” Updated March 20, 2020:

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf?_ga=2.220934360.1957727313.1585613210-1777692384.1528389858

² Dirk Lange, “Digital Worship and Sacramental Life in the Time of Pandemic,” March 24, 2020:

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic>

³ Luther writes: “We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and helps against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18[:20]: ‘Where two or three are gathered. . .’” *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article IV, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert and trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 319.

Communion using bread and wine in their own homes. Some ELCA and ELCIC theologians (Dr. Deanna Thompson and the Rev. Dr. Allen Jorgenson) have provided thoughtful theological arguments in support of this practice.⁴

While we appreciate the desire to provide the sacrament in this new way, we fear that more may be lost than gained in this innovative practice.

1. One of Luther's concerns was to alleviate the doubt of the believer. Regardless of what theologians say about online communion, we need to be concerned for those church members who might doubt that this is really the sacrament. Lutherans understand sacraments as actions commanded by Christ to which are attached the sure promise of God's grace. Online communion is such a departure from past practice that it would not be unreasonable for someone to doubt.
2. The Lutheran Confessions teach that the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated in the assembly of the baptized, and not privately or by individuals in their own homes. In this communal celebration, we do not invite Jesus to our family table. Jesus invites us to his family table to share his body and blood, which unites and strengthens the body of Christ, the church, in faith and service. Just as Christ is present in the sacrament bodily, the community gathered to receive the sacrament is best gathered bodily. While many of us can attest to the power of virtual community in other dimensions of our lives, online communion falls short of the embodied, communal experience of a physical assembly. Further, online communion functionally excommunicates those without the appropriate technology or access to the internet. We simply cannot assume that all who desire to participate in Holy Communion are able to do so when it is offered online.
3. Finally, one of the ancient principles of the church is *lex orandi, lex credendi*: prayer (including worship practice) shapes belief, and vice versa. We are concerned about how the practice of online communion will shape the theology of our members well beyond the current crisis. Even if one might be able to justify online communion theologically, the *practice* of communing alone or only with the members of one's immediate family or household will reshape people's understandings of communion in ways that undermine the fullness of the Christian assembly. This is of concern especially because the technology most often used for online worship connects worshipers to the worship leaders but does not connect them to other worshipers. Lived experience forms faith more deeply than our theological explanations. We worry that no matter what we teach about why people are receiving communion around their kitchen table during this health crisis, people will slowly be formed to think of communion more as a meal of their own family or household than as the meal of the gathered family of Christ. The longer the current situation continues, the more that sense will be reinforced. Some have referred to the "house churches" of early Christianity as a parallel to this situation, but those house

⁴ Deanna Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion," March 26, 2020: [https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/?fbclid=IwAR0w2nEKq_f2yGtb-BZkLoL1XHvE6JVuvG5RHofLA5NhZ7HKqAY52R0hcY](https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/?fbclid=IwAR0w2nEKq_f2yGtb-BZkLoL1XHvE6JVuvG5RHofLA5NhZ7HKqAY52R0hcY;); Allen Jorgenson, "Corona and Communion," March 29, 2020: <https://stillvoicing.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR0zLaXBcwftHkFP7jJNQYH-3Wzo4QJkskRG7SnEOGZqwg5saQLH8UBOzg0>

churches did not consist of an individual household; rather, a believer opened her or his home up to others to come together and form a new family of faith in Christ.

While we recommend against the practice of online communion, we would suggest the judicious distribution of the sacrament to those sheltered at home in cases of extreme illness (whether COVID-related or not), for the comforting of the sick and dying.

Many congregations have had regular lay visitations bringing the sacrament. For example, a minister may celebrate the Lord's Supper (with at least one other person present), following strict hygiene protocols with respect to handling the elements and preparing boxes/kits for the homebound. These could be brought to the door by a church member able to understand both the need for reverence and need for hygiene when handling the box and leaving it for those expecting it or handing it to a resident without entering the home. Then, over the phone or Zoom, the pastor or other leader could have a visit with the person, reminding them that "In the night in which he was betrayed, Our Lord Jesus..." (Words of Institution spoken as words of Gospel), or when this is not possible, the little booklet typically used for lay distribution of communion would be in order.

We regard this to be the exception rather than the rule, but having the community refrain from the Lord's Supper during a public health crisis is different from potentially denying a sick or dying person access to this means of grace when they earnestly desire it.

However, even in the midst of doing this for those in extreme sickness, we emphasize that God's grace and forgiveness, offered through Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, is abundantly available through other means—the spoken Word, baptism, the absolution, and the mutual consolation of our siblings.

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