
Denominational Considerations for Online Communion

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A quick shift

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, worshipping communities learned quickly how to be flexible and creative with worship practices when gathering in our physical buildings was impossible or unwise. Other expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, including synods and the churchwide organization, were learning just as quickly. Early in the pandemic, large amounts of information and guidance circulated fast around all expressions of the church and our partners. The speed with which our world was changing and the uncertainty about how the change would impact the church in the immediate and short term were difficult to comprehend and, at times, confusing.

As congregations learned how to do very familiar things in new ways, many questions were raised about how practices might be adapted, even temporarily. Celebrating and sharing the sacrament of Holy Communion in digital community was one practice that invoked deep questions around the core of our theologies of worship and the sacraments.

What became clear early on was that these deep theological questions were not going to be answered simply or quickly. The question of how a denomination, in this case, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), might help its pastors and worshipping communities discern the best practices around the sacraments in changing times is ongoing.

Grounding guidance

As questions around and experimentation with Holy Communion in online worship and other pandemic-necessitated practices unfolded, many looked for answers in Lutheran theology, the Confessions, and Scripture. ELCA guidance on sacramental practice was also analyzed for applicability to times of limited or no in-person gatherings.

For its first ten years of existence, the ELCA was guided by the 1989 *Statement on Communion Practices*, identical to a 1978 statement of predecessor church bodies. Following nearly eight years of development, including study and reflection across all expressions of the ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, a state-

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ment on the practice of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA, was adopted “for guidance and practice” by the Fifth Churchwide Assembly in 1997. The statement consists of “principles” together with “background” material and “application” of the principles to specific practices.

This statement helped the ELCA consider common practice around Word and Sacrament among the various expressions of this church, as well as freedom for appropriate diversity. At its introduction to the 1997 Churchwide Assembly, it was noted that this statement “is not a comprehensive doctrine of the means of grace and is not intended to be. Preparing such theology for the Church is an important task appropriately done by the teaching theologians of this church in an academic context.”¹ Rather it “seeks to encourage unity among us in the administration of the means of grace and to foster a common understanding and practice. It does not seek to impose uniformity among us.”² This guiding statement encouraged an already growing practice of celebrating Holy Communion weekly on Sundays. It also honored

1. 1997 Churchwide Assembly, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes. <https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CWA1997.pdf>.

2. ELCA, Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes.

a variety of practices in the church regarding who was admitted to the table i.e., various ages for first communion.

The Use of the Means of Grace notes that “Holy Communion takes place in the assembly.”³ Defining “the assembly” has been a significant part of the conversation around whether Holy Communion celebrated in online worship could or should be normative practice in the church. What does this mean for worshiping communities that were meeting entirely online? To so-called “virtual” assemblies that might meet synchronously or asynchronously? What does this mean to those unable to connect with their worshiping community online?

Denominations also grapple with questions of jurisdiction in these conversations. Who has the authority to make these decisions? The ELCA’s governance and guidance documents make clear that the ministry of Word and Sacrament in a local congregation “is the responsibility of the pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.”⁴ Synod bishops have leadership in exercising “oversight of the preaching, teaching, and administration of the sacraments” in that synod.⁵ The churchwide organization has a responsibility to “recommend, through the presiding bishop, policies related to worship and sacramental practices to the Church Council and the Churchwide Assembly.”⁶ The relationship between the local minister of Word and Sacrament and the wider church represents an important interconnectedness. Still, ultimately it is the local pastor who is responsible for Word and Sacrament ministry in the context to which they are called.

Variety of practice

As the pandemic unfolded in 2020, it became clear that there was a variety of practice in local congregations regarding the celebration and distribution of Holy Communion. Many congregations refrained from Holy Communion during times when we could not gather physically proximate. These congregations found ways to live even more deeply in the Word. Some worshiping communities were rediscovering, or discovering for the first time, the rich services for daily prayer in our worship resources and applying them to online forums. This often meant offering more worship opportunities in a week than they might have before the pandemic.

Other congregations found ways to continue distributing the sacrament at a distance. Some communities gathered in cars in parking lots, and communion was safely delivered to each vehicle. Some congregations began experimenting with the possibility of services of Holy Communion with individuals participating online, bringing their own bread and wine, and sharing in the meal together in digital community. Most communities did not stick

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with any one method but changed as the pandemic lengthened or adapted to current and ever-changing local conditions.

During this time, there seemed to be just as much variety of guidance as there was variety of practice. Throughout 2020 there were numerous papers and positions both for and against Holy Communion in digitally mediated worship. Many synods gathered theological panels to consult and advise. The ELCA Conference of Bishops had both informal and focused conversations on the sacraments at multiple points in the pandemic, including during their biannual meeting in the fall of 2021 when they spent focused time reviewing the Lutheran understanding of sacraments in these times of pandemic, social injustice, and climate crises. These conversations only began to scratch the surface and often led to other important and layered questions on related theological and ecclesiological topics. Although guidance from bishops was varied at times, it remained evident that bishops and synods supported pastors in doing what was best for their community during very uncertain and unprecedented times.

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Looking to our partners

The ELCA’s ecumenical partners, including those with whom the ELCA shares full communion relationships, are having similar conversations and studies. While our full communion relationships do not imply a complete agreement on every theological

3. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 39.

4. See also *Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, August 2022 edition, www.elca.org/constitution, 7.31.02.

5. *Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, S8.12.h.1.

6. *Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, Constitution, 16.12.A21.j.

aspect around the sacraments, we do well to learn from our partners and the unity we share. We also do well to understand any potential implications to our existing partnerships as we seek clarity on the theological and practical matters surrounding online communion. There are also considerations related to the implications of the ELCA's discernment on these matters for and with the ELCA's Catholic and Orthodox dialogue partners.

Ongoing conversation

Although conversation on this topic has continued, and people have continued to study and write on the practice of Holy Communion in online worship, there had been little traction for formalized interconnected conversations among the various expressions of the ELCA. A memorial to the 2022 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America proposed further conversation. "Holy Communion Practice in Unusual Circumstances and in Pandemic Times" was adopted by the 2022 Pacifica Synod Assembly and memorialized (sent on to) to the churchwide assembly. It asks that the ELCA "consider with great faith, flexibility, and theological reflection how to speak, write, and teach about Holy Communion concerning participants who are worshipping online remotely, and other alternative communion practices."⁷

The Memorials Committee of the churchwide assembly recommended to the assembly that such conversation and study continue in collaboration with the Conference of Bishops, the Office of the Presiding Bishop, and teaching theologians and asked for a report to the Church Council no later than its Fall 2024 meeting. As with many memorials to the churchwide assembly, this memorial passed *en bloc* without discussion on the assembly floor. Although not a topic that generated conversation on the floor of the churchwide assembly, the passing of this memorial does formalize further conversation in collaboration with the groups named above.

This is not the first time a memorial related to sacramental practice has come to the churchwide assembly. The 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted to adopt a memorial asking the church to study who is welcome and invited to receive Holy Communion in ELCA congregations.⁸ The memorial asked the church to consider whether only the baptized are welcome to receive communion. Following an initial survey of current practice, the church was invited to a renewed study and conversation about *The Use of the Means of Grace* in congregations. The study affirmed a variety of practice in welcome statements, etc. The overall feedback questioned the study's goal while affirming the encouragement to be in deeper conversation about the sacraments in congregations and synods. Other feedback anxiously wondered if there might be

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a divisive vote on the sacraments. This recent history might affirm that these conversations are very good for the life of the church but not things that are settled swiftly.

As the church continues to study sacramental practices in changing times, it is good to be reminded that *The Use of the Means of Grace* does not stand to be a barrier in the conversation. "It does not address our practice of Word and Sacrament out of antiquarian or legalistic interests but rather to ground the practice of our church in the Gospel and to encourage good order within our church."⁹ It is hoped that this statement of guidance and practice continues to be a model for how healthy conversation and study might take place in a church that embraces seeking unity and not necessarily uniformity.

Conversations and study continue to unfold. This journal is one example of the type of conversation that will help shape ongoing conversation as the church continues to live into what it means to worship in Word and Sacrament in changing times.

7. As found in "Report of the Memorials Committee," 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly Pre-Assembly Report, Section VII, Category B10, <https://elca.org/Resources/Churchwide-Assembly>.

8. "Table and Font: Who Is Welcome," Final Report and Resources, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/TF_Final_Report_and_Resources.pdf.

9. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Background 4A.