

## Holy Communion During This Global Pandemic

March 30, 2020

Dear beloved ones of our Eastern North Dakota Synod:

*God's grace, mercy and peace be multiplied unto you through Jesus our Savior.*

Recently I read something that caused me deep concern: *“Most emergencies – natural disasters, financial crises, and even war – bring us together as a community. They create a shared sense of mission, a spirit of the trenches, that we can overcome adversity together. Pandemics, by contrast, pull us apart; they isolate us, and make us afraid of our neighbours. Fear of one another can tear at the fabric of a nation.”*<sup>1</sup>

Surveying the torrent of words that have been written (often on social media) regarding whether and how Christians might or might not partake of the Lord's Supper right now, I fear this pandemic may be tearing at the fabric of—not just our nation—but **our church**. How tragic that the Meal that binds us to our Lord and to our siblings in Christ could become a wedge of division among us!

Though I'm hesitant to add more words to this “stew,” I'm writing this letter to share some of my own reflections. My hope and prayer is to help reduce the heat and increase the light on this challenging topic.

First, let us be mindful of three grounding principles:

- Lutherans define the church in terms of the Word and the sacraments: *It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel* (Augsburg Confession, Article VII);
- The Word and Sacraments always point us to Christ and “deliver” Christ to us—thus saving, comforting, calling and equipping us to serve God and one another;
- These precious means of grace are administered via different pathways across space and time—various **modes**<sup>2</sup> that differ from one another while still pointing us to the one Lord Jesus Christ. I understand the current debate in our ELCA regarding administering Holy Communion to be chiefly about the appropriateness of various modes for receiving (or not receiving) the sacramental gift of Jesus Christ during this pandemic.

Second, we will be wise to exercise caution about equating any single mode with being the only acceptable practice. In the words of Dr. Timothy Wengert, *The first thing to say is that, outside of following the guidance of medical professionals, there is no one “right answer” to this problem, and we*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_view\\_from\\_washington\\_the\\_america\\_first\\_pandemic](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_view_from_washington_the_america_first_pandemic)

<sup>2</sup> Examples of what I mean by “modes” include: how frequently the Sacrament is offered; the provision of alternatives to wine and bread for those who are recovering alcoholics or gluten-intolerant; whether communion is received kneeling or standing or from a common cup or individual communion glasses; etc.

*must be very careful not to project our anxiety upon others who may find other solutions to this practical problem. The frequency of the Lord's Supper is not fixed in the New Testament and is not part of the Ten Commandments, so we must not assume that what we do is the only right way. It is adiaphora, a word that does not mean that it is not important but rather means that we cannot clearly tell what is the right or wrong practice.*

Third, it is vital that each local faith community engages in deep discernment regarding which mode for administering the Word and Sacraments will best serve the community of Christ in this time and place. Such communal discernment will most likely begin among those called to positions of trust and responsibility in the community—pastors, deacons, SAMs and congregational councils. Their discernment should inform and “feed” the broader discernment of the whole Body of Christ.

Fourth, as congregations engage in such discernment, they should do so fully mindful that we are living in extraordinary times—a state of national emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, congregations will best discern a path forward by clearly understanding that the mode of celebrating Communion they use could be temporary and provisional in nature. Moreover, whenever this pandemic ends, we will likely return to former patterns for celebrating the sacraments. In fact, some of the modes we might use for administering Holy Communion in this time of a public health emergency might be inappropriate when we return to “ordinary time.”

Fifth, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America the first duty of congregations is to “*Provide services of worship at which the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered.*” (\*C4.03.a in the *ELCA Model Constitution for Congregations*). As such, congregations are responsible for discerning and choosing the best mode(s) for administering Holy Communion in the congregation’s unique setting. The ELCA churchwide organization and the synod may and should be consulted—and these wider expressions of our church may suggest resources and make recommendations. But when all is said and done, congregations are responsible for the shape of their worship life.

Finally, as the congregations of our Eastern North Dakota Synod continue to discern how best to shape their worship life—especially with respect to administering Holy Communion during this global pandemic—I want to lift up several resources that could inform your discussions and decisions. These resources propose various modes for faithfully administering Holy Communion during this public health emergency. I hope you will find them helpful, and I stand ready to consult with you as you discern a path forward.

- I. **The mode of “fasting” from Holy Communion** is recommended on the second page of the ELCA resource entitled *Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns* ([https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship\\_in\\_Times\\_of\\_Public\\_Health\\_Concerns.pdf?\\_ga=2.39907297.2125301115.1585500817-1066145809.1579549265](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf?_ga=2.39907297.2125301115.1585500817-1066145809.1579549265)).
- II. **The mode of celebrating Holy Communion in the context of “virtual” worship** is discussed by Dr. Deanna Thompson of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values and Communion at St Olaf College, Northfield MN, in a recent blogpost at <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion>.

- III. **The mode of administering Holy Communion within households** is described in a set of resources just released in our neighboring Western North Dakota Synod by Interim Bishop David Zellmer available at [https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Recommendation-for-Holy-Communion-during-COVID-19--Updated-.html?soid=1111756212968&aid=nWoW\\_mIx1Hk](https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Recommendation-for-Holy-Communion-during-COVID-19--Updated-.html?soid=1111756212968&aid=nWoW_mIx1Hk).

I believe that each of these modes can be considered faithful ways to “*administer the sacraments in accordance with the gospel*” (Augsburg Confession VII). I also believe that there are pros and cons for each of these modes that deserve our consideration. I pray that this letter and the resources it lifts up prove helpful to the congregations of our beloved synod.

In faith and friendship,



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**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.