



**South-Central Synod of Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

March 20, 2020

Dear Partners in Ministry:

In response to questions I've received about communion practices in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic and suspension of worship services...

I've been asked "What's the proper response? What's the church's teaching on this?" And the answer is "um, there is no precedent for these circumstances." That's hasn't stopped the wonderings, the phone calls, the discussion among pastors. And that's as it should be – if we are conscientious about the care of our congregations, we are of course wrestling with how we as "Ministers of Word and Sacrament" go about administering the sacrament in these times of isolation. So I will venture into the discussion, and pray that this can be helpful to you. I'll offer my own guidance by the end of this.

Here are the building blocks to the thinking that follows:

1. There is no "church teaching" that directly dictates proper practice on this.
2. There is sound basis for saying we may have some differing thoughts. So I like to refer back to the early apostles wrestling with the question of gentiles announcing the outcome with "It seems good to the holy spirit and to us," or to Paul in Corinthians saying "I have no word from the Lord on this but here is what I think." It's one of the matters where it's OK to see in the mirror dimly – to borrow from Paul again.
3. Having said that, I don't lapse into "whatever feels good, do it." Or even "that's a cool idea!" I believe that thinking deeply about this question can both guide us well and deepen our people's understanding of the ministry we shepherd.

First, I'm going to ask you to read/reflect more deeply with reading beyond this note from me. Three sources can be helpful:

- a) Bishop Eaton has recently shared a reflection on our response to the suspension of public worship; it can be found at this link:
https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf?_ga=2.157789690.1162890219.1584716776-1842824070.1553531065
- b) I'm attaching to this letter an essay written by Dr. Tim Wengert, a respected ELCA teaching theologian who was asked by his bishop for his thoughts. I know Tim and hold him and his teaching in high regard. It's written specifically to our questions today. It won't give you a final outcome definitively, but will certainly lead you to a more informed outcome. Note the questions he raises about each of the suggestions of how to do communion without public worship.

- c) The ELCA’s teaching document on communion practices is “The Use of the Means of Grace.” You can find that document here – see particularly part 3, Holy Communion, which points us to the assembly of believers being the appropriate place for this celebration.
https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf?_ga=2.157789690.1162890219.1584716776-1842824070.1553531065

Then, having listened to a number of you and been in communication with the way the thoughts and questions reach the desks of many of my colleague bishops, I offer a kind of compendium of observations:

- The church has done faithful ministry in the days before every-Sunday eucharist. I – and many of you of my generation – remember well the days of monthly communion. My father remembers once-a-quarter practice in his isolated Dakota farm community.
- As we experienced the liturgical renewal movement of the 60s-70s-80s, we moved increasingly to weekly communion, and many have become used to the eucharist as an essential part of worship. We taught well. So it’s not surprising that the question of how to provide for it should arise. But as the Wengert article and other sources point out, it has never been regarded as necessary for us in order to worship the Living Word.
- Presiding Bishop Eaton has reflected that we may regard these times as being invited into a time of fasting – refraining from public worship, refraining from the Sacrament – and the Christian community has long regarded the fast as a healthy spiritual discipline, enriching life as the fast ends.
- Remember that practices that begin in unusual circumstances often give rise to people wondering why they can’t always be done that way. Is the practice you’re considering something you would readily say is appropriate in more usual circumstances... because the question will likely come.
- It’s worthwhile to ponder if communion during the time of no public worship is something or people are asking for? Or is it a result of us pastors eager to *do* something. That’s not a bad eagerness, to be sure, but ought not be the driving reason for instituting a foreign sacramental practice.

“So, having said all that, Bishop Rogness, what counsel do *you* have for us as bishop in this place?”

I lean pretty strongly in the direction of believing there can be good things to come from a period of “fasting” from the Sacrament of the Altar. The sharing of the body and blood is an act of sharing, an act of the assembled community in receiving our Lord’s presence. It is not the only way. Central to our Reformation theology is the recovery that the Living Word is Christ, proclaimed in both Word and Sacrament. The act of receiving the bread and wine is not “necessary” and has been practiced variously through history.

The sharing of communion is the central act that we actively do together (as opposed to hearing the proclamation, a more passive action), and the elements of bread and wine shared give physical expression to that common act of the gathered community. Just as fasting is a long tradition in the life of the Christian Church, which we've lately mostly trivialized by "giving up chocolate or Netflix for Lent," we may be in a time of "fasting" from the Eucharist, "fasting" from communal worship itself... building up to a joyful celebration when we are once again brought together as a community, gathered once again around the table of the Lord.

So that's my counsel. I will not be policing those pastors and congregations that find their way to another conclusion out of their desire to faithfully feed the community of believers in that place. In fact, I will remain open to listening and learning from those who find their way to different conclusions, out of their own reflection and faithful response to nurturing their communities of faith. We live in a rapidly changing world, and we must never be closed to the insights of others.

I trust that we all will recognize that when we are once again able to gather, we will do so with a gusto and appreciation for our life together that has arisen from this time in the desert.

And a post-script regarding Easter. It is not clear now whether we will be able to gather on April 12. Recall that the reason the New Testament community altered the "sabbath" from the 7th day to the 1st day of the week is because of the resurrection, meaning every Sunday is an Easter. Which leads me to encourage you to treat your first Sunday back as a humdinger of an Easter Celebration... and not lament that you missed it this year! Who says you can only do Easter brass and baskets and bonnets and breakfasts on one day of the year?

I'm grateful for your leadership in challenging times!! Stay in touch.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Rogness". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Peter Rogness
Interim Bishop

Holy Communion under Quarantine

Unless one is over 100 years old, none of us has lived through such a serious world-wide pandemic. While we can stream our worship service on-line, the Lord's Supper poses a particular problem for Lutherans, who in the last fifty years have gone from quarterly to monthly to weekly communion in our congregations (especially on the East Coast). What should we do?

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 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. Thus, we should not judge one another. In the Formula of Concord's article on *adiaphora* (art. 10), the concordists remind us:

We also believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments, according to the well known saying, "*Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei,*"

"Dissimilarity in fasting is not to disrupt unity in faith."

Franklin Drews Fry, a long-time pastor in New Jersey, taught me an important method for approaching such matters: "Give it your 'reverent, best guess!'" It is reverent, in that we must study Scripture, pray, and beg God for guidance. It is best, in that we use our heads to figure out the best thing to do. But it remains a guess, because we are ignorant, sinful mortals, not God. This means that once we make a decision, we should always be open to suggestions about what may be better.

Now, when it comes to the Lord's Supper, as I said, there is no magic number of times to celebrate. The fact that Roman Catholic priests were required to celebrate the Mass daily in Luther's day led the reformers to emphasize a comment from the ancient church, which described how the church in Alexandria, Egypt did not do this. The fact that most of us celebrate weekly does not necessarily mean that this is the only practice. Indeed, not receiving the Lord's Supper during Lent this year would remind us that we are in solidarity with those who were preparing for Baptism in the ancient church, who would first receive the Supper after Baptism on Easter Day. Perhaps this virus is forcing on us a better Lenten discipline to impress upon us once more just how precious the Meal is and how we are all in need of the waters of baptism.

In 1523, followers of John Hus in Bohemia posed a question to Luther about the sacraments, given that many of them were bereft of pastors as a result of their struggle with the church of Rome. Luther, giving it his "reverent best guess," responded with Concerning the Ministry (Luther's Works [LW] 40:7-44). There he reminded his correspondents that in each household the head of that household could preach and, in this emergency situation, baptize.

But, for Luther, the Lord's Supper was somewhat different and was intended to take place in the Sunday gathering and not privately. He also had high respect for the public office of ministry, so he did not think that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated without a properly called minister. Given that the church in Bohemia could not receive such pastors, Luther advised them to do without pastors in the emergency. He wrote (LW 40:9): "For it would be safer and more wholesome for the father of the household to read the gospel and, since the universal custom and use allows it to the laity, to baptize those born in his home, and so to govern himself and his according to the doctrine of Christ, even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is not so necessary that salvation depends on it. The gospel and baptism are sufficient since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly."

Moreover, in the same letter, Luther points out that the Supper is itself a proclamation of the gospel, given that Christ commands it be done "in remembrance of me" and Paul states that "as often as we eat ... and drink ... we proclaim the Lord's death." Thus, the Supper is not some sort of separate, required spiritual magic but it is another form of the Word, what St.

Augustine called a "visible word." Thus, we must not confuse our desire to receive the Lord's Supper with a kind of necessity that leads us away from faith and trust in God's promises and toward a belief that worship is not really worship without the "mere performance of the work" of the liturgy. What matters is faith in the Word of God, who comes down from heaven and in aural and visible Word whispers, "You are mine," to which faith answers: "I'm yours."

Once we are freed of some sort of spiritual necessity for celebrating the Supper, we are much better prepared to discuss with one another how best to behave in this situation. But here, rather than doing theology "by fiat" ("the Bible, Luther, the Bishop or I say it; you better believe it; that settles it"), we need to practice Christian conversation about these matters, remembering that line from Proverbs: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." Or, as Philip Melancthon once put it: "Wir sind zum wechselseitigen Gespräch geboren" (We are born to back-and-forth conversation). In part this means admitting to the weaknesses in all of our practical solutions. So, what are our options?

First, some congregations and their ministers may decide not to celebrate the Lord's

Supper until the threat of this virus is over. The danger here, of course, is that people suddenly get the idea that the Lord's Supper is optional even on days when we are healthy—even pointing to Luther for support, when in fact he was speaking especially to the emergency in the Bohemian Church.

Second, one could (like St. Thomas Episcopal Church, the famous African American Episcopal Church in Philadelphia) find a way to distribute the Lord's Supper as people drive up in their cars. Here we are in danger of turning the Sacrament into a bit of magic. Faith and proclamation would disappear as if the Sacrament were effective by the mere performance of the work. The church is not a drive-through restaurant but a Christian assembly, gathered around

Word and Sacrament.

One could also, I suppose, send out bread and wine that would be “live streamed” consecrated by the pastor somewhere else. Here, too, the danger revolves around trying to create a virtual community and, again, turning the Supper into a bit of magic.

Another possibility might be to consecrate the elements and leave them on the altar for people to commune themselves as they come in individually to pray during the week. Here, too, the very communal nature of Holy Communion is in danger of being lost, and the meal becomes simply a support for individual piety rather than what it is: “Given and shed for you” [always plural in the Greek New Testament text].

Perhaps one of the ways to sort out our approaches is to ask, “Why do you” or “Why do I want to do this?” What’s the point? I regularly warned my students that when it comes to the sacramental practices, the reformers saw two dangers. Either we make the sacrament into something effective by virtue of some work we do or virtue we possess (“Only if you’re a believer is the sacrament effective”) or we make the sacrament into something effective “by the mere performance of the rite.” Even in an emergency such as what we face today, these dangers are lurking, and such practices threaten to undermine the actual heart of the sacraments—and the proclamation of the gospel. At the heart of all these things is truly God’s undeserved mercy and love, on the one hand, and faith which is engendered and strengthened by them.

Timothy J. Wengert

16 March 2020