

Reflections and Recommendations on Holy Communion during COVID-19 Pandemic March 31, 2020

Beloved in Christ,

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been conversation across our church and in our synod about how congregations and communities of faith would address the practice of Holy Communion when in-person gatherings were no longer safe. We have reached that point. At this time, no one knows how long the recommendation to remain apart will last; my advice to pastors and deacons has been to prepare for the long haul, knowing that we can adjust quickly if the “all clear” sign is given earlier than anticipated.

Before I comment specifically on Holy Communion practice, I want to acknowledge that this pandemic has impacted other important parts of congregational and ministry life including the celebration of baptism, holding funerals and memorial services, providing in-person pastoral care, engaging in many types of ministry and service with our communities and neighbors. Yet because Holy Communion is so integral to our regular experience of worship, I would like to address it explicitly in this letter, with the understanding that it can never be fully separated from the other aspects of our life as communities of faith.

I also want to acknowledge that the way in which any congregation or ministry will be able to apply this conversation on the practice of Holy Communion will depend on how they are choosing to be church during this time of physical separation. Those who are sending materials out for household worship will be different than those who are using a digital platform for worship. Those who are pre-taping worship for viewing at home will respond differently than those who are conducting worship on a real time digital platform.

A number of important articles and statements have been published about the practice of Holy Communion in a time of pandemic, both within our ELCA/Lutheran communion and by our ecumenical partners. A list of some key references are posted on the Rocky Mountain Synod website: <https://www.rmselca.org/holy-communion-and-covid-19> .

In addition to these writings, on Friday March 27 about 100 pastors and deacons gathered with me via ZOOM to discuss various pathways forward with respect to the practice of Holy Communion during a time of pandemic. In considering how they were addressing this matter in their local context, I invited our rostered ministers to engage the following:

- the **Scriptural/theological/confessional** questions or considerations
- the **pastoral** questions or considerations
- the **practical** questions or including
 - what is and isn't permitted or safe during this time
 - whether we are considering these pathways **ONLY** in light of this pandemic or whether we are somehow setting the stage for something beyond this time

- the **ecclesiological questions** or considerations—in particular, how are we informed by the fact that we are
 - a ***glocal*** church (at once global and local) in which our local ministry is informed by our relationships with the worldwide Lutheran Communion;
 - an ***ecumenical*** church with six full communion relationships with certain expectations of one another
 - a ***three-expression church*** of congregations, synods and churchwide in which the expression most impacted by a decision is expected to take the lead in the conversation that will impact not only its life but the life of the whole church.

[Three presentations](#) were offered, after which we split into small groups for conversation. We then returned together to hear some summary thought. It was holy, respectful, faith-filled conversation for which I am immensely grateful.

In addition to this conversation, we offered the opportunity for pastors and deacons to respond to a survey on Holy Communion practice. We received around 80 responses.

I have taken all of these resources into consideration as I prepared the reflections and recommendations that follow.

My overarching conclusion:

During a time of pandemic, there are a ***variety of faithful responses*** a faith community can choose with respect to the practice of Holy Communion. Each of these pathways presents both ***challenges and opportunities***. None is perfect. Some are more commendable than others.

One's local context, together with prayerful conversation between pastoral and lay leadership, are key in determining the pathway a community of faith chooses. A particular community of faith may choose to employ more than one option over time, or even at the same time. As Church Together, it is important that we ***stay engaged in this conversation*** and learn from one another, even as we offer grace to those who may choose a response that is different from our own.

As Church Becoming, we are exploring these various pathways as a way of ***explicitly responding to this pandemic***, knowing that when this crisis is over, we must discuss together what we have learned and what might apply to our future life as Christ's Church.

With that being said, I offer the four following pathways for consideration with my additional reflections, below:

A faith community seeking to faithfully tend to the practice of Holy Communion during a time of pandemic might consider:

- 1. refraining from the celebration of Holy Communion until the community can meet in person.**
- 2. finding ways to celebrate Holy Communion using digital technology.**
- 3. offering opportunities for small groups of people to celebrate Holy Communion safely in person.**
- 4. authorizing members of a household to celebrate Holy Communion without a pastor present.**

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- 1. A faith community seeking to faithfully tend to the practice of Holy Communion during a time of pandemic might consider refraining from the celebration of Holy Communion until the community can meet in person.**

Reflections: This pathway is certainly to be recommended for congregations to consider and is currently the suggested response offered in our ELCA Worship statement: [Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19/Coronavirus](#) (20 March 2020).

Some have spoken of this pathway as a *fast* from Holy Communion; such language might be appropriate during the season of Lent. I, along with Bishop Eaton, have recommended that our communities of faith do indeed practice a Holy Communion fast during this Lenten season. However, it is more accurate to say that the pathway of refraining from Holy Communion during this time of pandemic is not so much about fasting as it is the logical outcome of an understanding of Holy Communion predicated on the notion that the Meal shared requires the real physical presence of the community gathered.

Challenges/Considerations:

There are several challenges or considerations associated with refraining from Holy Communion during this time of pandemic.

One challenge stems from the fact that most ELCA congregations in the Rocky Mountain Synod practice weekly Holy Communion, pointing to the integrity of Word and Sacrament in the context of regular worship. While it is not necessary in our Lutheran understanding to celebrate Holy Communion each time we meet for worship, adequate pastoral consideration should be given to members who have come to rely on regular Holy Communion to nurture their spiritual life. It is important to address the expectation of some of the faithful that Holy Communion should be shared during this time, a desire accentuated by the pain and disorientation of this pandemic. Those who have regularly shared in the meal weekly may not easily understand why there is no effort to seek a means to share it now. Those who are facing illness or loss of loved one in this pandemic may have an even more intense need to *taste and see that the Lord is good*.

It's also important that worship experiences that do not include Holy Communion during this time of pandemic give consideration to other possible embodied experiences of God's love in Christ. It would be tempting during this time to focus on the centrality and sufficiency of God's

Word. While that is wholly appropriate, it is important to remember the many ways in which that word is incarnate and embodied, lest we fall prey to our Lutheran tendency to get stuck in our heads. There are many good recommendations for offering embodied worship experiences even when the community cannot meet in person.

2. A faith community seeking to faithfully tend to the practice of Holy Communion during a time of pandemic might consider finding ways to celebrate Holy Communion using digital technology.

Reflections: This pathway is one that can certainly be considered by communities of faith whose experience of authentic community when gathering through real-time digital technology aligns with their understanding of how Christ can be present in, with and under elements that are physically separated through the spoken Words of Institution. A key question here is the nature of the community gathered via digital technology when physical presence with one another is considered unsafe.

Given that all community is rooted in relationship, it should be acknowledged that physical presence with one another does not guarantee the existence of community, just as relationship cultivated by digital technology does not preclude the creation of authentic community. Real community is a relationship of people cultivated with intention and commitment.

Since real community can be experienced using digital technology, then the question of celebrating Holy Communion becomes a valid pathway to explore under the circumstances of a pandemic, assuming that the community of faith also agrees that the real presence of Christ is available in multiple places at the same time. It should be noted that some of our full communion church bodies have created space for this option, including the [Presbyterian Church USA](#) and certain conferences of the [United Methodist Church](#).

Challenges/Considerations:

While I have limited experience with the full variety of ways in which community can be created using technology, it seems to me that not all digital platforms for worship are equal when it comes to idea of celebrating Holy Communion during a time of pandemic. Given that Holy Communion is an intimate encounter with the crucified and living Christ set within the context of the gathered Body of Christ, the specificity of each person receiving this meal “for you” is important. My sense is that the digital technology best suited for a celebration of Holy Communion in diaspora would be one in which the technology was interactive and in real time. Platforms such as ZOOM allow for such connection and one could imagine the pastor or a communion server communing each person gathered by name, much as we do when we are in person. For larger congregations, something like ZOOM breakout rooms might serve as “tables” of communion. In this scenario, each person experiences the “for you” of the meal, whether they are home alone or gathered with other family members.

Some real-time digital platforms, including types of livestreaming like Facebook Live, offer interactive options like chat features that help connect people in real time but feel less directly personal than platforms that allow us to see and speak with one another. I’m not sure how well this might facilitate our sense of being the gathered community for the sake of celebrating Holy Communion.

As for livestreamed worship without interactive capacity, while such platforms can certainly create a shared worship experience in the moment, it's even harder to facilitate the personal "for you" dynamic I believe is most suitable for a service of Holy Communion.

The question has arisen about Holy Communion in the context of a pre-recorded worship. I would personally recommend using pre-recorded worship for services other than Holy Communion. Congregations that are using a non-interactive or pre-recorded platform for regular worship might want to consider offering additional Holy Communion worship options using a real-time interactive digital platform.

Given how quickly we are being forced to live into this new reality of digitally based worship and considering the variety of available platforms, the question of how we might best celebrate Holy Communion using digital technology warrants additional collaborative conversation, especially among those already experimenting with various platforms.

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3. **A faith community seeking to faithfully tend to the practice of Holy Communion during a time of pandemic might consider offering opportunities for small groups of people to celebrate Holy Communion safely in person.**

Reflections: While offering Holy Communion to small groups of people – either at a church building or in homes – is certainly an option during a time when large group gatherings are not advised, *under the current circumstances I do not recommend this practice out of concern for public safety.* While the current restrictions on public gatherings vary from state to state in our synods, there is simply too much we do not know about the coronavirus and too much risk for contamination even when two people are gathered for this to be a wise option.

Once the conditions change, there may be ways to exercise this option more safely and appropriately, as a stepping-stone back to gathering as full communities of faith.

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4. **A faith community seeking to faithfully tend to the practice of Holy Communion during a time of pandemic might consider authorizing members of a household to celebrate Holy Communion without a pastor present.**

Reflections: It is true that the early church gathered in homes where Holy Communion was celebrated within a household. The idea of home communion connects us with our deeply held value that faith is best nurtured not in a church building but within the household. While home communion meets the standards of a safe manner in which to practice Holy Communion during a time of pandemic, it does not take into consideration the variety of households in our current society, including the significant number of single households, where this practice could prove even more isolating. It also complicates our current understanding that for the sake of good order, only ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament or those authorized in special circumstances be the ones to preside over Holy Communion. In our current polity, household Communion would require authorizing someone in every household of our synod to serve as presider for the Meal.

While currently [one synod in the ELCA](#) is recommending this option, I am not recommending it at this time when other options are available. At this time, I believe that Holy Communion

celebrated appropriately using digital technology is a better option for congregations who do not choose to refrain from celebrating the Meal during the remainder of this pandemic.

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Additional Reflections

There are a number of other Holy Communion options that might be imagined during a time of pandemic that are not discussed in detail here. One such option is for the pastor to preside at the Table alone in a pre-recorded or online worship and then send the elements to each of the households in the congregation, much as is done with homebound communion. Given the logistics as well as the potential health risks related with this option, I would encourage other pathways to be considered first. Simply sending out “pre-consecrated elements” without any direct connection as a community of faith is also problematic as it is inconsistent with our Lutheran understanding of the pastoral role is one of presider more than consecrator.

As ordained ministers and lay leaders wrestle with this issue, I do recognize the desire to offer a faithful and pastoral response in these unusual circumstances. Grace abounds; yet integrity matters. It’s my experience that the more we talk with one another, the more we will discover best practices that reflect not only our desire to be faithful but are filled with theological and ecclesiological integrity.

Here are some additional questions for consideration:

- How do we live graciously as Church Together while choosing to follow different pathways with respect to the practice of Holy Communion in a time of pandemic?
- Who is most served by the particular pathway we choose? Who is disenfranchised?
- How do we meet the spiritual needs of those who have no access to digital technology? Could one imagine a pastor sharing Holy Communion over the phone these extreme circumstances?
- How do we accompany congregations that do not have the capacity to connect and gather digitally that is available to others?
- How does a congregation navigate a pathway forward if the pastor and Council leadership disagree on the way forward?
- How do congregations navigate a pathway forward if they are collaborating for the purposes of worship?

Some Final Thoughts

We are living in unprecedented times. As part of church becoming, this letter is certainly not the only word on the question of Holy Communion practice in a time of pandemic, nor is it a final word. I offer these reflections and recommendations with humility and with the assurance that they will continue to become, too. I would appreciate continued conversation with you; I trust the wise and thoughtful decisions you will make for your own context and community.

Please know of my profound gratitude for every congregation and ministry of our synod and for the faithful ways you are seeking to be Christ’s Church during these days of challenge and unexpected opportunity. My prayers accompany you as *together we proclaim and embody God’s unconditional love for the sake of the world.*

Yours in Faith,
Bishop Jim Gonia