

## Virtual Communion

This is presented by Pastor Leta Arndt Behrens and Pastor Michael Stadtmueller at the request of Bishop Jim Gonia. It was written for the conversation around communion with colleagues in the Rocky Mountain Synod during the COVID 19 Pandemic. We are presenting it in draft form on March 26, 2020 acknowledging that there could be further work to be done.

The Table we share at Holy Communion is a sacred gift that not only connects us to Christ and the assembly, but as people of God, to generations that have gone before us. As we eat and drink of the real presence of Christ we seek to honor that table. We also seek to share in our understanding of why some of us believe that in these extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in due to the Covid19 virus that we might extend this gift of grace in our worshipping communities through virtual means.

With both the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA and Professor Tim Wengert amongst many other respected colleagues voicing their reservations to the possibility, we understand how anyone would be reluctant to open up such a broad frontier as virtual communion. We believe that circumstances dictate we respond in the midst of a crisis that calls us to remain isolated from physical contact with each other. We are not advocating virtual communion as a “norm”, just as sharing communion with homebound is not the “norm”, but as a response to sharing the supper in times of great disruption. We suggest that this is the church in assembly at this time and we should therefore share communion in the ways we are now in assembly.

### **Scriptural Basis:**

Our scriptures provide a foundation for the understanding of grace and the tangible elements that tie us to share in the body and blood of Christ. At the Last Supper, Jesus gives instructions to his disciples to take and eat, take and drink and remember me. It is in these words and in this sharing that we have a basis for communion at all. Jesus used bread and wine, common and ordinary physical elements at the table of the passover meal. Bread and wine were part of the meals and culture of the time. They were accessible rather than unique, something the people would have had readily available. It was not the particular bread or wine that Jesus used, but the particular words he said and the gift he shared. Jesus asks us to share in this meal to remember and to know God’s real presence with us whenever we do.

We also have scriptures that give us insight into the working of God’s grace in the world. First, we know from Matthew 18:20 also shares with us that wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus is there among us. Also, in Acts 8:26-40 we have the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In this story regarding our other sacrament, baptism, the grace and forgiveness of God come to the Ethiopian man through the scriptures and he asks Philip, what is to prevent me from being baptized? The answer is nothing. Nothing prevents God’s grace and the sacraments in being shared. We hear this echoed again in Romans 8:38 and 39 that nothing separates us from the love of God.

These scriptures provide an initial ally basis for virtual communion to be shared. Of course the writers would not have predicted an online community or virtual connections, however, what God conveys to us through them is that grace is not to be limited by human understanding, it is not to be locked, and that God knows no bounds. When Jesus shares with his disciples, he is sharing the word and grace of God. When Matthew writes, he is inviting us into the presence of God in situations outside of a synagogue/church. When Luke and Paul write in Acts and Romans, they are sharing God's grace as knowing no bounds. Virtual assembly is still people gathered, the word is still spoken, and God's grace is not bound by our gathering in one particular way. In our understanding, grace and the forgiveness of sins are not limited by God in scripture and therefore should not be limited by us.

### **Theology:**

In our shared Lutheran theology of the cross, we come to an understanding that God is with us in all things. God does not only come to us in glory but in suffering, not only in joy, but in sorrow, not only in good times but in the deepest, darkest most confusing times of our lives. In our Lutheran theology of communion we acknowledge together that Jesus is present in, with and under the bread and wine through the word of God. The words of institution are spoken and in those words we share the word and promise of God's forgiveness and grace. It is not the particular person or the particular hands, it is not through physical touching of the elements. There is no 'magic' that turns a particular piece of bread or a particular cup of wine into something else, rather, it is the word of God spoken and shared that creates extraordinary from ordinary. And in that word, God's grace becomes physical and real to us in the eating and in the drinking.

It is also a long standing norm that the kind of bread and the kind of wine/juice that we share need not be uniform or of a particular make. Churches use everything from loaves of fresh baked bread to tortillas to crackers to wafers. In the drink, it is not specific which wine or what kind of grape juice must be on hand for communion. This is not important as it is the word of God that brings in the real presence of Christ.

Since it is the word of God that makes what is ordinary, extraordinary, is the word of God that is paramount in the offering of communion. As we are now gathered in new ways, virtual community is one of those ways. Virtual does not mean 'fake' or 'not real' it simply means not physically gathered in the same room or space. Yet, it is still a gathering, it is still a community, it is still a way of hearing and engaging in the word of God. When we share in communion online, we are sharing the word of God. We are sharing the real presence of Christ. We are allowing God's boundless grace to be just that, boundless.

When we share the words of institution in this way, no special or even common bread and wine are needed. What is needed is the simple bread and drink that our people have in their homes with them. This is their food, this is their norm, this is what they bring forth to their table to share together in the word of God. When the word of God is spoken and the words Given and Shed for you are shared, the people in their homes can partake and thus we are in assembly and community together in communion.

Our Lutheran theology also leaves room for the spirit of God to work in many ways. We want people to take the word of God and the practices of faith and make them part of their daily lives. We often proclaim that home is church too! Now we are in a time where home must be a church and there is no way around it. It's scary and it's beautiful. The practices of our life together become the practices that continue to tie us together even when we are separate, even when we are in diaspora. The Hebrew Bible stories of the people spread apart are an inspiration here as well. Gatherings were not always possible and the people remained in their faith by practicing in their homes, with their closest relations. We have the gift of virtual communication. We have the gift of technology that allows us to be separate and yet together. We have the gift of a theology that opens up all boundaries, including the gift of communion that can be shared in ways we are new to know.

### **Confessional:**

Article 54 from The Use of the Means of Grace document on the value of the sacrament seems a good base point- *As a means of grace Holy Communion is that messianic banquet at which God bestows mercy and forgiveness, creates and strengthens faith for our daily work and ministry in the world, draws us to long for the day of God's manifest justice in all the world, and provides a sure and certain hope of the coming resurrection to eternal life.*

This statement alone reminds us why we are reluctant to withhold the sacrament simply because the assembly can not meet in person. We see this gift in these words as something that truly creates and strengthens our communities. We believe that in our greatest time of need we should not withhold this gift on the basis of the assembly being in a virtual community. When other means endanger us, and indeed even the remembrance of our baptism in a communal font is prohibited, we appeal to you to consider a virtual basis for communion.

In virtual communion the word is present and so is the community albeit in a manner that certainly Martin Luther himself never thought possible. As we journey with more and more of our generations that are increasingly comfortable with their own virtual presence we acknowledge the gift that virtual communities can provide.

Professor Wengert argues that the movement in our church to communion becoming a weekly occurrence is a recent phenomenon (over the last 100 years) and so seems to argue that this might be a reason to fast in this extreme time from this sacrament and focus on our baptismal promise. A promise that cannot be taken away from us. This is a change, but we assume that this movement towards regular holy communion is born of the Spirit and that the rise in the sharing of the eucharist is a blessing and God at work in our community. We acknowledge the value of both sacraments, and we do not discount that each is best shared within the assembly. And yet we regularly go into homes and share communion to the homebound. The church makes provisions for anyone to baptize in extreme situations as recognized by article 23 of The Use of the Means of Grace.

We would argue that sharing the supper virtually with a Pastor sharing the word to all listeners is in many ways less bold than some practices already in place. From *The Use of the Means of Grace: 48A Occasional Services provides an order for the Distribution of Communion to Those in Special Circumstances*. *As an extension of the Sunday worship, the servers of Communion take the elements to those unable to attend*. 84

The church already acknowledges special circumstances for the distribution of communion. In these circumstances the word is blessed in the assembly and then distributed by lay persons. This is an extraordinary act of grace that happens regularly in many of our congregations. It is important to acknowledge that when we share this bread the participant did not hear the word from a pastor in person but received this gift outside of the assembled body. As we consider a pandemic where lives are threatened and assembly is not allowed virtual communion seems a similar act of extraordinary grace in extraordinary times.

### **Pastoral & Practical Considerations:**

As we consider virtual communion from a pastoral perspective, we take into consideration the particular context of our congregational communities and how we are assembling at this time. Several factors can be considered such as:

- What was the normative practice around communion for this particular community prior to the pandemic?
- What are the resources and access to those resources for virtual communion and are they practical?
- How can we remain safe from spreading the virus and contaminating surfaces?
- What is the practical theology of the community and how do they respond in this time of need to the particular faith practice of sharing in communion?
- How should I communicate and articulate the theology for virtual communion?

When we consider what the practices and norms are in our context, we may come to different conclusions, different ways of sharing in assembly and different perspectives on what would be received well in our context. For some, this time apart is a new way and good way to rethink about worship and what it means to be in faith practice together or apart. For others, the comfort of something close to normal as possible may be taken into consideration as a way of being with the people. When it comes to the practices of communion, the pastor in conversation with her/his/their context will need to consider these questions and make a decision that best fits the community she/he/they serve and at this time of pandemic consider the safety of the community.

When we consider the pastoral benefits of virtual communion, we have found that the oldest and most vulnerable are the ones who seem most appreciative of this act. This past Sunday as we joined together in worship and consecrated the bread in each other's homes there was one 90 year old member who was entering hospice. He and his wife have spent their entire lives connected with the people of God and joined us in a virtual supper. On Tuesday Morning he died. Was it necessary for

salvation for him to have communion in the last days of his life? No. Was it comforting and meaningful? Yes.

Another benefit of virtual communion is the sense of community that it creates, the sense of being together in a united action, a united physical partaking, a togetherness that we cannot experience otherwise. It is not something we want to do long term, but it is something that is connecting and normative for our congregational community during this time and in our way of being church together. It is also a reminder that there is no magic. Jesus really, truly is in with and under in the words of grace and in the eating and drinking of those promises.

This is also an opportunity for the priesthood of all believers to come into conversation with one another and their pastors. When we invite the sharing of communion and we talk openly about our practice and why, the people are honored as a part of this experience and their wisdom and insights become important to the conversation that is often reserved for rostered ministers. It is necessary to communicate the why and how of practicing virtual communion not only with leadership, but also with the assembly as a whole. This can be a beautiful opportunity to share more deeply in our theology of grace together.

This can be done in a variety of ways, including a simple explanation during the worship, inviting them to partake in this new way and sharing the word of God is spoken and Jesus presence is promised. For example, as we enter into our live worship community we have begun our welcome by sharing that we will be sharing communion. We invite the listeners that want to partake to find bread and wine or alternatives to those that they feel comfortable in being shared in communion. The liturgy of Holy communion is shared and after the Lord's prayer, we offer the words of the body of Christ given for you, the blood of Christ shed for you and pause for as we take communion at our own tables.

Finally, during this time of pandemic, the offering of virtual communion is a safe alternative. There is no asking anyone to risk physical distance restrictions, no contact outside the home, and no risk of this practice of communion spreading the COVID 19 virus.

### **Ecclesiological:**

As we consider our ministry as church together some have argued that a virtual communion might become normative practice and allow some to commune virtually after the pandemic is over. We acknowledge this point as something that should be a part of future dialogues. We see the value for the whole church to not dismiss these practices, but find ways to bring clarity in how we share the supper virtually. As a medium to reach our homebound and most vulnerable participants this seems a practical way to share communion with the entire assembly. To share communion in real time would be a gift for those who are separated from the body. Would this be "less magical" (using Professor Wengert's words) that the word of God might consecrate something in their homes than it would be to have bread consecrated by a pastor earlier and brought to them?

Virtual community is never meant to be a replacement for coming together as an assembly, but we are aware that there will always be those unable to join the assembly. The church has always embraced finding ways to reach out to those who for various reasons are physically unable to attend. The beauty of the virtual world is that we have the opportunity to be better together in a way that previous generations could not have shared. Our most vulnerable populations now have the opportunity to come and be a part of the community actively and in real time. This also opens up new possibilities for outreach and evangelism in teaching and sharing our theology with those who are seeking ways to engage in a digital world.

We would welcome more guidelines in how the whole church partners in proper ways to share this gift. As we consider the future we can imagine that in many of our lifetimes there is a high probability of someone journeying to Mars or some other distant location. With clarity from the church on “best practices” we could conceivably share communion with people who are literally on another world.