

# Administering Holy Communion Amidst Pandemic and Beyond

An Invitation to Conversation from Pastor Steve Solberg to Immanuel's Lay Leadership

March 16, 2021

In my Letter of Call, you have called me to “exercise among [you] the ministry of Word and Sacrament which God has established and which the Holy Spirit empowers: To preach and teach the Word of God in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; to administer Holy Baptism and Holy Communion....” I invite you as Immanuel's lay leaders into the following conversation regarding administering Holy Communion amidst pandemic and beyond.

When we first isolated in our homes one year ago, worshiping together through online videos, I chose to lead us in Services of the Word that fasted from the Lord's Supper. We focused rather on Christ's presence in God's Word declared, read, and preached. As Luther wrote in his 1523 treatise “Concerning the Ministry” in response to ministry questions posed by Bohemian followers of John Hus, “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” (Luther's Works [LW] 40:9). Note that Luther introduced his treatise with the preface that in his writing he gave them what he had “but with the understanding that each and all of you may use his own judgment” (LW 40:7).

So began our first pandemic sacramental approach. One of the drawbacks to this is that people over time might begin to believe that the Lord's Supper is optional even in times of community health. Note that in Luther's comment above he was addressing an emergency amongst the Bohemians, one lacking clergy.

Our second pandemic sacramental approach arose as we first returned to in-person worship and weekly Eucharist in 2020. My concern was for those who were participating from the new “balcony” of online live streaming and the resulting recorded videos that we posted. Under COVID isolation, I did not wish to administer Holy Communion simply as a point of privilege for those who risked gathering physically, while others were excluded due to the virus. How to include them in the meal? I invited those at home to have bread and wine present for the celebration of this meal through the virtual connection of the digital world. I trusted that the Holy Spirit could present Jesus to those at home, and I continued this approach even when we moved away from in-person worship. One of the drawbacks to this approach is that physically isolated people can begin to believe that Holy Communion doesn't require the community of believers at all. Our society already struggles with being “me”-centered! While some ELCA congregations were using this same approach, others practiced everything from drive-up Lord's Supper to continuing the fast.

This second approach continues to be our sacramental practice, but I am now beginning to contemplate best practices as we move past the pandemic emergency. I do not wish to give any suggestion that Holy Communion is some sort of magic. Nor do I wish to forget about the “balcony” section of people that will continue to worship with us. How should we proceed? The following are excerpts from the Bible, the Book of Concord, Luther's Works, our ELCA sacramental statement, as well as my own comments and questions. Thank you for considering this with me.

## 1) The Biblical Witness:

- a. **Matthew 26:26-29:** <sup>26</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."<sup>27</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;<sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."
- b. **Mark 14:22-25:** <sup>22</sup> While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."<sup>23</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.<sup>24</sup> He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.<sup>25</sup> Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."
- c. **Luke 22:14-20:** <sup>14</sup> When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him.<sup>15</sup> He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer;<sup>16</sup> for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."<sup>17</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves;<sup>18</sup> for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."<sup>19</sup> Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."<sup>20</sup> And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."
- d. **1 Corinthians 11:23-26:** <sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,<sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."<sup>25</sup> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."<sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
  - i. The above is introduced with Paul's indictment of the church that they are ignoring brothers and sisters in Christ in the meal. Some are fed while others go hungry.

**1 Corinthians 11:17-22:** <sup>17</sup> Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.<sup>18</sup> For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.<sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.<sup>21</sup> For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.<sup>22</sup> What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

- ii. After sharing the Words of Institution, Paul continues with

**1 Corinthians 11:27-34b:** <sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. <sup>30</sup> For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. <sup>33</sup> So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. <sup>34b</sup> If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.

## 2) The Lutheran Confessions: The Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar

- a. [4] Here, too, we do not want to quarrel and dispute with those who despise and desecrate this sacrament. Instead, as in the case of baptism, we shall first learn what is of greatest importance, namely, that the chief thing is God’s Word and ordinance or command. It was not dreamed up or invented by some mere human being but was instituted by Christ without anyone’s counsel or deliberation. [5] Therefore, just as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed retain their nature and value even if you never keep, pray, or believe them, so also does this blessed sacrament remain unimpaired and inviolate even if we use and handle it unworthily. [6] Do you think God cares so much about our faith and conduct that he would permit them to affect his ordinance? No, all temporal things remain as God has created and ordered them, regardless of how we treat them. [7] This must always be emphasized, for thus we can thoroughly refute all the babbling of the seditious spirits who, contrary to the Word of God, regard the sacraments as something that we do.<sup>1</sup>
- b. [8] Now, what is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of the LORD Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ’s word to eat and drink. [9] And just as we said of baptism that it is not mere water, so we say here, too, that the sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread and wine such as is served at the table. Rather, it is bread and wine set within God’s Word and bound to it.<sup>2</sup>
- c. [10] It is the Word, I say, that makes this a sacrament and distinguishes it from ordinary bread and wine, so that it is called and truly is Christ’s body and blood. For it is said, “Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum,” that is, “When

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<sup>1</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). [\*The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church\*](#) (p. 467). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>2</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). [\*The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church\*](#) (p. 467). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

the Word is joined to the external element, it becomes a sacrament.” This saying of St. Augustine is so appropriate and well put that he could hardly have said anything better. The Word must make the element a sacrament; otherwise, it remains an ordinary element. [11] Now, this is not the word and ordinance of a prince or emperor, but of the divine Majesty at whose feet all creatures should kneel and confess that it is as he says, and they should accept it with all reverence, fear, and humility.<sup>3</sup>

- d. [12] With this Word you can strengthen your conscience and declare: “Let a hundred thousand devils, with all the fanatics, come forward and say, ‘How can bread and wine be Christ’s body and blood?’ etc. Still I know that all the spirits and scholars put together have less wisdom than the divine Majesty has in his littlest finger. [13] Here is Christ’s word: ‘Take, eat, this is my body.’ ‘Drink of this, all of you, this is the New Testament in my blood,’ etc. Here we shall take our stand and see who dares to instruct Christ and alter what he has spoken. [14] It is true, indeed, that if you take the Word away from the elements or view them apart from the Word, you have nothing but ordinary bread and wine. But if the words remain, as is right and necessary, then by virtue of them the elements are truly the body and blood of Christ. For as Christ’s lips speak and say, so it is; he cannot lie or deceive.”<sup>4</sup>
- e. [15] Hence it is easy to answer all kinds of questions that now trouble people—for example, whether even a wicked priest can administer the sacrament, and similar questions. [16] Our conclusion is: Even though a scoundrel receives or administers the sacrament, it is the true sacrament (that is, Christ’s body and blood), just as truly as when one uses it most worthily. For it is not founded on human holiness but on the Word of God. As no saint on earth, yes, no angel in heaven can make bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood, so likewise can no one change or alter the sacrament, even through misuse. [17] For the Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual’s unworthiness or unbelief. Christ does not say, “If you believe or if you are worthy, you have my body and blood,” but rather, “Take, eat and drink, this is my body and blood.” Likewise, when he says, “Do this” (namely, what I now do, what I institute, what I give you and bid you take), [18] this is as much as to say, “No matter whether you are worthy or unworthy, you have here his body and blood by the power of these words that are connected to the bread and wine.” Mark this and remember it well. [19] For upon these words rest our whole

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<sup>3</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). [\*The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church\*](#) (pp. 467–468). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>4</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). [\*The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church\*](#) (p. 468). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

argument, our protection and defense against all errors and deceptions that have ever arisen or may yet arise.<sup>5</sup>

- f. [61] People with such misgivings must learn that it is the highest art to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness. For we are not baptized because we are worthy and holy, nor do we come to confession as if we were pure and without sin; on the contrary, we come as poor, miserable people, precisely because we are unworthy. The only exception would be the person who desires no grace and absolution and has no intention of improving.<sup>6</sup>

**3) Luther's Works: Vol. 40, Church and Ministry II, Concerning the Ministry** – While other volumes of Luther's Works speak in greater detail about Holy Communion (e.g., LW, Volumes 35, 36, and 37, Word and Sacrament I, II, and III), this volume deals with an emergency situation when the Bohemian followers of John Hus are not able to get ordained clergy from Rome.

- a. Introduction by Conrad Bergendoff: How far Luther was prepared to go in discarding the time-honored organization of the church is seen in the letter to the Bohemian Christians. He had reason to believe that the followers of John Huss would join forces with himself, and give up a very questionable method of obtaining an ordained ministry. Luther envisioned the possibility of small groups of Christians obtaining a minister by selection from their own midst. Supporters of the most advanced type of congregationalism can find confirmation of their views in this letter. But it should be remembered that the situation in Bohemia was highly abnormal and that Luther's suggestion is confined to an emergency. He advocated no such solution for Germany. The statement does clearly prove that apostolic succession in the Roman sense, or the doctrine of an indelible character in ordination, meant nothing to Luther, and that there may be times when a small band of Christians must establish a ministry based on nothing but the right of a congregation to elect those who shall preach the Word to it. The foundation of the ministry is in the Word and in the sacrament of baptism, not in age-old traditions, or the vote of a majority.<sup>7</sup> We have already sufficiently made clear that herein we neither ought, should, nor would be bound by human traditions, however sacred and highly regarded, but clearly exercise our reason and Christian liberty, as it is written, "All things are yours, whether Peter or Paul, but you are Christ's" [1 Cor. 3:22, 23].<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). [\*The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church\*](#) (p. 468). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>6</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). [\*The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church\*](#) (p. 473). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, M. (1999). [\*Luther's works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II\*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 40, p. x). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, M. (1999). [\*Luther's works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II\*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 40, pp. 7–8). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

- b. Clearly if misfortune and need are so great that they can secure ministers in no other way [than by subterfuge], I would confidently advise that you have no ministers at all. 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 who are 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.<sup>9</sup>
- c. The third function [of the office of ministry] is to consecrate or to administer the sacred bread and wine. Here those in the order of the shorn vaunt themselves and set themselves up as rulers of a power given neither to angels nor the virgin mother. Unmoved by their senselessness we hold that this function, too, like the priesthood, belongs to all, and this we assert, not on our own authority, but that of Christ who at the Last Supper said, "Do this in remembrance of me" [Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24].<sup>10</sup>
- d. It is of the common rights of Christians that we have been speaking. For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. Lay hold then of this right and exercise it, where there is no one else who has the same rights. But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly. Otherwise, there might be shameful confusion among the people of God, and a kind of Babylon in the church, where everything should be done in order, as the Apostle teaches [1 Cor. 14:40]. For it is one thing to exercise a right publicly; another to use it in time of emergency. Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church. In time of emergency each may use it as he deems best.<sup>11</sup>

**4) The Use of the Means of Grace, A Statement on the Practice of Word & Sacrament, ELCA**

**a. COMMUNION PRACTICES REFLECT UNITY AND DIGNITY (p. 49)**

Principle 45 Practices of distributing and receiving Holy Communion reflect the unity of the Body of Christ and the dignity and new life of the baptized.

Application 45A The promise of Christ is spoken to each communicant by those distributing the Sacrament: "The Body of Christ given for you; " "The Blood of Christ

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<sup>9</sup> Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 40, p. 9). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 40, p. 24). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 40, p. 34). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

shed for you" Ordinarily the bread is placed in the communicant's hand and the chalice is guided by the communicant or care - fully poured by the minister of communion. Application 45B Continuous communion of the whole congregation, with the post-communion blessing given after all have communed, underscores the aspects of fellowship and unity in the sacrament. Either standing or kneeling is appropriate when receiving Communion. Ministers of Communion will need to facilitate the communion of those who have difficulty moving, kneeling, standing, holding the bread, or guiding the chalice.

Application 45C Common devotion during the distribution of Communion is served both by music and by silence.

b. **CONGREGATIONS PROVIDE COMMUNION FOR THE ABSENT** (p. 51)

Principle 48 Congregations provide for communion of the sick, homebound, and imprisoned.

Application 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.

Application 48B When pastors celebrate a service of Word and Sacrament in a home, hospital, or other institution, the corporate nature of the gift is strengthened by including others from the congregation. Occasional Services provides an order for the Celebration of Holy Communion with Those in Special Circumstances.

**5) Technology's Application** – Although the Gospel writers, Martin Luther, and other faith ancestors had their technology for sharing the Gospel (e.g., pen and "paper"), we now have at our disposal technological tools they (or even me starting as a pastor 32 years ago) could have never imagined or comprehended. Through use of online streaming, Zoom, etc., we can connect and be in relationship with one another like never before. In virtual way we enter the same space.

The virtual world, however, has its limitations as can be attested by the celebration of those who have returned to in-person worship. I'll be bold to say that human interaction is best done in person. Having said that, when Jesus told us "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20), I am confident that Jesus is present across our digital connections. Considering the physics of time and Jesus' rule, I am even confident that Jesus is present across recorded media.

Immanuel's use of technology in our worship life is like the proverbial genie out of the bottle; it is not going back in. Our challenge? How do we use it well? How do we best minister sacramentally in this new era?

**6) Some Pastoral Questions:**

- a. How do we care sacramentally for those who worship online?
- b. Is there a way of improving what we are doing (e.g., sending out prefilled communion cups consecrated at the altar), or should we abandon the present approach altogether?
- c. For encouragement and accountability, how can we track what people do at home?
- d. If we make any changes, when should those changes be instituted?
- e. How do we educate the congregation on our sacramental practices?