

Celebrating Holy Communion in a Time of Pandemic

Date:2020-05-19

Version:1.1

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Organization: Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, Rockford, Ill.

Status: Proposal for council discussion

Background

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. (1 Corinthians 11:33, NRSV)

We have not celebrated Holy Communion since March 8. Continuing to follow the guidance of public health authorities for our neighbor's sake and in solidarity with them, we have been gathering online, where we are not limited by size or distancing requirements.

Yet a hallmark of the church of Christ is that we gather freely, publicly, as one body, showing no partiality and sharing in all things. Holy Communion is an expression of this unity, not a substitute for it—one reason why “we celebrate only the public or common Mass,” not “private Masses.”¹

But fully gathering in-person will not happen overnight. According to the five-phase COVID-19 plan² of the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), our region is, as of this writing, on track to move soon from the “flattening” phase to the “recovery” phase of our response, which will provide for gatherings of up to ten people under IDPH-recommended social distancing guidelines. State officials have been consistent in naming what is needed to get the pandemic under greater control: greatly expanded testing and contact tracing for those who contract COVID-19. Until that happens, even permitted gatherings must take every precaution to slow the spread of the virus.

On May 12 our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) offered its own up-to-date guidance, “Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship: Being Church Together during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Informed in part by University of Minnesota public health professor Dr. Michael Osterholm, this document

1 Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV (Kolb and Wengert ed.)

2 <https://coronavirus.illinois.gov/sfc/servlet.shepherd/document/download/069t000000BadSOAAJ>

addresses many details of sacramental worship, including the relative risk of communal singing and a recommendation against Holy Communion “until well into the final phases of gatherings of 50 or more people.”³

Proposal

Bearing the above guidance and our calling as Christ’s church in mind, this memo proposes a plan for reintroducing Holy Communion once gatherings of up to ten people are permitted.

1. Until we can safely gather in-person as a whole congregation plus visitors, our primary (Sunday) worship will continue to take place online, where any number may participate.
2. Other gatherings that are intentionally open-ended in number (e.g., Wednesday Bible Study) will also continue to take place online.
3. We will establish a sign-up (e.g., a Google document) to form small groups of up to eight worshipers (plus pastor and potential musician) to gather in person for Holy Communion. Signing up will be optional (see also paragraph 12 below), but will not be restricted except for reasons of public health and ensuring everyone gets a turn. (Regardless of sign-ups, we encourage anyone with signs of or recent exposure to coronavirus to stay home.)
4. All members of a household (i.e., living together) and those already in regular contact with that household (e.g., family members) will be in the same group whenever possible.
5. Slots will be reserved both for those with email access and those without, and the process will be communicated via email, letter, followup phone calls, and the church website.
6. These staggered Holy Communion services will take place on consecutive Wednesday evenings, with different liturgy, readings and sermon from Sunday worship (i.e., not in place of Sundays). Sermons will be posted online after worship for the edification of all.
7. Once every small group has worshiped, we will repeat the rotation. The small groups will be maintained and not mix together, minimizing contagion and simplifying contact tracing. Additional small groups will be formed as needed.

3 <https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/returning-to%20In-person-worship.pdf>

8. These services will follow IDPH and ELCA recommendations for social distancing, such as masks, sharing the Peace without touching, maintaining distance between worshipers, and, for now, no communal singing.
9. In consultation with the Worship and Music Committee and Altar Guild, I will develop protocols for preparing and serving communion and for worship generally to minimize worshipers' risk and simplify contact tracing. For example, I, rather than an additional contact, would prepare and clean the communion vessels personally.
10. Private funerals during this time will be scheduled only Fridays through Sundays, will follow all relevant IDPH and ELCA guidance, and will not include Holy Communion.
11. The Property Committee and I will ensure the spaces worshipers use are cleaned in accordance with public health recommendations between all worship services and are not occupied other than for worship services.
12. In a way that minimizes risk of contagion, I will distribute Holy Communion to the homebound, high-risk, and others who are unable or unwilling to sign-up for in-person worship.
13. If I get sick or need to be quarantined because of a contact, Wednesday worship will be put on hold until it's safe for me to return.
14. As the permissible group size increases, groups will be formed by combining small groups into consistent larger groups (e.g., making a group of fifty out of several smaller groups).
15. To prepare for future phases with larger groups, I will assess in consultation the Worship and Music Committee the "socially distanced" capacity of our worship spaces, including the possibility of regular outdoor worship.
16. This plan will be subject to revision or modification as public health guidance or liability insurance policy provisions warrant.