



The Virginia Synod

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ISLAND DISTRICT, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Since, then, we have such a hope [through Christ Jesus], we act with great boldness [2 Corinthians 3:12 NRSV]

In-Person and Digital Holy Communion Guidance from the Office of the Bishop September 10, 2020

"And when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

([1 Cor. 11:24](#))

From its earliest days, the Church has had long and faith-filled conversations about these words of Jesus, first recorded by St. Paul, about what it means to "Do this," that is, celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In doing so, leaders and people in countless settings have repeatedly returned to a shared set of commitments to guide them in obeying Christ's command. Through famine, persecution, exile, and plague as well as in times of peace and unity, Christians have striven to honor the presence of Christ in the bread and cup, maintain the unity of our fellowship as his body, proclaim the trustworthy promises that accompany the meal, and practice charity and grace toward those striving to remain faithful in difficult circumstances.

For Lutherans, the task of clarifying "Do this" is never simply about right or wrong practices, but **always about our mission to proclaim the Word of God in everything we do** – preaching, sacramental practice, pastoral care, service to the neighbor, and so on. Our current challenge – how best to be obedient to Jesus' command while navigating a dangerous pandemic – is but one in a series of opportunities for Christian leaders and people to revisit our core teachings on Sacraments!

St. Paul asked in [Romans 8:31](#), "What are we to say about these things...?" Like you, the Synod Staff has been pondering what to say about "digital worship and celebrating Holy Communion."

As we considered what to say about digital worship and celebrating Holy Communion, a few important considerations came to mind.

First, as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are bound by Holy Scriptures, by our Confessions and by [The Use of the Means of Grace](#) (UMG) to guide our decisions. Any discussion of digital worship and celebrating Holy Communion must address Use of the Means of Grace Principles 39 and 40 and specifically ask ourselves 'In a digital age, is it possible for God's people to be gathered digitally and for a pastor to preside digitally in the midst of that gathered community?'

UMG Principle 39: "The gathered people of God celebrate the sacrament"

and

UMG Principle 40: "In witness that this sacrament is a celebration of the Church, serving its unity, [a Pastor] presides in the service of Holy Communion and proclaims the Great Thanksgiving"

Second, Presiding Bishop Eaton has shared that abstaining from Holy Communion during this time is our most faithful response ([Worship in a Time of Public Health Concern](#)). During this time of abstinence, we are encouraged to remind one another of our teachings concerning the eucharist and together to look forward to that time when all who desire to share in this holy sacrament may safely do so.

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Third, as a staff we remain concerned that Holy Communion be made available for all the faithful, not only those with access to technology and the ability to acquire the bread and wine for the communion meal. Limiting access to communion to those with good internet, a computer, and the financial and health resources to purchase bread and wine calls to mind Paul's admonition of the Corinthians ([1 Corinthians 11:17-34](#)) against the wealthy separating themselves from the poor at communion.

Since the Use of the Means of Grace was not intended to address issues of digital communion, we are living in a time of tension where both those affirming that fasting from Holy Communion is the best option and those moving forward with digital communion understandably feel that they are following the best and most faithful course of action. While the members of the Synod staff have opinions about these questions, we feel the most appropriate way forward is to gather voices from around the Synod to continue this conversation and make recommendations to the Synod Council, the Synod Assembly, and potentially memorialize the Churchwide Assembly regarding issues of digital worship, community and Holy Communion. These conversations may have started because of the pandemic, but the decisions we make will shape a new age of digital ministry.

In the interim, we offer the following possibilities.

- 1 Continue to abstain from Holy Communion until such time as we can gather together in-person safely. During this time, we encourage congregations to invest time in worship teaching about the sacraments and reflecting on what they mean for our life of faith. Luther's [Small Catechism](#) provides a solid starting point. Consider including insights from [Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections](#) or resources from the [ELCA's Freed & Renewed in Christ](#) 500th Anniversary Reformation Archive.
- 2 Should you choose to gather for worship in-person and decide to offer communion, follow all guidelines from the Commonwealth of Virginia for religious gatherings and take precautions to avoid cross contamination in distributing the bread only using a wafer or individual, pre-packaged communion cups and wafers. **We are still confronting a deadly virus, so our first consideration should always be caring for and serving others.**
- 3 Should you choose to provide communion at a digital worship service, the service should be in the midst of a live, synchronous community (like Zoom or Facebook Live). Recorded services should not be provided for members to play later and celebrate the sacrament on their own.
- 4 Inviting people to celebrate Holy Communion at home on their own is not in line with historic Lutheran practice. There is no provision for this practice in the Use of the Means of Grace.

For additional reading and resources click here: <https://www.vasynod.org/covid-19/communion/>. We look forward to continuing this conversation together.

Thank you for your faithfulness and witness to the love of Jesus during these difficult times. We will continue to remember you in our prayers. Please call on us if we can help in your ongoing discernment and planning. May our Lord bless you, your family and those you serve!