Dear People of God,

As you know congregations have been asking questions regarding returning to Holy Communion. Others have already begun sharing the Sacrament in some fashion. At the beginning of this pandemic I asked you to ‘fast’ from the Sacrament during the season of Lent, understanding that the pandemic was not going to last that long. Well, we made it through Lent, added Easter to the mix and are on our way into Pentecost. With that in mind I share my following thoughts as we move forward.

I continue to believe, from a theological and confessional point of view, that the proper response in this time of pandemic is to refrain from the celebration of the Holy Communion until we are able to assemble again. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a celebration of the real presence of the risen Christ among the gathered people of God. The essence of the sacrament is to be found in the assembly, not the elements. In these days let us continue to deeply lament our inability to gather and to pray earnestly for the coming of the day when again we shall.

I have found in these past ten or so weeks that the Word has fed me via the preaching of others, my study of it in preparation for preaching and 9@9s and in simply resting in it. I know this has worked for a few others but it is not a resolution for all.

So, how do we move forward? What are our options? In full disclosure, this document comes from a number of Zoom meetings with Bishop Jim Hazelwood of the New England Synod and Bishop Craig Satterlee of the North/West Lower Michigan Synod. We have agreed in principal to its contents and have personalized it for our own synods.

**Holy Communion**

As you know, this topic has occupied my mind and time for some months as I’m sure it has yours. I asked, and for the most part, you honored my request to withhold from any practices involving “online/virtual communion”. I have been deeply appreciative of that.

We have spent the past six weeks in conversations around the synod with Deans and Rostered Leaders answering a series of six questions to develop a better understanding of what is taking place. The compilation of those documents will be sent out to the Deans for dissemination within the next week or so.

I made several resources available including some writing by Dr. Timothy Wengert, Dr. Gordon Lathrop and a video by Bishop Guy Irwin. I have listened to a wide variety of perspectives, read the reports from our conference conversations and engaged in dialogue...
with rostered and lay leaders across this synod. What follows are my recommendations for our practices going forward in the Upstate New York Synod.

I recognize that we are in unprecedented times, along with a diversity of perspectives. Therefore, I offer the following options to consider following a careful discussion and review by your Congregation Council.

1. **In-person outdoor worship with a social distance form of communion** conducted in a staggered manner throughout the day, keeping in line with CDC and NYS Guidelines regarding occupancy rates and social distancing. This approach, along with 2 & 3 that follow, are described in detail in a document that follows. An immunologist was asked to review these procedures.

2. **In-person outdoor worship conducted in a church parking lot** with persons remaining in their cars with the distribution of communion and proper procedures being followed.

3. **In-person small group worship services in doors with socially distanced communion** keeping in line with NYS Guidelines regarding occupancy rates and social distancing.

4. **The Celebration of Communion in a home setting**
   A practice which we are exploring, which has some historical precedent and may be helpful to us all. It will necessitate some printed materials, guidelines and instruction on which we are now working.

Regarding Option 4 above I recognize that some will not be able to return to worship or be involved in a congregation where home communion is possible and that this may last for longer than anticipated. We will work on resources shortly to offer opportunities for participation.

Finally, whatever we do, we need to do for the entire community that we serve as pastors and leaders in this church. Those on the margins, those unable to be present, those who choose to remain away from worship until a vaccine is in place and those who are simply scared to come back need to be part of our equations regarding re-opening and the Sacraments. How we best care for them moving forward is critical to our ministry and their lives.

Sincerely in Christ.

John S. Macholz, Bishop
Upstate New York Synod-ELCA
These options come from three congregations in the New England Synod and are offered as example of what’s being done or might be done.

Options for the Practice of Holy Communion

This document describes three options for receiving Holy Communion. These represent three different approaches being taken by New England Synod Congregations. Each has endeavored to respond to their particular context. You may use these to help design your own approach. Once again, I encourage all our congregations to follow the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control, State health Department Guidance as well as our ELCA considerations for re-opening.

Option 1 – An on-going Staggered Receiving of Communion
Option 2 – Communion with Shepherding/Discipleship Groups
Option 3 - Communion in a Drive in Worship Service

Option 1 - Possibilities for Receiving Communion with Lowered Risk

These options are offered for those who are hungering to receive Holy Communion but who cannot gather in large groups to celebrate the sacrament in the typical manner. People’s hunger for the tangible presence of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion is real and should not be diminished or explained away. These guidelines are imperfect, recognizing that none of these distribution methods will “feel like normal,” but are nevertheless better than abstaining from the gift of Christ’s body and blood for an indeterminate amount of time.

They are aimed at avoiding two traps: the appearance of the Eucharist being “magic,” effected by the incantation of special words by an ordained pastor, and the reduction of the Eucharist to a memorial meal that is celebrated in any context and in the absence of an embodied assembly.

Here’s what might happen:

When an assembly can safely be gathered, even ten people, a congregation holds its Sunday service in the usual way, but as a full service of Holy Communion. Those who are physically present receive the sacrament during the liturgy using these precautions:

- The communion elements are prepared by the presider (thus only one set of hands coming into contact). A facial mask and gloves are worn while preparing the elements.

- The common cup is not used; individual cups are spaced far enough apart in the tray so that fingers do not come into contact with adjacent cups. Sealed, pre-filled communion cups are added to the tray for those who cannot be physically present.

- If preparing the cup is not possible (i.e. individual cups are not used or available) communion is offered only in the form of bread with the assurance that Christ’s full presence is received. The presider alone drinks the cup or refrains from it and returns it to the earth following the service.
• The communion elements are not brought in procession to the altar; they remain on the altar until the liturgy of the meal.

• During the Great Thanksgiving, the presider does not speak into the elements; they are held at arm’s length. They may also remain on the table distant from the presider’s mouth.

• Communion is distributed in a continuous line with six feet between individuals. A Plexiglas screen may separate the server from the communicant. If communicants must gather at a rail, they should be distanced six feet, and the rail must be sanitized after each group of people communes.

• The bread is placed into the communicant’s hand without touching the hand. The wine is taken from the tray by the communicant as the assisting minister says, “The blood of Christ, shed for you.” If hand contact is made, the server washes their hands or replaces their gloves.

• Used cups are placed into a container where they can be sanitized (glass) or disposed of (plastic).

• At the end of distribution, this or another prayer for Sending Holy Communion is offered, and communion elements are reserved for distribution that day or soon after.
  o  Gracious God, loving all your family with a mother’s tender care: As you sent the angel to feed Elijah with heavenly bread, assist us in this ministry on which we are sent forth. In your love and care, nourish and strengthen those to whom we bring this sacrament, that through the body and blood of your Son we all may know the comfort of your abiding presence.

• The remaining bread (or hosts) and sealed cups are divided among trained eucharistic ministers for home distribution.

Those who are not physically present at the time of the worship but arriving at a later time may receive the sacrament in one of the following ways:

• The presider remains at the church for a specified amount of time following the service where the sacrament can be distributed outside with social distance. A moment can be spent in prayer and a blessing offered.

• Trained eucharistic ministers (who are in a low risk category and wearing facial masks and gloves) bring the sacrament to the homebound, thus “extending the celebration” as is common Lutheran practice and advocated in The Use of the Means of Grace. The form offered in ELW Sending of Holy Communion can be used, beginning at the Meal portion. People may sign up in advance for a communion visit, or certain people could be in charge of various shepherding groups. The meal is distributed outside. A moment can be spent in prayer and a blessing offered.
• The presider offers times during the week or by appointment for the sacrament to be distributed outdoors with social distance. Since these times may be distant from the Sunday celebration, the words in the rite of Sending of Holy Communion may be used so that the eating and drinking are linked with the proclamation of Christ’s promise:
  o When our congregation gathered in worship, our congregation remembered with thanksgiving that “in the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.” This is the supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. This same bread and cup, shared in our community of faith, are here given for you.

These guidelines assume an indoor worship service. Holding the entire worship service outside would allow for even reduced risk.

For those who cannot receive

If a person in a high-risk category is not comfortable leaving their home or being visited outdoors by a Eucharistic minister, there may still be a spiritual benefit in participating in the Eucharistic liturgy with their eyes and ears. Here the promise of Christ’s victory over sin and death is proclaimed with strong and beautiful language. Joining in the Great Thanksgiving, even if one cannot receive communion, allows us to participate in the central mystery of our faith: that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. We join our voices with the whole church on earth and heaven singing “Holy, holy, holy!” We praise Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

While there is little in the Lutheran tradition about making a “spiritual communion,” it would have been common in the Reformation era for people to be present at a celebration of the Eucharist and not receive communion (in those days if they were not “properly prepared,” which might have included individual confession and absolution).

The Book of Common Prayer (Episcopal) states: “If a person desires to receive the Sacrament, but, by reason of extreme sickness or physical disability, is unable to eat and drink the Bread and Wine, the Celebrant is to assure that person that all the benefits of Communion are received, even though the Sacrament is not received with the mouth.” There are also prayers within the wider Christian tradition that are offered when a person cannot physically receive:

Lord Jesus,
I believe that you are present in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.
I love you above all things,
and I desire to receive you in my soul,
to be in communion with your body, the Church,
and to feast at the Lamb’s sacred banquet in the new creation.
I embrace you and unite myself wholly to you.
Never let me be separated from you.
Build up the bonds of charity among your people,
and bring us all to the feast of heaven.
(Deacon Fritz Bauerschmidt, adapted JRN)

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the bread of life and the one true vine.
I believe that you are truly present in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.
I seek you. I worship and adore you.
Since I cannot receive you in the eucharistic bread and wine,
I pray that you will come into my heart and soul,
that I may be united to you,
by your all-powerful and ever-present Holy Spirit.
Let me receive you, and be nourished by you.
Become for me the manna in my wilderness, the bread of angels
for my very human journey through time, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet,
and solace in the hour of my death.
I pray all this, trusting that you yourself are our Life, our Peace, and our everlasting Joy.
(Teresa Berger, Yale Divinity School)

My Jesus, at your feet
I offer you my contrite heart in your holy presence.
I adore you in the Sacrament of your love, the Eucharist which is beyond all words.
I desire to receive you in the dwelling which my heart offers you.
In anticipation of the happiness of sacramental communion,
I long to possess you in spirit.
Come to me, Jesus, so that I may come to you.
Let your love inflame the whole of my being in life and in death.
I believe in you, I hope in you, I love you.
(Pope Francis, adapt JRN)

More on this in an article by ELCA pastor and liturgical theologian Maxwell Johnson:

Option 2 – Congregation Proposal for Receiving Holy Communion

Our primary worship service, which includes, preaching, readings, hymns, and prayers would continue online via Zoom (a live service that people can and do attend). WE would also continue to record the Zoom service for people to watch via a YouTube link, and continue to email out the bulletin and sermon to people who prefer to worship without the use of Zoom or YouTube. We are still working on how to consistently reach those who do not have any internet access with worship materials/opportunities. Everyone who attends the Communion gatherings would be encouraged to access the “primary” worship service in some way as well.
Gathering:
We have 13 Discipleship groups one for each of our 13 council members. Each discipleship group is made up of 8-10 households. For the most part, this means that each group consists of around 20 people.

According to the town Public Health Director, there are no regulations governing how many people can gather outdoors (at the time of this writing in this specific location – check with your local Health Dept), but she recommends small groups, maintaining social distancing.

For our communion services, we would invite two discipleship groups to come for a particular time slot (for example 1:00 p.m., Sunday afternoon). Since it is unlikely that all of the members of the discipleship groups would come, that would give us a gathering of 15-30 people. Our plan would be to have the people who would gather, spread out in our church’s courtyard and wearing masks.

Using the discipleship groups would give us the names of everyone attending, in case we needed them for contact tracing.

Logistics: It might be helpful to have someone who attends each communion gathering make a list of the people who actually attends. This might be a good role for the council member whose discipleship group is meeting.

If people did not feel comfortable coming to the service, but still wanted to receive communion, we would send the consecrated elements to them in their home, with a Eucharistic minister from their discipleship group.

Logistics:
We would need to some way to find out from people who do not come to the communion service if they are not coming because they don’t want to come or because they are at risk and can’t come out.

We would need to gather volunteers from each discipleship group to serve as these Eucharistic Ministers.

Preparation:
Holy Communion using wafers and small cups would be prepared by masked and gloved members of the altar guild.

Consecration:
Holy Communion would be consecrated with me standing on the porch with a table and the elements. I would consecrate the covered elements, standing away from them and from the gathered congregation.

The liturgy would include:
  a reading from scripture (perhaps a lesson from the day, perhaps something specifically about communion)

  The Dialogue, preface, and Eucharistic Prayer
  The Lord’s Prayer
  An Invitation to Communion
**Distribution:**
The way our courtyard is designed is a sidewalk on the right, leading to the porch where I would be standing, and then a sidewalk on the left. I would put on gloves, place a wafer on a disposable napkin with a small cup of wine next to it. People could make a socially distanced line and come up one at a time to receive their wafer and wine. I would speak the words of distribution and then they could leave by the other sidewalk on the left. This would help people maintain social distancing. Once person 1 had received communion, I would place another wafer and another cup of wine/grape juice on the table for person 2, etc. Since I would never be touching something another person touched, I would not need to change gloves. (The Public Health Director agreed)

**Logistic:** There are steps to get to the porch that might be a challenge for some. We would need to have a plan for those who cannot navigate the steps. (Realistically many of those are probably in our at-risk population and would likely need to have communion delivered to them anyway.)

**Dismissal:**
Once everyone present had received communion I would pray a sending prayer for the “prepackaged” elements that would be distributed to those who could not come in person.

Then the Eucharistic Ministers could come forward one at a time

**Logistics:** Would Eucharistic Ministers need to wear gloves, if they are not touching something that someone else would consume (my understanding is that contracting the virus by surface contact is much less of a concern than it was originally thought to be, but we need to do everything that we can do to keep people safe).

How we will prepare the elements for transport?

After the Eucharistic Ministers have gathered the elements, I will speak a dismissal and people will leave.

**Notes:** It is my expectation that each communion gathering would take around 30 minutes. If I do three every Sunday, then people will have the opportunity to receive communion twice a month. (Three smaller discipleship groups would need to be combined.) Still not perfect, but a significant improvement from not at all.

If I hold them on the hour: 1 p.m., 2 p.m., and 3 p.m. then we would reduce traffic the risk of our coming and going creating physical distancing issues.

Obviously, a rainy Sunday would make this more challenging, but we could reschedule for another time during the week or invite people to bring umbrellas, depending how seriously it is raining.

**Logistic:** Should we leave the building locked or allow it to be open in case people need to use the bathroom?
Option 3 - Holy Communion at a Church Drive-In Worship

This is a worship that typically happens in the church parking lot. If you are using another parking lot, consider getting permission and discussing coverage with your congregation’s insurance carrier. What follows is a description of how one church is managing this option.

As people enter the parking lot, Ushers hand the driver or passenger a bulletin and communion wafer. Note this is a communion worship in which wine is not used so as to eliminate the handling or spilling of liquids. Each small host will be in its own wrapper and will be distributed with the bulletin at entrance to the parking lot. There will be a canopy over the outdoor Mensa wherein I (the Pastor) will lead worship and space for an electric piano for the musician. There will be distancing rules for everyone. Masks and gloves unless the car windows are up. It’s going to be a short service and people will need to plan accordingly so as to avoid use of the bathrooms and all that is involved with cleaning.

It will be my job, the hardest one, to connect the dots theologically. Ultimately, I think we will be stretching the footprint of the worship area for this unique use each time we do this. We will still maintain the integrity of the idea of a worshipping community, gathered around the Word, “in, with and under” the bread. I have discussed this extensively with the leadership and with other clergy in the conference. I want to make sure that I am not giving people the impression that I am “pre-consecrating” and that it’s not magic. It is, in every sense, the best way we know how to maintain good order under difficult circumstances.

Pastor will preside at a full saying of the words of institution and then invite people to take the host/wafer they received when they arrived. They will remain in their cars.

We will be using an FM transmitter to broadcast the music and the spoken words, including the sermon. The transmitter has a range of about 1,000 ft. The unit only cost $200, and my tech folks say the clarity is as good as any other FM station.