

June 18, 2020

“...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Gal 5:22-23

For the past few months, a small group of ELCA bishops from Region 8 and professors from United Lutheran Seminary have been engaged in thoughtful conversation around some of the theological, liturgical, and practical issues raised by worship challenges—and opportunities—in the midst of COVID-19.

The specific issue that sparked our dialogue was the question around technologically-mediated communion—what some are calling “virtual” or “online” communion. However, in the course of our conversations we realized that while this continues to be a pressing issue for many pastors, deacons and congregations in our denomination, the guiding principles that can helpfully shape thinking and practice in this area also can be helpful for the many other challenging decisions that will need to be made regarding our life together in the coming months.

In this document, then, we share some of the key Lutheran doctrines that we believe are the most relevant and insightful, not only to questions of Eucharistic practice, but also to larger questions of how we can best be church together in a time of pandemic. In addition, we offer a set of lingering questions that, to our minds, offer no easy answers, but can be constructively wrestled with in any process of mutual discernment. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us, there are moments where we are simply called to live the questions now; sometimes this process is just as important as finding answers.

Finally, we want to share that these conversations took place in a spirit of great mutual respect, care, and Christian love for each other and the different situations in which we find ourselves. While we do share agreement around the statements and questions below, it is important to emphasize that we did not all agree on the specific practices of and theology around technologically-mediated communion, either at the start or the end of the process. However, we quickly realized that agreement was not the point.

Instead, the great value of our time together was the mutual learning and growth that occurred through the power of the Spirit, and our deepened understanding and appreciation of each other. Above all, we commend to you this spirit of love and respect in your own conversations, especially during this season of Pentecost, when we celebrate the transformative power of the Spirit to work wonders in the church and in the world.

Key Doctrines and Shared Affirmations:

1. The foundation of our faith is God’s love for God’s whole creation seen in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

2. The Lutheran Confessions call first and foremost for bold proclamation of Christ against the prevailing wisdom of the world, recognizing that faith liberates us from both the anxious quest for self-justification before God and self-defense vis-à-vis others so that we can worship God truly and show genuine love for others.
3. Theology and doctrine are always concerned about the *usus practicus* (the practical use)—theology is not done for the sake of argument alone.
4. The church is created by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Jesus; it does not exist to perpetuate itself. Both the form of the church itself and the church's worship have continued to develop and change over time to make God's word accessible by responding to developments in technology, language, and culture.
5. Apart from the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments according to the gospel, the structures, rules, and practices—including the worship practices—of the Lutheran church are to be regarded as *adiaphora*, meaning that we could do things differently if our particular situation demands it. *Adiaphora* are not unimportant, but things classified as *adiaphora* can be altered according to whatever most effectively brings people to faith in Christ. The decisive questions are (a) what best edifies the community, and (b) how do we care for the weak in faith?
6. Online community is real community that operates in a different form. Both types of community require intentionality.
7. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, humans across time and space, including technologically-mediated spaces, are held together as the one body of Christ. Holy Communion is an essential, necessary sign of this union, and a means to grow that union.
8. Context matters. Even as we respect practices that unify us, congregational and denominational practices always should be interpreted faithfully by a specific community in a given situation, with particular attention paid to diverse voices that are too often marginalized or ignored.
9. The external nature of the means of grace and worship highlight the embodied nature of Christian practice; the sacraments are visible, tangible manifestations of God's promise through word and the physical elements of God's creation.
10. Luther does not say that Christ is more present in the Lord's Supper; he says that Christ's presence in the Supper is clearer to us as gospel. Our hearing/seeing/tasting/laying hold of Christ's body in the Supper is to enable us to see/hear/taste/lay hold of the broken body of the resurrected Christ who by the life-giving Spirit is present with us and for us in a pentecostal plurality of places and ways today. We may be in uncertain territory about celebrating communion online, but where we are not in uncertain territory is that if our eucharistic practice is not helping us recognize, for example, George Floyd as the broken body of Christ, then in a fundamental way our sacramental practice is not happening "in remembrance" of the Jesus who was tortured to death by authorities of the state.

Important Questions:

1. How can technology support the church in being the body of Christ in the world?

2. How is technology (not just ZOOM, YouTube, computers, etc., but lights, microphones, screens, loudspeakers, air conditioners, etc.) helping your congregation to be the body of Christ? How is it hindering that work?
3. What might we change to make our existing worship practices more inclusive and broadly welcoming?
4. How are we privileging specific bodies (and ignoring others) in specific worship practices as well as conversations about both online and in-person community?
5. How are worship practices, both online and in-person, limiting or opening access to Word and Sacrament to certain people, and who are those people?
6. How can we envision and reimagine how we function as church in our context and facilitate access for all people? How do we implement and co-create that vision?
7. In new situations of uncertainty, is it time to wait for clarity or time to experiment (i.e. alter existing practices concerning adiaphora with the hope but not the guarantee of better proclaiming the essentials)? How does who we are as individuals and as a collective inform our decision making?
8. Both individually and communally, how does our culture, society, and the political situation inform how we understand who we are as church and inform and motivate how we live out our faith?
9. How do we faithfully respond to the ways our current situation is altering the way we gather, both now and going forward, keeping in mind the following: our reluctance to change, our bodily nature, emerging technologies with hybrid (online and physical) worship, and a redefinition of community?
10. Regarding technologically-mediated communion specifically, “The Use of Means of Grace” states that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly where the gathered people of God celebrate the sacrament (Principle 39). As the mission of the church expands into a technologically enhanced environment, how will we continue to be faithful to the incarnational nature of the Eucharist in a technologically-mediated environment? What will best further the mission of the proclamation of the gospel?
11. Who is most directly affected by the worship practices we have adopted or are considering adopting? [For reference: The language of provision 5.01.c. in the ELCA constitution says, in part, “Whenever possible, the entity most directly affected by a decision shall be the principal party responsible for decision and implementation, with the other entities facilitating and assisting.” The entities here are congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. In the case of the proverbial color of the carpet in the nave, clearly the congregation should make that decision, and not the synod or the churchwide organization. But what about the administration of the sacraments? Who is most directly affected by this part of our life together? While the answer may seem to be obvious to many—“our congregation,” when the question is answered that way, the error of the Corinthians comes again into view. Who, then, is actually affected by our decisions around the administration of the sacrament? The weak? The whole Body of Christ? And does our broader answer to this question also call for broader decision-making?]
12. How do we discern the presence of Christ in technologically-mediated Eucharist?

13. How do we define and/or redefine “gathering” and “assembly” in our digital age?

In Christ,

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