



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.



# Table and font: Who is welcome?

*An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion*

## Introduction

All members and congregations of the ELCA are invited and encouraged to engage an important study and conversation that will officially begin this fall. Now is the time to build this into your planning for education and formation.

For most Christians through many centuries, Holy Baptism has been considered the sacrament of initiation or entrance into the church, while Holy Communion is the sacrament that nourishes and sustains Christians week by week. This remains the recommended practice in the ELCA. Our church's statement on the practice of word and sacrament, "[The Use of the Means of Grace](#)" / "[Uso de los Medios de Gracia](#)," states:

### Principle 37

*Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.*

Increasingly, in many congregations of this church and our ecumenical partners, the invitation to receive communion is for everyone, not only for those who have been baptized. For some, it is a simple matter of hospitality. If this is Christ's table, then all are welcome. Period. For others, the initiatory nature of baptism into the body of Christ is critical. Becoming a baptized and communing Christian involves serious commitment and even risk. The invitation, therefore, must be gracious yet clear: Holy Communion is for the baptized; the call to Holy Baptism is for all. Still others find some middle ground in this important conversation.

A generation or two ago, the question was about whether other Christians were welcome to receive Holy Communion in Lutheran congregations. There was also serious concern over the implications if a non-baptized person received communion. These questions have long since received consensus in this church and are not a part of the current conversations. "The Use of the Means of Grace" states:

#### Principle 49

*Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.*

#### Application 37G

*When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.*

The conversation and study that our church is about to engage in is about the invitation to Holy Communion. Especially important is the relationship between communion and baptism, as well as the relation between the sacraments and the proclamation of God's word, the worship space, music, prayers and the whole of the liturgy. Congregations are encouraged to make this an opportunity to once again discover the richness of "The Use of the Means of Grace" and its value for a congregation. The document is not prescriptive. Rather, it describes normative practices – practices rich in diversity and open to varied interpretation in various contexts. Studying and discussing it together can be a renewing experience. It might result in the consideration of changing some current practices in a congregation's worship life. Such considerations should always be done carefully and with pastoral sensitivity, valuing important and treasured traditions of a congregation.

To assist these conversations, a collection of resources will be available on the worship website (<http://www.ELCA.org/worship>) by mid-August in time for your fall programming. Anyone who engages in this study is encouraged to offer feedback. We are interested to learn the thoughts, ideas and concerns of all. The website will include suggestions on how to offer your feedback.

For Lutherans, the church is defined as "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). Therefore, this is a vitally important conversation for our church. We hope you will engage in it seriously with gracious and open hearts and minds.