



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we distribute Holy Communion?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Lutherans believe that Jesus Christ is truly present in the meal we call Holy Communion, among other names.¹ This holy mystery calls for reverence, care and pastoral wisdom in the practices surrounding its distribution. As set forth in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace*,

Practices of distributing and receiving Holy Communion reflect the unity of the Body of Christ and the dignity and new life of the baptized (Principle 45).

We believe that at Christ's Last Supper, he took the bread and commanded his disciples to "take and eat." Likewise, he took a cup of wine, blessed it by giving thanks, and gave it for them to drink. As we examine the possibilities for gathering at and distributing this meal, it is important to consider how our practices interpret this command to eat and drink.²

Bread

For a description of the kinds of bread used for communion, [see "What kinds of bread Are Used for Holy Communion?"](#). That question addresses the "what" dimension of the issue, whereas this question considers the "how" dimension. How is the bread distributed?

The bread is usually distributed by the presiding minister or if more communion assistants are required, the presider is among those serving. For congregations that use a whole loaf of leavened or unleavened bread, the presider breaks off pieces for each communicant. The presider takes care that pieces are generous but not too large, as they need to be chewed before receiving the wine. To prevent crumbs from falling, the presider holds the bread in a purificator (a white cloth approximately 12-15 inches square).

¹ These other names include Lord's Supper, Eucharist, Divine Service, Sacrament of the Altar, Divine Liturgy and Mass. See the Use of the Means of Grace, Principal 36.

² For a thorough discussion on this topic, see *The Sunday Assembly* in resource list.

For congregations that use hosts (wafers), they are simply placed into each communicant's hand.

There is an ancient fourth-century tradition for communicants to make their hands into a "throne" for the King of kings. This "throne" is made by placing the open right hand upon and across the left hand (forming a cross). Both hands are then used to bring the bread to the mouth.

Wine

For a description for the kinds of wine used for Holy Communion, [see "What Kinds of Wine are Used for Holy Communion?"](#).

The question of wine distribution is less straightforward and more controversial. We will highlight the three most prevalent practices: common cup, individual glasses and intinction.

Common cup

The oldest practice associated with partaking the wine is to drink from one cup. Like eating the bread from one loaf, the one cup symbolizes our unity in Christ.

Authors of *The Sunday Assembly*, a companion volume to Evangelical Lutheran Worship, note that this practice began to abate in the beginning of the twentieth century, most likely a result of concerns about hygiene.

However, evidence seems to show that when used properly, this method is actually the most sanitary method of distributing the wine, especially if wine glasses are pre-filled or intinction is practiced (see below). The latter practices involve much more use of the hands, which are "the most frequent source of passing pathogens, not our mouths" (*The Sunday Assembly*, p. 193).

How is wine distributed from a common drinking chalice?

From *The Sunday Assembly*: "The minister of the chalice will usually hold the middle or node of the chalice stem by one hand, presenting the cup near the person's mouth and allowing the communicant to tip the chalice to his or her lips while holding on to the base. The communion minister uses the purificator, held in the other hand, to wipe the outside and inside of the lip of the chalice while, at the same time, rotating the cup to present it to the next communicant" (216).

Individual glasses

If congregations use individual glasses, it is advised to pour during distribution rather than pre-filling them. As stated in *The Sunday Assembly*: "This practice will maintain the symbol of the cup, make the altar less crowded, make caring for what is left over much easier and more reverent, and actually result in a healthier practice than is possible with pre-filled glasses" (193).

How is wine distributed from a pouring chalice?

From *The Sunday Assembly*: "In assemblies using small glasses, the minister with the cup must pour carefully into the small glass, afterward touching the spout of the chalice with the purificator to catch any stray drops." (216)

Intinction

Intinction refers to the process of receiving the bread or host and dipping it into the wine. This method is typically commended for its convenience. While this process seems less complicated one must consider its limitations.

When we eat and drink a meal in everyday life, we eat and then drink. We rarely dip our bread in our wine. It is easier to understand communion as a meal when we are eating and drinking.

This method is likely to be more unsanitary because many hands can touch the cup. There is also the issue of pieces of bread floating in the wine, a problem if this chalice is also used as the drinking chalice. It may be preferable to use hosts/wafers for intinction or to have a separate chalice for intinction.

Again, Lutherans do not dictate a manner of eating or drinking, but it is important to carefully consider how and why we do what we do. (See *The Sunday Assembly*, 192-194).

Manner of Distribution

Congregations also need to consider how people will gather for communion. Options include gathering at a communion rail or forming stations where the assembly forms a line/s.

Gathering at a rail may create a sense of community, especially if all are dismissed at once. This can be done standing or kneeling. Standing is the more ancient practice and is especially suitable for the Easter season.

Continuous communion, either at the rail or by station, creates community in a different sense. We have a greater sense of the communion of saints that extends before us and follows after us. The communion continues and we are simply part of this open-handed cloud of witnesses receiving the bread of life and the wine of grace.

Other Matters

Here are other points for consideration:

- Have all the elements (bread/wine) on the table at the time of the Great Thanksgiving. This communicates that there is enough food for all. (See *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 47a).
- Does the assembly know what to do at the time of communion? Be sure that a worship folder or other materials/announcements explain your local practices. Can regular worshippers explain this to visitors? This is matter of hospitality.
- Be clear on how children are welcomed to the table, either to receive communion or a blessing.
- Be clear that receiving in one kind (bread or wine) is acceptable, especially for those who have allergies or sensitivities or who must abstain from alcohol in any amount.
- Be mindful of those who cannot come to the table and communion them where they are seated. (See also, [“How can we make our worship space accessible?”](#) and [“How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?”](#))

- Train communion ministers thoroughly so that they will be confident in their role and ready for unexpected circumstances (For a helpful list, see *The Sunday Assembly*, p. 217).
- Consider the environmental impacts of your communion practice, especially the use in some settings of disposable plastic communion cups.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ What kinds of bread are used for Holy Communion?
- ☪ What kinds of wine are used for Holy Communion?
- ☪ How can we make our worship space accessible?
- ☪ How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.

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