



**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*

### **All Are Welcome**

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Holy Communion saved my life. When I was growing up in the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, I was internalizing all kinds of messages about what a boy was supposed to be. I knew deep down that I would never meet all the expectations my church and culture had for me. I found it hard to love myself. However, every time I came to the table I heard the promise, “The body of Christ given for you.” Somehow a message of grace and love took root among all those other messages and grew to be a source of redemption, a counter-message to the world that draws boundaries and often decides who is worthy and who is not. I suspect I would have wandered away from the church had I not discovered Christ Lutheran Church in Athens, Ohio, where I attended college, a congregation of the Lutheran Church in America whose invitation to the table included the words, “all baptized Christians.”

In those days, including “all baptized Christians” was a powerful way of announcing that our church did not draw boundaries around Christ’s table as did other churches. The words were intended to be open and inclusive. We welcomed everyone from every expression of the church to gather together around the promise of the gospel, present for us in bread and wine; a beautiful sign of the unity that God intends for the whole church. The predecessor churches to the ELCA were laying down the tracks for an ecumenical spirit that would lead the ELCA from table fellowship to full communion in so many, beautiful directions. Eucharistic hospitality (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 49) quite literally led us more deeply into mission and discipleship, transformed by the grace of Christ, to be a more powerful witness to the gospel in the world.

Since my days in college, the world and the church have changed. As our church experiences declining membership, most of us are aware that the pipeline of Lutherans into our new member classes is shrinking dramatically. We find ourselves in relationship with people from many religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Our children are

going to school with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Young adults increasingly list their primary religious preference is “none.” Issues of hospitality and community play out across the front pages of our newspapers. People walk away from many religious traditions because they experience them to be judgmental, divisive and sectarian — behaviors that counter a message of unconditional love. The church finds itself in mission in a profoundly new and different context than when *The Use of the Means of Grace* was beautifully relevant. As we move into this new century, our eucharistic hospitality will need to take this new context into account. We will need to be (about) mission, invitation, and poetically descriptive.

### **Eucharistic hospitality as mission**

Our language of “all baptized Christians” is no longer experienced by many with its intended welcome, but rather as a limit—God’s love reserved for those who are already “inside.” In many of our congregations, (Thanks be to God!) new people are coming forward, hands outstretched to receive a gift that is being offered at our tables. They are drawn to participate in our mission, having heard something about Christ’s love for them and for the world. Coming to the table is how all of us are drawn into that mission, members and visitors, even the baptized and the unbaptized. I suspect that in the early church, the meal was often the way that new Christians found their way to the font. A wide welcome at the table can, indeed, be a primary way that we take seriously our great commission to baptize and teach all that Christ commands. Table fellowship invites all of us more deeply into discipleship, some of us into baptism, some of us into affirmation of baptism. We must find language in our welcome that links eucharist and baptism, so that what we say draws us from table to font and back again. Either way, if our language leads people to think that the sacraments create categories of insiders and outsiders, we have likely made our sacramental life into works righteousness.

### **Eucharistic hospitality as invitation**

It’s rather ironic that we find ourselves debating who should be called to our tables when, in truth, our congregations are not flooded with unbaptized people racing forward to receive the bread of life. Oh, that we really had that problem! Rather than decide who should or should not be receiving communion, we should probably put our energy into evangelism, announcing to our neighborhoods that God’s mercy is for all of us. In a congregation I served, we announced weekly in worship and publicly in the neighborhood, “In Christ’s love, there are no longer insiders and outsiders, but all are welcomed into God’s work of love and justice.” Many in our culture expect the church to be exclusive. The media reinforces this stereotype over and over again. Most of us have friends who have some kind of church horror story. To be about Christ’s mission in

this context, we have to be careful and clear to announce that everyone is welcome. Better to be extravagant than stingy in a starving and wounded world.

### **Eucharist hospitality is poetry**

In order to be extravagant in our welcome, we need language that describes Christ's presence in bread and wine rather than defines who can receive it. We are stewards of a mystery, not gatekeepers at the altar rail. Our welcome calls for poetry. In the end, we cannot contain Christ's love. Grace is always larger than our words can communicate. It will be transformative in ways that we often cannot expect. The Holy Spirit will call, gather, and enlighten people that we never expected to show up at our door. (Read the book of Acts!) We cannot fully define how and to whom God will be truly present in bread and wine. We set bread and wine extravagantly on our tables, offering great thanksgiving for the ways that God can take us, as well as any gift of creation, and use it to bless and redeem the earth. We break the bread, Christ's body and our own, broken and healed. We cast our bread upon the waters, trusting that God will feed the hungry. We sow the seeds of the gospel, trusting that God will bring faith to bloom. Maybe all we need to say is "Come! Come, and receive the gifts of God, holy things for holy people." And in that moment, the whole creation is redeemed.

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