



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



Study guide



This study guide was developed for congregations and small groups as part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's conversation on who is invited to receive Holy Communion in ELCA congregations. It is meant to accompany "The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament."

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We are a church whose unity is in Jesus, who gathers us around word and water, wine and bread.

Who is welcome and invited to receive Holy Communion? This question, sometimes described as a matter of “eucharistic hospitality,” is answered in a variety of ways by Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations. A generation ago the question focused primarily on the invitation of all Christians to the table. Today the question has broadened, asking whether those who have not been baptized may be invited to receive Holy Communion. The Church Council of the ELCA has invited members, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization into conversation and study regarding this question. This conversation also presents an opportunity for congregations to reflect on “The Use of the Means of Grace,” the ELCA’s statement on the practice of word and sacrament, in its entirety.

Questions about the meaning and practice of eucharistic hospitality have arisen out of the ordinary experience of ELCA pastors and members. Congregations regularly welcome worshipers who belong to congregations of other denominations. In addition, people who were not baptized and have no church affiliation worship in ELCA congregations. They come for a variety of reasons. Perhaps they have begun a spiritual journey following a major shift in their lives, such as marrying a longtime Lutheran, moving to a new community, going through a divorce, or beginning an addiction recovery program. Or maybe the family of an ELCA member has gathered to celebrate a milestone birthday or anniversary and attending church is part of the festivities. In these and other situations, ELCA members and both baptized and unbaptized guests ask, “Is going to communion OK? Who is invited?” Pastors themselves wonder, “Should I welcome everyone to the table?”

ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

This guide is a tool to facilitate reflection on this issue in your congregation or small group. Part 1, “Hospitality and Holy Communion,” focuses on Principles 37 and 49 of “The Use of the Means of Grace,” which speak most directly to eucharistic hospitality. Some conversations will focus on only the question of hospitality. Other conversations will address the relationship between baptism and eucharist. Part 2 of this guide, “Welcome, nurture, and the Christian faith,” supports that broader reflection.

Still others will choose to examine worship as a whole. Planners and leaders should refer to the study guide included in “The Use of the Means of Grace” (pages 60 to 63), a process for surveying the entire statement. Group leaders planning even one or two hours of informal discussion may find the guide useful and are encouraged to review it.

The discussion questions in this guide are suitable for a large-group forum, a small study group, and other venues, such as a congregation council planning retreat. They might also be helpful to worship or education committees that want to explore implications of eucharistic hospitality for the ministries they oversee.

These materials are prepared for use in a congregation. However, conversations among pastors, between a bishop and rostered leaders, and in other settings may also be fruitful. With minor adjustments, these study materials may be useful in those contexts as well.

SHARING YOUR FEEDBACK

After you've completed this study, please share your congregation or small group's feedback with the churchwide organization's worship team. You can send your thoughts to worship@elca.org.

PREPARATION

As you begin planning for your congregation's conversation, you first need to determine what you will focus on — eucharistic hospitality, baptism and eucharist, or worship as a whole. Each part of this guide supports a one-hour session. The study guide at the end of “The Use of the Means of Grace” might also be used to plan as many as six sessions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to this study guide, the churchwide organization's worship team has assembled more resources that you can draw on for your study. These materials include:

- An essay about why “The Use of the Means of Grace” is valuable for congregations
- An essay exploring implications of the Lutheran Confessions and the ELCA constitution for eucharistic hospitality
- Examples of communion invitations among congregation of the ELCA, showing the varied practices of this church
- Fifteen brief articles* by a variety of Lutheran seminary professors, pastors and other ELCA leaders offering perspectives on the topic of inviting people to communion

**These articles can be easily downloaded from the dropdown menu of the Table and Font widget on the right-hand side of www.ELCA.org/worship.*

Select resources that are most relevant to the practices and issues in your setting. For the deepest learning, choose a mix of materials — some that support and others that challenge your current practices. These additional resources will most likely be helpful in the second part of the sessions, titled “Engaging ‘The Use of the Means of Grace’,” in this guide.

Distribute selected print materials before the session, so participants have sufficient time to read and reflect on them. You might include a guide for readers similar to the following:

Reflection guide

- In your own words and in one sentence, summarize the author's argument.
- What one or two ideas seem most important to you?
- What most surprised you?
- What ideas can we apply to our congregation?
- What would you like to talk about more?

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Consider including in your study experiences participants might share before you begin this conversation or between sessions. Participants might, for example:

- Visit other congregations and observe their Communion practices, especially regarding eucharistic hospitality.
- Collect worship folders, pew cards or other materials that are relevant to this conversation from other congregations.
- Interview children, youth or new members who have recently begun communing in your congregation about what sharing in Holy Communion means to them.
- Talk to friends and family who belong to other denominations about Communion practices in their congregation.

All adult learners draw on experience as they process new information. Conversation is enriched, however, when participants have common bases for exploration. Experiences that involve not only our minds but our bodies and emotions further stimulate discovery and enhance learners' understanding and integration. Well-chosen experiences will help conversation partners take ownership of and apply their learning from these sessions.

MATERIALS NEEDED

When groups assemble for this conversation, ensure that each participant has a copy of the following materials:

- Portions of "The Use of the Means of Grace" that will be discussed — Principles 37 and 49 (with applications and background) or the entire statement
- Statements about your congregation's understanding of Communion and invitations to the Lord's Supper that your congregation includes in its worship folder, flyers and other print or web-based documents
- Sample statements and invitations gathered from a wide range of ELCA congregations available among the other resources prepared for this conversation
- Other print or web-based resources to be explored
- Any other materials you will be discussing

If your congregation does not have a printed Communion statement or invitation but regularly offers an oral invitation to the Lord's Supper, write down a typical version of that invitation and distribute a copy with the other study materials. If your congregation does not usually extend an invitation to communion or you are planning a conversation outside a congregation, use the samples among the other resources prepared for this conversation (for a comprehensive guide, see the Introduction, p. 5).

Hospitality and Holy Communion

FOCUSING ACTIVITY (10 MINUTES)

Invite group members to recall a time when they worshiped with another congregation, perhaps one of a denomination or faith tradition different from their own. Guide the conversation with the questions such as the following.

1. What about the experience was comfortable or uncomfortable for you? What aspects of worship spoke to your mind? Your heart or spirit?
2. To what extent did you participate in worship, and to what extent did you simply observe? How did you choose the ways you would participate?
3. Did you commune in that congregation? How did you feel about not knowing exactly how communion would be done? Were you instructed and welcomed?
4. What thoughts and feelings did you have after worship concluded? Would you look forward to worshipping with that congregation again? Why or why not?
5. Do you recall a time when you were told — explicitly or implicitly — that you were not welcome to commune in a Christian gathering? If so, what rationale, if any, was offered? What did you think and how did you feel about the experience?

ENGAGING “THE USE OF THE MEANS OF GRACE” (25 MINUTES)

1. Reflect on your congregation's statement about its understanding of Holy Communion and who is invited to the table.
 - Read your congregation's statement.
 - Put the statement in your own words, or write a paraphrase and share it.
 - Determine whether the statement invites only the baptized to commune, invites all people, or does not specify who is welcome.

2. Read Principle 49, Applications 49A and 49B, and Application 37G. Discuss questions such as:
 - What does “hospitality” mean? Why might you as an individual practice hospitality? Why would your congregation as a community strive to be hospitable?
 - In what ways does your congregation exercise hospitality, both in worship and in other settings? What do these practices communicate about the importance of hospitality for your congregation?
 - In what ways is your congregation’s announcement about Holy Communion consistent or inconsistent with your congregation’s practice of hospitality in other aspects of your life together?
 - Is your statement consistent with the guidance offered in Principle 49 and the three applications? If not, how do your statement and the guidance differ? What thoughts do you have about why they might differ?

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING (25 MINUTES)

Practicing generous hospitality is a value — a belief we think is important and endeavor to express in our behavior and attitudes. Upholding conformity with Scripture and Lutheran teaching, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism or as reflected in “The Use of the Means of Grace,” is another value, one that ELCA congregations are expected to uphold.

1. Imagine you are looking at a snapshot of your congregation. Identify the three or four values most visible in your congregation’s life together.
2. Explore the implications of practicing those values.
 - For each value, list several ways living out that value might:
 - enrich individuals’ faith journey
 - support your congregation’s mission and ministry
 - strengthen the church (both the ELCA and the body of Christ throughout the world) as it carries out the Great Commission
 - List several ways practicing the value might impede or harm faithfulness to these callings.
 - Reflect on whether your analysis suggests some values should be given higher priority than others, practiced in a different way, or not practiced at all.
3. Identify the values you think your congregation’s Communion statement conveys to worshipers. What additional values might be expressed in such an announcement?

4. Discuss ways your congregation's Communion practices might better reflect the values you identified in your snapshot or concluded in item 2 that your congregation wants to emphasize.
5. List the specific values and practices of your congregation that your Communion statement might better capture.
6. If you think your congregation's Communion statement could be revised to better reflect your understanding of hospitality and the Lord's Supper, write a draft of an invitation, or ask for volunteers to work on a new version. (If your group will be using part 2 of this study guide to explore the relationship between Baptism and the Lord's Supper, complete this exercise at the end of the second session.)
 - Gather a group of three to five people, if possible including both new and longtime, and younger and older members. Keep in mind who would most benefit from this conversation.
 - Refer to your notes from your discussion.
 - Review sample statements from this study guide.
 - Decide whether your group will write as a team or group members will work alone and pool their efforts, and proceed accordingly.
 - Share your draft with the larger group.
 - Talk with a pastor, your study leader, or another appropriate leader about how these draft statements might be used to inform the practice of eucharistic hospitality in your congregation.

Welcome, nurture and the Christian faith

FOCUSING ACTIVITY (10 MINUTES)

Ask group members to form pairs, and guide them in the following reflection.

1. If you commune and can remember the first time you participated in the eucharist, briefly tell your conversation partner about that experience.
2. If you remember a time when you did not commune, or if you do not commune now, what thoughts and feelings did you have, or do you have now, about not participating?
3. If you received some type of instruction before you communed, what did that consist of?
4. How have you been nurtured and instructed in the faith throughout your life—in the congregations you have belonged to? In your home? In school or other settings?

ENGAGING “THE USE OF THE MEANS OF GRACE” (25 MINUTES)

1. Read Principle 37, Application 37E, and Background 37F. Discuss questions as the following.
 - What does “catechesis” mean? Why might it be important to your congregation?
 - How are children and youth nurtured in the Christian faith in your congregation?
 - How are new members instructed?
 - How does their instruction connect with Baptism? Holy Communion?
2. Reflect on the role of instruction and nurture in the Christian faith in your congregation.
 - In your congregation, how are preparations for Baptism and for Holy Communion the same? How do they differ?
 - Why might preparation for both sacraments be valuable? Why might it be required?

- Why might preparation for either sacrament be unnecessary, even if it is beneficial?
3. Read Application 37G, and discuss questions such as:
 - For what reasons might a person who has not been baptized seek to commune? Why might a person not have been baptized?
 - Why might ministers commune a person who has not been baptized?
 - How does the application suggest communicants and ministers respond in such situations?
 - How does this recommendation compare with your congregation's current practices, in both its worship and education programs?

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING (25 MINUTES)

1. Examine your congregation's Communion statement.
 - What does your statement express or imply about the meaning of the Lord's Supper? The meaning of Baptism?
 - Does the statement specify who is invited to commune? If so, who is welcomed?
 - Does it suggest that those who are not baptized explore the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?
2. Discuss why it is important that Holy Communion be open to all baptized people. What does that openness say about one's understanding of Communion?
3. Discuss why a congregation might welcome all people to the Lord's table. What does that invitation say about one's understanding of Communion?
4. Explore how your congregation could better provide for the instruction and nurture in the Christian faith for people of all ages, baptized and unbaptized.
5. Briefly review our group's discussion in part 1 of this study guide about your congregation's values, Communion practices, and invitation to commune.
 - If you think your congregation's Communion statement could be revised to better reflect your understanding and practice of hospitality, Holy Communion, and Baptism, write a draft of an invitation, or ask for volunteers to work on a new version.
 - Gather a group of three to five people, if possible including both new and longtime, and younger and older members. Keep in mind who would most benefit from this conversation.

- Refer to your notes from your discussion.
- Review sample statements from this study guide.
- Decide whether your group will write as a team or individual group members will work alone and then pool their efforts, and proceed accordingly.
- Share your draft with the larger group.
- Talk with a pastor, your study leader, or another appropriate leader about how these draft statements might be used to inform the practice of eucharistic hospitality in your congregation.

SHARING YOUR FEEDBACK

Everyone engaging this conversation in any way is encouraged to provide feedback from their experience which will help inform potential future action for this church. Send your comments to worship@elca.org by May 2015. Your feedback may include:

- brief description of the nature of the conversation (who was involved? in what setting? over what period of time?)
- a short summary of the conversations (what issues were discussed? what was affirmed? what was a surprise?)
- suggestions for future consideration?
- anything else you would like to share?

Get involved yourself. Find ways, within your own ministry, to engage this question with others. Publicize it. Widen the dialogue. Encourage study. Encourage feedback. Thank you for your faithful service and for the ways you will help members of this church to study and discuss together “The Use of the Means of Grace” and prayerfully consider the question of whom we invite and welcome to receive Holy Communion.

TO SHARE YOUR CONGREGATION'S OR SMALL GROUP'S FEEDBACK

Send thoughts and comments to worship@elca.org by **May 2015**.

