



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

“The Use of Means of Grace”: Why it matters for congregations

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Just two years into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)'s life as a church body, something was already becoming very clear. A larger church body with a more diverse composition of ethnic and regional backgrounds and pieties had a much broader variety of practices, particularly in worship, than anything we had experienced in our past. Liturgical renewal movements born out of Vatican II were colliding with seeker-sensitive evangelical-influenced worship practices. “Worship Wars” was a phrase used far too often to describe what was going on within congregations and synods as they planned what confessionally and theologically we all knew should be a source and sign of unity rather than division. Synodical bishops found themselves swept into these discussions and debates with limited resources from the church to shape meaningful and constructive dialogue among assemblies and leaders struggling with these issues. So it was then, in 1989, that the ELCA Conference of Bishops came to the Churchwide Assembly requesting that “a statement on sacramental practices be prepared as a guide to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”

This request led to an extensive and careful discussion within our church about the central themes of worship. This discussion was synthesized with Scripture, the confessions, our historical traditions and the current missional demands of our culture in the resource we now know as “The Use of the Means of Grace.” As the document came before the 1997 Churchwide Assembly, Wyvetta Bullock presented it with this introduction. She said, “This statement on sacramental practices seeks to encourage unity among us in the administration of the means of grace and to foster a common understanding and practice. It does not seek to impose uniformity among us.” The statement was considered and overwhelmingly approved by the assembly that year.

Even then, in 1997, I am not certain how much we could have comprehended or predicted what a gift this statement would be to our church moving into the future. Secretary Almen's report at that assembly communicated steady church membership at 5.1 million members. There was increase among total receipts in congregations of 82 million dollars reported. In our seminaries, there was talk about "post-modernity" and a general decline among membership in mainline congregations, but the ELCA seemed to be holding its own.

Seventeen years later, we all know that the pressures have mounted on this church. The demand for change and relevance are connected to real concerns of mission and even survival. Some have been so bold as to call it a time of a new reformation. At the very least, we all know it as a time of profound change, and in the midst of this change, we are forced to wrestle with many significant questions about our identity as Lutheran witnesses to the resurrected Christ. How is our Lutheran identity expressed in a new age of mission? As a church that confessionally defines its identity in liturgical language (Augsburg Confession, Article 7), how we answer questions of identity relative to our worship will have a profound impact on the ways that we move into the future.

As we wrestle with our identity in a new age of mission, many would argue that everything is on the table for consideration for change. That may in fact be true, but as Lutherans we believe that our formation as disciples of Jesus is tied to the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments in worship. Our styles may change. Our songs may change. Some practices may change, but always with a commitment to keep the central things central.

Principle 51 of "The Use of the Means of Grace" states, "In every celebration of the means of grace, God acts to show forth both the need of the world and the truth of the Gospel. In every gathering of Christians around the proclaimed Word and the holy sacraments, God acts to empower the Church for mission."

This current study is but one example of how this document will continue to guide our church's consideration of questions of worship practice as we enter an ever-evolving missional frontier. For many congregations the document was a first step to reconsider long-standing practices regarding the frequency of communion and the age of first communicants. Many discussions that begin with long-held emotional positions are transformed when congregation members come to see them through theological and missional lenses. I remember considering a new placement of our font in my first congregation. I didn't think that it would be possible for it to actually happen in that traditional congregation, but the discussion took an unexpected turn toward openness when we read Article 27 and its application.

The document can also serve as a reasoned objective voice in the midst of emotional topics for congregations and individuals. When someone wants to know why their child can only be baptized on a festival Sunday and not when Aunt Mille is there for a visit we can share application 25B as part of the rationale for that congregational decision about baptismal celebrations. It can also serve as an articulate voice in difficult pastoral situations. I remember consulting principles 16 and 17 as I assisted a family trying to navigate a difficult conversation about a young adult child planning to be re-baptized in another denomination. Principle 24 about the Trinitarian nature of baptism came into play when consulting with someone planning to join the congregation that was baptized into a non-Trinitarian tradition.

The document does not presume to always be the ending place of a discussion of what happens in our assembly's worship. There are many pastoral concerns, local traditions and missional opportunities that must be considered that may affect the outcome of the conversation. Yet it is always a great place to begin the conversation, to acknowledge that this is the usual practice of our church even though we may choose to do something different out of local concerns.

One of the things that beginning the conversation with these principles does is to frame the issue in a missional and theological context. There are many times where a divergence from what is normative may be appropriate, but we should be able to justify it from a missional and theological perspective. This is most likely to happen if we know the document to be normative for our life together. So we can use it in new member classes as we describe the shape of our liturgy and what values guide our decision-making in planning worship. We can utilize the principles in teaching adult forums on worship. We can highlight individual principles in regular articles in our newsletters about why we worship in the ways that we do. It is a great place to begin with new members of a worship arts committee. The charge can be, "Let's be as creative, inclusive and inviting as possible, knowing that these principles guide us and ground us in our Lutheran tradition."

The document steeps us in biblical and theological principles that do not restrict us but rather free us to creatively and constructively wrestle with questions of practice and meaning. We listen to the Holy Spirit. We dream new dreams. We talk to our neighbors to know their concerns and needs as we seek to incarnate the gospel among them. When we do these things, we can come to bold new places into which we believe God is calling us. "The Use of the Means of Grace" serves as a place to bring those bold new directions and thoughtfully consider how they reflect the church's "care and fidelity in its use of the means of grace, so that all people may hear and believe the

Gospel of Jesus Christ and be gathered into God's own mission for the life of the world.”
“Use of the Means of Grace,” Principle 2.

Article Seven of The Augsburg Confession speaks both to the church's unity and to our sacramental practices. Some may question which of these two is the priority of the article, but the genius of Augsburg 7 may lie in the balance between the two. They are two sides of the same coin. Unity is a missional priority but it is only possible through right administration of sacraments and the proclamation of the gospel in purity. Diligent consideration and application of the principles of the “Use of the Means of Grace” within our worshiping assemblies by no means assures strict conformity of practice, but it does establish our unity within our diversity around central commitments of sacramental beliefs and practices.

In the midst of diversity of practice, styles and media presentation, there were many that asked the simple question, “Why a book?” when we launched “Evangelical Lutheran Worship.” One of the ways that we might consider looking at this resource is as an extended appendix to “The Use of the Means of Grace.” We always said that the worship book was not meant to be a static prescription for all that our church does in worship, but it is intended to be our best representation of the principles of “The Use of the Means of Grace” in liturgy, song and prayer. It models principles that we hoped and dreamed would engender even more careful and creative stewardship of these gifts of God's presence in our assemblies.

Now the ELCA needs to be ever more intentional about seeing the weekly assembly as an opportunity to invite our communities into an expression of the reign of God that is breaking into our world today. It is an opportunity for people to grow in trust of their baptismal identity as members of the body of Christ sent into the world. Our weekly assemblies must be places of discovery where people profoundly encounter God's grace and feel empowered to embody that grace in their daily living. It is a daunting task, but the truth is that God has already given us reliable gifts to use in this work in the means of grace. The challenges of today demand that we not settle for a static expression of these gifts. “The Use of the Means of Grace” at the same time tempers us and emboldens us in this creative task for the sake of God's mission in the world.

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