



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How can we provide for communion of the ill, homebound, and imprisoned?

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.

A celebration of Holy Communion in the home, at the bedside of an ill or homebound person, or in a clinical setting such as a nursing home, hospital or hospice, is one way for congregations to provide for communion of the ill, homebound, imprisoned and others. This church provides two ways for this ministry to be carried out. The first is a service of Holy Communion led by an ordained pastor; the second is a distribution of the bread and wine that has been sent from the Sunday assembly's worship.

Pastoral Care: Holy Communion in Special Circumstances

The *Pastoral Care* volume of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* outlines a service of Holy Communion to be presided at by an ordained pastor. This service resembles the Gathering, Word, Meal and Sending of the Holy Communion service, but may be adapted and abbreviated as needed.

The strength of this form for communing the ill, homebound, and imprisoned is that it ties together the proclamation of the Word through the Words of Institution, the pastoral office, and the ministry to the ill. Another important dimension is the link between pastoral care to the sick and homebound and ministry at the time of death. When pastors regularly visit and commune those who are approaching the end of life, they are forming relationships that will be helpful when providing pastoral care and liturgical leadership at the time of death.

The weakness of this service is that unless special care is taken to involve family members or members of the congregation in the bedside or home celebration of the sacrament, it can appear to be happening apart from the life and ministry of the congregation. That is why the ELCA's set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, indicates:

When pastors celebrate a service of Word and Sacrament in a home, hospital or other institution, the corporate nature of the gift is strengthened by including others from the congregation (Application 48B).

Pastoral Care: The Sending of Holy Communion

In a second option, the communion elements received by the ill, homebound, or imprisoned have been broken and shared at the assembly's worship and then brought to them. The introductory rubric for this service states:

This order extends the assembly's service of Holy Communion by sending ministers from the assembly, bearing the gifts of God's word and sacramental meal to those who are unable to be present in public worship. This ministry offers these people (such as those who are sick, homebound, or imprisoned) a means of participating in the worship of the whole assembly, and it helps those who have gathered publicly to recognize their oneness with sisters and brothers who are absent. (*Pastoral Care*, p. 81)

The prayer for this sending, also found in the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly* and the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition* encapsulates the value of this rite:

Gracious God, loving all your family with a mother's tender care: As you sent the angel to feed Elijah with heavenly bread, assist those who set forth to share your word and sacrament with those who are *sick, homebound, and imprisoned*. In your love and care, nourish and strengthen those who will receive this sacrament and give us all the comfort of your abiding presence through the body and blood of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. (*Occasional Services*, p. 42; *Leaders Edition*, p. 208).

Detailed notes on this service can be found in the *Pastoral Care* volume (p. 89-92). "How-to" details of this rite can also be found in the *Leaders Desk Edition* (see p. 24).

It is important to note that in the outline for Holy Communion in the pew edition of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the first suggested element of the Sending rite is this "Sending of Communion" (p. 93). The strength, then, of this service is the link it provides between the gathered assembly and those not able to be present in worship. The communion table is made wider by this sending. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, establishes this principle:

Principle 48: Congregations provide for communion of the sick, homebound, and imprisoned.

Application 48A: *Occasional Services* provides an order for the Distribution of Communion to Those in Special Circumstances. As an extension of the Sunday worship, the servers of Communion take the elements to those unable to attend (Since the publication of *The Use of the Means of Grace*, a similar order can be found in the *Leaders Edition* as well as in *Occasional Services* (see above).

If a brief Healing service is desired as a part of the visit to the sick, the assembly has a part in this important ministry of healing. In larger congregations, this service can be a practical help for pastors who have many homebound members.

The weakness of this option is the opposite of the strength mentioned in the service for those in special circumstances (above). This service cannot be a regular substitute for pastoral visits, as the connection with the pastor can be very valuable, especially in smaller congregations where there is only one pastor.

As with other lay ministries, preparation and teaching is essential. The pastor and other leaders will want both to engage in careful teaching and explanation to those who receive these ministries, and to train those who will carry it out. Preparation should also include prior contact with the absent member to arrange for either a celebration with the pastor or distribution by lay ministers.

RESOURCES

[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:](#)

- 📖 Luther, Donald J. *A Worship Handbook: Ministers of Communion from the Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006

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