



## Why and how do we move to weekly 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.*

### Background

The meanings of Holy Communion are rich and varied, as is the history of its celebration among Christians. In *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*, the author reminds us of the New Testament origins of such a holy meal: both Jesus' last supper as recorded in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In addition to these oft-cited "proofs" for this sacrament, "the church comes into existence as a meal-fellowship (Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Cor. 11:17-22), in which the thanksgiving, eating, and drinking are the very place where the community discovers that the crucified one is risen (Luke 24:28-35, 41-43; Acts 10:41; John 21:1-14" (*The Sunday Assembly*, p. 30). The early church came to understand themselves as Jesus' followers "in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35).

When an assembly that does not celebrate weekly communion moves toward this practice, they are, therefore, rediscovering what was essential to the first Christians.<sup>1</sup> This reason may not be compelling enough for some: doing something ancient is not necessarily better. This meal, however, is central to our identity as Lutherans and a mark of unity with other Christians who are also practicing more frequent communion.

The ELCA's statement on word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, follows the counsel of the Lutheran confessions, stating:

According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Lutheran congregations celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday and festival. This confession remains the norm for our practice (UMG, Principle 35).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sunday Assembly* treats the early Christian writings that record the early meal practice of Christians as well as the meanings and history for the loss of this practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see pp. 31-34).

The Church celebrates the Holy Communion frequently because the Church needs the sacrament, the means by which the church's fellowship is established and its mission as the baptized people of God is nourished and sustained... We continue to need "consistent pastoral encouragement and instruction relating to Holy Communion... pointing up Christ's command, his promise, and our deep need" (UMG, 35A).

In spite of the confessional affirmation that Lutherans celebrate Holy Communion each week, a number of historical and cultural influences have shaped congregational life and, in some places, made Holy Communion a bi-weekly, monthly, or quarterly experience. These patterns and practices can be firmly ingrained in a congregation's piety; pastors and members of congregations often find the move to more frequent celebration of Holy Communion met with resistance. A pastoral awareness of a congregation's context and culture will provide an understanding of questions that might be raised and teaching that might be needed.

Why might a congregation desire less-frequent communion? Concern might be raised about worshippers coming to the sacrament with less thought or preparation. Luther himself addressed this concern and spoke both of frequent reception and regular preparation. "...Now that we have the right interpretation and teaching concerning the sacrament, there is also great need to admonish and encourage us so that we do not let this great a treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians, pass by to no purpose. What I mean is that those who want to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently" (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*)<sup>2</sup>. Preparation for communion can become a part of the weekly habit of a life of faith.

Another concern is raised when some wonder if weekly celebrations of Holy Communion will make the sacrament less 'special.' In fact, it seems from the experience of many that just the opposite is the case. The sacrament has become more meaningful. With infrequent celebrations of Holy Communion, preparation tends to focus mostly on repentance and the forgiveness of sin. With frequent celebrations, people find that the Body of Christ sustains them through a variety of experiences. Joy, grief, hope, repentance, thanksgiving, anxiety, and other aspects of life are all met with the grace of God in Jesus Christ made present in bread and wine.

### **Practice**

Since the late 1980s, the number of ELCA congregations practicing weekly communion has increased from less than twenty percent of congregations to over fifty percent. If a congregation has made that transition to weekly communion successfully, how has it done so? While there is no one-sized-fits-all method, consider the following tips for moving to weekly communion.

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<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin. "The Large Catechism" in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, © 2000, Fortress Press, p. 470-71.

- Know well the congregation and its history. Before making any changes, it is helpful to know why the congregation has its current practice. Is it simply the way previous pastors have chosen? Has there been any parish education over the years? What may be holding them back from a more regular practice? Are the concerns theological or practical?
- Teach graciously. Before moving to weekly communion, use many and various opportunities for teaching all ages about the importance of receiving this sacrament weekly: adult forums, Sunday school, confirmation, preaching, newsletter articles, etc.
- Explore more frequent communion for a season. One way to move toward more frequent celebration is to do so seasonally. For example, decide that you will have weekly communion during the fifty days of Easter, the time when we celebrate the risen Christ meeting us in the breaking of the bread. You may also decide that you will have communion on every principal festival: Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas), Epiphany of Our Lord, Transfiguration, Sunday of the Passion, Resurrection of our Lord (Easter Day) Day of Pentecost, The Holy Trinity and Christ the King.
- Gradually increase the number of seasons for weekly communion. For example, perhaps you have been observing communion biweekly except during the season of Easter where you have communion each week. Next the congregation adds communion for each festival. Then the congregation moves to weekly communion every Sunday in Advent and Christmas. Before long, instead of asking why are we having more frequent communion, the question may become why aren't we communing on a particular Sunday.
- Notice what is happening. Once an assembly encounters weekly communion, they will rarely want to experience this communion less frequently. Leading by example, graciously providing the sacrament each week, will gradually form the body of Christ. They will come to expect that when they gather, they gather to receive this treasure of Christ in both word and sacrament.

## RESOURCES

### [Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☪ At what age do congregation members receive communion?
- ☪ How do we distribute Holy Communion?
- ☪ How can we provide for communion of the ill, homebound and imprisoned?
- ☪ What kinds of bread are used in Holy Communion?
- ☪ What kinds of wine are used in Holy Communion?

### [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. Specifically Part 3: Holy Communion and the Christian Assembly. (Available in English and Spanish)
- ☪ *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

- 🎥 *These Things Matter: Word, Baptism, Communion*. Division for Congregational Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 1999. Video on sacramental practices.

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Lathrop, Gordon. *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- 📖 Torvend, Samuel. *Daily Bread, Holy Meal: Opening the Gifts of Holy Communion*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.

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