



Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19/Coronavirus

Updated March 20, 2020

When anxiety is high in our culture, worship continues to be a primary location for the proclamation both of the good news of Jesus Christ and of the continuing compassion and care of God in the midst of our humanity. It is a place where we can find solace and reassurance in the midst of our fears.

When worshipping together in person is not advised or prohibited by municipal/state government, leaders are facing circumstances they have likely not encountered. This resource is offered to help consider how we are the body of Christ together when we cannot gather in-person for worship. Ministry at this time is not easy; gentleness with one another is welcomed as we live as the body of Christ in the world.

Livestreaming/temporary virtual worship communities

Communities may consider alternate ways to gather using technology in this time. For those communities who would like to form a virtual community for worship, a helpful document, "[How to stream your worship service — A starter guide](#)," offers advice on livestreaming worship or creating an alternative virtual worshipping community.

The elements of Service of the Word (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 210) or one of the Daily Prayer services (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 295-331) can be easily adapted for use in a virtual gathering.

Consider how to honor the body of Christ in your virtual community. When possible, utilize technology that allows people to see one another. Find ways to incorporate others in leadership roles. Assign individuals to read Scripture or lead prayers from their location. Use chat features to communicate prayer requests. Assign someone to monitor the chat feed and gather these requests. Consider short, repetitive songs to allow the community to sing together remotely. Movement may still be part of a virtual gathering. Encourage people to stand to hear the Gospel or for the intercessions. Individuals may be encouraged to light a candle or have a glass of water nearby to remember our baptism.

When leading prayers or litanies with assembly responses in a virtual setting, the leader will want to speak the assembly parts aloud. Adding a slight pause before the response will help indicate that it is time to respond.

"Hear us, O God." (*Slight pause.*) **"Your mercy is great."**

Realize that what you are doing is not a production and it will not be perfect. Gather around word and prayer and look to God whom we need more than ever.

Worship leaders are encouraged to find creative ways to build community and offer pastoral care in times where some or all people cannot gather together for worship. Some examples include:

- Host a virtual coffee hour for conversation with one another and with congregational leaders. Some digital platforms allow a larger group of participants to break up into smaller groups for conversation.
- Lead Bible studies, conversations and other classes, such as confirmation, using technology like Zoom or Google Hangouts.
- Host a regular conference call (using Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.) to check in.
- Share daily devotions via social media, email or text.

- Consider setting a common prayer time so folks know they are praying together even if they aren't gathered in person.
- Create a phone tree for checking in with those who are isolated and/or not connected online.
- For leaders who decide that livestreaming is not the best option for their community, they may provide devotions based on the weekly texts for use in their homes.

Virtual worship and Holy Communion

We live in anxious times. COVID-19 makes these times even more anxious. In a time of crisis, it is our natural instinct to gather together, but this pandemic demands that we distance ourselves from one another for a time. This has led to major disruptions to all aspects of our lives, including corporate worship. There is discussion and experimentation with the celebration and distribution of Holy Communion.

This disruption may actually be of benefit to us. The world has hit the pause button and now we have time to reflect more deeply on the evangelical understanding of the Word that was recovered during the Reformation. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate. The proclamation of God's message to us as both law and gospel is the Word of God. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. The question should be turned around from, "How do we receive Holy Communion?" to "How does the Word of God come to us and how do we receive the Word of God?" God comes to us in all these ways and is really present. Holy Communion is not the only way that the Word of God is communicated—it's not even the preeminent way that the Word of God is communicated.

This disruption also gives us the time and space to examine our understanding of and practices around Holy Communion. Some will remember times when communion was celebrated once a month. Now we have done such a good job of encouraging our people to receive the sacrament more frequently that many, if not most, of our congregations have weekly communion! Of course, the pandemic-forced physical distancing has interrupted this practice. But it hasn't separated us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). We don't know how long this pandemic will last, but it won't last forever. Fasting from Holy Communion for a time might be a good discipline. This absence makes God's presence more profound. During this limited fast we might become more aware of God's presence around us and in creation in ways that we have never noticed before. Even in times when a community cannot gather to share the sacrament, Jesus shows up, and we are still part of the body of Christ.

"[The Use of the Means of Grace](#)" reminds us that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly (Principle 39). We recommend that we do not urge people to employ virtual communion, that deacons, pastors, and bishops use this time as a teaching moment about the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God, and that we make use of the Service of the Word and Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer and Responsive Prayer. Let us spend time in scripture study, pray for each other, and contact others regularly by phone, email or social media.

Above all, let us remember to be gentle with one another in this time. We've never been here before. We are all trying to do our best to be faithful and loving in this time of COVID-19. We trust that the presence of Christ goes before us and behind us, around us and within us. In the words of Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's message: "Respect the disease. Do not take unnecessary risks. Provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the neighbor. Make use of medical aid. Care for one another, especially the most vulnerable."

Further questions may be directed to the Worship team of the Office of the Presiding Bishop at 800-638-3522, ext. 2590, or worship@elca.org.

Updated March 20, 2020

Copyright © 2020 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.