Augsburg lutheran churches statement on

worship during the pandemic

While our nation, and the world, live through the stressful days of sheltering at home due to an international flu pandemic, we have not been allowed to gather for worship publicly. Many of our congregations have recorded their services and posted them online. A growing number of congregations from a wide variety of faith groups have been able to use “live” features online so their members can be present in time, if not space, while recording the service so that others may watch as they are able. The use of this new media available via the internet has enabled pastors to preach the Word, and parishioners to hear the Word, so the faithful continue to be nurtured while complying with our state governments’ requests to stay home in an attempt to mitigate the spread of this novel virus.

The question of including the Sacrament of the Altar in these online services has been raised, and in particular, whether or not we can administer the Lord’s Supper with the pastor saying the words of institution with the elements in one place while the communicants with their bread and wine are in another place, namely, their homes. The question, in particular is, will the oral proclamation of the Word transmitted electronically effectively consecrate the bread and the wine in the home of the listener, i.e., can the communicant be confident that he or she is receiving the true body and blood of Christ in this practice which we call “extended distribution”?

We have not faced this question at this level before. In the past, parishioners working in the kitchen and the nursery have been able to watch the service on flat screens and hear the words through the church’s public address system, and they were not refused the Lord’s Supper when they come “from the basement” to the altar rail. Nursery attendants came forward to receive communion when they brought the children forward for a blessing. Now, however, the situation calls for almost everyone to watch and listen remotely. Fellowship with other members of the church during the Lord’s Supper is being redefined. The practice of extended distribution has raised serious questions as to whether or not the ritual has been properly performed in accordance with Christ’s institution, and thus whether the elements are truly consecrated in this practice. These questions can also be framed this way, does the Word proclaimed and heard in the sermon and the absolution, which have been transmitted electronically for decades, lose its efficacy when joined to the sacrament? Stated succinctly, is the orally proclaimed Word in the sermon mere *words* while the orally proclaimed Word in the sacrament conveys Christ?

The ALC has refrained from making a statement to our congregations as to whether they should practice extended distribution of the Lord’s Supper due to the congregational nature of the ALC. In fact, the ALC has no authority to rule on this question; it is up to each congregation to decide. We are aware that there are sincere beliefs and reasons for celebrating, or not celebrating, the Lord’s Supper during the pandemic stay-at-home rules that are being enforced by state and local governments.

We are aware from our conversations and pastoral memos that other church bodies have taken up this issue. Some have instructed the congregations and pastors of their church body to refrain from the practice of extended distribution. Some have permitted their congregations and pastors to practice extended distribution. Others have asked that their congregations and pastors to defer the practice pending further research and discussion.

The Augsburg Lutheran Churches neither bans nor promotes the practice of extended distribution of the sacrament via internet during the pandemic. We are aware of strong arguments for and against the practice of extended distribution. And, we understand that the arguments from each perspective have responses from their opponents. In short, the social distancing and imposed quarantine brought about by the pandemic has revealed the extent to which our understanding of fellowship has changed.

One viable option that falls within the confessions of the evangelical-Lutheran Church is for the head of household to lead a communion service for their family, particularly if an older family member is ill. Another option is for churches to refrain from the sacrament and simply have a Service of the Word until the pandemic mitigation rules are lifted.

The burning issue during this stressful time of “self-imposed” unemployment due to quarantine, and mental illness from the stay-at-home rules, is whether or not people *may* receive the Lord’s Supper in a live or recorded service via internet, i.e., extended distribution. Perhaps now, more than ever, people yearn for the sacrament of the Altar and Christ’s body and blood for the strengthening of their faith.

From our perspective, there is no difference between the Word people hear proclaimed in the sermon and the Word they hear proclaimed with the sacrament. As Lutherans, we believe that the Word of God proclaimed by the pastor in sermon or sacrament is the means for the Holy Spirit to work, and faith is created when and where he pleases (AC 5). Whether it be proclaimed in sermon or sacrament, both forms of the Word of God are being electronically transmitted just as they are during a church service where a sound system is being used, and where a live feed is being transmitted to the Nursery, kitchen, or Narthex. With this in mind, the ALC allows for evangelical freedom and pastoral discretion with respect to this matter rather than endanger the spiritual, emotional, or even physical health of a parishioner at a time of great need.[[1]](#footnote-1) During these days of the pandemic, our pastors have risked giving home communion with the dying and the seriously ill, and our hospitals and nursing facilities have allowed this to take place for the same spiritual, emotional, and physical health concerns already mentioned.

The ALC and other Lutheran church bodies will be discussing and researching this question for quite some time. More considerations and issues no doubt will present themselves as this pandemic attacks us. The unintended consequences of the stay-at-home rules, i.e., unemployment, economic havoc, depression, suicide, and social isolation demand consideration during this emergency. We pray for God’s guidance at this time, and trust that we are safe in His hands. Whether we live or die, we belong to Christ. We have died in baptism, and Christ is our life.

1. *BC, 32.* It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. 2 For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. 3 It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. 4 It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” (AC 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)