

The Lord's Supper and COVID-19

Collected wisdom from Pastors, Chaplains, Church Polity Experts, and Historians

This is a challenging time during which churches in the CRC find ourselves examining and rethinking many of our practices, including the celebration of the sacraments, as we respond to our current realities. While oversight of worship and the sacraments lies in the hands of the elders of the local church, those discussions are never done in isolation from the rest of the church body. While Synod can't quickly convene and form an official response to our urgent need for guidance on this issue, we can search out the wisdom of the larger body to help inform the decisions our local church leaders need to make. The following insights are gleaned from scripture, church history, Reformed theology, and church order, as well as conversations and facebook posts. They are offered to assist those in the local church who are called to make decisions about the celebration of the sacraments.

KEY INSIGHTS TO GUIDE OUR DECISIONS

Scripture

1. **Celebrated in homes and small groups:** from the celebration of the Passover (Exodus 12), to the Last Supper (Mark 14, Luke 22) and the early church (Acts 2), the Lord's Supper happened in homes with families or small groups of people as those were the contexts of weekly worship.
2. **Communal:** scripture clearly teaches though that the Lord's Supper is meant to occur in community. (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)
3. **The how matters:** scripture also makes it clear that how we celebrate matters, that there are issues of justice and accessibility to consider, and that it must be done with an awareness of the larger body of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:17-24)
4. **It is important:** regular participation in the Lord's Supper is important as a source of spiritual nourishment through which Christ is revealed (Luke 24:13-35)

The Church of All Time and Place

1. **Connected to the Preached Word:**
 - a. Martin Luther: "Three elements stand out in Luther's reform of the mass: a congregation must be present, it must hear the preaching of the Word, and it must be able to participate in the eucharist. The private mass was quickly abolished in Lutheran circles." James E. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, Abingdon Press, 1999, p. 91

2. **How Often?**

- a. John Calvin believed in the importance of the regular participation in the Lord's Supper and argued for weekly observance because he believed it to be a real and effectual means of grace.
- b. "The practice of the church, as described in the New Testament, was regular, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. This practice continued for the first several centuries of the church's existence. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church gradually moved away from weekly celebrations in which everyone participated. During the sixteenth century, many of the Reformers called for a return to the practice of the apostolic church." -Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*, P&R Publishing, 2002, p. 297

3. **Who Can Preside at the Table?**

- a. American Frontier (1800s): it was argued that since the Lord's Supper was to be a part of worship and the spiritual nourishment of God's people if there was no pastor present a "senior layman could preside." James E. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, Abingdon Press, 1999, p. 90

4. **Always Connected to the Larger Body:** The church throughout history and in its variety of expressions has made provisions for those who cannot be physically present for the LS in worship to still participate. However, they were also always careful to connect the "home communion" to that of the larger church body:

- a. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150), "there was reference to deacons carrying the eucharistized bread and wine to those who were absent" for example. -Frank C. Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries*, Paulist Press, 1999, p. 193
- b. North Africa (3rd century church): Christians took the Lord's Supper elements home with them most likely because they could not have communion together in the church due to persecution. -Frank C. Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries*, Paulist Press, 1999, p. 193
- c. Roman Catholic Church (1973 reformed rites): "Priests are not to refuse to give communion to the faithful who ask for it even outside mass...the communal dimensions of communion outside mass" -Frank C. Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries*, Paulist Press, 1999, p. 198
- d. Book of Common Prayer (1979): some of the LS elements were reserved "for the Communion of the sick or of others who for weighty [reasons] could not be present at the celebration, or for the administration of communion by a deacon to a congregation when no priest is available" -Frank C. Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries*, Paulist Press, 1999, p. 199.
- e. Statement on Communion Practices (1978, American Lutheran Church/Lutheran Church in America): "Sick and homebound members should be included in the

Communion of the congregation...intended to be seen as an extension of the congregation's service of Holy Communion."

"Clearly the separation of reception of communion from the eucharistic celebration has been regarded as extraordinary throughout church history. It has been provided primarily to enable those to commune who, for justifiable reasons, could not be present in the assembly. It has also made possible the wider distribution of communion by ministers [i.e. elders, laypersons] other than priests or pastors... The negative aspect of the special Celebration of Holy Communion is that it splinters the eucharist fellowship in time and space." -Frank C. Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries*, Paulist Press, 1999, p. 203.

5. **Spiritual Communion:** In church history we also hear of times when individuals could not participate in the worship of their local congregation nor could it be brought to them. At these times they were encouraged to practice *spiritual communion*. See this article: "[Spiritual Communion During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)" by Janathan Warran P.
6. **Elements Used:**
 - a. "The ultimate goal, it seems to me, is simply to get us to eat and drink together in Jesus' name as an act of worship in which we are nourished by his very life. Beyond that, we have wide freedom about the particular foodstuffs used and the particular qualities they convey." The key requirement for Yee is that when choosing what to use, we choose the most nourishing and natural of food. -Russell Yee, *Worship on the Way: Exploring Asian North American Christian Experience*, Judson Press, 2012 p. 143
7. **Learning from Today's Non-Western Church**

North Americans have much to learn from the non-Western church that continually faces challenges to weekly worship from Ebola to persecution. What can we learn from them?

 - **Africa:** "Perhaps the expression of common Africanness indicated earlier in this chapter centers now on the enduring tension and pain that African people have experienced over the centuries. The celebration of the sacraments must therefore embody a deep sense of liberation and freedom, a reminder that the paschal mystery is a journey from passion and death to resurrection. As is often heard in the testimony of African Americans in their struggles, let there be an announcement that "joy comes in the morning." Nwaka Chris Egbulem, "Mission and Inculturation: Africa," *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 694.
 - **Rev. Behago, former president of the CRC of Nigeria**, when asked about worship practices when they were faced with the Ebola crisis reports that when churches closed people worshiped with their household and were encouraged to read a Bible passage of their choice. The sacraments were not observed and no additional worship resources provided. Today, they are grateful to have a

Christian radio station through which they were able to lead a worship service but again no sacraments.

Reformed Theology and CRC Church Polity

The CRC's church polity is the accumulation of wisdom from previous generations meant to help the church be faithful to scripture and give full expression to our Reformed theology. It was developed in community, and as a communion of churches we have covenanted to hold each other accountable to it; it serves as an antidote to the individualism that has grown in Western cultures since the Enlightenment.

1. Connection between Word and Sacrament

- a. One difference between the CRC and other denominations is that our pastors are ordained as Ministers of the Word and not Ministers of the Word *and* Sacrament. It isn't that we don't think the sacraments are significant, but that we see them as an extension of the preached Word: that the two cannot be divided. The Lord's Supper is an affirmation of the gospel message--that what you've just heard is true; and thus we respond by participating in the sacrament.

“But the sacramental eating and drinking itself embodies the congregational response [to the preached word]. We partake in faith; in eating and drinking the congregation affirms the cross and its power, and affirms the congregation's own readiness to be God's cross-bought people. The communion action is a faith action in which the people declare to God their Yes to His promise of fellowship in the body and blood of Christ. Hence, the one action is both proclamation and response.” -1968 Acts of Synod, supplement 3

- b. In the CRC on Sundays when the sacrament wasn't celebrated it was still deemed important to appropriately respond to the preached Word. Historically in place of the sacrament one of the creeds (usually the Apostles') was professed as an affirmation of the gospel message just preached.
- c. It is this connection between the preached Word and the sacraments that has led the CRC to Article 55 of the church order.

Church Order Article 55

The sacraments shall be administered upon the authority of the consistory in the public worship service by a minister of the Word, a commissioned pastor, or, in the case of need, an ordained person who has received the approval of classis, with the use of the prescribed forms or adaptations of them that conform to synodical guidelines.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 55

2. **Communal:** Our corporate worship happens in response to God's call to gather as a community and it's within that community that the sacraments are celebrated. The very act of partaking in the Lord's Supper is an expression of the unity of Christ's body, which is why it is often referred to as "communion."

"Public Christian worship is an act of the Christian community. The church as community is not an intellectual abstraction. It is real people in a specific time and place and with a unique history. Worship happens in the particulars of a gathered congregation with all its joys and sorrows. Biblical worship is always local.

By "community" we have in mind more than fellowship. Certainly fellowship-people knowing one another intimately and caring for one another deeply-is an important feature of the body of Christ and of Christian community.

But by community we have in mind something deeper. Christian community is the shared identity we have with others in a particular time and place because of shared beliefs, shared meanings, shared values, and shared purposes...

The church also must understand anew the strategic role of worship in forming community. The church is a community of shared memory and shared meanings, shared stories, shared beliefs, shared ways of praying and worshiping. As congregations contemplate changes in worship, they must do so within their broad historical picture. Churches that do so will also keep before them the community-forming and community-sustaining power of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper." -*Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture*, Acts of Synod 1997.

Church Order: Article 60

The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least once every three months in a manner conducive to building up the body of Christ and in keeping with the teachings of God's Word.

3. Leadership and Oversight

Church Order Article 53:

a. The worship services shall be led by the ministers of the Word and others appointed by the consistory.

b. Worship services may be led by persons licensed to exhort or by those appointed by the consistory to read a sermon. Such persons, however, shall refrain from all official acts of ministry, and only sermons approved by the consistory shall be read in a worship service. —Cf. Supplement, Article 53

Supplement, Article 53

“Official Acts of Ministry”

- 1) Certain acts of ministry—among them the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the pronouncement of blessings for the people, the laying of hands on new leaders, and the reception and formal dismissal of members—are part of the ministry of Christ to his followers and are entrusted to the church and, within the church, to its ordained leaders, not to a specific office.

- 2) Therefore, no long-standing, organized congregation of Christians should be deprived of these liturgical acts simply because it cannot provide for the presence of an ordained minister or commissioned pastor.

- 3) These acts of ministry symbolize and strengthen the relationships among the Lord, leaders, and the people of God. Their use is a sacred trust given to leaders by the Lord for the purpose of strengthening the flock. Therefore the administration of these acts should continue to be regulated by the church.

(Acts of Synod 2001, p. 504)

Church Order Article 55

The sacraments shall be administered upon the authority of the consistory in the public worship service by a minister of the Word, a commissioned pastor, or, in the case of need, an ordained person who has received the approval of classis, with the use of the prescribed forms or adaptations of them that conform to synodical guidelines.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 55

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- a. Classis approval is required for an ordained person to administer the sacraments.
- b. Ordinarily the ordained person should be an elder.

-(Acts of Synod 2002, p. 537)

c. Liturgical Requirements

Church Order Article 52:

- a. The consistory shall regulate the worship services.

b. The consistory shall see to it that the principles and elements of worship approved by synod are observed, including the use of liturgical forms, songs, and synodically approved Bible versions. If liturgical forms are adapted or additional psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are used in worship, these elements should conform to synodical guidelines.

Synod 1994 said you may adapt synodically approved liturgical forms for the Lord's Supper or create your own as long as it includes the following: the scriptural words of institution (with actions of breaking and pouring), the thanksgiving and consecration, and the communion with bread and cup. see: [Acts of Synod 1994, pages 493-94](#))

d. **Pastoral Flexibility:** Synod in 1968 and 1997, and in its approval of the introduction to the *Psalter Hymnal* (1987) recognized four motifs to serve as guiding principles for worship: Biblical, Catholic/Universal, Confessional, and Pastoral. We have addressed Biblical teaching and practices, highlighted the practice of the church in all times and places, as well as our Reformed theology. But we also need to keep in mind the need for pastoral flexibility.

“This is the motif that points to the liturgy as a service, not only of, but for the people...For this reason one asks what people are here and now, what their spiritual state and competence is, what their culture is, and what their specific needs are. This motif stresses the need for flexibility as the other emphasize stability...For such reasons such as these, we are not disposed to look to synod for compulsory regulation of the details of the liturgy...the voice of wisdom and love suggests that synod limit itself to directions rather than directives, to setting limits rather than defining details.” -1968 *Synodical Report*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is your congregation's understanding of “regular participation”? During this time when everything seems different, it is pastorally wise to stick to as many normal patterns of behavior as possible.
2. How would your congregants define “upon the authority of the consistory”? Does it require the elders to be physically present? Given our unique context is it enough that they are aware of and support the celebration?
3. What justice and accessibility issues might you as a community face if celebrating online (those who don't have internet), through a written liturgy (literacy challenges), or even in

having the necessary provisions to celebrate (bread, wine/grape juice)? How might these be creatively addressed?

4. Sacraments are means of grace given to the church. How do we provide this spiritual nourishment at this time?
5. If opting to provide for the celebration of communion either as individual households or as part of a larger on-line worshiping community, how might you highlight its connection to the larger body of Christ?
6. If opting to wait for the celebration of the Lord's Supper till such a time as you can gather in person, how will you provide for the spiritual nourishment of your congregational members?

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

1. In response to our unique circumstances the elders might consider allowing for the celebration of the Lord's Supper in unique ways, keeping in mind its connection to the larger body of Christ, issues around justice, and practicing oversight through one or more of the following:
 - a. Communal:
 - i. Partaking at the same time via a live on-line connection.
 - ii. Partaking whenever we view or listen to the service, even if that doesn't happen simultaneously.
 - iii. It is possible to give expression of our unity in Christ if we all utilize the same printed liturgy.
 - b. Proper Authority:
 - i. One or more elders are physically present for the celebration that happens live online.
 - ii. Elders are virtually present but know that the sacrament will be celebrated and have approved this practice.
 - iii. Elders approve the sending out of a litany as a way of extending their oversight of the sacrament with the intent that all use the liturgy when participating in the sacrament. You could even request that everyone meet to celebrate the sacrament at the same time.
2. Despite the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves the elders may discern that it best to wait to partake of the Lord's Supper till the congregation is able to meet as a worshiping community in person. In the meantime they can encourage congregants to practice one or more of the following spiritual disciplines as a means of recalling the meal and in joyful anticipation of being able to partake again.

- a. Celebrate an agape meal or use their daily mealtime as a means of recalling the gift of the Lord's Supper.
- b. Highlight the practice of Spiritual Communion"
 - i. See: "[Spiritual Communion During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)" by Janathan Warran P.

RESOURCES

- [Together for a Meal](#) (Family or Small Group Worship)
- Service of Holy Communion for the Sick or Homebound (2016): Covid-19 Leader
- Service of Holy Communion for the Sick or Homebound (2016): Covid-19 Participant