

A Pastoral Letter on Sacramental Practices in the Nebraska Synod  
July 5, 2024

Beloved in Christ,

In the spring of 2023, I was approached by the interim pastor and council president of a congregation in the Nebraska Synod to discuss the process by which congregations not currently being served by a pastor could arrange the administration and distribution of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. As a result of that conversation, and others which followed upon it, the Nebraska Synod Council approved my request to form a task force to study the issue and report back to the Council with recommendations for more equitable practices for the entire synod regarding the availability of the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Holy Baptism. The Task Force was convened in August 2023.

We have studied the history of sacramental practices from the earliest days of the church to our modern context, and we have learned that the availability of the sacraments has often been an issue requiring flexibility, grace, and determination from congregations, ministers, and other church leaders. Solutions have been perhaps more contextual than what might be expected, until one considers that our understanding of and teaching about the sacraments has evolved in the two millennia since our Lord established the Church. The realities which the earliest church teachers addressed were not what Martin Luther saw in his own time, nor are they what we face in ours.

It is perhaps most important to note that the event which led to the formation of this task force was the difficulty a congregation experienced arranging for Holy Communion at their Christmas Eve worship service: inconsistent communication, lack of clarity about process, and conflicting interpretations of best practices led to a highly frustrating experience, and a revealing look at the privilege that exists for those congregations served by pastors when compared to those congregations which are not served by pastors. It is this experience of privilege which has led us to believe that we must endeavor to do better for one another.

The history of the Nebraska Synod is filled with stories of generosity, determination, and ingenuity. Congregations now celebrating 150th anniversaries were started by families coming together in prairie dugouts to pray, study scripture together, and sing praises to God, only occasionally blessed by the presence of a pastor so that the Lord's Supper could be celebrated. Over time, this occasional reception of the Eucharist became an inherited norm, even when congregations and communities grew more settled and a greater number of pastors were called to ministry. In the late 20th century, the work of liturgical renewal brought many within the ELCA back to a more historic understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar and a willingness to commit ourselves to more frequent celebration. In these most recent years, however, we are realizing that changes in our culture and in the church itself have forced us into a system of "haves" and "have nots," and previous attempts to address it have not been sufficient to the task.

"People are hungering and thirsting for the sacrament of Holy Communion." The recommendations that follow are this task force's attempt to address that hunger in ways that are attainable and equitable for the entire Nebraska Synod in this time and place. We offer them on behalf of all those who have yearned for the tangible means of grace our Lord gives to us in the holy meal but found themselves unfulfilled. May we all commit ourselves to walking together in this way as fellow disciples in the Nebraska Synod.

With joy and gratitude,  
Bishop Scott Alan Johnson

## Guidelines for Sacramental Practices in a Time of Pastoral Transition or Vacancy

“At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord’s Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved.”

– *Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Art. XXIV: Of the Mass* –

“According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Lutheran congregations celebrate the Holy Communion every Sunday and festival. This confession remains the norm for our practice. ... For a variety of historical reasons, Lutherans in various places moved away from weekly celebration of the sacrament ... All of our congregations are encouraged to celebrate the Lord’s Supper weekly, but not every service need be a Eucharist.”

*The Use of the Means of Grace. Principle 35: The Holy Communion is Celebrated Weekly.*

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“The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations.

This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.”

– *Nebraska Synod Constitution S5.03* –

### Introduction

- 1) The Augsburg Confession clearly binds the saving work of Jesus Christ with the ministry of the Church. Article IV affirms God’s work of justification through Jesus Christ alone. Article V continues, “so that we obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given...” (emphasis added).
- 2) Jesus Christ, as the Word of God made flesh, has promised to be personally, fully, and efficaciously present wherever and whenever “the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (Article VII, Augsburg Confession). Word and Sacrament are precious gifts of Christ Jesus himself to be generously and regularly distributed. As such, we agree with our Roman Catholic siblings, who affirm that the reception of Holy Communion is a right given to the baptized (Code of Canon Law, #912).
- 3) This ministry is given to the whole Church, which is to say, to all baptized Christians. Therefore, the whole Church is called to see to it that faithful preaching and sacramental grace are rightly and regularly distributed throughout the whole Church.
- 4) Within this ministry of the whole Church, Jesus has established the particular ministry of the ordained, those who are set aside (not above nor apart from) for preaching and the administration of the sacraments, according to apostolic use by laying on of hands and prayer (see also Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession).
- 5) This call to ordained ministry is a divine call to the whole Church. Therefore, it is the solemn duty of the ordained to attend to the care of souls through preaching and administration of the sacraments throughout the whole Church. Thus, even though letters of call are extended by particular congregations, the calling of ordained ministers is understood to include the whole church, although primarily focused through the congregation(s) to which they are called to serve.
- 6) Likewise, since the call to preaching and administration of the sacraments belongs to the whole Church, each congregation exists in loving bonds of mutual partnership with other congregations.

Therefore, a congregation which has called a pastor should not ignore the needs of neighboring congregations which are not directly served by a pastor. As a synod, congregations and other worshipping communities “walk alongside” one another in our mutual pilgrim journey of discipleship.

- 7) These guidelines are intended to address the current context in which we exist as the Nebraska Synod, to identify and recommend best practices in this context where congregations without pastoral leadership have experienced barriers to regular sacramental availability. What is here lifted up should not be understood to be binding or even recommended for the entire Church in all times and places. We are concerned with what is equitable and beneficial for all, today, and trust that as the Church evolves in the future, the Church’s practice may evolve with it.

Together we affirm the following:

- 1) The bishop of the Nebraska Synod, having “primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod and its congregations,” (Nebraska Synod Constitution S8.12.b), will regularly evaluate the availability of sacraments throughout the Nebraska Synod, and will encourage congregations, worshipping communities, clergy, congregational leaders, and lay ministers to make the sacramental needs of the entire synod a high priority.
- 2) The Nebraska Synod also exists interdependently with the rest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Our practices and guidelines for the administration of the sacraments will not violate the standards for ministry and sacramental practice of the ELCA, so as to honor our ecclesiastical relationships with one another and our full communion partnerships.
  - a) Within the ELCA, some synods have chosen to appoint a roster of Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs): lay persons who hold some ministerial authorization granted and overseen by the local bishop. These persons are authorized for ministry only in specific locations for specific periods of time. In the Nebraska Synod, Parish Ministry Associates (PMAs) serve as SAMs in many locations where a minister of Word and Sacrament is not available. The Nebraska Synod continues to affirm that care will be taken so that our practices support the good order which the Church has agreed is an essential part of our ministry together.
- 3) Regular celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion should be a priority for all congregations and worshipping communities of the Nebraska Synod, informing both our local practice and our interdependent relationships with our neighbors.
  - a) The Lord’s Supper is primarily understood as a gift and a mystery for the whole Church. Historical practice regarding the sacrament has varied, and will likely continue to evolve as the church follows God’s lead into the future.
  - b) It is our recommendation that the worshipping communities of the Nebraska Synod celebrate the sacrament once per month at the least. This should be understood as neither a minimum nor a maximum, but rather an agreed-upon expectation which the entire synod can hold as a goal to inform and guide our care for one another.
  - c) Particular care and coordination should be exercised in planning for the availability of Holy Communion on the primary festival days of the church: The Nativity of Our Lord, The Resurrection of Our Lord, Pentecost, and All Saints. The Eucharist is particularly meaningful on these dates, and we believe it is the duty of the entire Nebraska Synod to ensure that all have access to the meal at these times.
- 4) In the current context of the Nebraska Synod, ensuring regular access to the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion will require generosity and flexibility on the part of all worshipping communities, Ministers of Word and Sacrament, Ministers of Word and Service, Parish Ministry Associates, and others who serve as preachers and worship leaders.
  - a) Some worshipping communities will need to adjust schedules so that those ministers who will travel to administer the sacraments may do so. This may include worshipping communities who are not in transition or vacancy; accommodating our neighbors is an act of love that our Lord would ask us to consider for the sake of the whole Church.

- b) We strongly encourage all worshipping communities to exchange their blessings with one another for the sake of regular sacramental participation. Lay preachers, PMAs and Ministers of Word and Service who regularly preach and lead worship as part of their vocational calling may travel in exchange for ministers of Word and Sacrament traveling to their own worshipping communities. Ministers of Word and Sacrament called to congregations with more than one pastor are encouraged to make themselves available to local congregations in transition or vacancy, especially on the primary festival days of the church.
- 5) This task forces joyously affirms and faithfully encourages that in all matters related to preaching, the Sacrament of Baptism, and the Sacrament of Holy Communion, our congregations be guided by the principles and practices articulated in [\*The Use and Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament\*](#), which was adopted for guidance and practice by at the Fifth Biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August 1997.

People are hungering and thirsting for the sacrament of Holy Communion. The holy meal is for all of God's beloved children, and the Church has often extended the table to which our Lord invites us so that those who are homebound, hospitalized, imprisoned, or otherwise unable to be physically present may still receive the promises of Christ through this holy meal, leading to transformation and reformation, uniting God's people in love as the body of Christ. We the undersigned exhort the entire Nebraska Synod to join us in considering how to ensure that all of God's children can regularly receive the benefits of Christ, in order that it might truly be "a foretaste of the feast to come."

PMA Elizabeth Florian  
Dale Fornander  
Pastor H. Ashley Hall  
Bishop Scott Alan Johnson  
Vernae Luhr  
Elysia McGill  
Pastor Ernesto Medina  
Pastor Nathan Metzger  
Laurie Schmidt

## Procedural Steps for Arranging Sacramental Ministry in a Time of Transition or Vacancy

- *Step 1: Interim or Transitional Pastor*
  - This is the established practice for congregations in a time of pastoral vacancy. Availability of an interim or transitional pastor will vary by site and congregational need. Nebraska Synod staff will make arrangements for transitional and interim ministers, or will advise the congregation when such arrangements cannot be made.
- *Step 2: Word & Sacrament Supply Contract from the Nebraska Synod Pulpit Supply roster*
  - The Nebraska Synod office maintains a regularly updated roster of ministers willing to provide pulpit and altar supply. That list is available at the Synod website or by contacting the Nebraska Synod office.
- *Step 3: Word & Sacrament Supply Contract with a pastor from a neighboring full communion partner congregation (see list of denominations below).*
  - The ELCA has full communion relationships with six denominations. As such, ministers in good standing with their respective denominations may provide sacramental ministry in ELCA congregations.<sup>1</sup>
- *Step 4: Assignment of a Certified PMA authorized for sacramental ministry by the Bishop of the Nebraska Synod (Congregational Council must request authorization on an annual basis).*
  - Parish Ministry Associates (PMAs) are lay ministers certified by the Nebraska Synod to provide ministry in one location for specified periods of time, under an agreement related to Synod Authorized Ministry within the Conference of Bishops. PMAs are assigned by the Bishop of the Nebraska Synod and must be reapproved for ministry annually. Assignment may be requested by contacting the Bishop, the PMA Director, or the PMA Administrator.
- *Step 5: Arrange an occasional pulpit and altar exchange with a local ELCA congregation*
  - The Nebraska Synod is divided into 16 Mission Clusters for local collaboration and support. Each Mission Cluster elects a Cluster Dean who works to communicate with local congregations and the Nebraska Synod office & staff. Cluster Deans can provide some assistance in identifying local congregations which could allow their pastor to provide sacraments on occasion while a lay preacher from your congregation preaches at their site. Each congregation should have their Cluster Dean's contact information; contact the Synod office if the information is missing or incorrect.
  - In some instances, a congregation may be geographically closer to congregations in other mission clusters. Cluster Deans are free to collaborate with one another and with local congregations in the interest of ensuring all have access to the sacraments as they have need.
- *Step 6: Arrange a temporary communion service at a time when an ELCA pastor could travel to your congregation (i.e. Saturday evening, Sunday afternoon/evening, Wednesday evening).*
  - Sunday morning worship is not mandated in any confessional or theological document of the ELCA. The Sunday morning gathering certainly has the weight of history and long practice behind it, but Holy Communion is a "movable feast" which can be celebrated at other times. "Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind and not

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<sup>1</sup> *The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament:* 8.62.15. The availability of a minister of Word and Sacrament from a church body with which a relationship of full communion has been declared and established by a Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America shall be understood normally in three categories: availability to serve in an occasional situation; availability to meet an extended need, including service in "yoked parish" settings; and availability for a transfer of roster status.

a. Occasional service: An occasional situation is defined as one in which a minister of Word and Sacrament of a church body with which a relationship of full communion exists may be asked to preach or administer the sacraments in an ELCA congregation on an occasional basis with the authorization of the synodical bishop.

humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27-28)

- *Step 7: Arrange for consecrated elements to be transported from another congregation’s worship service to yours.*
  - The practice of “reserving” communion elements has historical standing within the church. Many Lutheran congregations continue to bring communion to congregants and fellow disciples who, for various reasons, are unable to join the congregation for celebration of the Lord’s Supper during worship, and the rite for these visits generally refers to the moment of consecration but does not imply that it is reenacted. The same principle applies to elements brought from another congregation’s worship service.
    - In these instances, it is important to recognize that the presence of Christ within the meal is a mystery which does not include an expiration date. Care should be taken to not unnecessarily delay distribution of reserved elements, and to treat them with respect, but Lutherans believe the key moment in the meal is the moment when we hear and believe “given and shed for you” as we receive the bread and cup.

#### **Full Communion Partner Denominations**

- The United Church of Christ (UCC) - 1997
- The Presbyterian Church - USA (PCUSA) - 1997
- The Reformed Church in America (RCA) - 1997
- The Episcopal Church (ECUSA) - 1999
- The Moravian Church - 1999
- The United Methodist Church - 2009

#### **NOT Full Communion Partners**

- The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS)
- Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC)
- The North American Lutheran Church (NALC)
- The Association of Free Lutheran Churches (AFLC)
- The American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC)
- The Global Methodist Church (GMC)
- Church of the Brethren
- The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)
- The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion)
- The Orthodox Church
- The Roman Catholic Church

## Appendix A: Receiving the Meal from Reserved Elements

*This is a sample liturgy which may be used by a congregation when there is no pastor available, but reserved elements have already been blessed during a previous service.*

*Plain Text: Worship Leader*

**Bold Text: Assembly**

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

We affirm with joy that Jesus said, "For when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We acknowledge Jesus with us now.

On [insert date], the community gathered, and together with Pastor [insert name] we recalled the great drama of salvation. We experienced Jesus in our midst and we feasted.

The presence and promise of Jesus remain with us in, with, and under these elements of bread and wine.

We gather with the saints of every time and place to offer our thanks for life and the reality of Jesus walking with us on our journey.

**We give thanks.**

Let us pray.

Praise and thanks to you, holy God, for by your Word you made all things:

you spoke light into darkness, called forth beauty from chaos, and brought life into being.

For your Word of life, O God,

**we give you thanks and praise.**

By your Word you called your people Israel to tell of your wonderful gifts:

freedom from captivity, water on the desert journey, a pathway home from exile, wisdom for life with you.

For your Word of life, O God,

**we give you thanks and praise.**

Through Jesus, your Word made flesh, you speak to us and call us to witness:

forgiveness through the cross, life to those entombed by death, the way of your self-giving love.

For your Word of life, O God,

**we give you thanks and praise.**

The Word gives life. Jesus is the Word made flesh.

Let us offer together the words of Jesus when he gathered with his friends in the upper room.

Gathered at the Lord's table, our congregation remembered with thanksgiving that

**In the night in which he was betrayed,  
our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks;  
broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying:  
Take and eat; this is my body, given for you.  
Do this for the remembrance of me.**

**Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks,  
and gave it for all to drink, saying:  
This cup is the new covenant in my blood,  
shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.  
Do this for the remembrance of me.**

For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup,  
we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.  
**Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

Send your Spirit of truth, O God; rekindle your gifts within us: renew our faith, increase our hope, and deepen our love, for the sake of a world in need. Faithful to your Word, O God, draw near to all who call on you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever.

**Amen.**

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

*OPTION A: Our Father in heaven*

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.**

*OPTION B: Our Father, who art in heaven*

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those**

**who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
forever and ever. Amen.**

*Words of invitation are offered and the people are invited to come forward to receive the Sacrament.*