



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

Updated March 12, 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. Great care should be taken to continue this central ministry of the church, especially in these times. Congregations are advised to use common sense and intentional action with regard to preventing the spread of pathogens while continuing to gather around the means of grace.

In times of anxiety about the spread of such pathogens as COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) or influenza, churches are advised to follow the advice of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) regarding gatherings of people. In some cases it may not be necessary to cancel worship services or stop gathering around the means of grace. However, worship leaders should take some time to be well informed of the situation in their area and to examine worship practices with regard to the spread of pathogens, making changes that will help alleviate the anxiety of the gathered assembly. Guidance follows for communities that continue to gather for worship. Further below, find information regarding virtual online gatherings for worship.

Passing of the peace and other times of greeting

The passing of the peace is an integral way that the assembly recognizes the presence of the peace of Christ in their midst. It is not necessary to eliminate the passing of the peace from the worship service; however, it may be advisable, based on your local situation, for the presider to suggest how the assembly may greet one another without handshakes. Some alternatives to sharing the peace include:

- Grasp the lower arms of the person you are greeting as you speak the words “Peace be with you” and let that person grasp your lower arms.
- Simply bow to the person as you speak, without touching.

Regardless of the method used, congregations may offer hand sanitizer for use after the passing of the peace. For more information, please see the ELCA Worship frequently asked question [“What is the Exchange of Peace?”](#)

In places where worship leaders regularly greet people as they gather or depart from the worship space, it may be wise to cease or adapt this practice. Again, consider hand sanitizer at all entrances to the worship space.

Offering

It may be wise to not pass offering plates or baskets during times of public health concerns. The assembly may move forward to leave offerings in a centrally placed basket at the time of the offering in the service or at other times, such as moving to receive Holy Communion or entering or departing the worship space. Consider electronic giving options such as ELCA-preferred vendors [Tithe.ly](#) or [Vanco](#).

Baptismal font

The baptismal font, regularly filled with water, is an important symbol and liturgical center in the worship space. The practice of remembering your baptism by touching the water in the font may

be discouraged during times of public health concerns. A congregation may wish to keep the visible symbol of water in the font or, in extreme circumstances, may empty the font for a time. It would be wise to empty, sanitize and refill the font with fresh water before a baptism.

Holy Communion

Many of our worship concerns in times of fear concerning the spread of pathogens center around the means of distribution of the elements at communion. Consider your local situation and the severity of risk at this time. Local worshipping communities will make decisions that both reflect the nature and meaning of Holy Communion and make sense in their context. Here is a list of common-sense precautions:

- People (including pastors and other worship leaders) who are ill with the virus or the flu should stay away from public worship.
- Servers of the meal should wash their hands before distributing the elements. This can be accomplished by providing on the credence table to the side of the altar a lavabo bowl that contains warm water and antiseptic soap or by providing hand sanitizer in the sacristy or at another convenient location near the chancel.
- Thoroughly wash all communion vessels in hot water with disinfectant soap following each use.
- Since the earliest centuries, the church has made use of the common cup without credible evidence that the practice contributes to the spread of disease. However, any practice that uses one vessel that will be touched by a number of people is brought under scrutiny in times of public health concerns. Both the mouths that come in contact with a common cup and the hands that may come in contact with the bread and wine in intinction carry pathogens.

Even so, given the strength of this symbol of unity in the meal and the historical precedent, the use of the common cup is preferable to intinction. Historically, the church has been served without ill effect by favoring sacramental wine with a higher alcohol content (18%), normally served in a metal cup, thoroughly wiped (on both the inside and the outside of the rim) and turned prior to the next person communing.

- The practice of intinction (dipping the bread into the wine) is highly discouraged in times of public health concern.
- An alternative to intinction or drinking from a common cup may be provided. During times of great fear and concern, congregations may choose to distribute wine by pouring it from one common pouring chalice into small cups, thereby maintaining the symbol of the common cup.
- Most importantly, if individuals are particularly hesitant about the communion elements for pressing reasons of health, they may commune under one element (“[The Use of the Means of Grace,](#)” Application 44C). The pastor may assure them that the crucified and risen Christ is fully present in, with and under this one element. While our confessions speak against communion “in one form,” their intent is to protest the practice of withholding the cup from the whole assembly (“[The Use of the Means of Grace,](#)” Application 44D).

For more information, please see the ELCA Worship frequently asked question [“How do we distribute Holy Communion?”](#)

Sending of Holy Communion

In cases where a congregation continues to meet for regular celebrations of Holy Communion, consider enhancing the congregation's ministry of sending communion to those who are absent. [Sending of Holy Communion with notes and commentary](#) and [a print-ready booklet](#) are available for local use. This service is from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care*. Communion ministers sent from the assembly should take proper precautions to ensure a healthy environment for those they visit.

Worship furniture

It is important to regularly clean furniture and objects used in worship during times of heightened health concern. This includes pews/chairs, altar rails and worship books. For congregations with multiple services on the same day, it may also be best to do it between services.

Livestreaming/temporary virtual worship communities

In cases where it is advisable to not gather, or gatherings are prohibited by local government, communities may consider alternate ways to gather using technology. 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.

In cases of virtual worship gatherings, the sacrament of Holy Communion is not to be celebrated. "[The Use of the Means of Grace](#)" reminds us that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly (Principle 39). 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.

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.

Conclusion

Especially in times of need, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is God's living bread come down from heaven for the life of the world. During these times, particularly with a communal health concern, the Sunday assembly of Christians is an important sign of resurrection hope in the midst of fear and trouble. In this assembly we pray for the needs of a suffering world and are sent to care for all our neighbors who are sick, hurt and hungry. As we are careful and prepare for worship either in the gathered assembly or by substituting a virtual gathering for a time, we are continually looking for ways that we can care for the "least of these." From Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's message to the church: "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.

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