

Advisory Opinion

Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic

May a congregation celebrate the Lord's Supper within an electronic worship service during an emergency or pandemic?

Yes.

The Book of Order gives the responsibility to the Session (and other councils) to authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly, ... in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship. ⁱ Councils may choose to authorize the celebration as a form of pastoral care so that those receiving communion are able to receive the sacrament as a means of God's grace.ⁱⁱ

In emergency circumstances there may be situations in which the pastoral needs of that moment require that the church take actions that run contrary to normal practice. During an emergency or a pandemic in which the church is unable to gather or advised not to gather in person for reasons of public health, a congregation's session may determine that this includes observing communion online.

Is this advice different from the advice given in early March, 2020?

Yes.

Previous advice followed the principles in the Directory for Worship which assumes in person celebration of communion followed by the extension of the table by persons in ordered ministry to those who might not be able to participate in the worship service in person.ⁱⁱⁱ

Decisions made within an emergency or during a pandemic which precludes the church from meeting in person are not to be taken as changing this denomination's understanding of the meaning and practice of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as found within the Directory for Worship. That understanding has been worked out in deeply Presbyterian ways: through careful reflection, study, discussion, and through making decisions collectively.

How does a Session or other council authorize the Lord's Supper in an emergency situation or during a pandemic?

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The Book of Order gives the responsibility to the Session (and other councils) to authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly, ... in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship.

The principles of the Directory for Worship include guidance on the theology underlying the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Councils are required to ensure that those individuals who will extend the service of communion are equipped with the theological means to provide pastoral care so that those receiving communion are able to receive the sacrament as a means of grace.^{iv}

When circumstances limit the ability of the congregation to gather in person for a lengthy period of time, the session may decide for pastoral reasons to authorize the Lord's Supper during a service in which worshippers are participating virtually. It should do so after thorough exploration of the theology of the Lord's Supper using Scripture, the Confessions and the Book of Order and with a clear understanding of why the Session is making the decision and how those who will participate in the Lord's Supper at home will receive the sacrament as a means of God's grace.

The following Book of Order provisions can be helpful to this discernment:

F-1.0101

F-1.02, F-1.03, F-1.04

G-3.0101, 3.0201 a, b & c

W-1.0106, W-1.0107, W-1.0203, W-1.0204

W-3.0306, W-3.0309

W-3.0401, W-3.0409, W-3.0410, W-3.0411, W-3.0412, W-3.0413, W-3.0414, W-4.0202

The council should be clear that their decision is one of emphasizing the unity of the body in an extraordinary time when we are not able to worship or be together in person.

How does a session or council authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a non-emergency or non-pandemic time?

As stated above, the Book of Order gives the responsibility to the Session (and other councils) to authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly, ... in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship.

The principles of the Directory for Worship include guidance on the theology underlying the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Directory for Worship assumes that the Lord's Supper will be administered in person in a gathered assembly, after which it may be taken beyond the initial worship service to those who are home-bound or shut in, as an extension of that worship service, by two persons in ordered ministry. ^v

The Directory for Worship identifies several theological reasons for this including:

Embodiment:

Christianity is an embodied faith. The first Christians worshiped at the temple and in synagogues, homes, cata-combs, and prisons. The important thing was not the place, but the gathering of Christ's body-the people of God-and the presence of Christ among them in Word and Sacrament.^{vi}

Community:

The Sacraments are the Word of God enacted and sealed in the life of the Church, the body of Christ. They are gracious acts of God, by which Christ Jesus offers his life to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. They are also human acts of gratitude, by which we offer our lives to God in love and service. The Sacraments are both physical signs and spiritual gifts, including words and actions, surrounded by prayer, in the context of the Church's common worship. They employ ordinary things-the basic elements of water, bread, and wine-in proclaiming the extraordinary love of God^{vii}.

Meaning:

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper offers an abundant feast of theological meaning, including: thanksgiving to God the Father; remembrance of Jesus Christ; invocation of the Holy Spirit; communion in the body of Christ; and a meal of the realm of God. The Reformed tradition understands the Lord's Supper to be a sign of God's covenant. The bread of the Lord's Supper is linked with the bread of Passover and the gift of manna in the wilderness. The Lord's Supper thus connects us with God's saving power and providential care from generation to generation. Like the offering of sacrifices, a sign of Israel's thanksgiving for God's faithfulness, the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of praise and a sign of our gratitude for God's steadfast love. The Lord's Supper represents God's gracious invitation to an everlasting covenant. The Lord's Supper also reflects our calling to feed others as we have been fed, and offers a foretaste of that heavenly banquet when God will wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.

The Lord's Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord's Supper is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ nourishes us in righteousness, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit renews the Church in its identity and sends the Church to mission in the world.

When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world.^{viii}

ⁱ G-3.0301b. *provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received.* This responsibility shall include authorizing the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly and the administration of Baptism as appropriate, in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship; and exercising pastoral care among the congregation in order that the Sacraments may be received as a means of grace, and the congregation may live in the unity represented in the Sacraments.

ⁱⁱ W-3.0410: Responsibility for the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper shall be authorized by the session and administered by a minister of the Word and Sacrament[†]. It is appropriate that a presbytery authorize and train ruling elders to administer the Lord's Supper in the event of the absence of pastors (G-3.0301b). The session may authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at events other than the Service for the Lord's Day, including services of Christian marriage, ordination and installation, services of wholeness, ministry to the sick, and services of witness to the resurrection. At all such events, the Word is to be read and proclaimed. When the Lord's Supper takes place apart from public worship, the congregation shall be represented by one or more members.

A council may authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper in certain contexts beyond the congregational setting, such as hospitals, prisons, schools, military bases, or other ministry settings (G-3.02, G-3.03).

ⁱⁱⁱ W-3.0414: Communion

The bread and cup are shared in the manner most appropriate to the occasion. Worshipers may gather at the table, come forward to meet the servers, or receive the bread and cup where they are. The bread may be broken and placed in people's hands or they may receive pieces of bread prepared for distribution. They may drink from a common cup, receive individual cups, or dip the broken bread into the cup. Ordinarily ruling elders, deacons, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament[†] serve the bread and cup; the session may authorize other church members to do so. While the bread and cup are shared worshipers may sing, other music may be offered, appropriate passages of Scripture may be read, or the people may pray in silence.

When all have received the bread and cup the remaining elements are placed on the table. The minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] then leads the people in prayer, thanking God for the gift

of the Sacrament and asking for grace to live and serve faithfully until the coming of Christ's realm in fullness.

As soon as possible after the service (ordinarily on the same day), the bread and cup may be shared with absent, homebound, or hospitalized members by two or more persons in ordered ministry. Those who carry out this extended service of communion shall be authorized by the session; equipped with the necessary theological, pastoral, and liturgical gifts and resources; and instructed to maintain the unity of Word and Sacrament through the reading of Scripture and offering of prayers.

At the conclusion of the Service for the Lord's Day, the bread and cup are to be removed from the table and used or disposed of in a manner approved by the session, in keeping with the Reformed understanding of the Sacrament and principles of good stewardship. This may be accomplished by consuming what remains or returning the elements to the earth.

^{iv} W-3.0410

^v W-3.0414

^{vi} W-1.0203 : Space

Because heaven and earth belong to God, we may worship in any place. The Old Testament describes stone altars, tabernacles, temples, and other places where the people gathered and encountered God. The Gospels tell us that Jesus worshiped at the synagogue and temple, but he also worshiped in the wilderness, on hillsides, and at lakeshores, demonstrating that God cannot be confined to any one place.

The first Christians worshiped at the temple and in synagogues, homes, cata-combs, and prisons. The important thing was not the place, but the gathering of Christ's body-the people of God-and the presence of Christ among them in Word and Sacrament. Later the Church began to build special places to meet for worship. To this day, space for Christian worship is primarily established by the presence of the risen Lord and the communion of the Holy Spirit in the gathering of the people of God.

Space that is set apart for worship should encourage community, be accessible to all, and open us to reverence for God. It is not to be an escape from the world, but a place for encountering the God of all creation who gathers us in and sends us out. Space for Christian worship should include a place for the reading and proclamation of the Word, a font or pool for Baptism, and a table for the Lord's Supper. The arrangement of these symbols of Word and Sacrament conveys their relationship to one another and their centrality in Christian worship.

^{vii} W-3.0401 : Theology of the Sacraments

The Sacraments are the Word of God enacted and sealed in the life of the Church, the body of Christ. They are gracious acts of God, by which Christ Jesus offers his life to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. They are also human acts of gratitude, by which we offer our lives to God in love and service. The Sacraments are both physical signs and spiritual gifts, including words and actions, surrounded by prayer, in the context of the Church's common worship. They employ ordinary things—the basic elements of water, bread, and wine—in proclaiming the extraordinary love of God. The Reformed tradition recognizes the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (also called Eucharist or Holy Communion) as having been instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ through the witness of the Scriptures and sustained through the history of the universal Church.

viii W-3.0409 : Theology of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) is the sign and seal of our communion with the crucified and risen Lord. Jesus shared meals with his followers throughout his earthly life and ministry—common suppers, miraculous feasts, and the covenant commemorations of the people of God. Jesus spoke of himself as the bread of life, and the true vine, in whom we are branches. On the night before his death, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples. He spoke of the bread and wine as his body and blood, signs of the new covenant and told the disciples to remember him by keeping this feast. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. The disciples continued to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, prayers, and the common meal. As Paul wrote, when we share the bread and cup in Jesus' name, "we who are many are one body" (1 Cor. 10:17).

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faithfulness, and discipleship. Through the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit renews the Church in its identity and sends the Church to mission in the world.

When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world.

The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding. If some of those who come have not yet been baptized, an invitation to baptismal preparation and Baptism should be graciously extended.

Worshipers prepare themselves to celebrate the Lord's Supper by putting their trust in Christ, confessing their sin, and seeking reconciliation with God and one another. Even those who doubt may come to the table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated as a regular part of the Service for the Lord's Day, preceded by the proclamation of the Word, in the gathering of the people of God. When local circumstances call for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated less frequently, the session may approve other schedules for celebration, in no case less than quarterly. If the Lord's Supper is celebrated less frequently than on each Lord's Day, public notice is to be given at least one week in advance so that all may prepare to receive the Sacrament.