



## **Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns**

Guidance from the Worship and Liturgical Resources Section of the Office of the Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
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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 influenza, churches are advised to follow the advice of the government's [Centers for Disease Control](#) with regard to gatherings of people. At this time, it is not 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 local area and to examine worship practices with regard to the spread of pathogens, perhaps making small changes that will help alleviate the anxiety of the gathered assembly.

### **Passing of the Peace**

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. The verbal greeting paired with a reverent bow may be suggested. Alternatively, congregations may offer hand sanitizer for use after the passing of the peace in an inconspicuous way by placing sanitizer bottles at the ends of pews, in pew racks or under chairs.

### **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 consider if the risk is real or imagined. There may be no reason in your area to alter your communion distribution practices. Local worshiping communities will make decisions that both reflect the nature and meaning of Holy Communion, and make sense in their context. Some common-sense precautions may be all that is necessary:

- People (including pastors) who are ill with the flu should be encouraged to stay home from public worship.
- Servers of the meal should wash their hands before distributing the elements. This can be accomplished by servers leaving worship at the passing of the peace to wash their hands in the sacristy or nearby washroom, by providing hand sanitizer

in the sacristy or at another convenient location near the chancel, or by providing on the credence table to the side of the altar a lavabo bowl that contains warm water and a small amount of antiseptic soap.

- 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 for each communicant.

- 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 the wine from one common pouring chalice into small cups, thereby maintaining the symbol of the common cup.
- 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).

## 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 this time of anxiety around a new form of influenza, the Sunday assembly of Christians around word and sacrament is a particularly important sign of resurrection hope in the midst of fear and trouble. We taste and see the Risen Christ’s presence in the community gathered around word and meal. In this eucharistic assembly we pray for the needs of a suffering world, and from this eucharistic assembly we are sent to care for all our neighbors who are sick, hurt and hungry.

Further questions may be directed to Worship and Liturgical Resources at 800-638-3522, ext. 2590, or [worship@elca.org](mailto:worship@elca.org).