



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
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## Table and font: Who is welcome?

*An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion.*

### **Report to the ELCA Church Council November 2015**

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*Assistant to the Presiding Bishop/Executive for Worship*

This report is in response to the 2012 Memorial and subsequent CWA action in 2013 and Church Council action in 2014.

A survey was fielded to a random sample of 1,000 ELCA congregations asking about the communion practices and welcome statements used in their Sunday worship folder(s). Forty-eight percent of the congregations responded. There was a good distribution by region and by congregational size. (See Figures 3 and 4 below).

Each of the statements was coded into one of several categories which ranged from explicitly stating that Holy Communion is the meal of the baptized and to receive it, one must accept the real presence of Christ; to Holy Communion is God’s meal and all are welcome regardless if you are baptized or what you believe. The responses show there is considerable diversity in communion practices and welcome statements. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Percent of Congregations by Type of Communion Practice Statements**

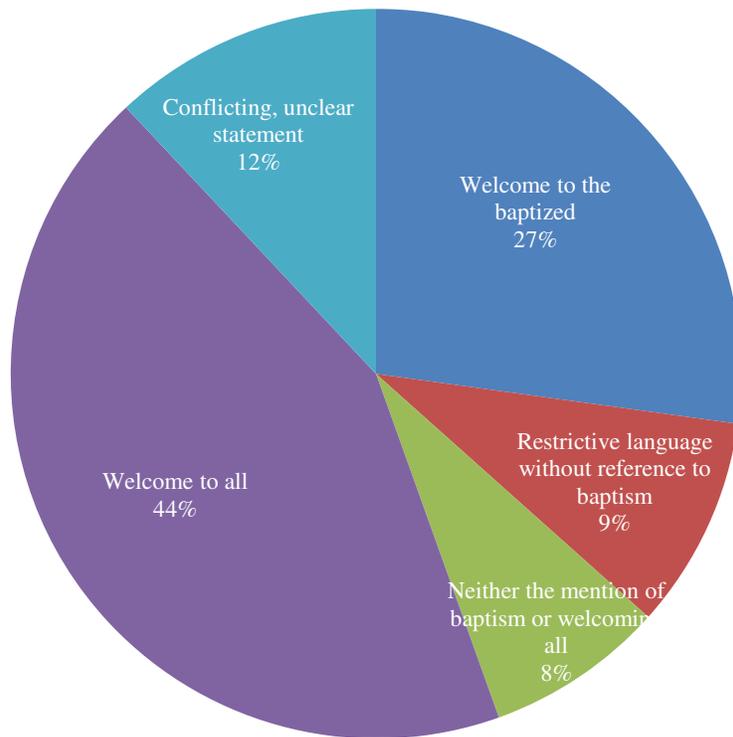
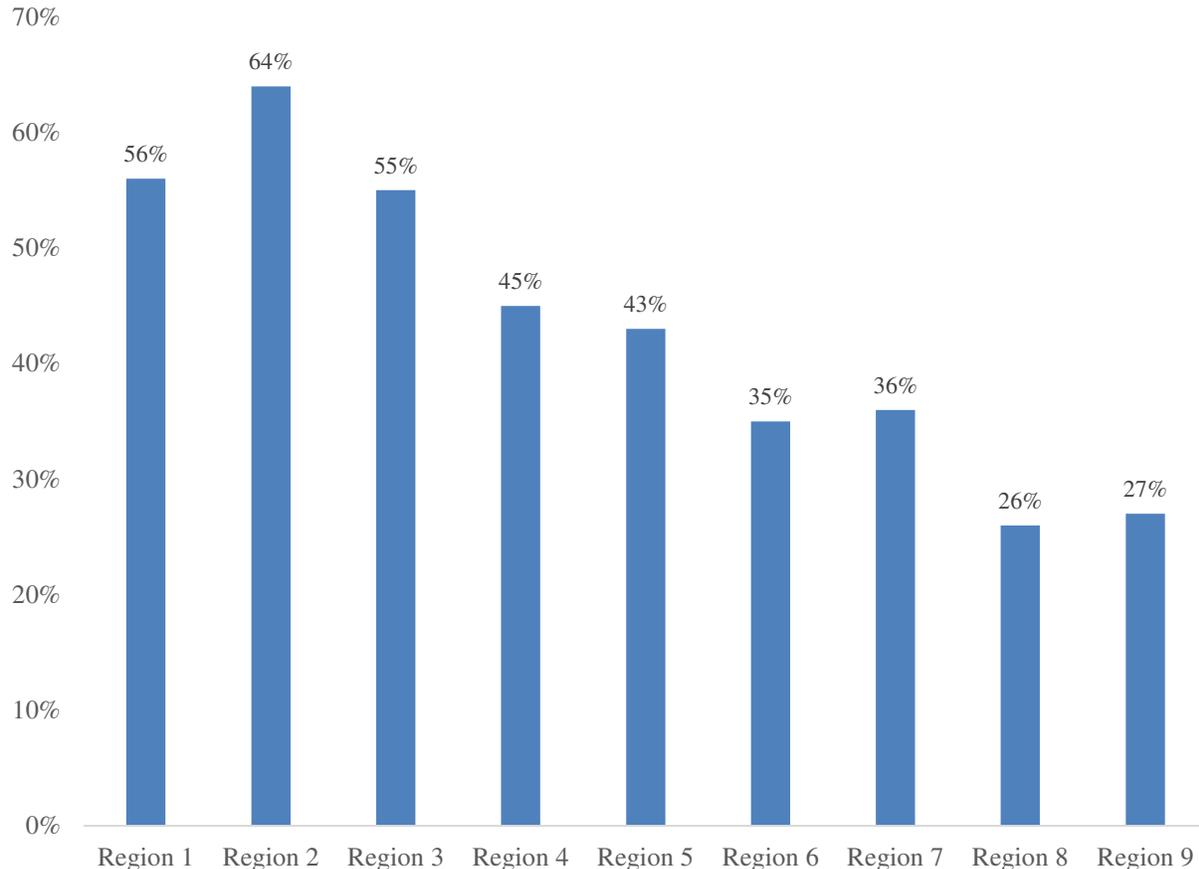


Figure 2 shows the differences by region. Congregations in the West (Regions 1 and 2) are most likely to welcome all. Regions in the East and South (Regions 8 and 9) are most likely to extend the welcome to baptized.

**Figure 2: Percent of Congregations Using Welcome All in Their Communion Practice by Region**



Following the survey, a study guide, “Table and Font: Who is welcome?” was created. Responses were received from 134 individuals and 138 congregations or groups (As of the deadline of June 30, 2015). We also received a letter from Lutheran Core and approximately 30 responses after the deadline. In addition to these formal responses, there have been multiple threads of conversation occurring on the ELCA Clergy Facebook page and other social media.

*There is a diversity of practice from, “The consensus of our discussion was that our theology should shape our worship practices. Traditional Lutheran theology understands Holy Baptism as the entrance rite into the church. Holy Communion follows this entrance into the family of faith. Therefore, we feel that the current practice of the ELCA concerning Communion practices as outlined in The Use of the Means of Grace, should continue to be the practice of the ELCA going forward. The Use of the Means of Grace states that there occasionally may be times when a person who has not been baptized may receive communion, but this should be the exception and not the rule. Our hope is that the current practices of the ELCA Font and Table (in that order) will continue.”*

*To, “Thank you for involving local churches in this study. We see a more inclusive approach now than attitudes were in Martin Luther’s time, when many aspects of life and culture and worship practice were more legalistic. Today’s more global world view is more inclusive and accepting of everyone. Christ invites everyone to the banquet. The Use of the Means of Grace is almost twenty years old. It is encouraging that the ELCA continues to move forward as people of God, with dividing walls coming down and with more ecumenical flexibility and cross-pollination.”*

*To, “We believe that it is our responsibility as faithful stewards of the Sacraments to emphasize to all communicants (baptized or un-baptized) the centrality to our shared Christian faith of both Sacraments, and to proactively engage any of God’s children who commune with us and are not already baptized (or who are unsure about their baptismal status) in a loving conversation about the importance of their sharing with us fully, through Baptism, in a life joined to Christ in mission. We also believe that Holy Communion should never be received flippantly, disrespectfully, or without some level of appreciation for the gift that God so graciously offers us in the marvelous body and blood of Christ, coupled with the living Holy Spirit.”*

In reflecting on all the responses, I made two observations: One, there seems to be a sense of anxiety that the discussion itself will cause divisions in the church and produce a divisive “vote” on the sacraments of the church.

Second, many (even those who faithfully did the study) have asked why are we having this conversation and what is the goal. On the other hand, about as many have said how thankful they were for the opportunity to have this conversation within their congregations and even synods.

The ELCA has been guided by “The Use of the Means of Grace,” since 1997. This document set out the sacramental practices of our church and addressed good stewardship for the care and fidelity of God’s gifts of grace. “The Use of the Means of Grace,” while describing preferred practices, noted this “statement grows out of the church’s concern for healthy pastoral action and strong congregational mission. It does not address our practice of Word and Sacrament out of antiquarian or legalistic interests but rather to ground the practice of our church in the Gospel and to encourage good order within our church.” (Background 4a)

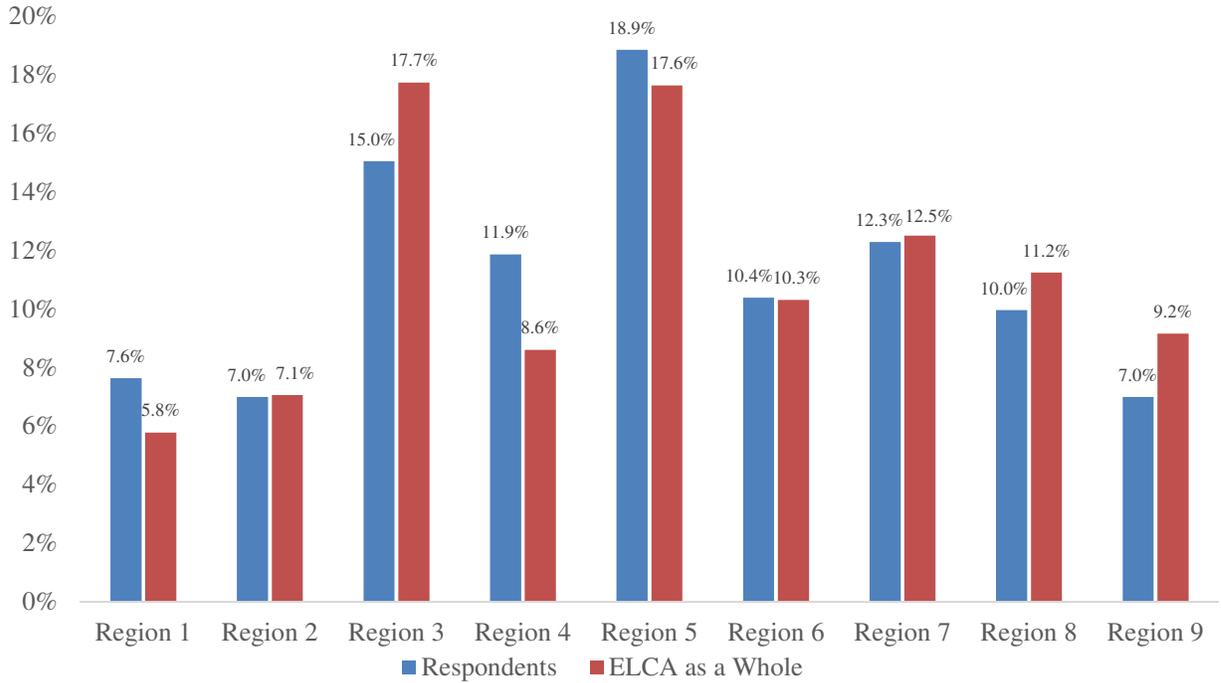
We are a church that centers itself on the central things of our faith—Water, Word, and Meal; central things that point us to Christ who is our center. We remember that, “In every celebration of the means of grace, God acts to show forth both the need of the world and the truth of the Gospel. In every gathering of Christians around the proclaimed Word and the holy sacraments, God acts to empower the Church for mission. Jesus Christ, who is God’s living bread come from heaven, has given his flesh to be the life of the world. This very flesh, given for the life of all, is encountered in the Word and Sacraments.” (Principle 51)

The ELCA Worship staff sees no further need to research the practices of congregations with respect to “The Use of the Means of Grace” and sees this report as the conclusion of its work related to the 2012 Memorial and the subsequent actions by the 2013 CWA and the 2014 Church Council.

Respectfully submitted,

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*Assistant to the Presiding Bishop/Executive for Worship*

**Figure 3: Percent of Responding Congregations by Region Compared to the ELCA as a Whole**



**Figure 4: Percent of Responding Congregations by Worship Size Compared to the ELCA as a Whole**

