



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

Who Is Welcome at the Lord's Table?

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Primary Questions

Does the announcement, written or verbal, used in your congregation as to who is welcome at the Lord's Table reflect the ELCA's understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Communion?

Does it include a reference to baptism as a prerequisite for Holy Communion?

Does it affirm the real presence of Christ in the sacrament?

Does it acknowledge God's new covenant of grace in which we receive the gifts of "forgiveness, life and salvation"?

Does it suggest that this meal is a "foretaste of the feast to come?"

Is it consistent with the *Communion Practices Statement* adopted by the ELCA in 1989?

Is it consistent with *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* adopted by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly?

Is it consistent with *Principles for Worship, Renewing Worship 2*, published in 2002 by the ELCA? (It includes the 1997 statement on the *Use of the Means of Grace* as an appendix and makes reference to the 1989 *Communion Practices Statement*.)

Given the current trend toward becoming a more welcoming church, is there a need to revisit the current stated policy of the ELCA with regard to who is welcome at the Lord's Table? If so, a resolution memorializing the ELCA to do so would be appropriate. Do we wish to initiate such a conversation?

What is the stated policy of the ELCA with regard to who is welcome at the Lord's Table?

Two principles from *The Use of the Means of Grace* seem pertinent to this conversation.

Principle 37

Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.

The Applications and Background sections which follow highlights such items as when adults and older children received into membership by baptism may be communed; various ages for communing children who have been baptized; the communion of infants; and on-going catechesis. Application 37G seems pertinent to this conversation:

Application 37G

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.

Principle 49

Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices Eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.

Note again the emphasis on baptism. Application 49A also makes reference to the *Statement on Communion Practices*: "Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, through the Church to those who are baptized."

Two additional comments from *Principles for Worship*:

Principle S-10

The table of our Lord Jesus Christ is set in the midst of the assembly.

While this principle has to do with worship space and the Christian Assembly, Application S-10C indicates that:

Application S-10C

The meal is prepared and the table is set for the baptized people of God.

And, Principle S-3 includes this quote from *With One Voice*: "Sunday is the primary day on which the Church assembles...The baptized (my emphasis) gather to hear the word, to pray for those in need, to offer thanks to God for the gift of salvation, to receive the bread of life and the cup of blessing, and to be renewed for the daily witness of faith, hope, and love." (WOV, page 8)

Reflections on recent worship experiences

My wife and I recently had the opportunity to worship in four very diverse settings. We attended Ash Wednesday services at a Roman Catholic basilica in Santa Fe, N.M. The church was nearly filled for the 12:10 mass. A large number were probably government employees, since Santa Fe is New Mexico's capital city. Santa Fe also has a sizable Spanish-speaking population, as well as American Indians, many of whom are Catholic. There were also a number of worshippers of African descent, and some of Asian descent. Those present spanned the age spectrum from the very young to the aged, some with walkers and some in wheelchairs. The service was a blend of English and Spanish.

We received the ashes, as well as communion. No verbal or written announcement suggested that we were not welcome. The only "glitch" was when my wife received the host and was about to dip it in the chalice. She was informed politely to consume the host and receive the wine from the chalice.

Three days later, we attended the installation service for the new pastor of an ELCA mission congregation. The mission is located in the heart of an area with Spanish-speaking residents and offers a wide variety of programs serving the needs of the community. The service was a blend of English and Spanish, contemporary and traditional, with two Praise Bands from nearby congregations, an impromptu Bell Choir, a piano and a harp solo during the offertory.

The synod bishop was the preacher and presiding minister for the Rite of Installation. Following the sharing of the peace, the new pastor announced (and I am paraphrasing): "This is God's Table and everyone is welcome, even if you have not been in church for a long time or even if this is the first time you have ever been to church. Jesus is the host at this table and all are welcome."

On Sunday morning we worshipped at another ELCA congregation. A typical Lutheran congregation in a residential area of the city, its roots are in the Augustana tradition. A praise band led the prelude songs and the hymns during communion. Setting One from ELW was used for the service, and the organ postlude was Handel's "Prelude and Fugue in E Minor." One line of the pastor's sermon struck me as both significant as to why we gather for worship, and what message it conveys to the stranger in our midst: "We have all been baptized and marked with the cross of Christ forever." (Underlining for emphasis.)

The following was printed in the bulletin:

When it is time to receive Holy Communion all are invited to gather at the Lord's Table. You need not be a Lutheran or a member of this

congregation to receive God's food here. Whether it is at a potluck, or the coffee cart in the Fellowship Hall or here in the Sanctuary on Sunday morning, all our tables are open. We only ask of you what God asks of all of us – that you come to His table recognizing your need for Him, accepting Christ's sacrifice for you by faith, and sincerely seeking His forgiveness and renewal in your life.

The worship attendance card included the following comment concerning communion:

I believe Jesus Christ is personally present in Holy Communion. I need His forgiveness and will strive to live for Him.

The following Sunday we worshipped at another Catholic basilica in Denver, Colo. The service was fairly traditional and the congregation was primarily white middle class, with some of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Only the bread was distributed during communion.

When it came time for communion, my wife was in front me and the priest asked if she was Catholic. When she replied, "no", she was told she could not receive. The priest offered a pastoral blessing instead. It may have been the manner in which she held out her hand to receive the bread that tipped him off to the fact that she was not Catholic. Instead of a cupped palm in which to receive the host, she held out her hand to receive, as she usually does, with her thumb and forefinger. I simply indicated that I could not receive and received a pastoral blessing as well.

I have not worshipped in many Catholic parishes except for funerals and weddings. I have received the sacrament on at least four occasions. This is the first time I have gone forward and been refused.

Some concluding thoughts

I believe I understand the rationale for wanting to be more inclusive and welcoming. Yet, I firmly believe that until the stated policy of the ELCA with regard to who is welcome at the Lord's Table is changed, we have a responsibility to act accordingly. I know some will take exception to that.

Another ELCA pastor has a different take on this question. He tells the story of an 82-year-old lady who had never been baptized (*Seeds for the Parish, Summer 2011, page 4*). She apparently had, however, been receiving Holy Communion for some time. One day she said to him: "Pastor, I am ready to be baptized." When asked why she had never been baptized, her response was simple: "No one has ever invited me before."

This pastor uses the story to address his concern about hospitality at the table and other aspects of the church's ministry. "I preach God's unconditional love from the pulpit. How then is it possible to move from the pulpit to the communion rail and place a condition (i.e. a rule of the church) on God's love?"

My second thought has to do with the ELCA's understanding of "The Nature of the Church". "The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service." (*Model Constitution for Congregations of the ELCA*, *C3.02.) This was further expanded in 2011 by the addition of *C3.03. to the *Model Constitution*: "... 'this church' as used herein refers in general references to this whole church, including its three expressions: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. ..."

I believe this chapter of the constitution affirms the interdependent nature of the church, as we understand it. What happens in the life of the synod and/or ELCA is an expression of a partnership congregations share within this church. And congregations are visible signs of this church's presence in the local community. Consistency, therefore, in how we worship and teach, witness and serve, is of great significance. While congregations are given wide latitude in how their ministries are developed and shaped, there are matters on which we need to be consistent. Among them are our teachings and practices regarding the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

It is for that reason that the *Statement on the Means of Grace* was developed and adopted by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. It replaced the 1989 *Statement on Communion Practices*. That statement was essentially the same as statements adopted previously in 1978 by both the former Lutheran Church in America and the former American Lutheran Church.

The question is before us: Where do we, as a denomination, wish to go from here?

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