

EXTRA-CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNION SERVICES

A report from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations Lutheran Church–Canada September 1992

Resolution 90:1.105 of the 1990 convention of Lutheran Church–Canada expressed concern that proper pastoral care be exercised when extra-congregational communion services are held. It was rightly noted that the pastor and individual congregations are given the responsibility by God to administer Word and Sacrament in accordance with sound Scriptural teaching, the implication being that the multitude of guests, most of them unknown to pastor and/or congregation, make it impossible to exercise proper care in determining the spiritual condition of those present. The convention resolution came into being as the result of an overture from the East District Board of Directors which specifically asked that the congregations of LCC refrain from sponsoring extra-congregational communion services, and that the auxiliary organizations and agencies of LCC refrain from requesting Communion services at its conventions, conferences, or gatherings. In addition, the East District Board of Directors on November 7, 1989, also asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to study the question of Extra-congregational Communion Services in light of the concerns mentioned above. The question before the CTCR is whether extra-congregational communion services are permissible in view of those concerns.

In the past, extra-congregational communion services were held at pastoral conferences and at the conventions of Synod. Since the discussion of the sacrament in 1 Corinthians assumes celebration in a congregational setting, these celebrations were sponsored by a local congregation. P.E. Kretzmann noted three reasons for the practice: 1) because the celebration is historically connected with the Christian congregation; 2) because it presupposes congregational membership; and 3) because it should evidently be celebrated only under congregational supervision and control, since the responsibility for those partaking of the Lord's Supper has been laid upon the congregation.¹ Thus, he notes, those who attended those services did so as guests of the congregations, not of independent organizations or temporary congregations, and that the lay members of the host congregation had the right and privilege to receive the sacrament at these services.²

However, it is clear from the context that the reason this was done was to give pastors the opportunity to receive the sacrament, since at the time self-communication of pastors or the practice even of a layman such as an elder communicating the pastor was not practised (at least not extensively) within the Missouri Synod. Thus, Kretzmann declares:

It is not a mere tradition that laymen and parish teachers, on such occasions did not, as a rule, partake of the Lord's Table (unless with a guest card [i.e., a card declaring them to be a member in good standing of a congregation of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod]); for it was understood that they had the opportunity of partaking of the Holy Supper at any time in their home congregation. The alleged difficulty concerning the infrequent Communion attendance of pastors may easily be solved if the congregations in whose midst

*a conference meets will always arrange a Communion service, so that the visitors may partake of the Sacrament.*³

It might legitimately be asked whether such services in which pastors were the only guests admitted to the Supper violated the traditional rubric that in all services in which the sacrament is celebrated, all eligible worshippers be allowed to receive the sacrament. Nevertheless, the first Communion service for all attending a synodical convention was not held until June 22, 1956, when such a service was held in St. Paul, Minnesota, the delegates being guests of Trinity First Lutheran Church, Minneapolis.⁴

There is no question but that it is the local congregation that is entrusted with the responsibility to administer Word and Sacrament. Outside of the institution of the Supper itself, the only other instance of celebration of the sacrament explicitly mentioned in the Scriptures is in the congregation at Corinth (1 Cor. 10:19-17 and 11:17-34). If the “breaking of bread” mentioned in Acts 2:42 is in fact a reference to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, it becomes quite clear that this corporate celebration became a regular occurrence as soon as believers began to gather together after Pentecost. Paul’s admonition to the congregation in Corinth calls upon the members to examine themselves, that no one receive the sacrament to his judgment (1 Cor. 11:29-34).

The corporate nature of the sacrament demands a caring relationship among the members, not mere concern with one’s own state without regard for the present.

Though the power of the keys belongs to the whole congregation, the pastoral office is given by God for the purpose of publicly preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. Thus the celebration of the sacrament apart from a sponsoring congregation, or celebration of the sacrament by individuals without a “regular call” (AC XIV), are violations of God-ordained Church order. The congregation is the church in a given locality, and the means by which God gathers believers together to receive His grace. Therefore the Missouri Synod as late as 1960 had questions about the propriety of all extra-congregational communion services.⁵

Although the sacrament is given to the congregation, we also recognize that congregations may administer the sacrament to those outside of their immediate congregational fellowship who confess the same faith. This is done as a matter of course, though the practice of using the “guest card” to affirm membership has fallen by the wayside. Now, when one desires to receive the sacrament as the guest of another congregation, it is considered proper to see the pastor or an elder before the service. Although at extra-congregational communion services the opportunity to confer with the pastor beforehand is usually impossible, as beneficial as it might be, it is also necessary to recognize that the determination of worthiness to receive the sacrament does not fall solely upon the congregation and the pastor. Paul’s words of admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:28 call for self-examination, since ultimately only the individual knows whether or not he is truly penitent and trusts those words, “given and shed for you for the remission of sins”. The pastor and the congregation serve to admonish the individual and guide him in his self-examination, and to retain the sins of the manifestly impenitent. Though the pastor and the congregation are to exercise their God-given stewardship diligently, it is humanly impossible to ensure that each and every person who comes to the altar at any given service is a worthy recipient.

At the same time, we recognize that the Lord's Supper is Gospel, and is joyfully administered in the public setting of congregational worship to those who repent of their sins and trust in the words "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins". We rejoice at every opportunity to confess our common faith and share in the Communion of the body and the blood of our Lord. However, since the celebration of the sacrament is to take place in the context of the local congregation, it is appropriate that when the opportunity arises for celebrating the sacrament among believers in fellowship with one another who are members of different congregations, that this be done under the sponsorship of a congregation in that fellowship. Thus, when a Communion service is held at a college or seminary, convention, or synodically-sponsored event, it is the sponsoring congregation's act to which guests who confess the same faith are admitted, no matter what the number of those guests might be. Public admonishment and exhortation, and perhaps a Confessional Address apart from the sermon, could take place as an aid to self-examination, to remind the hearers of what is needed and of what is given in the sacrament, and manifest sinners should be excluded from the table. In this way responsible pastoral and congregational care can be exercised.

In some past cases the congregational ties to the service have been tenuous at best. The CTCR of the LCMS in its document Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper lists the following criteria which should be met to assure a God-pleasing celebration of the sacrament:

- a. Requests for extra-congregational communion services on a circuit, district, synodical level should be discussed first of all with the pastoral advisor of the group. Consideration should be given to these questions:
 1. Is the reason for a Communion service consonant with the Scriptural and confessional meaning and intent of the sacrament? (Cf. Ap XXIV,68; FC SD VII,59)
 2. Will the sacrament be offered only to members affiliated or in fellowship with The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in an atmosphere where confessional integrity can be preserved?
- b. The counsel of the district president should be sought.
- c. A host congregation should be secured, and the pastoral advisor should work closely with this congregation in making the necessary preparations.
- d. The celebrant at the service of Holy Communion should ordinarily be the pastor of the host congregation.⁶

Using such criteria as guidelines would go far to ensure that the sacrament would be celebrated in a God-pleasing manner.

It should be added that responsible Christian judgment would dictate that at gatherings at which there is a substantial presence of Christians with whom we are not in fellowship (and thus not

in harmony with point a2 above), such services not be held, since in those cases the sacrament would not be a confession of unity as God means it to be, but that service would become a source of division.

In summary, there are valid concerns which need to be expressed concerning the holding of Communion services apart from the context of the regular congregational worship service. However, those concerns can be met in a way in which large gatherings of Christians who, coming from many congregations and confessing a common faith, may celebrate and receive the blessings offered in the Lord's Supper.

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- 1 P.E. Kretzmann, "The Means of Grace from the Administrative Angle", Concordia Theological Monthly 11 (August 1940): 607.
 - 2 Ibid., 609.
 - 3 Ibid. See also John H.C. Fritz, Pastoral Theology (St. Louis: Concordia, 1945), 127.
 - 4 Proceedings of the Forty-third Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, St. Paul, Minn., June 20-29, 1956, v: cited in Frederick H. Pralle, "Extra-congregational Communion Services", Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (March 1963): 158.
 - 5 Pralle, 159, lists two references which urge that such services not be held; Ottomar O. Krueger, "The Lord's Supper", The Abiding Word (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), III, 461, and A.E. Krause, "The Proper Use of the Sacrament of Holy Communion", The Abiding Word III, 521.
 - 6 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper (St. Louis: 1983), 23-24.