

**SUGGESTIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR VIRTUAL COMMUNION
DURING THE PANDEMIC
THE MERCERSBURG SOCIETY
September 15, 2020**

INTRODUCTION

Many churches are providing Sunday morning worship via technology. Some are live streaming, others offering You Tube recordings, or Zoom conferencing. Some are emailing bulletins that can be printed out and followed individually at any time during the week.

Such offerings are good and worthy to be used in these extraordinary times and in this Covid 19 season. We are all aware, however, that we do not know how long we will need to be social distancing. Pastors are asking, “What about communion?” Can the Sacrament be celebrated virtually? Is it appropriate to have a clergy person representing the feast, saying the words, breaking the bread, pouring the wine, and consuming on behalf of the faithful watching on their screens? How would clergy advise the congregation to participate? Would a home slice of bread and a shot glass of wine be able to be blessed, consecrated, and regarded as holy?

What insights from our Reformed, Heidelberg, Mercersburg heritage might we glean to help us minister faithfully?

Below are thoughts and quotes that may help us be in conversation about this subject. We begin with reflections from our ecumenical friends in order to take seriously the conversation in the broader body of Christ. Then we consider the unique contribution of the Mercersburg heritage, believing that it has valuable gifts that can enrich our deliberations. Next we examine potential abuses and negative consequences of the practice of virtual communion, for the cultural context of our worship life must be taken into account. Finally, we offer some suggestions for congregations that do decide to practice virtual communion, and suggestions for those that do not. Whether you decide to “cyber celebrate” or “not cyber celebrate,” we hope you come to that conclusion based on sound theological reflection on the Sacrament and its meaning. We also hope you will be able to articulate the meaning of the Sacrament to the people in your parish.

COMMENTS FROM OUR ECUMENICAL FRIENDS

Episcopal: Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s Word to the church: On Our Theology of Worship of The Episcopal Church: March 31, 2020

It is my conviction that the Anglican way of following Jesus has deep within it a way and habit of worship and liturgy that is of significant help to us in this moment. It may well be that the breadth and depth of the Anglican way of common prayer can come to our aid now, when for the sake of others, we abstain from physical, public gathering to hear God’s Word and to receive the Sacrament.

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“The Use of the Means of Grace” reminds us that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly (Principle 39). We recommend that we do not urge people to employ virtual communion, that deacons, pastors, and bishops use this time as a teaching moment about the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God, and that we make use of the Service of the Word and Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer and Responsive Prayer. Let us spend time in scripture study, pray for each other, and contact others regularly by phone, email or social media.

Presbyterian Church USA: Rick Jones | Office of the General Assembly - March 25, 2020

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.

Orthodox Churches: We would value a statement.

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM THE MERCERSBURG PERSPECTIVE

The support for virtual communion and the resistance to it partly revolve around the issue of the significance of embodiment in regard to the Eucharist. Here the embodiment question has two aspects: the embodiment of Christ in the ritual and the embodiment of the Eucharistic community.

One strand of the Reformed tradition, the Mercersburg theology, may shed light on these matters. On the one hand this heritage affirms the foundational theme that through the Lord’s Supper faithful Christians participate in Christ’s personhood in an absolutely unique way. God is the active agent here; the power of the sacred meal is not rooted in the individual’s capacity to remember Christ in a particularly moving way. Against such psychologization this tradition insists that God is the active agent here. It is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible to have a real union with Christ’s personhood. The crucial addendum here is that personhood which necessarily includes a specific body. Human beings are psychosomatic unities, and therefore Christ’s body is a constituent of his unique identity.

On the other hand, this theology resists the view that the body and blood of Christ are somehow attached to or contained in the physical material of the bread and wine. It cautions that our union with Christ’s glorified body does not involve any ingestion of molecules. So, this heritage

presents us with an ostensible paradox: in the Lord's Supper we partake of the body of Christ, but that body has nothing to do with spatial materiality.

The tradition's solution to this conundrum is to draw a distinction between "body" in the sense of three-dimensional physical mass, and "body" in the sense of that mysterious principle that gives a person a unique identity that can manifest itself outwardly and interact with others. That personal core, that unique "body," can exist and exercise agency without being clothed in material particles. So, the conclusion is that a person can have communion with the "body" of another person without having contact with the material particles of that body. This is a way of conceptualizing how it is possible to have non-material communion with the body (and not just the spirit) of Christ. If this were to be conceptualized in a twenty-first century idiom, it sounds like a justification for the "virtual" (i.e., non-physical) communion of believers with Christ. Such a seemingly oxymoronic notion should not be troubling to people who have pondered Paul's elusive concept of a "spiritual body."

According to this theology there can be bodily participation without material contact. In this context the important thing about the "body" is that it is an outward, public manifestation of a unique, individuated life. The physical molecules that constitute someone's body are not the important thing here, nor is geographic proximity. Rather, the manifestation of a particularized identity is the crucial factor. That leads us to the possibility that electronic media using visual images and sounds could successfully communicate the core of a person's individual identity, perhaps just as well physical interaction can do.

If this is true of communion with the body of Christ, it is also true of the embodied communion of believers with one another. There can be a spirit of embodied community without physical presence or geographic proximity. So, from this perspective there is no good theological reason why there could not be an embodied virtual Eucharistic community.

Having said this, it must be pointed out that we are only talking about a *theological* justification. There might be other factors, perhaps issues of the likely social and cultural consequences of virtual communion, that might lead to cautionary reserve about the practice. Something could be theologically permissible, but still not be pragmatically wise.

VIRTUAL COMMUNION CONCERNS

Virtual Communion raises several concerns for us that should be seriously considered. Right off the bat, we should recognize that virtual Communion is by no means ideal, and that it should never be thought of as an acceptable, permanent practice of the Church. If it is considered at all, it is in response to what we pray will be a temporary emergency, caused by the global pandemic.

Second, is a "slippery slope" concern. We fear that the practice may encourage virtual Communion as a customary practice. Churches that switch to visual media, which focus on the preached word are one thing. But to make a virtual Service of the Word into a virtual Service of the Word and Sacrament as a regular practice, would utterly alter the idea of communion as a ritual meal among the gathered body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper was meant by Christ to be a sacred meal where the assembly of God's people was physically intimate, as were the disciples in the Upper Room at the Last Supper. That assembly around that same table or altar, became the Church. Ideally a flesh and blood gathering of the people of God reinforces the essential place of the visible Church. Briefly stated, virtual Communion is not optimal, and it leads to questionable ecclesiology.

The case to be made is simple and straightforward. In as much as people are communing in their own homes with virtual Communion, the practice encourages an undesirable separateness, not unlike the idea of eating alone. Hardly the Paschal Meal Holy Communion was meant to be, as a feast-like or festival gathering of the family of God. And if it became common or acceptable, it would serve as an unhealthy symbol of individualism, much too attractive to our too often segregated and privatized society. It would threaten a core value of the Common Meal, which is that no cast, color, pedigree or spiritual status will be allowed to divide the people of God; that unity and equality are too important as principles and too easily compromised, to be allowed to slip into our practice as it once did in Corinth.

Finally, the practice undermines the third mark of the Church for those in the Reformed family of faith who highly esteem the Belgic Confession, which states that the third mark of the Church is discipline.

Respect for the essential holiness of the Meal and its safeguarding, is the responsibility of the elders, and among most Reformed bodies, church polity requires that elders oversee the Eucharist. But where are the elders in the practice of virtual Communion? There is just too much room for abuse or more likely, rank spirituality, to desecrate the meal in virtual Communion. Moreover, the practice of virtual Communion would surely result in a diminishing of the office of elder in the churches where elders have responsibility for church discipline.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MERCERSBURG SOCIETY

IF YOU DECIDE TO REFRAIN FROM COMMUNION FOR THE PRESENT:

In place of Holy Communion, the congregation might declare a time of penitential fast (voluntary). A preparatory rite or service (or if part of a Service of the Word, a preparatory prayer) would take the place of Holy Communion. When possible, or each Sunday, or when Communion would have been celebrated, the rite or prayer might take the place of Communion. The rite or prayer would feature petitions for deliverance and forgiveness. They would make mention of the global crisis, the need for forgiveness, the hope of deliverance, and the joyful anticipation of the physical re-gathering of the people of God to celebrate Holy Communion when the pandemic is over. A sample preparatory rite is included below. Also, we provided a sample preparatory prayer also below.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO OFFER (OR CONTINUE TO OFFER) VIRTUAL COMMUNION:

- Make sure you articulate the theology of the Sacrament to the people. This is more important now more than ever! This could be done in a series of sermons, in a well-advertised virtual classroom accessible on your Website or on U Tube so that it can be referenced and watched repeatedly, or offer it in a written document mailed to all households.
- Virtual Communion should ONLY be celebrated in a live event where Pastor, Elders, and Congregants are “virtually” present. Taped videos of a service cannot bring people into spiritual oneness.
- At the beginning of your service (before the Invocation and Call to Worship) give the people a short reminder of the meaning of the Sacrament. Use these or similar words:

The celebration of the Lord’s Supper has even been regarded by the Church as the innermost sanctuary of the whole Christian worship. We will enter here into living communion with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and to express our fellowship with one another as members of his Church. Gathering about our tables, we profess our desire to be numbered among his people and to walk in his ways. (An Alternate Order for Holy Communion, Evangelical and Reformed Hymnal p. 32, slightly adapted)

- Perhaps with some prelude music playing, suggest people who have not yet prepared, leave, then return with their elements. Bread (of any variety), and Wine, (or fruit of the vine) are always preferred because of their historic use and organic symbolism. However, if needed, households may use substitutions as long as they can be given due regard as for their sacramental purpose.
- Ask communicants to avail table space in their home for the Lord’s Supper about to commence. This might be nothing more than a simple napkin spread with a tiny plate and cup to serve as Paten and Chalice. Other visuals such as candles, crosses, pictures of Christ etc. may be suggested to enhance the experience.
- Continue now with the service of the Word and sermon. In the “normal” time for offering, household may lift their plate and cup in dedication for sacramental use.
- Use a liturgy of the Church especially when celebrating virtual Communion. This could be an established liturgy form your denomination or from and ecumenical partner denomination, or from an ecumenically endorsed Eucharistic occasion. This is especially important so that the people’s sense of connection with the “Holy catholic Church” from which we derive our lives, is enhanced and it avoids individualism and sectarianism.
- The People should be encouraged to participate by joining in these responses:

Sursum Corda, such as: The Lord be with you. And also, with you.

Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to our God.

Let us give thanks to God Most High. It is right to give Him thanks and praise

The Seraphic Hymn, such as: Holy, holy, holy, God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest!

Affirmation of Faith, such as: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Oblation, such as: In company with all believers in every time and beyond time, we dedicate ourselves to You and gather around this table to know the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

- As the Words of Institution by the Pastor are said, the people should keep silent.
- During the Epiclesis, eyes should focus on the elements. As the people are blessed, a gesture such as a hand on one's heart or on another's shoulder may be appropriate.
- After the Lord's Prayer, when invited to "Take and Eat" etc., people should always be asked to be open to the Mystical Presence at work among us as Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord God and with each other near and far.
- All should be invited to join in a prayer of Thanksgiving.
- After the Benediction, invite the hosts to either consume any remaining elements or dispose of them with due remembrance and respect for what they represent.
- Ask members for feedback, after the service.

ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTIONS

- Host a virtual coffee hour for conversation with one another and with congregational leaders. Some digital platforms allow a larger group of participants to break up into smaller groups for conversation.
- Lead Bible studies, conversations and other classes, such as confirmation, using technology like Zoom or Google Hangouts.
- Host a regular conference call (using Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.) to check in.
- Share daily devotions via social media, email or text.
- Consider setting a common prayer time so folks know they are praying together even if they aren't gathered in person.
- Create a phone tree for checking in with those who are isolated and/or not connected online.
- For leaders who decide that livestreaming is not the best option for their community, they may provide devotions based on the weekly texts for use in their homes.

SUGGESTED ADVANTAGES

- Allows viewers feel as though they are the congregation, participating in liturgy with posted Scripture lessons, hymns, creed, prayers with responses, and offertory by posting how to contribute via address or electronic means
- Gives "outsiders" to faith and worship and local Church an "inside" look and the potential of wanting to "checkout" the Church and the service of worship when possible to do so

- Provides opportunity to involve members with tech skills, musicians, artists, photographers, to use video camera to supplement recording with focus on: worship appointments in main Church and chancel, stained glass windows, symbols represented in worship area, banners

PREPARATORY RITE (for use in a service of the word after the offering)

Examination of Conscience:

Pastor: God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other Gods before me.

Cantor: **Trisagion**

Ho - ly God, Ho - ly and might - y One,
 Ho - ly Im - mor - tal One, have mer - cy up - on us.

Reader: You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Cantor **Trisagion**

Pastor: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Cantor **Trisagion**

Reader: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but

rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Cantor

Trisagion

Pastor: Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Cantor

Trisagion

Reader: You shall not murder.

Cantor

Trisagion

Pastor: You shall not commit adultery.

Cantor

Trisagion

Reader: You shall not steal.

Cantor

Trisagion

Pastor: You shall not be a false witness against your neighbor.

Cantor

Trisagion

Reader: You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Cantor

Trisagion

Pastor: Hear also what our Lord Jesus Christ said: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

The Litany Prayer: (Let us Pray)

Pastor: Almighty God, who delivered your ancient people from slavery and in the fullness of time sent your Son Jesus Christ to rescue the people from their sins, hear us as we pray for deliverance from our bondage and lead us forth into the glorious liberty of your children.

Pastor: Deliver us from habits that enslave, from willing bondage to the flesh, from contentment with mediocrity, and from our reluctance to enter your kingdom.

People:

Jesus, Remember Me

Pastor: Deliver us from fragmentary living, from divided aims and rival loyalties, and from failure to seek and achieve wholeness in thought, word, and deed.

People: **Jesus, Remember Me**

Pastor: Deliver us from counterfeit humility, from the modesty that calls attention to itself, from the arrogance which creates the world in our own image, and will not bow to the authority of truth as it meets us in Jesus Christ.

People: **Jesus, Remember Me**

Pastor: Deliver us from religious selfishness, from the piety that is centered upon safety rather than service, from seeking peace of mind instead of reconciliation with you and with all people.

People: **Jesus, Remember Me**

Pastor: Deliver us from being sorry for ourselves and not for our sins, for esteeming reputation above character and the show of righteousness above the reality of it.

People: **Jesus, Remember Me**

Pastor: Deliver us, above all, from substituting religion for Christ, from taking refuge in systems and ceremonies that bring us comfort and security rather than encountering his disturbing presence. These things we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: **Amen, Amen, Amen.**

Litany for the Human Family:

Pastor: O God, the Father of us all, we offer our prayers for the human family: We pray for those who have given up praying for themselves, because experience had made them cynical or wary of asking; for those who dislike what they have become but will not turn to you for forgiveness; and for those who have made an uneasy truce with conscience.

People: **We pray for those who are weakened by selfishness and poisoned by resentment, for those who see everyone's hand against them, and for those who are intent on spoiling the peace of others.**

Pastor: We pray for the disgruntled, the weak-minded, those who bury their gifts, the sick who have taken refuge in invalidism, and the bereaved who have lost the power of making new friends.

People: **We pray for those who refuse to be discouraged by failure, for those who live in the midst of negative thought, pessimism, and hopelessness yet remain undaunted.**

Pastor: We pray for *... (Intercessions may be said here.)*

People: Finally, we pray for ourselves, that in the name and power of Christ we may bring healing to the sick, hope to the defeated, and confidence to the disheartened through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: Amen, Amen, Amen.

Exhortation on the Mysteries (short review of the meaning of the Sacrament)

Call to Confession:

Pastor: Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the only one begotten by God,

People: Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Confession of Sin:

All: Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Silent Meditation

Confessional Questions:

Pastor: I now ask you in the presence of God, and upon the evidence of your own conscience:

Do you acknowledge and deplore your many sins with contrite heart?

Response

Pastor: Do you believe that our heavenly Father is willing, for Jesus' sake, to forgive all your sins?

Response

Pastor: Do you forgive those who have sinned against you?

Response

Pastor: Do you resolve to submit yourself in the future to the gracious direction of the Holy Spirit, so that you may no more purposely sin, but be enabled to follow after holiness?

Response

Lord's Prayer: **Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.**

*Absolution:

Pastor: Jesus looked up and said to a sinner: Where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.

People: Thanks be to God.

PREPARATORY PRAYER

Dear God, our Heavenly Father, we humbly come before you, seeking your divine help in this great time of need. We need a word from you in our time of desperation. Speak to our hearts.

Lord, speak to us.

Even as doctors, scientists and our political leaders impart their best wisdom; even as this pestilence encroaches upon our communities, claiming lives, threatening millions; even as we are encompassed by fear and a legitimate concern over the well-being of family, friends and our fellow man, only you can settle our hearts and minds.

We need your peace for such a time as this. Give peace, oh Lord.

Lord, give us peace.

Jesus, you are the Prince of Peace. You are the architect of all creation. There is no virus, no plague, no pestilence, no pandemic, no earthen tragedy that you cannot overcome.

So, we call upon you. We seek your face. We ask for your mercy and grace. We ask for wisdom and your divine hand of guidance and deliverance.

Hear us, Lord.

Lord, look upon the homeless and indigent, those families who live in cars or in tent homes, those who make their beds under bridges viaducts and overpasses with no resources to "shelter in place."

Lord, we pray that the Church will now arise and be the Church. To be the hands and feet of Jesus, and to remember the widow, the poor and the orphaned.

Let the Church speak with a message of hope and with prayers of healing and deliverance — even as it mourns in repentance for its sins of greed, hypocrisy and turning from you.

Be a guardian of single mothers, the elderly and the infirm who are now cut off from family. Be a shield to medical workers and staff, researchers and first responders.

Let our leaders speak truth. Lord, tie the tongues of liars who would deceive the people. Let this time of isolation be a time of holy consecration, penitence, family rededication and meditation.

Let the spirit of community and brotherhood arise. Let us remember to love our neighbor as ourselves—to look out for one another.

Lord, every now and then, we need reminders. Reminders of our human frailty. Reminders of our powerlessness — in spite of our own pride and sense of economic, political or social status.

So Lord, we thank you.

Oh Lord, we give you thanks.

Thank you, Lord, for watching over us. For deliverance. For the faith and wisdom to seek the grace and mercy of an invisible God, even as an invisible enemy encroaches. By your Spirit, we shall prevail.

Finally, Lord. Hear us in this season of penitence as we fast and pray and confess before you our sins. Purge us of any wrongdoing, and now by your Holy Spirit prepare our hearts for that time, and may it be soon, when as forgiven people we can celebrate the Holy Supper together, and in the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Maranatha, even so, come Lord Jesus. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

And all the people said together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.**

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

**For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.**