



NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA SYNOD

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. CHRISTOPHER deFOREST
Bishop

June 3, 2024

Dear Rostered Ministers,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Our Synod Constitution explicitly states, in Article S7.41. – “Holy Communion shall be celebrated at each regular Synod Assembly.” As we know, this Assembly is a “hybrid” meeting. One-third of our voting members will be actively participating via online means – in this case, Zoom, which allows for live, real-time presence and participation.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic, our Synod Assemblies met for three years, 2020-2022, entirely online. All of those Assembly meetings celebrated worship together, gathered in community, online. None of them, however, celebrated Holy Communion. We were out of compliance with our Constitution, because of the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic; and because, as a synod, we maintained the position that fasting from Holy Communion during the period of the pandemic, would be the generally acknowledged policy and practice for our Synod. Let me explicitly define what “fasting from Holy Communion” means. It means that, as a synod, we were not encouraging congregations to practice “online Holy Communion.” That is, inviting persons not physically present in that worship assembly in their church, to have bread and wine or grape juice available in their home, and while participating in the worship service online, eating and drinking that bread and wine in communion with their congregation.

When I became bishop in January 2021, I continued this policy, of fasting, as established by our previous bishop, Samuel Zeiser. An important part of that policy, however, was that this was not some kind of directive or rule, to which there would be consequences if not followed. In fact, Bishop Zeiser, and I in turn, left the decision to be made at the local level, by each congregation and their rostered ministers and their lay leadership, based on their own prayer, deliberation, and discernment.

For full disclosure: as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Kutztown, after much prayer and research and reflection, we decided to practice online Holy Communion. However, we established clear boundaries. We maintained live, simultaneous, interactive assembly, by using Zoom, rather than YouTube or even Facebook Live. We asked those on Zoom to keep their video on. And we asked them to have bread, wine or grape juice on hand, that they acquired themselves, present with them at the table where they are gathered in worship, in their homes or other community spaces.

These were extraordinary means, for extraordinary times. Thankfully, the pandemic has been reduced to levels that allow us to return to safe public gathering. And we can all admit that there is real, even superior value to us gathering in-person whenever possible, especially for worship. At the same time, we can recognize that there are persons who cannot be present for reasons that are greater than convenience or discomfort.

In the midst of this moment, it is essential that we also bring to bear the historical teachings of our church. Our Lutheran Confessions, five centuries old, still have much to teach and guide us. For example,

in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII, it is written: “For [Holy Communion] includes the entire action or administration of the sacrament: that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed...”

From this, one of the primary questions to answer is: “What is a Christian assembly?” This is what each congregation and its leadership must discern. As Bishop of this synod, I would encourage practices that give preference to in-person gathering. This is best, especially for worship. However, I believe that “Christian assembly” does not necessarily exclude persons who assemble online – especially if they do so through simultaneous, interactive means, such as Zoom. And, that extraordinary circumstances, beyond the pandemic, can continue to exist, that give value to creating a hybrid worship service.

I believe that this particular Synod Assembly, with its large hybrid community, whose voting members are fully participating in the Assembly meeting, by voice and vote, by simultaneous attendance – this 2024 Synod Assembly Meeting constitutes an extraordinary circumstance. So, for our Festival Worship on Saturday, June 8, at 9am, we will invite all, who have prepared elements at home, to feel free to participate. If this practice does not fit your understanding of the sacrament, or your own conscience, or the practice of your congregation, you may certainly choose to fast or abstain, and encourage others under your charge or guidance to do the same.

I will be communicating this out directly to all those who are registered as voting members on Zoom. I will not extend this particular invitation in advance to all those who plan to watch the service online via YouTube. This is to emphasize the difference made by live, simultaneous, interactive participation.

So, those voting members attending by Zoom, will be invited to prepare their own elements of bread, wine, or grape juice, and have them ready as they attend our Festival Worship on Saturday morning.

For now, this does not represent a wholesale change in the recommendation coming from me as your bishop. I still maintain that the most beneficial practice is to participate in worship in-person, where your worshipping community is bodily gathered. If you cannot gather there, due to illness or infirmity, then the Eucharist can still be sent out, by Lay Eucharistic ministers or visiting pastors or deacons. However, if your congregation discerns that extraordinary circumstances still exist for your community, you may discern to continue online practices as the Holy Spirit leads and guides you, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher deForest". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Christopher deForest
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America