

Celebrating the Sacraments in a Time of Emergency/Pandemic

A Statement from the PC(USA) Office of Theology and Worship – March 25, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted basic patterns of life, including the basic patterns of life of the body of Christ. The gathered body of Christ must not, for a season, gather in bodily form. Care for the sick, the dying, the grieving, and the anxious must, for this season of social distancing, take unfamiliar and irregular forms. We are presented with challenges not anticipated in our confessions or polity; nevertheless, the resources of our tradition can help us make faithful decisions in light of rapidly changing events and new contexts for ministry.

Particular questions have been raised about the celebration of the sacraments at this time. A March 11, 2020, [advisory opinion](#) from the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly included guidance on the celebration of the Lord's Supper. A second [advisory opinion](#) on March 24, 2020, expanded the options available to congregations. This follow-up statement is offered in response to further questions that have emerged in this season of our life as a denomination.

As congregations seek to discern faithful forms of worship and service at this time, certain theological considerations are critical to remember:

- The work of God in creation and incarnation is expressed through the embodied nature of the sacraments and of the gathered community (W-10103, W-1.0104).
- The proclamation of the word and celebration of the sacraments together bear witness to the presence and action of Christ in the church (W-1.0106).
- Christian worship involves the interwoven dimensions of time, space, and matter, all created, redeemed, and sanctified by God (W-1.0201).
- The sacraments express and reflect our covenantal theology, rooted in the relational dynamics of giving and receiving, serving and being served (W-3.0402, W-3.0409).
- The sacraments are communal events, taking place in the context of the gathering of the people of God as the body of Christ (W-3.0402, W-3.0409).
- The sacraments have profound ecumenical implications, binding us together with the one holy catholic and apostolic church (W-3.0402, W-3.0409).
- The Reformed tradition has resisted emergency celebrations of the sacraments, urging rather that they be observed “without undue haste or undue delay” (W-3.0403).
- Sacramental celebrations “shall be authorized by the session and administered by a minister of the Word and Sacrament” (W-3.0403, W-3.0410).

With these themes in mind, we note the variety of ways in which Presbyterian congregations and other denominational partners have sought to navigate these challenges.

1. Some are calling for a season of lament and fasting from sacramental celebration during this time of refraining from other forms of intimate communion, anticipating the joyful feast we will share when we are once again “all together in one place” (Acts 2:1).
2. Some are seeking ways to “reaffirm our baptism” or “remember our communion” during this time apart, emphasizing the spiritual bonds that continue to connect us through non-sacramental affirmations or remembrances of baptism and communion.

3. Some are exploring forms of service inspired by sacramental worship, for instance focusing on making and equipping disciples as an expression of our baptismal calling, or organizing ministries of feeding as an outgrowth of our eucharistic formation.
4. Some are making use of the church's provisions for baptism apart from public worship (W-3.0402) and the extended serving of communion (W-3.0414), in which the larger congregation is represented by one or more members.
5. Some are experimenting with online celebrations of the sacraments, making use of new technology and relying on virtual presence as a form of pastoral care in a time of crisis. This possibility is described in the latest advisory opinion.

Being one in Christ during this time and in the days that follow it requires that we exercise thoughtful forbearance with one another. Let us take to heart Paul's call to the congregation at Ephesus: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:1-5).