



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

POST OFFICE BOX 5606
10330 STAPLES MILL ROAD

GLEN ALLEN, VIRGINIA 23058-5606

Sharma D. Lewis
RESIDENT BISHOP

Cabinet
OF THE VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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A Statement on Holy Communion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In this extraordinary season of suspended corporate worship, clergy are challenged to examine how to live out our calling to sacramental ministry. As clergy have heard and felt the sincere expression of our laity for communion with one another, this naturally has led to conversations about the use and possible adaptation of the Service of Word and Table for our present, scattered context. We view these conversations to be a faithful and healthy expression of our Wesleyan character. How may we offer a nimble, pastoral approach to this crisis, and at the same time honor our sacred traditions of sacramental ministry?

Bishop Sharma Lewis, the Cabinet, and the Center for Clergy Excellence of the Virginia Conference offer this list of resources and options for pastors to use within their mission context.

Endorsed Practices and Available Resources

The following practices are within the bounds of our tradition and we endorse them for use throughout the Virginia Conference.

A. Yearning for Communion

- a. Placing the elements, or simply the chalice and paten, in a central, visible spot for our online worship services to serve as a reminder and a foretaste of the sacrament we are unable to share in person. Churches would refrain from the celebration of the Eucharist during this interim period.
- b. This practice calls our attention to a stark absence we feel in many of our communities in this between time. In our longing for this meal, we can draw nearer to Christ and sharpen our hunger for the Eucharistic Meal that we will share when the pandemic fades.

B. Love feast

- a. Though the Love Feast is distinct from Communion, this historic celebration of the intimacy of the bands and classes may be carried out online or in small groups practicing physical distancing, and could speak to some of the pastoral needs introduced by discontinued corporate worship.
- b. A liturgy for the Love Feast is found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship #581*.

C. Additional Resources

- a. [*This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*](#)
- b. [*Comfort Food: Feast of Love Liturgy*](#) by Marcia McFee
- c. [*A Liturgy for When We Cannot Meet*](#) by the Order of St. Luke

Online Communion Moratorium

Clergy and congregations should uphold the current moratorium on online Communion that was called for in 2013. We recognize that other Conferences and Jurisdictions have, in some cases, allowed for online Communion in their own guidelines. We also recognize the technological possibilities for online worship will continue to raise this question for us. We, as Virginia Conference leaders humbly considering this option in an exceptional time, are not of one mind about the appropriateness of this practice to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and hence cannot offer a unanimous endorsement of online communion.

As your Bishop, I, Sharma Lewis, note that at the Laity Re-Connect event held on February 8, 2020, I was asked by the Planning Team to facilitate Communion at Woodlake UMC and the five satellite sites around the

Conference. As your Bishop, my action to offer online communion at that time was inappropriate. I humbly ask you to accept my apology and forgive me. However, in these critical times the Cabinet and I have prayerfully explored online communion and we feel called to uphold the current standard.

We present the options in the section above to fulfill the desire to reach out to our congregations in these unusual times. We feel that these recommendations represent a faithful response to the urgency of the present moment, as well as to our Wesleyan heritage of sacramental theology. Our prayers are with all the commissioned and ordained servant-leaders of our Conference, as we seek to draw together in the bonds of fellowship and yearn for the resumption of our practice of corporate worship.

Signed:

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis

Cabinet of the Virginia Conference

Center for Clergy Excellence of the Virginia Conference