



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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RESIDENT BISHOP

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OF THE VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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In this extraordinary season of pandemic and the safety precautions necessary to prevent infection, 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?

After considerable deliberation with a diversity of theological perspectives, Bishop Sharma Lewis and the Cabinet of the Virginia Conference offer an updated list of resources and new options for clergy to use within their mission context. In this **new version of the work last done April 3, 2020**, we now offer the clergy and the churches of the Conference an option to develop online communion. If you have questions about this document and the options for communion, please do not hesitate to contact your District Superintendent. You may begin this work as soon as you feel comfortable, or not at all if you are not theologically comfortable.

Signed: Bishop Sharma D. Lewis  
Cabinet of the Virginia Conference

## A Statement on Holy Communion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**This is an updated set of offerings to the Virginia Conference, after prayer, consideration, and in light of the extreme duration and more complex nature of holding in-person worship in an age of pandemic.**

### 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 for A&B**

- 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

#### D. **Online Communion**

In offering the following considerations for online communion, we find ourselves in new territory opened up by the technological innovations of our age. As a denomination, we have not completed the discussions that led a group of United Methodist leaders, in 2013, to call for a moratorium on online communion to allow further study. We recognize that our denomination continues to struggle with this practice, and this may be revisited at a future date by either the Conference or the Denomination. We trust that clergy will be wise and judicious in struggling to be faithful to the call to sacramental ministry in this season. For that reason, we allow the possibility of online communion for the period in which in person worship may have limitations, recognizing that this abnormal period challenges us to consider practices on which we have not achieved clarity or unanimity. **This is an allowance for a time, not a settled practice**, and when churches may once again offer unlimited in-person worship, the Bishop may signal that the period for this practice has ended. **No clergy person should feel that they are obligated to offer online communion.**

Following the work of other bishops and conferences, we offer the following guidelines for online communion:

### ***Specific Guidelines for Practice for Online Communities***

## Here is what is necessary for any expression, celebration or participation.

1. *Explanation:* Presiding clergy must explain to those participating that the practice of online communion is an extraordinary means for observing the sacrament and that it is only permitted for the present crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. *Service of Word and Table:* Use the Communion liturgy found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, or other appropriate source. The consecration of the bread and the cup must be done by a licensed, ordained, or associate clergy member.
3. *Elements:* Bread or crackers and grape juice are preferable.
4. *Presiding:* The clergy person presides both for those worship participants present in the room and for those online.
5. *Precautions:* Special care should be taken to ensure the health of all participants. While the presider may use a single cup and loaf for the Great Thanksgiving, no common cup or loaf should be used for those receiving from the presider.

### Additional Resources for Online Communion

- A. Attached, please find our Guidelines and Sample Liturgy for the Virginia Conference.
- B. Given the Technical Assistance Manual's overall instructions, there will need to be an HCT plan if there are plans for giving out communion elements in drive by or in person situations prior to online communion. Versions of limited (small groups, etc.) in person communion will always need an HCT plan as well. You will not need an HCT plan for simply adding online communion into your online worship if you rely on the community to provide its own elements.
- C. We commend the reading of [Bishop Palmer's statement on online communion "in extremis"](#) and [Bishop Kenneth Carter's reflections on online communion](#).
- D. This is a good set of [resources for online as well as non-online communion](#) from the Florida Conference in an age of pandemic.
- E. For specific recommendations on how to prepare home participants for an online communion service, we commend the North Georgia Conference's FAQ on [Holy Communion and Online Worship](#).

In these critical times we have explored Online Communion once again, as we did initially in March, 2020. We present these options with the new option for online communion to fulfill the desire to reach out to our congregations and the wider community in these *in extremis* times.

We, as the leadership of the Virginia Conference, feel that the above 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 the clergy and laity 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.

## Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church

### Appointive Cabinet Guidelines and Liturgy for Virtual Communion

#### Guidelines

- Virtual communion, albeit digitally transmitted and celebrated, is always a “live” or a real-time event. It is not to be recorded and then distributed or re-broadcasted for people to *individually* partake of it at a different time without a virtually gathered community. It is not to be recorded and used or transmitted at any other time than when the community is physically gathered through any electronic means. *If you record your service and ‘premier’ or publish it online at your service time, with the gathering of your community, that is considered “live” and a gathered community.*
- The congregation should receive notice by appropriate means in a timely fashion so that members can prepare to participate in the sacrament.
- Participants should have bread or crackers available and grape juice, if possible. If grape juice is not available, simply use a suitable substitute (i.e. juice, water).
- Liturgy should be sent via email or text to people ahead of time if possible so they can follow along and still have the visual connection. Alternatively, the liturgy may be projected through the streaming platform should a church have such a capability. If liturgy is mailed in paper form, please use all sanitation care for that process - masks and gloves, etc.

#### **An announcement at the Beginning of the Sacrament of Communion in Worship:**

##### Rationale:

Christ’s Table must always be prepared for the sacrament of communion. Virtual communion requires proactive verbal and non-verbal preparation to provide the communion contextualization; this is especially needed because of the novel nature of virtual communion in our United Methodist tradition during this *in extremis* season.

Virtual communion, albeit an electronic extension of Christ’s Table, is necessarily communal in nature. Therefore, it is important that any announcement make a clear distinction between a public gathering of the community online and a recording watched after-the-fact without the gathered community. How this differentiation can be facilitated is contextual in nature dependent upon the level of technology capabilities of a given church. If you have questions about this, please contact your District Superintendent.

Additionally, it is important that the people at home are not distracted at the time of the Great Thanksgiving trying to get the elements ready.

## **Preparing the Elements** (sample narrative):

*If you are watching and participating in today's service as the gathered community, we will include sharing in Holy Communion [the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or whatever name is common for your congregation]. If you are watching and participating on a later recorded version of a prior worship service, we hope you will be blessed during this time together, and we invite you to join us again on [insert date/time] for the communion part of what you will observe on this recording.*

*Please take a moment to spiritually prepare your hearts as you also prepare your Communion elements.*

*You will want to gather: bread/crackers and grape juice. If you do not have grape juice, use your best judgment on a replacement (i.e. juice, water).*

[Adequate time needs to be given for individuals to gather the elements as an act of hospitality for those who are digitally "visiting" or who were unaware to prepare beforehand. This would be an appropriate time for special music, silence, etc.]

## **Introductory Words** (Clergy sample narrative):

*We are experiencing Holy Communion in a new way today. Though physically separated from one another, we are still bound together as family through our baptism and as the children of God. As members of the household of God we now join together virtually, yet still present to one another as we gather from across the miles.*

*This presence is marked by our shared praises and prayers, our shared hearing and affirming of God's Word, and now our shared partaking of God's Holy Meal that transcends both time and space as a means of grace. And now, let us share in the Confession of our sins, the forgiveness of God, and the Great Thanksgiving.*

## **The Clergy Proceeds with the Confession, Pardon, and Great Thanksgiving**

### Rationale:

While virtual in nature during these *in extremis* times, the fundamental practices of the Eucharistic celebration remain unchanged. The clergy should refer to *The United Methodist Hymnal* or *United Methodist Book of Worship* as a resource for these liturgical practices and language. It is important to note that during this season of challenge and disorientation, the historical liturgy might well be a source of strength and comfort for those we serve as pastors.

## **A Possible Prayer After Receiving**

**Day after day after day you give yourself to us: in two or more gathered in your name, in connection across the miles, and in bread and wine. As we go from this gathering around your most sacred table, may we feel restored to your body, companioned by your people, and sustained by the power of your Spirit as we witness to your healing and reconciling work. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.\***

[When the service concludes, a leader should instruct the congregation that their remaining Communion elements can be consumed or explain to the gathered community the elements should be appropriately returned to the earth.]

\*Partially adapted from: <https://www.la-umc.org/newsdetail/holy-communion-in-the-midst-of-a-global-pandemic-13534687>; the Revs. Lane Cotton Winn and Juan Huertas, and <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/online-communion>.