



**Greater Milwaukee Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's Work. Our Hands.

A Pastoral Letter on Eucharistic Practices  
October 2018

Dear friends in Christ:

As I travel around the synod and across the church, one of the questions I am frequently asked is, “What’s the most surprising thing you have encountered in your time as bishop?” While I could answer that every day is filled with surprises, some delightful and others not so much, I have generally answered that I’ve been surprised at the frequency with which questions surrounding who can preside at the eucharist have arisen and the level of energy around these questions. This has happened often enough that it seems that it may be helpful to answer them in a more public manner so that folks can understand how I interpret and seek to be faithful to the principles and practices that guide us in the ELCA. While I am aware that such a letter may be perceived as legalistic or rules-oriented, my hope is that we will come to a more deeply held and common understanding of the important role that the eucharist plays in our weekly worship services and the need for care and attention in how we administer and celebrate each week.

The majority of questions that have come to me regarding eucharistic practices have centered on what to do when an ordained pastor is not present for a regular communion service. I have been asked to write letters granting authorization for lay leaders, seminarians, and others to preside at the table, often when the pastor is away on vacation or otherwise unable to be present for the service. I have also been asked if it is proper for a pastor to “bless” the elements prior to the worship service, or to consecrate ahead of time an amount of bread and wine sufficient for coming services at which he or she will not be present.

My response to these questions is guided by the ELCA document, “The Use of the Means of Grace” (approved by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 1997 and available at [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)). Specifically, Principle 40 (page 45) of this document states,

*In witness that this sacrament is a celebration of the Church, serving its unity, an ordained minister presides in the service of Holy Communion and proclaims the Great Thanksgiving. Where it is not possible for an extended period of time to provide ordained pastoral leadership, a synodical bishop may authorize a properly trained lay person to preside for a specified period of time and in a given location only.*

This principle is written in this way not because ordination grants special powers to the ordained which only they possess, but because the eucharist does not belong to any particular congregation or worshipping community; it is a gift from Christ, given to the Church. As the background statement to this principle states,

*In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. He is the shepherd who leads the people of God, the prophet who announces the Word of God, the priest who celebrates the mystery of God. In most churches, this presidency is signified by an ordained minister. The one who presides at the eucharistic celebration in the name of Christ makes clear that the rite is not the assembly's own creation or possession; the eucharist is*



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*received as a gift from Christ living in his church. The minister of the eucharist is the ambassador who represents the divine initiative and expresses the connection of the local community with other local communities in the universal Church.*

While there have been times when I have granted authorization to Synodically Authorized Ministers, lay people who can then preside at the eucharist in a specific location for a period of up to one year, this does not apply to situations in which the pastor will be absent for a brief period of time (i.e., several weeks). Congregations who anticipate a pastoral absence are encouraged to either contract with an ordained pastor who may be available to preside on a temporary basis (pulpit and altar supply) or to plan for a Service of the Word, a non-eucharistic liturgy.

I am including with this letter a document that answers some of the more specific and practical questions that I have received, and I invite anyone who has additional questions not addressed in these documents to contact me so that we can continue the conversation. Both documents will also be housed on the synod website at [www.milwaukeesynod.org](http://www.milwaukeesynod.org).

I am taking the time to write about this because I believe that the eucharist is central to our life and witness as Christian communities and because I believe that its importance and centrality is best honored by careful attention to how we practice it.

In Christ,

Bishop Paul D. Erickson