
New advisory opinion on congregations celebrating communion

March 25, 2020 by Leslie Scanlon (<https://pres-outlook.org/author/lesliescanlon/>)



The Office of the General Assembly has released a new advisory opinion

(https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communic from J. Herbert Nelson, the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), about how congregations can celebrate communion in an emergency or pandemic.

A key question: Can a PC(USA) congregation celebrate the Lord's Supper if it is meeting virtually — not in person?

Yes, according to the new advisory opinion, titled “Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic” and released March 24.

“In emergency circumstances there may be situations in which the pastoral needs of that moment require that the church take actions that run contrary to normal practice,” the advisory opinion states. A session of a congregation or church council may determine that includes celebrating communion online, the opinion states, giving

determine that includes celebrating communion online, the opinion states — giving instruction to guide sessions in making that decision.

“When circumstances limit the ability of the congregation to gather in person for a lengthy period of time, the session may decide for pastoral reasons to authorize the Lord’s Supper during a service in which worshippers are participating virtually,” the advisory opinion states. “It should do so after thorough exploration of the theology of the Lord’s Supper using Scripture, the Confessions and the Book of Order and with a clear understanding of why the Session is making the decision and how those who will participate in the Lord’s Supper at home will receive the sacrament as a means of God’s grace.”

The opinion also acknowledges that this determination differs from advice given in an earlier March 12 advisory opinion (<https://pres-outlook.org/2020/03/church-in-an-emergency-pandemic-advisory-opinion-from-the-office-of-the-general-assembly/>)— an opinion that relied on the principles of the Directory for Worship, which assumes an in-person celebration. Decisions made during a pandemic that prevent in-person worship don’t change the PC(USA)’s understanding of the meaning and practice of the Lord’s Supper, the opinion states.

Here is the full text of the new advisory opinion.

Advisory Opinion Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic

May a congregation celebrate the Lord’s Supper within an electronic worship service during an emergency or pandemic?

Yes.

The Book of Order gives the responsibility to the Session (and other councils) to authorize the celebration of the Lord’s Supper at least quarterly, ... in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship. (G-3.0301b.) Councils may choose to authorize the celebration as a form of pastoral care so that those receiving communion are able to receive the sacrament as a means of God’s grace. (W-3.0410)

In emergency circumstances there may be situations in which the pastoral needs of that moment require that the church take actions that run contrary to normal practice. During an emergency or a pandemic in which the church is unable to gather or advised not to gather in person for reasons of public health, a congregation’s session may determine that this includes observing communion online.

Is this advice different from the advice given in early March, 2020?

Yes.

Previous advice followed the principles in the Directory for Worship which assumes in person celebration of communion followed by the extension of the table by persons in ordered ministry to those who might not be able to participate in the worship service in person. (W-3.0414: Communion)

Decisions made within an emergency or during a pandemic which precludes the church from meeting in person are not to be taken as changing this denomination's understanding of the meaning and practice of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as found within the Directory for Worship. That understanding has been worked out in deeply Presbyterian ways: through careful reflection, study, discussion, and through making decisions collectively.

How does a Session or other council authorize the Lord's Supper in an emergency situation or during a pandemic?

The Book of Order gives the responsibility to the Session (and other councils) to authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly, in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship.

The principles of the Directory for Worship include guidance on the theology underlying the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Councils are required to ensure that those individuals who will extend the service of communion are equipped with the theological means to provide pastoral care so that those receiving communion are able to receive the sacrament as a means of grace.

(W-3.0410 v W-3.0414)

When circumstances limit the ability of the congregation to gather in person for a lengthy period of time, the session may decide for pastoral reasons to authorize the Lord's Supper during a service in which worshippers are participating virtually. It should do so after thorough exploration of the theology of the Lord's Supper using Scripture, the Confessions and the Book of Order and with a clear understanding of why the Session is making the decision and how those who will participate in the Lord's Supper at home will receive the sacrament as a means of God's grace.

The following Book of Order provisions can be helpful to this discernment:

- F-1.0101
- F-1.02, F-1.03, F-1.04

- G-3.0101, 3.0201 a, b & c
- W-1.0106, W-1.0107, W-1.0203, W-1.0204
- W-3.0306, W-3.0309

W-3.0401, W-3.0402, W-3.0410, W-3.0411, W-3.0412, W-3.0413, W-3.0414

The council should be clear that their decision is one of emphasizing the unity of the body in an extraordinary time when we are not able to worship or be together in person.

How does a session or council authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a non-emergency or non-pandemic time?

As stated above, the Book of Order gives the responsibility to the Session (and other councils) to authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly, in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship.

The principles of the Directory for Worship include guidance on the theology underlying the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Directory for Worship assumes that the Lord's Supper will be administered in person in a gathered assembly, after which it may be taken beyond the initial worship service to those who are home-bound or shut in, as an extension of that worship service, by two persons in ordered ministry. (W-3.0414)

The Directory for Worship identifies several theological reasons for this including:

Embodiment:

Christianity is an embodied faith. The first Christians worshiped at the temple and in synagogues, homes, cata-combs, and prisons. The important thing was not the place, but the gathering of Christ's body-the people of God-and the presence of Christ among them in Word and Sacrament. (W-1.0203 : Space)

Community:

The Sacraments are the Word of God enacted and sealed in the life of the Church, the body of Christ. They are gracious acts of God, by which Christ Jesus offers his life to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. They are also human acts of gratitude, by which we offer our lives to God in love and service. The Sacraments are both physical signs and spiritual gifts, including words and actions, surrounded by prayer, in the context of the Church's common worship. They employ ordinary things-the basic elements of water, bread, and wine-in proclaiming the extraordinary love of God. (W-3.0401)

Meaning:

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper offers an abundant feast of theological meaning, including: thanksgiving to God the Father; remembrance of Jesus Christ; invocation of the Holy Spirit; communion in the body of Christ; and a meal of the realm of God. The Reformed tradition understands the Lord's Supper to be a sign of God's covenant. The

Reformed tradition understands the Lord's Supper to be a sign of God's covenant. The bread of the Lord's Supper is linked with the bread of Passover and the gift of manna in the wilderness. The Lord's Supper thus connects us with God's saving power and providential care from generation to generation. Like the offering of sacrifices, a sign of Israel's thanksgiving for God's faithfulness, the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of praise and a sign of our gratitude for God's steadfast love. The Lord's Supper represents God's gracious invitation to an everlasting covenant. The Lord's Supper also reflects our calling to feed others as we have been fed, and offers a foretaste of that heavenly banquet when God will wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.

The Lord's Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord's Supper is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ nourishes us in righteousness, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit renews the Church in its identity and sends the Church to mission in the world.

When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world. (W-3.0409)

Download the full advisory opinion with explanatory footnotes:
[advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic](#)

Tagged With: [COVID19 \(https://pres-outlook.org/tag/covid19/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/tag/covid19/) • [sacraments \(https://pres-outlook.org/tag/sacraments/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/tag/sacraments/)



Add a comment...



Le Anne Clausen de Montes

I do think it is best *not* to take elements around to people's homes during this time. Even the best of us are just not that good at maintaining a 'sterile field' against such a virulent strain. Our local school district is moving to 'knock and drop' emergency food deliveries, and even with gloves on, it's a challenge for them. Even dropping off a little pre-packaged cup/wafer thingy-- it has to ride in someone's car; it has to be picked up and handled by the volunteer, who may themselves be an asymptomatic carrier and not realize it. Packaging it in a larger box for delivery does little good,... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 4w



Alan Meyers

Very good! Any guidance on exactly how this is to be done by those worshipping from home? Do they need to use grape juice (or wine)? May other beverages be used, if a household does not have those beverages? Etc.

Like · Reply · 2 · 4w

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

Comments



Timothy Luoma from Plattsburgh, NY says

March 25, 2020 at 10:11 pm (<https://pres-outlook.org/2020/03/new-advisory-opinion-on-congregations-celebrating-communion/#comment-176572>)

For those looking for the download mentioned in the last line, you can get it here:

https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf

(https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf)

Log in to Reply (<https://pres-outlook.org/wp-login.php?>

[redirect_to=https%3A%2F%2Fpres-outlook.org%2F2020%2F03%2Fnew-advisory-opinion-on-congregations-celebrating-communion%2F](https://pres-outlook.org/wp-login.php?redirect_to=https%3A%2F%2Fpres-outlook.org%2F2020%2F03%2Fnew-advisory-opinion-on-congregations-celebrating-communion%2F))

Trackbacks

Presbyterian leaders seek ways to support congregations responding to COVID-19 - The Presbyterian Outlook (<https://pres-outlook.org/2020/03/presbyterian-leaders-seek-ways-to-support-congregations-responding-to-covid-19/>) says:

March 27, 2020 at 10:14 am (<https://pres-outlook.org/2020/03/new-advisory-opinion-on-congregations-celebrating-communion/#comment-176624>)

on-congregations-celebrating-communion/#comment-176624)
[...] into the realities of contextual ministry in the midst of a pandemic. On March 24, he released a new advisory opinion stating that congregations could celebrate communion during online worship – a change from an [...]

You must be logged in (https://pres-outlook.org/wp-login.php?redirect_to=https%3A%2F%2Fpres-outlook.org%2F2020%2F03%2Fnew-advisory-opinion-on-congregations-celebrating-communion%2F) to post a comment.

RELATED POSTS

LPTS WOMEN'S ORDINATION ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

([HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/2006/04/LPTS-WOMENS-ORDINATION-ANNIVERSARY-CELEBRATION/](https://pres-outlook.org/2006/04/lpts-womens-ordination-anniversary-celebration/))

LOUISVILLE -- In some ways, the anniversaries of women's ordination that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in the midst of celebrating this year -- 100 years for deacons, 75 years for elders, 50 years for ministers -- are momentous, historic events. And in other ways they are like a panorama...

BILLY GRAHAM BRINGS HIS CRUSADE TO LOUISVILLE

([HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/2001/06/BILLY-GRAHAM-BRINGS-HIS-CRUSADE-TO-LOUISVILLE/](https://pres-outlook.org/2001/06/billy-graham-brings-his-crusade-to-louisville/))

Speaking Thursday night, June 21, to a crowd of 37,500, the 82-year-old evangelist who's been revered for more than 50 years, spoke of the racial tension "smoldering underneath" American cities today. "The only answer to the race problem is love," Graham said -- and God is love. He later told...

OUTLOOK REPORTER, ART DIRECTOR HONORED BY ASSOCIATED CHURCH PRESS ([HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/2004/04/OUTLOOK-REPORTER-ART-DIRECTOR-HONORED-BY-ASSOCIATED-CHURCH-PRESS/](https://pres-outlook.org/2004/04/outlook-reporter-art-director-honored-by-associated-church-press/))

Bailey won an honorable mention for best redesign. During the past year — his first with the magazine — he oversaw improvements in both the appearance and printing of The Outlook. Scanlon also received a first-place award for "professional resource" for an article she wrote for U. S. Catholic on...

TWEET WITH US

(<https://twitter.com/presoutlook>)

BE A FACEBOOK FAN

(<https://www.facebook.com/presbyterian.outlook>)

OUR WORLD IN PHOTOS

(<https://instagram.com/presoutlook>)

PIN WITH US

(<https://www.pinterest.com/presoutlook>)

CONTACT US:


1 N. 5th St., Suite 500

Richmond, VA 23219

T: 800-446-6008 F: 804-353-6369

info@pres-outlook.org

(<mailto:info@pres-outlook.org>)

OR  **FILL OUT OUR CONTACT FORM (/CONTACT/)**

[MINISTRY RESOURCES \(HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/CATEGORY/MINISTRY-RESOURCES/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/)

[CLASSIFIEDS \(HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/CATEGORY/CLASSIFIEDS/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/category/classifieds/)

[ABOUT US \(HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/US/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/us/)

[PRESBYTERIAN HUB \(HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/CATEGORY/PRESBYTERIAN-HUB/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/category/presbyterian-hub/)

[ADVERTISE WITH THE OUTLOOK \(HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/ADVERTISE-US/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/advertise-us/)

[SUBMISSIONS \(HTTPS://PRES-OUTLOOK.ORG/HOMEPAGE/SUBMISSIONS/\)](https://pres-outlook.org/homepage/submissions/)