

First Communion: A Policy Statement The Lutheran Church of Singapore September 2007

I. The Proposed Policy of the Lutheran Church of Singapore on First Communion

Traditionally, Lutheran churches permitted the communing of those children baptized in infancy only after catechetical instruction and the rite of confirmation. However, in recent years many Lutherans and other Christians (e.g., Anglicans) have allowed children to commune at an earlier age.

It is proposed that the Lutheran Church in Singapore permit children aged 8 (approximately) to receive Holy Communion prior to confirmation. The decision about whether a particular child will begin communing will follow a conversation involving the pastor, the child, and his/her parents concerning the child's readiness. Furthermore, an early communion will be preceded by instruction in the meaning of Holy Communion that helps the child to understand and receive the spiritual gifts of the sacrament.

The purpose of this document is to provide the historical, theological and pastoral background and rationale for the Ministerium's proposal. In a very preliminary way, it will outline the goals of first communion instruction as well as give suggestions for liturgical practice when children receive their first communion in a Sunday service.

II. Historical Perspective

The New Testament offers very little if any information about admission to Holy Communion. Acts 2.41-47 suggests that nothing more than a profession of faith and water baptism initiated people into the fellowship of the Lord's Supper. Other passages in Acts (8.14-17, 19.1-7) that speak of an apostolic laying on of hands as a supplement to an earlier water baptism are generally regarded by scholars as irregular situations that do not reflect the common apostolic practice.¹ The short narrative about Eutychus being raised from the dead (Acts 20.7-12), which refers to the Lord's Supper (i.e., "breaking bread"), gives no indication that anything more than baptism was required for communing membership in the church. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the apostolic-era church made no distinction between a baptized membership and a communing membership, which the practice of delaying communion until after confirmation tends to imply.

During the first several centuries after the apostolic period, baptism itself clearly admitted the baptized to Holy Communion, insofar as the two sacraments take place in the same service. Following is a brief survey of the evidence in some of the more important early liturgical documents:

¹See Maxwell E Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 24-25.

- In his *First Apology* a Roman Christian named Justin (ca 160 CE), describes a practice whereby just-baptized persons are immediately escorted into the liturgical assembly where they partake of Holy Communion.²
- A document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*, ascribed to a Roman presbyter (priest) named Hippolytus (ca. 217 CE) outlines a baptismal service that is followed by a Holy Communion that included not only the newly baptized receiving the bread and wine, but also a cup of milk and honey (chapters 20 and 21). This document also indicates that very young children (“those who cannot speak for themselves”) were among those to be baptized.³ Although there is no explicit reference to these infants receiving Holy Communion, there is nothing to indicate the contrary.
- The *Gelasian Sacramentary*, a liturgical book from the late fifth century, contains a baptismal rite that assumes that most candidates are infants and that the rites of initiation will culminate with communion.⁴
- Around the year 500 CE a Roman deacon named John wrote a letter to a nobleman in which he states that all the rites of initiation – including first reception of Holy Communion – “are done even to infants.”⁵
- A set of liturgical directions (“rubrics”) from the eighth century, known as the *Ordo Romanus XI* states that after the baptismal rites, members of the baptismal group “go in to Mass and all the infants receive communion.”⁶

The above suggests, in fact, that Holy Communion was one of the rites of initiation in the early church. Regarding the relationship of baptism and communion, liturgical historian James F. White concludes that “...it is important for contemporary debates that for nearly twelve centuries, both West and East were agreed that communion was part of initiation. Infant communion has a long, if forgotten, history throughout Christendom.”⁷

Over the centuries, however, the church moved away from the practice of communing infants and young children, due in large part to developments in the theology and practice of Holy Communion. The withdrawal of the cup from the laity made it impossible for infants to commune, since, being unable to digest the bread, they could only receive a small amount of wine placed into their mouths. It was the case, then, that the communion of infants ceased for *practical* reasons rather than for any theological reasons related directly to the infants themselves.

² E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, revised and expanded by Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 3.

³ *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 7.

⁴ *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 212-236.

⁵ *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 211.

⁶ *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 251.

⁷ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 81.

III. Theological Perspective

As the historical summary above shows, admission to Holy Communion was for centuries based on *baptism*. Accordingly, the rationale for first communion today must have its basis in a theology of baptism.

Both the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions teach that baptism is *full and complete* Christian initiation. In baptism the triune God adopts the individual as God's own child and joins him/her to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 6). Through the work of the Holy Spirit, baptism becomes a means of rebirth and renewal (John 3.5, Titus 3.5). In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther states that baptism "brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it as the words and promise of God declare."⁸

Baptism, therefore, is more than the church's ratification of a person's conversion experience or an outward sign that an infant has been born into the covenant community. It is a divine action and is therefore to be received by faith.⁹ As Luther puts it: "When the Word accompanies the water, baptism is valid, even though faith is lacking. For my faith does not make baptism; rather it receives baptism. Baptism does not become invalid if it is not properly received or used...for it is not bound to our faith but to the Word [of God]."¹⁰

Because it is God's saving deed through water and the Word, baptism is not something partial that needs to be completed by a later act of ratification by the baptized person (i.e., confirmation). It fully unites the person with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, makes him a child of God, and a member of the Church.¹¹

Baptism is therefore properly understood as *the* rite of admission to Holy Communion. To be a member of the church is to be a member of the *communing* fellowship. It is theologically problematic to suggest that something more than the divinely-instituted rite of initiation is needed for admission to the Lord's Table. Accordingly, those who are full members of the church through baptism should begin communing as soon as it is pastorally feasible.

⁸ Martin Luther, Small Catechism, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2000), 359.5-6. Henceforth, BC.

⁹ Luther, Large Catechism, BC 457.10.

¹⁰ Luther, Large Catechism, BC 463.53.

¹¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), Principle 14A.

IV. The Question of “Worthy Reception”

For many years, Lutherans were preoccupied with the question of worthy reception of Holy Communion, based upon their reading of 1 Corinthians 11.27-29.¹² In these verses, Paul ties “worthy reception” to “recognizing the body of the Lord.” Because of their doctrine of the bodily presence of Christ in the Supper,¹³ Lutherans have interpreted this passage to mean that unless a person understands the doctrine of the “real presence” of Christ in the sacramental elements, one eats and drinks to one’s judgment or “damnation.” It was then reasoned that because very young children could not understand this doctrine until their early teenage years, they should not be permitted to receive the Lord’s Supper.

However, it is questionable whether this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11.27-29 adequately considers the *pastoral context* of the entirety of chapter 11, where Paul is condemning the meal practices of the Corinthian church. Apparently, some members of the church arrived early to the eucharistic gathering—which at that time included a full fellowship meal—and feasted abundantly while poorer, working members went hungry because of their “late” arrival when much of the food was gone (vv. 20-21). For Paul this situation created a division within the church (v 18) that tainted the eucharistic actions with bread and wine, making them into something that was *not* the Lord’s Supper (v. 20). In other words, the accentuation of the rich-poor difference denied the unity of the Christian fellowship which Paul compares to a body (σῶμα) in 12.12. So for Paul not recognizing the “body” (σῶμα) really means not recognizing and fully respecting the fellowship of the Christian church!

In that case, the notion of “recognizing” or “discerning” has to do with appreciating *relationships*, not with one’s understanding a particular theology of the sacraments as has sometimes been supposed. It could therefore be argued that a Lord’s Supper that makes divisions by excluding *any* of the baptized “members of the body” is, like the Corinthian meal, something that is *not* the Supper of the Lord.

This is not to downplay or reject the Lutheran theology of the “real presence.” Rather it is to suggest that we take seriously our baptismal theology by including children as participants in the Supper as a sign of their unity and fellowship with us adults. Young children may not be able to understand fully the doctrine of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, but that understanding can, with the help of church and family, grow and develop over the years—as it does with faithful adults. Until their intellectual understanding can mature, it is enough for children to participate in Holy Communion knowing that Jesus is present and that by eating and drinking they become closer to him.

¹² “Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (NIV).

¹³ See for example, Augsburg Confession, X, BC 44.1; Smalkald Articles III.6, BC 320.1; Small Catechism BC 362.1-2; Formula of Concord, VII, BC 591.1ff.

V. Pastoral Perspective

Besides simply living out the implications of our understanding of baptism, a pre-confirmation reception of Holy Communion is warranted for several pastoral reasons:

1. *To allow children the benefit of receiving the sacrament.* While baptism makes us members of the body of Christ, Holy Communion sustains us in this life because it grants the forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation.¹⁴ These gifts of Holy Communion are received by faith for the strengthening of faith.¹⁵ Many Lutherans believe that delaying first communion until confirmation deprives younger children of this strengthening, which they, as fellow Christians struggling against sin, need. To put it more positively, allowing younger (pre-confirmation age) children to receive Holy Communion is a means for the church to aid children in their spiritual development.
2. *To allow children to experience themselves as members of the body of Christ and participants in its life and mission.* The Lord's Supper is not only communion with Jesus Christ and the reception of his saving gifts, it is also a communion with each other, insofar as we eat of the same bread and partake of the same cup. To share in this fellowship means to share in the church's mission, for Holy Communion "forms the Church, as a community, to bear witness in the world."¹⁶ When children are permitted to commune, they come to realize in a very concrete way that they are part of the Christian community and its life, just as eating a meal in the home reinforces their identity as members of the family. If the church delays participation in Holy Communion it risks alienating its youngest members by giving the impression that communion is a privilege to be earned. But if children always experience themselves as full members of the church, the risks of such alienation are lessened.
3. *To avoid the suggestion that confirmation confers "full" membership status as a Christian.* One of the possible dangers in delaying Holy Communion until confirmation is the impression that, now that one has undergone a significant period of instruction and can (therefore) receive Holy Communion, one has arrived at "full" membership status. American Lutheran churches concluded that this impression caused young people to "drop out" of Christian education, if not all participation in church life.¹⁷ By separating first communion and confirmation, there is less likelihood that confirmation will be viewed as a pinnacle or terminal point of Christian formation. In that case, it will be easier to encourage life-long learning and formation following confirmation instruction. It should be remembered that insofar as we are simultaneously saints and sinners (*simul iustus*

¹⁴ Luther, Small Catechism, BC 362.5-6.

¹⁵ Augsburg Confession, XIII, BC 46.2.

¹⁶ *Use of the Means of Grace*, 54A.

¹⁷ "A Report for Study from the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation to the Honorable Presidents of The American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church in America, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," in Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion: A Study Book* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 200.

et peccator), we never fully “arrive” anywhere spiritually, but are always struggling against sin and temptations, and so find ourselves returning to our baptismal starting point. In that case, pastoral practice will want to downplay any sense of a spiritual “arrival” while encouraging continual study, prayer, and participation in the means of grace (worship, Holy Communion).

4. *To avoid the suggestion that Holy Communion is a “reward” for receiving confirmation instruction.* Lutherans have rightly emphasized the need for instruction that prepares one to receive Holy Communion. However, there is the possibility that Holy Communion could be perceived as a reward for one’s having completed all of the confirmation instruction’s requirements, written and otherwise. Theologically, then, the implication is that one “earns” the right to commune. Such an implication is untenable for Lutherans whose doctrine of justification holds that God imparts his gifts by his grace alone, apart from any effort of ours. As the Augsburg Confession declares, “...we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith...”¹⁸ In that case, it would be prudent to separate confirmation and first communion in order to avoid undermining the theological principle that is at the heart of Lutheran theology.

VI. First Communion Instruction

Holy Communion requires knowledge of the sacrament and its biblical background, as well as a practical instruction. Traditionally, confirmation instruction provided the instruction necessary for participation in Holy Communion. Obviously, the Lutheran Church in Singapore will need to develop some type of pre-confirmation instruction for 8 year-olds. Toward this end, it is proposed that first communion instruction enable children to:

1. *Understand and appreciate the nature of the sacrament of Holy Communion.* Specifically, first communion instruction needs to stress that the sacrament is: (a) something instituted by Christ; (b) a means of grace; (c) a celebration of the life, death, resurrection, and presence of Christ. It must enable students to: (a) tell the story of Jesus in their own words; (b) develop a sense of awe at the mystery of Christ’s love; and (c) experience the expectation of seeing Christ again in fulfillment of his future kingdom.
2. *Accept his/her place as a communicant in the fellowship of believers.* There is a need to help first communicants understanding the fellowship and communal aspects of the sacrament, as taught in the Bible. Specifically this means the child’s recognizing and responding to the congregation’s loving acceptance of him/her and his/her desiring to join with the congregation in receiving the sacraments.

¹⁸ Augsburg Confession, IV, BC 38.1.

3. *Examine him or herself, to make confession of sin, and to receive the absolution of sin for Christ's sake.* First communion instruction must foster an understanding of the relationship between sin and the forgiveness that is imparted through the sacrament. It should help a child to reflect on his/her life and experience an appropriate sorrow and repentance for sin and willingness to seek the help of the church's ministry of reconciliation in all its forms. At the same time, instruction should help first communicants understand and experience the joy and freedom that is imparted by Holy Communion and confession and absolution.¹⁹
4. *Realize the connection between Holy Communion and mission.* Holy Communion awakens in the participants a desire to feed others with the love and mercy of God that has been experienced in the sacrament. It should evoke a desire for achieving justice and peace in a troubled world, as well as the recognition that the reconciliation celebrated between God and the Christian believer is a gift to be shared with all the world.

Ideally, first communion instruction will precede and lead up to the reception of first communion. It should include practical instruction about how to receive the elements, e.g., posture at the altar, personal devotion before and after reception, appropriate reverence at the time of reception, and instruction on how to personally prepare one's self for receiving. Instruction will need to utilize language that is understandable to eight year-old children.

Prior to the first-communion instruction, children approaching the age of eight should be given the opportunity to express their desire for receiving the sacrament. There should be a mutual dialog between the pastor, the family, and the child concerning the child's readiness for Holy Communion.

VII. The Celebration of First Communion

Insofar as first communion "is the moment when a privilege granted in baptism is first exercised" there is no need for any liturgical rite or action other than the actual reception of Holy Communion. Professions of faith, the making of vows/promises, exhortations by the pastor, or other rites associated with baptism (e.g., handlaying, anointing) only serve to obscure the nature of the event as well as suggest that a person is obtaining a new status as a Christian. It is best to avoid entirely the idea of a first communion "rite."

Nevertheless, it would be appropriate if those receiving their first communion were welcomed by the pastor either during the announcement time or during the sermon. Such a welcome ideally would recall baptism and its relationship to this event. It would also be appropriate to offer special prayers for such persons during the prayers of intercession at the Sunday service.

¹⁹ "Report for Study," p. 206.

Example of a welcome

Today is a special day for *Names*. When they were baptized, God made them part of his household, the family we call the Church. As they grew, they learned about their heavenly Father and what it means to be part of his family. They learned to love others from Jesus, who loved everybody so much that he gave his life for them on the cross. They have learned how in sharing the bread and wine of Holy Communion we remember Jesus' death and his rising to life again on that first Easter Day, and how eating the bread and drinking the wine makes us one with him and brings us closer to each other. They have expressed their desire to join us as we gather around the Lord's Table, and so they are invited to participate for the first time. We welcome you to the Lord's table. We thank God for you and rejoice in your being among us. And we pray that you will remain faithful to Christ and to his holy Church, find joy and strength in his body and blood, the signs of his love for the world.

Examples of prayer

We thank you gracious Father, for those who come to their first communion, and for their parents, baptismal sponsors, and friends who have loved them, cared for them, taught them, and set them a good example. Bless them as they come to the table of your Son by showing them your love and by giving them joy in your salvation. Keep them faithful to the covenant of their baptism, and bring them to that great feast which today we are privileged to taste.

Or

We thank you Lord for *Names*. As in baptism you made them your own, now make them faithful in the communion of your Son, our Savior. Bind us close to him and to each other by your forgiving power, bringing us all to that day when our hunger and thirst for your love will be perfectly satisfied.²⁰

At the time of first communion, children should simply come forward with their families. Since it was their families who brought them to the sacrament of baptism, it is fitting that their families accompany them to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. If it is the case that a child candidate for first communion does not have family members in the church, a "foster family" should be found to accompany him or her through first communion instruction and the first reception of the sacrament.

It has been suggested that when communion is offered to children, grape juice or some other non-alcoholic beverage be used for the children. We should remember, however, that the sacrament was instituted with wine and that the church believes that following that institution is important, since "... when Christ's institution is not observed as he established it, there is no sacrament."²¹ Moreover, wine carries strong biblical overtones of joy, celebration, and deliverance (cf Isaiah 25.6). Pastorally, providing two beverages for the communion implies two communions, which undermines the themes of

²⁰ *Lutheran Book of Worship Ministers Edition* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 32.

²¹ *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, VII ("Concerning the Holy Supper"), BC 608.85.

sacramental fellowship and unity expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Parents could be reminded that the amount of alcohol in a small cup of wine is rather minimal, and that in some cases medicines have concentrations of alcohol equal to that of wine.

VIII. The Meaning of Confirmation in Light of the New Policy on First Communion

If the relationship between first communion and confirmation is now broken, the question arises as to what role confirmation will play in the life of those baptized in infancy.

In the case of American Lutheran churches, when first communion was no longer associated with confirmation, the latter was redefined in a way that associated it with the church's mission. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its predecessor church bodies have been working since 1970 with the following definition of confirmation:

Confirmation ministry is a pastoral and educational ministry of the church that helps the baptized [child] through Word and Sacrament to identify more deeply with the Christian community and participate more fully in its mission.²²

Notably, confirmation in the American churches is defined as a *ministry*, rather than a rite. It has been understood as a time of spiritual formation that prepares baptized child to become a knowledgeable and participating member of the church.

Since confirmation in the American church is defined as a ministry rather than a rite, the service celebrated at the completion of "confirmation" instruction is designated as a rite of "affirmation of baptism." While the content of the rite is similar to previous confirmation rites, its main purpose is to enable the candidates to acknowledge ("affirm") the gifts of God bestowed in baptism and to express a desire to live as a faithful members of the church.²³ Accordingly, the minister directs the following question to the candidates:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism:
to live among God's faithful people,
to hear his Word and share his supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus,
and to strive for justice and peace in all the world?²⁴

²² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries, "The Confirmation Ministry Task Force Report" (Chicago, 1993), 1.

²³ It was considered desirable to avoid the impression that an "affirmation of baptism" is a mature confession of faith that completes or ratifies an earlier baptism experienced in infancy. Likewise, it was stressed that confirmation is not a "conversion" or "born again" experience that justifies the previous baptism and/or the person's new membership in the church. It was believed that such understandings tended to exalt confirmation while undermining the importance of baptism.

²⁴ LBW *Ministers Edition*, 326.

This re-formulated rite of confirmation not only highlights Christian discipleship, but it also avoids the impression that confirmation (“affirmation of baptism”) is superior to or more important than baptism. Indeed, it complements the sacrament of baptism, which is more in keeping with the Lutheran theology of baptism.

So even if the “rite of confirmation” is no longer the *de facto* admission to Holy Communion, it can nevertheless serve important pastoral and theological purposes if it is understood and celebrated as a rite of “affirmation of baptism.”

IX. Conclusion

Christian history and the Lutheran theology of baptism suggest the appropriateness of a pre-confirmation first communion for children aged eight. For much of its history, the church permitted even infants to commune, as a sign of their inclusion by baptism into the Christian fellowship. If Lutheran Churches today take seriously their own confessional theology of baptism, then a reconsideration of their not allowing young children to commune is warranted. Although young children may not fully understand the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, that understanding can develop with time. If we baptize children with the idea that the means of grace will help form and nurture their understanding of baptism, then we should permit their reception of Holy Communion on the basis of that same pastoral approach, as well as our faith in the work of the Holy Spirit.

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