

Theological and Liturgical Principles to Guide LCS Congregations During COVID-19

During a pandemic, the work of the government is to keep people physically alive, and the church's role is primarily to keep people spiritually alive. Both the church and the government work together to keep body and spirit alive and healthy. For LCS congregations to remain open, congregations have to adjust their worship practices so as not to become a source for the spread of the coronavirus outbreak. Luther's words during the plague in Wittenberg (1527) exudes the spirit of love towards our neighbour when we implement physical distancing:

I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence...If my neighbour needs me however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God. (*Luther's Works*, Vol 43, pg. 142).

General Guidelines for All Activities:

1. Travel declaration, sanitising of hands, temperature taking as well as isolating those with flu symptoms at the entrance and exit points of the church compound.
2. Implement physical distancing of at least one metre (1 m) for all activities whether standing, sitting or kneeling.
3. Use photographic or videography equipment to make a record of where people are about each other (e.g. during worship, prayer meetings, education classes) and keep them for a month. Make known to the congregation that they will only be used for contact tracing purposes when needed.
4. Non-essential activities that are apart from the Divine Service must adhere to the above and provide for physical distancing.
5. Suspend senior-centric programmes to protect the more susceptible from illness.

In order also to remain faithful to the Lutheran confessions when implementing changes to our Divine Service, congregational pastors, leaders and people should understand the following theological and liturgical principles and their applications. This approach will serve to unite LCS together in collective worship and intercession for the world. It will also ensure that LCS will be able to continue to preach the gospel and give the body and blood of Christ at Divine Services throughout this pandemic and avoid being shut down.

Principle 1: The Nature of the Lord's Supper.

P1-1: The basis for the Lord's Supper is the oneness we have as one body, through Baptism, with Christ and with each other (Eph. 4:4-6).

P1-2: A sacramental union of the bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ also creates a sacramental union of Christ with the participants of Holy Communion (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

P1-3: Liturgically, the Holy Communion celebrates this hope of everlasting joy which is a marriage feast of consummation with our Lord (Rev 19:7-9). Hence, the Holy Communion should be offered at every Divine Service whenever possible.

Applications:

A1-1: Holy Communion must be presided over and distributed with holy awe (great respect) due to the sacramental character of that union we have with Christ and one another. Any changes made to the ritual actions of the Lord's Supper must take into consideration that we are eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ.

A1-2: All the baptised should commune whenever they gather together for Divine Service as it is the example of the apostolic church, as often as they gather (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 25), they "break bread" and participate in the Lord's Supper.

A1-3: Pre-packaged Holy Communion and self-administration (peeling off the packaging) do not promote proper use of the Sacrament. It wrongly encourages one to think of Holy Communion as only an ordinary meal or an empty symbol and not a participation in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Principle 2: Word and Sacrament (Preaching and Holy Communion)

P2-1 Word and Sacrament are given in Christian worship so that one can receive the gospel in the multitude of ways in which God had ordained the gospel to come to us, i.e. through all of our human senses. The ears hear preaching (Word), and the mouth eats and drinks the bread and wine (the Sacrament). Both are the high points of Lutheran worship. Both are offered as they are the means that the Holy Spirit uses to proclaim the gospel at every Divine Service.

P2-2: As Holy Communion is the visible Word of God, a means of the Holy Spirit to minister God's grace physically, there is a need for instruction, just as Christ himself gave words of instructions orally during the institution of this Sacrament through the apostolic teaching (1 Cor 11:23-29). Hence, the Word and the Sacrament should not be separated, meaning the administration of the Sacrament must always be accompanied by the reading of the Holy Scripture and with preaching and instructions for worthy participation.

Applications:

A2-1: One should not say if I have heard the preaching of the Word I need not then go for Holy Communion. Jesus commands both for the feeding of the soul. We cannot force someone to commune, but to accept Christ's invitation. Luther enjoined pastors during the plague to "admonish people to attend church and listen to the sermon, so they learn through God's Word how to live and how to die...Everyone should prepare in time and get ready for death by going to confession and taking the Sacrament once every week or fortnight." (*Luther's Works*, Vol 43, pg. 135).

A2-2: Word and Sacrament are the two high points of Lutheran worship! They should, therefore, be given together, liturgically at the Divine Service as often as humanly possible. At this period, if the church can still gather together, they should not neglect to participate in the Lord by eating and drinking together.

A2-3: When we have to stop the congregation from gathering at the church due to COVID-19, LCS will live stream Divine Services on Sundays with accompanying music for congregational singing at home, using a brief liturgy of the Word (preaching). Regrettably, Holy Communion cannot be given without the congregation being present.

A2-4: Pastors, together with congregation council, should visit those who are fearful and staying away from Divine Service. They are to provide pastoral care by encouraging them with the Word of God. Lutheran devotional materials should be distributed to the people by all possible means to support them with God's Word.

Principle 3: Celebrating Holy Communion During COVID-19.

P3-1: Since Jesus invites all his disciples to "Take and eat...take and drink" (1 Cor 17: 23) one should not force anyone to receive the Sacrament as the host of the Table invites his disciples. Those who stay away out of fear during a pandemic should be encouraged to participate when they have the assurance that they can do so safely. No one should look down or cast aspersions on them.

P3-2: During times of crisis in which Holy Communion cannot be distributed because of a health pandemic or due to a lack of ordained pastors to do the consecration, the church must be patient and pray for the Sacrament to be consecrated once again at the Divine Service. As the Lord had pointed out that he will not taste of this Sacrament until he comes again (Mk 14:25; Lk 22:18; 1 Cor 11:26), anticipating the end of Days, the church too have to wait with hope that they will have a heavenly banquet by which we will all be fed one day even when we cannot be fed for a while now on earth.

Applications:

A3-1: To allay fears the pastor should consume the blessed Sacrament that he touches with his hands during the consecration. All who help in the distribution should wear a surgical mask so that they can say these words as they distribute the bread: "This is the body of Christ given for you" and the wine: "This is the blood of Christ given for you" without any fear of catching a contagion. Hence, these words can be heard as the body and blood of Christ are distributed so people can take it with faith. All who handle the body and blood of Christ should have their hands washed with soap and water or rubbed with disinfectant.

A3-2: Communicants should receive the elements by stretching out their arms to the fullest extent with one hand open in a cupped manner to receive the body of Christ and the other hand holding out the small cup to receive the blood of Christ. Hence, the pastors and communion assistants need not bend in close to them and can simply drop the body into their open and cupped hand(s) and pour the blood into the small cup, staying an arm's length away.

A3-3: All worshippers and communicants should sit or kneel 1 m apart from each other. Pews and kneeling positions can be clearly marked to guide worshippers and communicants. Communicants and pastors together with communion assistants should be one arm length apart (about 1 m) when distributing Holy Communion. Those who do not have their two arms outstretched upwards will be reminded by the distributor with the words: "Please stretch out your arms to receive".

A3-4: Pastors and communion assistants who give blessings to those who cross their arms during Holy Communion should be done at arms-length, without touching them. They can raise a hand over them as a sign of conferral of blessing from a standing position, all the while maintaining a 1 m distance.

Principle 4: The Offering and Divine Service

P4-1: The offering from the congregation is an expression of thanksgiving to God during the Divine Service. It should be gathered together with the presentation of bread and wine at the altar before Holy Communion.

Applications:

A4-1: A special box is placed in the back of the church for members to deposit their offerings as they enter the church building. At the time of the offertory, the box is brought forward by ushers then follows the offertory prayer.

A4-2: Alternatively, the offering bags are placed at the ends of long poles that are then held out to seated assembly members for depositing their offerings. The bags are then brought forward in the usual manner.

A4-3: Information as to how to give monetary offering digitally should be made available for the congregation. Those who desire to give their offerings digitally when they come for Divine Service should receive a card with QR code of the bank account numbers from the ushers at the door. At the offering, they can participate in giving their offering symbolically by dropping that card into the offering bag during the Divine Service together with the congregation.

A4-4: If there is a concern about the cleanliness of making contact with currency notes prior to receiving communion, a hand sanitizer can be offered to assembly members as they make their way to the altar area for receiving communion.

Principle 5: Baptism and Divine Service

P5-1: Baptism is the liturgical entry into the life of the church (Matt 28:19). Therefore, when possible it should be celebrated at the Divine Service followed by Holy Communion.

P5-2: Teaching can come before or after Baptism (Matt 28:19-20). In times of emergency, when someone is baptised immediately, before catechism (teaching) is given, they should then be introduced to the congregation at the next Divine Service and subsequently catechised.

P5-3: Emergency baptisms by the priesthood of all believers can be done with the baptismal formula: "I baptise you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" as commanded by Christ (Matt 28:19), when pastors are unable to do them in time.

Applications:

- A5-1: The minister should use hand sanitizer before the baptismal rite. During the baptismal rite, the minister should keep his/her distance from the candidates (1 m) as much as possible
- A5-2: For the baptismal act: water should be placed in a dignified-looking vessel, e.g., a metal or glass pitcher and placed near or on the font. This water is consecrated along with the water in the font. At the time of Baptism, the water from the container is poured on each candidate such that it flows into the font. For subsequent baptismal candidates, water from the pitcher is used, rather than water from the font. The pitcher must be filled with sufficient water for all the baptismal candidates.
- A5-3: The baptizing minister should not touch any object other than the baptismal vessel; his/her book or service folder can be held by an assisting minister. If the baptismal rite includes the laying on of hands, the minister raises both hands over the head to bless the candidate instead, avoiding any touching. In lieu of marking with the sign of the cross on the candidate's forehead, the sign of the cross may simply be made *over* the candidate, as at the Trinitarian invocation at the beginning of the service or the benediction. If oil is used to mark the sign of the cross on the head of the newly-baptized person, a cotton bud should be used instead of the minister's fingers.

Principle 6: The Worship Space and Physical Distancing

- P6-1: The worship space is set apart for the gathering of God's people around Word and Sacrament. This space is holy (set apart) because of the people of God at worship and the promise of Christ: "When two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matt 18:20) The church is after all "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel." (*Augsburg Confession* 7).
- P6-2: The role of the priesthood (of all believers) is to minister to the world by their intercessory prayer for the sake of the world (1 Pet 2:4-5; 1 Tim 2:2-8; 2 Ch 7:14; Jer. 29:7; Heb. 10:24-25). In serious crisis, they pray for God's help and deliverance (Ps 34:4-17; 1 Jn 4:4; James 5:13-16).

Applications:

- A6-1: Congregations should strive to follow the government's health directives in order to enable churches to continue to be opened for Divine Service and intercessory prayer. In order to avoid an outbreak among our congregations, the entry points of the church grounds must have temperature checks, contact tracing details and sanitizers for everyone. Those who have symptoms of flu without fever must not enter! They can use the live streaming to join in the Divine Service at their own homes.
- A6-2: All gatherings must take into consideration a physical distancing of at least 1 m. This will likely mean a need to provide for an overflow area with sound and video projection if the Divine Service worship space is not enough. Overflow rooms must be well ventilated and sitting arrangements must maintain the 1 m physical distancing.
- A6-3: Different groups using the same venue should have time to leave in order that they do not come into contact with each other. E.g. the 9 a.m. Divine Service must have enough time to vacate the venue without meeting those coming in later. If this is not feasible, arranging for one group to use one exit and the other to use a separate entrance can

mitigate the mixing around of people from the two groups. Changing the schedule of worship times to allow for more time in-between services can also be implemented to fulfil the same goal.

A6-4: After a worship service, the top of pews, the communion rails, the altar-table, pulpit, all musical instruments, sound system and computer surfaces should be wiped down. Suitable cleaning agents should be used (look at NEA website).

Principle 7: Private Worship (and the use of Live Streaming) and Divine Service

P7-1: The use of private worship is not forbidden in scripture. Jesus often prays alone privately and with a small group (Mk 1:35-36; Lk 6:12; 5:16; 9:18-28; Mat 26:36-37). But Jesus' custom was also to gather in the synagogues (Mt 4:23; Lk 4:16) and the Temple in Jerusalem to worship God publicly with other people (Lk 2:41).

P7-2: Private worship cannot be used to argue against public worship, both have their place. The church should encourage the use of private worship by connecting it with the public worship of the Divine Service (Ps 5:7; 18:6; 138:2; Jon 2:4-7). So, in normal times, the Christian life of private devotion leads to Sunday public worship and then returns to private worship in the weekdays. Both private and public worship sets a rhythm of spirituality over the whole week for the Christian.

P7-3: The church brings us in her bosom to Christ (our personal relationship with Christ is always mediated by Christians who shared the gospel) and when we become the body of Christ, we have spiritual brothers and sisters who live on earth now and in heaven: the communion of saints. Hence, worship is before God (*coram Deo*) and before human beings (*coram hominibus*) both privately and publicly, on earth as it is in heaven, at the same time.

Application:

A7-1: A home altar (placed on a table can be a cross or crucifix, a bible for daily meditation, a hymn book and a prayer or devotional book) should be set up as a focus for personal and family worship. Personal devotion and family worship must be emphasised but it is not meant to replace the Divine Service.

A7-2: For those who choose not to take part in public worship at all due to misgivings during this pandemic, they should be encouraged to worship together with others in small groups. Pastors and council leaders should visit such members to encourage and remind them not to neglect the Divine Service and encourage them to return regularly if not weekly to the public worship of the church. No Holy Communion should be offered in such small groups.

A7-3: Live streaming of the Divine Service cannot replace the actual participation of public worship as Lutheran worship is sacramental. We worship together by participating in the body and blood of Christ. Live streaming means when the Divine Service begins a video feed will be put out over the internet until the end of the service. This is to enable worshippers who are not physically present with the gathered congregation to worship together with that congregation as much as is possible.

A7-4: The infirm, shut-ins, elderly or sick can request for Holy Communion after they have worshipped together with the congregation through live streaming if the church had

provided for it. If not, pastors and communion assistants should read the scripture and give a short devotion or sermon before communing them.

A7-5: Those who are not able to gather with the church for Divine Service out of illness yet longs to participate in the Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, should inform pastors to have it distributed to them at their bedside.

Practical Considerations for Other Services of the Church in view of COVID-19

Confirmation

- The minister should maintain a distance of 1 m from the confirmands during the service.
- The minister should lay hands on the shoulders of the confirmands, rather than on their heads.
- Instead of shaking hands with a newly confirmed person (“the right hand of fellowship”), the minister will present to him/her their confirmation certificate with words of congratulations.

Marriages

- When addressing the bride and groom, the minister should keep a distance of 1 m from the couple.
- When it is not necessary for the couple to be immediately in front of the minister, they can be seated in chairs brought into the sanctuary for this purpose or in the pews.
- It is not absolutely necessary that the minister take or touch the wedding rings in order to bless them. The bride and groom may hold them as the minister blesses them.
- For the blessing, the minister may raise his hands over the couple while maintaining an appropriate distance from them (1 m)
- If Holy Communion is to be part of the service, the procedures outlined above should be adhered to. Since communion is the church’s meal and not merely another marital ritual, all baptised Christians present at the service should be invited to partake of the Sacrament.

Wakes

- Chairs for congregants should be spaced so as to allow appropriate physical distancing.
- Those in attendance should be encouraged to maintain appropriate distancing when viewing the deceased and greeting the family.

Funerals

- All of the measures for physical distancing, temperature screening, photography or videography and contact tracing noted above should be strictly adhered to when there is a funeral at the church.

Concerning the Reduction of the Duration of the Divine Service in Response to the Spread of COVID 19.

In considering how to mitigate the spread of the COVID 19 virus, the issues involved are those of **intensity** (the degree to which speaking or singing spreads droplets of infected saliva), **density** (the relative concentration of people in an area), and **duration** (the length of time that assembly members are gathered together in a particular area). The longer the time period, the greater the opportunity for the virus to spread, while a shorter time frame provides less opportunity for the virus to spread.

In the interest of striving to lower the duration of interaction of assembly members, the following is offered as a model for a shorter service in the Lutheran Churches of Singapore. It is only to be used when social circumstances (e.g., the spread of disease) make a shorter service desirable. Because of the need to lessen intensity, the number of sung items is reduced to just two: the response hymn and the Sanctus of the Holy Communion Service.

1. Confession and Forgiveness
2. Greeting (“The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...”)
3. Prayer of the Day (collect)
4. Gospel Reading
5. Sermon (15 minutes or a manuscript of 2,000 English words; 4,000 Chinese words)
6. Response Hymn
7. Prayers of intercession (limiting the prayers to 4 petitions only, namely, for the universal church, the world and its leaders, those in need, and the local church)
8. Offering and offertory prayer (omitting the offertory song)
9. Great Thanksgiving
 - a. Dialog (“The Lord be with you. **And also with you**” etc.)
 - b. Sanctus (“Holy, Holy, holy, Lord, God of Power and Might,” etc.)
 - c. Words of Institution (“In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus,” etc.)
 - d. Lord’s Prayer
10. Communion (using prefilled cups to reduce the time taken to distribute the wine)
11. Post-communion Prayer
12. Benediction
13. Dismissal

NOTE: For Liturgy of the Word (without Holy Communion), 9-11 should be omitted.

Principles

1. Concerning the Essentials of the Divine Service

- a. In altering the Divine Service under extraordinary circumstances, we remain committed to the most essential parts of the liturgy as witnessed in Scripture (Acts 2:42; Luke 24:13-35) and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Augsburg Confession Art. 7)
- b. We avoid “reducing” the service in an arbitrary, whimsical manner.
- c. Since the Means of Grace—the Word of God and the Lord’s Supper—are the most central actions of the Divine Service, they are the main focus and the parts of the service that lead up to them and then lead away from them can be reduced in number.
- d. Since the Gospel is at the heart of the ministry of the Word, the Gospel lesson will always be read. If another lesson is desired, the Old Testament lesson is read so that the fullness of God’s Word through history is proclaimed.
- e. The Words of Institution, which include Jesus’ own words of promise concerning the bread and cup, are central to our thanksgiving over the bread and cup (the “consecration”) and are always spoken by the minister.

2. Concerning those Actions Surrounding the Essentials of the Divine Service

- a. Confession and forgiveness make us aware of our sin and brokenness as humans (1 John 1:8-10), and thus prepares us to hear the proclaimed Word and receive the Lord’s body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. It therefore retains a vital place in the Divine Service.
- b. The assembly is greeted by the minister because it is important to acknowledge the presence of God’s people and to invite them into participation in the Divine Service.
- c. The Prayer of the Day (or “collect” prayer) focusses us on the meaning and purpose of the Divine Service, and summarizes the biblical themes for the day. It therefore deepens the assembly’s understanding of and participation in the service.
- d. The Response Hymn (or “Hymn of the Day”) is the assembly’s own proclamation of the Gospel. It is a public witness to the assembly’s faith, of one Christian to another, and of our faith to the world. By singing the Hymn of the Day, we prepare ourselves for mission in the world. The Hymn of the Day (German: *Hauptlied*) historically has had an important role in the Divine Service of Lutherans, as Luther saw the singing of hymns as a way of “noising” (sharing, proclaiming) the gospel (Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal, 1523). In the interest of conserving time, some stanzas of hymns or verses of contemporary songs may be omitted. Over-repetition of lines or verses in contemporary songs should be avoided.

- e. As prayer was an important component of early Christian worship (Acts 12:42), and because St Paul invites Christians to join with him in prayer (1 Timothy 1:1-2; Romans 15:30), the church's intercessory prayers retain an important place in the Divine Service. Intercessory prayer is urgent in times of suffering and calamity.
- f. As the church's response to the gospel, the Offering is part of the assembly's total self-offering to God (Romans 12:1). Through our tithes and offerings, we symbolically offer ourselves to God's service in preparation for being fed at the Lord's Table and being sent into the world in mission.
- g. The post-communion prayer acknowledges and gives thanks for the gifts received in the Supper. It is an expression of the gratitude that characterizes our whole life as Christians before God.
- h. The Benediction summarizes the meaning and purpose of the Divine Service: God has blessed us through Word and Sacrament. By summarizing God's actions in the Service, the Benediction sends us forth into the world as God's representatives to share the Gospel with our neighbors. The Benediction is rooted in the biblical actions of Aaron (Numbers 6:24-26) and Jesus (Luke 24:50).
- i. Because the Divine Service equips us for mission in the world, the Dismissal has the vital function of sending us forth for that mission, much like Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20).