

Women Serving as Communion Assistants

St John's Lutheran Church, Napa, CA

The Question: Is it proper to deny women the opportunity to serve as communion assistants at St. John's? Should we continue our present practice of restricting women from this service, or should we remove the restriction?

Introduction

How should we approach this question? Where do we turn to seek the most appropriate answer for our congregation at this time? What do we consider when we seek to discern the Lord's will in this matter?

As a Lutheran Congregation we look to four areas in considering any topic related to church practice:

1. **Scripture:** What does the Bible say? Are there any instructions on this topic in the Scriptures? The Word of God is normative for all matters of faith and life, and so as a congregation we will look to Scripture as the final word and highest authority on all matters to which it speaks.
2. **The Lutheran Confessions:** As a congregation we have bound ourselves to the Lutheran confessional writings of the Book of Concord. The called staff has also bound itself to the Confessions as well. We will look at the question before us in terms of the confessional witness.
3. **Lutheran Church Missouri Synod practice:** We have bound ourselves to other Lutheran congregations as part of the LCMS. We will look at the practice of the LCMS on this issue and what it says to us on this issue.
4. **Local Mission Context:** We will also look at this in terms of the mission that God has called us to here at St. John's and in our Napa community. How does either denying or restricting women the opportunity to serve in this way help or hinder our mission?

Of the four sources listed above, two do not change, and two do change. While the Word of God and our Confessions do not change, certain practices in the church change over time based on the needs of the church and its mission, specifically as it seeks to be incarnate in an ever-changing culture.

For instance, Jesus Christ taught the timeless Word of God and carried out real events with significance for all, namely His cross and resurrection. But He did it thoroughly and completely within the 1st century Jewish/Roman culture. For example, that He died is transcultural. His mode of death – crucifixion -- was cultural. But this is what God in His wisdom carried out so that the atoning death of the Son of God would be incarnate within that culture.

In the same way, the timeless truths of God's Word and the unchanging essence of the Sacraments have been proclaimed, administered, spoken, pictured, sung, and so forth, in numerous cultures since the first Pentecost. Our task in our generation and in our place is to be faithful to the timeless Gospel, and so make it incarnate in our present culture for the sake of the mission, for the sake of those for whom

Christ died. And so the church changes, because the world changes, but through it all the essence of the Gospel remains the same.

For example, there have been many changes in the pastoral office in the lifetimes of many members of our congregation. There is now much greater lay involvement in areas that were formerly the exclusive purview of pastors. For instance at St. John's, lay people assist with the reading of Scripture in worship, distributing communion, teaching Bible Classes, and calling on the sick.

There have also been many changes regarding which areas of service are appropriate for women. Several roles which formerly were limited to men are no longer restricted in that way. For instance: Voting in the congregational assembly, serving as a classroom teacher, serving as an acolyte, a lay reader, a board or committee member, congregation president or chair, among others. At St. John's the only lay roles which are still limited to men are serving as Liturgist and Communion Assistant.

Since the scope of this paper is the role of Communion Assistant, a few more words about this area of service are appropriate. The communion assistant does not preside at the Lord's Supper. That is a technical term in a liturgical church for the one who "administers" the sacrament. It is the pastor who presides and administers. What does this mean? The pastor speaks the words of institution. The pastor decides who will commune or not commune. The pastor is in charge of preparing people for right reception at the altar, and the pastor pronounces the post communion blessing. The assistant does none of these things. The role of the assistant is chiefly the distributing of communion to the communicant, placing the elements in the hands or mouths of those communing.

As a side note, women are currently involved with other aspects of the Sacrament of the Altar at St. John's. Women serve on the worship preparation team which sets up for the celebration of communion. Women/girl acolytes bring the elements to the communion assistants during worship. Women worship preparation team members take down the communion ware and properly care for the consecrated elements after the service.

Scriptures

The main passages in the Scriptures that address the Lord's Supper are the accounts of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:19-21) along with Paul's discussion of the practice of the Lord's Supper in Corinth (1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 11:17-34). John 6:52-59, although it took place before the Last Supper, appears to refer to the Lord's Supper as well.

Distributing Communion

These passages say very little about the distribution of the Lord's Supper. The focus is on the essence of the Supper, the true body and blood of the Lord Jesus in the bread and wine for us to eat and drink. Jesus instructs His disciples to take and eat, and to take and drink, but we have no description regarding how they did that. Did He personally give the bread and wine to each or did they pass it around the table? The latter would have been more typical at a Passover meal.

Paul spoke harshly to the Corinthian congregation regarding the way they were practicing the Lord's Supper. But his concerns did not have to do with the mode of distribution so he does not address this part of their practice directly. His comments do indicate that communing was done at the action or initiation of the congregation. In 11:21, he says, *"for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else."* In 11:33 he encourages restraint as they commune: *"So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other."* This would suggest that they were passing the communion elements or at least that there was not someone in charge of manually distributing the elements. Please note that the problem was not the mode by which they were communing, but rather the lack of love they displayed when doing so, and the lack of appreciation for the presence of the body and blood of the Lord in the bread and the wine (1 Corinthians 11:27-32).

The fact is that there is not a set description in the Scriptures regarding how communion is to be distributed. This means that there is freedom regarding distribution.¹ We have certain traditions regarding communion distribution, but it is important to recognize them as traditions, rather than scripturally mandated requirements. Those who have worshipped in other congregations have likely witnessed or perhaps participated in a variety of communion distribution practices. Here are a few examples:

- Passing the elements down the pew and self-communing
- Passing the elements and communing the person next to you
- Placing the elements on tables at the front of the sanctuary and then the people come forward to take the elements for themselves
- The elements are placed on individual tables around which worshipers gather. Worshipers commune themselves or the person next to them.
- Bread is placed in a large tureen of wine and ladled to communicants
- Pastor distributes in mouth or hand
- Lay people distribute in mouth or hand

Women Serving in Worship

There are several passages in the New Testament which address restrictions on the activity of women in worship. In 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, Paul forbids women to engage in authoritative teaching, but instead calls for them to learn in silence. The context for both of these passages is the interactive style of preaching which was the norm at the time. The preacher would expound and apply a passage of Scripture. Others then would stand up and respond or ask questions. Paul restricted women from taking part in this interactive dialog in the worship setting.

There is no discussion in these passages regarding other liturgical functions, such as public praying or distributing communion. 1 Corinthians 11:5, however, provides instructions for women praying and prophesying in public. But there are no passages that speak specifically to the role of either presiding or assisting at the Lord's Table.

¹ See below in the Confessions section for a discussion of *adiaphora* and the proper approach to things neither commanded nor forbidden by Scriptures.

How are we to apply these passages today? There has been much debate regarding whether these passages speak to a specific historical context or whether the instructions are intended to be taken literally by the church of all times and all cultures. Are these examples of how the church was to be incarnate in a highly patriarchal context? Or are Paul's words to be applied literally in our setting today?

Our practice at St. John's indicates that we have viewed these passages to be culturally nuanced, reflecting Paul's instructions for the church of his time. Therefore, it has not been our practice to restrict the teaching and speaking activity of women according to a strict literalistic reading of Paul's instructions. At St. John's, women teach day school classes, lead small groups, and teach bible classes. Women are not restricted from responding during interactive sermons. Women read scripture lessons. Women lead singing and praying. These activities do not appear to be offensive or improper in our context. Rather the inclusion of women in these activities is a very natural application of the priesthood of all believers in our more egalitarian setting.

So what do we learn from Scripture regarding women and communion distribution? There is not much that Scripture says on this topic. The Bible is silent regarding the mode of communion distribution and the people who may take part in it. The passages that address women in worship, whether they are temporally bound or not, do not address communion distribution. Therefore we cannot say that Scripture forbids women from serving as communion assistants.

Lutheran Confessions

The following sections of the Lutheran Confessions address the Lord's Supper:

- Augsburg Confession: Articles X, XIII, XIV, XXII, and XXIV
- The Apology of the Augsburg Confession: Articles X, XIV, XXII, and XXIV
- The Smalcald Articles: The Third Part, section 6
- The Small Catechism: The Sacrament of the Altar
- The Large Catechism: The Sacrament of the Altar
- The Formula of Concord: Article VII

As we saw in surveying the relevant passages of Scripture, so also here, the Confessions do not address the role of communion assistants.

The focus of the passages listed above is primarily on the nature of the sacrament itself, that it is the true body and blood of the Lord Jesus in, with, and under the bread and wine for Christians to eat and drink. They also address the proper use of the sacrament in worship, that both the bread and the wine are to be given to the communicants, that the sacrament is not a sacrifice offered to God but a sacrament given by God to us, and that the benefits of the sacrament, namely forgiveness, peace, and union with Christ, are received through faith in Christ. The authors are concerned above all that the Gospel be delivered and received. For instance, they call for the Words of Institution to be spoken clearly in the language of the people in order that people understand what the sacrament is about.

The Word of God and the Sacrament

The Confessions point out that the blessings of the sacrament cannot be undone by the unworthiness of the one officiating the Lord's Supper. It is the Word of God alone which makes the sacrament. So even an unworthy, unbelieving pastor gives a real sacrament. The point is not to define a low bar of worthiness for administering the sacrament, but rather to give comfort to those who have been served by unworthy leaders. The sacrament is the gift of God through the Word, not the work of humans.

For this reason it is also true that anyone can speak the Words of Institution. The sacrament belongs to God through the Word for the church. It does not belong to the pastor. It is the Word that makes the sacrament, not the person.

We have applied this teaching at St. John's. In June of 2010, when I became ill during the service, our principal Joel Wahlers took over leadership of the service, including the communion liturgy, speaking the Words of Institution. This was a valid sacrament, and apparently all present understood that this was so. Similarly, we have at times have had lay persons bringing the Lord's Supper to homebound members, speaking the Words of Institution in their hearing and then communing them. The point is that it is the Word that makes the sacrament, and the person serving cannot change the nature of the sacrament.

That being said, keep in mind that in the discussion at hand, we are not talking about the officiant. We are still assuming that a pastor of St. John's would be the one presiding at communion, leading the worship service, speaking the Words of Institution, and overseeing the admission and preparation for communion. If it is not the officiant that makes the sacrament valid, how much less so the assistants. Keep in mind that in speaking about communion assistants, we are speaking of a role that is not mentioned in either Scripture or the Confessions.

Administering the Sacrament

There are several places in the Confessions that state that only those who are called should administer the sacraments (Augsburg Confession V and XIV). The focus here is on the "call." In its simplest form a call means that the congregation desires someone to be its pastor and that person consents and serves in that capacity.

What does it mean in these articles to "administer" the sacrament? The very narrow view is that it means that only the pastor(s) are to be involved with communion and its distribution. At one time, this was the practice in many Lutheran churches, especially smaller ones. There are still some LCMS churches that take this view and do not have anyone but the called pastor(s) involved with communion distribution. A more commonly accepted viewpoint is that "administer" refers to oversight. What does this oversight include?

- Teaching and preparing for communion
- Admitting or restricting people (based on readiness, unworthiness, discipline)

- Leading the Communion liturgy
- Speaking the Words of Institution
- Supervising the assistants

According to this understanding, serving as a communion assistant is not administering the sacrament. The assistants are being supervised by a pastor in their role as a “middleman” between the pastor and the communicant. Keep in mind, as pointed out above, that the role of communion assistant is not a theologically required position, since it is also valid for parishioners to commune themselves.

So these passages stating that only those who are called are to administer the sacrament do not speak to the issue of communion assistants. This is how it is understood throughout most of Lutheranism, and it is how it has been understood and practiced at St. John’s.

Adiaphora

The confessions are careful to distinguish between where God has spoken in His Word and where He is silent. If God has commanded or forbidden an activity, then we are obligated to obey. Where God has not commanded or forbidden, then we are not permitted to command or forbid. The word for this is *adiaphora*. This is addressed in Formula of Concord Article X. We have freedom regarding *adiaphora*, matters about which the Word is silent.

But this freedom does not mean that either individually or as a church we can arbitrarily do as we please. As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, love for the neighbor supersedes the exercise of freedom. So our decisions regarding *adiaphora* will take into account how it will affect those around us. For instance, Formula of Concord X, applying this teaching, states that decisions on matters of *adiaphora* in worship should take into account:

- Maintaining good order
- Not giving offense, and so getting in the way of the gospel
- Edifying the church, which includes building up believers and facilitating the mission

What does this mean for the matter at hand? The nature of the sacrament is not *adiaphora*. These are matters about which the Word has spoken: The true presence of Christ, the grace offered, the faith that receives. But much regarding the distribution is *adiaphora*: The specific communion liturgy, the mode of distribution and the use of other people (acolytes, communion assistants, etc.). In other words, the use of communion assistants and who they are is *adiaphora*, that is, not belonging to the essence of the sacrament, and something about which the Word has not spoken. But decisions regarding using communion assistants and who they should be are to be governed by the same principles that govern all *adiaphora*: Good order, not giving offense, and edifying the church.

LCMS Context

St. John's is affiliated with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS). The word "synod" means "walking together." As part of the LCMS, we seek to "walk together" with our sister congregations. We strive to take into account what the rest of the church body is doing, cognizant that there may be specific ways in which we carry out our ministries differently.

Being part of the same synod does not mean that we strive for uniformity in all of our practices. A very important article in the Augsburg Confession puts it this way: *"For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere."*²

What this means is that we are committed to unity in those things defined by Scripture and our Confessions. We also strive for unity in other practices that are necessary for working together. But in all other ways, District and Synod are advisory. This practice recognizes that each congregation is unique and each community mission field context is unique. In other words, it's all about the mission. Where it supports the mission, we strive for unity of practice. Where it would hinder the mission, we do not require it.

The role of women in the church is a very big topic in our church body today. There have been considerable changes in the practices of the churches in our synod over the past few decades. As pointed out above, many things that were once forbidden to women are now not only allowed, but encouraged. But at the time when these changes were taking place, there was vigorous opposition, and intense debate. For instance, the change to allow women to vote in congregational assemblies was a serious point of contention in our church body years ago. Now, with the exception of a handful of congregations, it is a well-established and unchallenged practice. Other changes include allowing women/girls to serve as acolytes and allowing women to serve on boards and committees.

Currently, there is division in our synod regarding whether it is appropriate for women to serve in certain ways. Consequently, there is not uniformity in our synod in these areas. Different churches in our synod have different practices regarding women serving in these ways:³

- Lay Readers
- Leading mixed bible studies or small groups
- Congregation President/Chair
- Distributing communion

²Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

³ While there is much discussion in some circles of the LCMS on the topic of ordaining women to the pastoral office, there is no division of practice on this issue as no LCMS congregations are being served by women pastors.

Note that of the above list, the only one for which St. John's restricts the service of women is distributing communion.

There have been several publications of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), and several Synodical Convention Resolutions that have addressed the service of women in the congregation.⁴

In 1985, the CTCR, in their document, "Women in the Church—Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice" directly addressed the question, "May women serve as assistants in the distribution of the Lord's Supper?" The commission answered the question as follows: "While some might argue that assisting the presiding minister in the distribution of the elements is not necessarily a distinctive function of the pastoral office, the commission strongly recommends that, to avoid confusion regarding the office of the public ministry and to avoid giving offense to the church, such assistance be limited to men."⁵

It should also be noted that in "Women in the Church", the commission gives other strong recommendations against practices that are already commonplace at St. John's. For example, it states, "that the reading of the Scriptures (in public worship) is most properly the function of the pastoral office and should therefore not ordinarily be delegated to a lay person, woman or man."⁶

The response of the CTCR assumes that offense can be given by allowing women to serve as communion assistants. But it is equally possible that the practice of restricting women from serving in this way also causes offense.

The 2004 LCMS Convention adopted a resolution which affirms its understanding that the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions permit women to hold all humanly established congregational and synodical offices, so long as these offices do not call upon the holders of these offices to "perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacraments" or to carry out "official functions that would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office."

As mentioned above, it is the contention of this paper that serving as a communion assistant is not a distinctive function of the pastoral office. It is not identified as such in Scripture or the Confessions. Confusion can be caused when the impression is given that a type of service belongs only to the pastoral office when in fact it does not.

The pastor is in fact assisted by many people in the performance of Word and Sacrament ministry. For instance, regarding the ministry of the Word, the pastor is assisted by those who read Scripture in

⁴ These documents include, "Women in the Church—Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice" (1985) and "The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical offices." (1994). These documents are available at www.lcms.org.

⁵ "Women in the Church," p. 47.

⁶ "Women in the Church," p. 45.

worship, as well as all those who serve in a teaching capacity. Both men and women are active in assisting the ministry of the Word in this way and this service does not cause confusion regarding the pastor's leadership role. For instance, the fact that a woman leads a small group does not undermine or confuse the fact that the pastor is called to oversee the ministry of the Word in the congregation.

There are many who assist the pastor regarding the Sacrament of the Altar as well. Acolytes, Worship Preparation Team, Communion Assistants, and Ushers are all part of the celebration of the sacrament. Does the service of lay people in these areas cause confusion regarding the pastoral office? Would allowing women to serve in the one remaining area currently closed to them – communion assistant – cause confusion regarding the pastoral office? Would it undermine the leadership of the pastoral office?

These publications and convention resolutions do not absolutely restrict women from serving as communion assistants. They cannot do so since neither Scripture nor the Confessions do. They discourage the practice, however, out of a fear of giving offense, and causing confusion over the pastoral office. In other words, the practice is discouraged because of a fear of harm done in the local mission context. Ultimately, according to our theology and practice, this is for the local church to decide in light of that local mission context, but doing so while weighing seriously the witness of other churches and leaders.

Local Context

To summarize:

- The Scriptures do not directly address this issue.
- The Confessions do not directly address this issue.
- The witness of the LCMS is mixed.
 - Certain documents discourage it, while not forbidding it.
 - Many congregations have made the choice to remove the restriction, as we have regarding lay readers, bible study leaders, and congregation chair.

So the question comes down to what best serves the mission at St. John's. If this is to be regarded as *adiaphora*, as mentioned above, then it is to be decided along the guidelines given in the Confessions, based on Scripture, regarding *adiaphora*.

- Maintaining good order
- Not giving offense, and so getting in the way of the gospel
- Edifying the church, which includes building up believers and facilitating the mission

It does not appear that deciding one way or the other on this issue will have any bearing on maintaining "good order" during our worship services.

Regarding giving offense, as mentioned above, offense can be given or perceived in both directions on this issue. Some might be offended to receive communion from a women. Other men and women are offended by the restriction, seeing it as contrary to the freedom of the Gospel. Which way gives least offense? Which way better serves the Gospel?

Regarding edifying the church, the opening of new avenues of service for half the congregation would be edifying for those who choose to participate in this ministry. The opportunity to serve the Lord and His church by assisting in the distribution of communion is a blessing to those who serve in this way.

Regarding the mission field, removing this restriction would be another way in which our congregation can be incarnate in our context. It is true that the changes regarding the service of women in the church mirror changes in our culture. That does not invalidate them, but rather is appropriate as the church seeks to minister appropriately in a changing context. We are called to be steadfast and immovable on what is essential and unchanging – The Word of God, the Gospel. But we are also called to be flexible on what is not essential, or what is *adiaphora*. This is the approach to ministry and culture that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

In light of this principle, a church in a patriarchal culture will make use of patriarchal structures. A church in a more egalitarian culture will reflect that culture in its *adiaphora*.

Conclusion

We return to the question with which we began: Is it proper to deny women the opportunity to serve as communion assistants at St. John's? Should we continue our present practice of restricting women from this service, or should we remove the restriction?

As we discuss this question we will consider

- The offense question. Does the restriction give offense? Would removing it give offense?
- The mission question: Does this restriction help or hinder the church's mission?
- The edification question: Does the restriction help or hinder the edification of the people of St. John's?

May God guide our discussions and deliberations in accord with His will.