



diocese of California

The Episcopal Church in the San Francisco Bay Area

Sharing communion after our fast from in-person Sacramental Life

From the middle of March through until now, we have refrained from gathering together, and we have fasted from physically receiving the Eucharist. While we thought that would be a short-lived phase while the virus was brought under control, that was bearable, albeit difficult. We now understand that the virus is going to be with us for much longer than hoped, and congregations are yearning for sacramental sustenance while continuing to minimize the risk to the physical health of our communities.

Going forward, we can continue to gather virtually for the Daily Offices. While there is any risk of virus transmission, this is undoubtedly the safest. As our Presiding Bishop the Most Rev. Michael Curry wrote back in March:

It may well be that the breadth and depth of the Anglican way of common prayer can come to our aid now, when for the sake of others, we abstain from physical, public gathering to hear God's Word and to receive the Sacrament.

When considering any kind of allowable gathering, of primary importance is that there is a culture of compliance with health regulations and protocols. It is of paramount importance that adequate masks be worn and physical distancing be maintained. The congregational leadership should be very clear about this.

Currently, there can be no indoor worship, although our small teams producing the virtual worship services can continue.

The counties in our diocese have paid differing attention to regulating what can take place outdoors with San Francisco currently being the most limited and most specific (no more than 12, and no meals).

With the current mandate forbidding indoor worship, how does our Eucharistic theology inform our choices about providing the Sacrament?

As Anglicans, we believe that we are the Body of Christ, and the consecrated elements of bread and wine are Christ's gift to the Body, reminding each member of their intimate relationship with themselves, each other and God, offering reconciliation and nourishing the whole for the journey. The elements are shared in the context of a celebration in which a community gathers for Word, prayer, and Sacrament.

Through the Spirit, Christ is present in the body that assembles, in the proclamation of the Word, in the Word as it is broken open in preaching, in the offering of prayer for the world and the Church, in the sharing of the peace of Christ, in the thanksgiving over the bread and wine, and in the consecrated elements. The community goes forth from this celebration to be the Body of Christ in the world, engaging in ministries of justice, peace, and love.

When the consecrated elements are taken to the sick who could not be present at the celebration, we understand that ministry to be an extension of the eucharistic celebration. Lay eucharistic visitors are formally sent forth from the assembly, and they en flesh the Body of Christ when they visit the sick.

The Book of Common Prayer also allows for Holy Communion from the reserved Sacrament be distributed to a gathered congregation in certain limited circumstances. While these services lack the fullness of the eucharistic celebration with its Great Thanksgiving, they allow a community to gather as the Body of Christ, to share in Word and prayer, and to receive the consecrated elements. Such liturgies of the presanctified gifts have precedence in Christian history, particularly in Eastern Christian tradition. The 1979 BCP includes this as an option (p.408).

Whether we receive the consecrated elements or not does not alter in any way our membership in the Body of Christ. While we have come to define ourselves as a Eucharistic people, the Body of Christ is nourished whenever we gather together as a faithful people, including when we gather virtually with the intention of communal worship.

What are our options for providing the Sacrament and resuming celebration of the Eucharist?

Different congregations are going to respond to the challenge of pandemic Eucharistic worship in creative and varying ways. There are some guidelines to help these decisions:

Since the gathering of the faithful as the Body of Christ is an essential piece of the Eucharist, the consecration of the elements needs to be accomplished in the presence of a priest presiding at a celebration when at least two or three are gathered together. This allows for bread and wine to be consecrated in the presence of a small, masked and physically distanced team. The elements then need to be consumed in community. One way to do this is for a eucharistic visitor to deliver elements to people to their homes, following safety protocols, and without entering the home. Another way is to provide elements to people in their homes and gather the community virtually for a liturgy of the presanctified.

This consecrated bread must be made available to all who desire it: our Gospel mandate is one of inclusion.

A note: Our theology requires the presence of a community for the celebration of the Eucharist, and it also requires the presence of at least one member of that community when presanctified elements are shared.

Therefore any 'virtual Eucharist', where bread and wine in congregants' homes is considered consecrated at an online celebration with the priest in another place, is not permitted.

Neither is a 'drive by' Eucharist allowed, in which people drive by the church to pick up consecrated elements to consume on their own.

A note about spiritual communion

Spiritual communion is a devotional practice rooted in Christian tradition, assuring individuals that they receive the benefits of communion even though they are unable to receive the consecrated elements. One expression of this spiritual communion is evident in the BCP rite for Ministration to the Sick (BCP p 457).

Another expression is the prayer for spiritual communion in the Prayer Book for the Armed Services (see attached).

During the pandemic, some congregations have adapted the practice of spiritual communion, providing a prayer for spiritual communion that individuals may recite during a celebration, or including a prayer said by or for the entire community that gathers for worship. While the presence of a community is not required for spiritual communion, these practices offer a way to nourish the Body of Christ in these challenging circumstances.

Any Christian may practice spiritual communion as a devotion at any time.

Given these understandings, the following five options are or will be available to our congregations.

- 1) **Virtual worship:** Daily Offices or Liturgy of the Word
- 2) **Outdoor Daily Office or Liturgy of the Word** in groups of no more than is permitted by the county, masked and physically distanced, with no touching of shared items.
- 3) **Agape at Home:** A liturgical blessing of a meal, eaten in separate homes with the congregation gathered virtually (see attached example). The agape does not require a priest because this is not a celebration of the eucharist.
- 4) **Home Communion:** A physically distanced, outdoor, and masked one-on-one sharing of consecrated bread (and wine) with a non-vulnerable Eucharistic Visitor (who does not enter the home). Any preparation/distribution must be in compliance with county and diocesan regulations. To consecrate bread (and wine), a community must gather with a priest, following current diocesan guidelines for small teams leading worship and the recommendations for celebrating eucharist in “Resuming Care-filled Worship” (pp. 20-21). To distribute the elements to households, follow the recommendations in “Resuming Care-filled Worship” (pp. 29-31); note that recyclable containers are preferable to plastic bags (see attached example liturgy).
- 5) A **Liturgy of the Presanctified Bread (and Wine)** with prior distribution of consecrated bread (and wine) (consecrated during a communal celebration of the Eucharist), and its consumption by all who desire it during a virtual service. Any preparation/distribution must be in compliance with county and diocesan regulations. To consecrate bread (and wine), a community must gather with a priest, following current diocesan guidelines for small teams leading worship and the recommendations for celebrating eucharist in “Resuming Care-filled Worship” (pp. 20-21). To distribute the elements to households prior to the Liturgy of the Presanctified, follow the recommendations in “Resuming Care-filled Worship” (pp. 29-31); note that recyclable containers are preferable to plastic bags. (see attached example liturgy)

Congregations who introduce home communion or a liturgy of the presanctified may find this to be a good opportunity for teaching about theology of the eucharist, for example, in a newsletter article or a homily or an educational program.

**Currently sharing a Eucharistic meal together during in-person worship is not permitted.
The Bishop's Office will release more information about procedures for sharing a Eucharistic meal together
in accordance with county regulations when permitted.**