

Extended Serving of the Communion of the Church

INTRODUCTION

The 211th General Assembly (1999) confirmed the addition to the Book of Order of a section providing for the Extended Serving of the Church's Communion to members isolated from congregational worship. The new section reads:

The serving of the elements may be extended, by two or more ordained officers of the church, to those isolated from the community's worship, provided

- (1) The elements are served following worship on the same calendar day, or as soon as practically feasible, as a direct extension of the serving of the gathered congregation, to church members who have responded to the church's invitation to receive the Sacrament;
- (2) Care is taken in the serving to ensure that the unity of Word and Sacrament is maintained, by the reading of Scripture and the offering of prayers; and
- (3) Those serving have been instructed by the Session or authorizing governing body in the theological and pastoral foundations of this ministry and in the liturgical resources for it. (W-3.3616e)

The intent of this provision is twofold. It strengthens the pastoral care of the church to its elderly, disabled, and homebound members by making it more feasible for them to participate regularly and frequently in the Lord's Supper. This provision also makes our celebration of the Lord's Supper a strong sign of the unity of the church by regularly including in the church's communion those who are unable to gather with the worshiping congregation.

In adopting W-3.3616e, the church has embraced opportunities for pastoral ministry to persons in a variety of isolating circumstances. This new provision has also opened an important arena for theological dialogue concerning the centrality and meaning of the Lord's Supper.

The Extended Serving provision both adds to and complements the existing practice of observing the Lord's Supper on "Special Occasions," specifically "in connection with the visitation of the sick and those isolated from public worship." The familiar practice or "a Special Observance of the Lord's Supper" (W-2.4010) *allows a minister, along with at least one other church member* to celebrate communion, apart from worship, with persons unable to come to church. The new provision for Extended Serving of the Communion of the Church (W-3.3616e) *allows officers serving together* to take the bread and cup directly from the worship service to church members who cannot be present in the sanctuary.

The following chart helps to clarify the distinctions between these two occasions.

<u>Special Observances:</u>	<u>Extended Serving:</u>
(1) Home communion is a <i>separate celebration</i> of the Lord's Supper.	(1) Home communion <i>extends the celebration</i> of the gathered congregation.
(2) The home visit may be scheduled <i>at any convenient time</i> .	(2) The home visit <i>directly follows the Service for the Lord's Day</i> .
(3) A Minister of the Word and Sacrament is <i>required</i> to preside.	(3) The Session sends elders and deacons <i>with or without</i> the pastor to members beyond the sanctuary.

(4) The home communion visit <i>consists of an abbreviated but complete celebration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.</i>	(4) The home communion visit <i>consists of the reading of Scripture and offering the bread and cup with prayer.</i>
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These two provisions for offering the church's sacramental ministry to its homebound members are complementary. That is, in any congregation it is possible that both Special Observances of the Lord's Supper and Extended Serving of the Communion of the Church may be practiced side by side. On some occasions, the need for a timely home communion visit will be best served by the pastor and others, celebrating the Lord's Supper as a Special Observance, even when a program for Extended Serving is also in place in the church. In other circumstances, the need for more frequent participation in the communion of the church will be better met by a regular program of Extended Serving, even when the pastor also makes home communion visits.

The pastoral need for the Extended Serving of the Church's Communion is significant. In the practice of many congregations and pastors, taking communion to homebound members does not happen often enough to provide regular fellowship, prayer, and communion for those who are apart from the worshipping church. As the median age of church members rises, the challenge of including the elderly and infirm at the Lord's Table becomes more urgent. Moreover, when the initiative of seeking communion is left to the church member, many seem reluctant to further "burden" their busy pastor by requesting a home communion visit. As a result, too many homebound members find themselves excommunicated in practice, or are included in the church's communion only on occasion.

The implications of this present reality are enormous. While Special Observances make needed provision for celebrations of the Lord's Supper that are necessarily "separate" and "special," Extended Serving offers a way to include homebound church members in regular celebration of the sacrament. This is an important witness to our homebound members, confirming that they are part of their congregation's worship. It is equally important in reminding the worshipping congregation that the community of their church extends beyond the company of those present in the sanctuary.

The provision for Extended Serving creates the possibility of serving all homebound members every time the congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper, serving isolated members on the same day, and from the same Table as the rest of the church. Elders and deacons would be sent out from the church to serve those who are unable to be present in the sanctuary, just as though they were in the last pew. Homebound members may be remembered and named in prayer at the Lord's Table. Likewise, Scripture readings and prayers from the sanctuary are repeated wherever communion is taken.

While the practice of Extended Serving is new to most Presbyterians, it was a practice of the early church, and is fully consistent with a Reformed understanding of the Sacrament. In the early church, deacons took the bread and wine to those absent from worship. Early emphasis on the Lord's Supper as an expression of the church's unity made leaving anyone out of the Sacrament unthinkable. The more familiar pattern of Special Observances of the Lord's Supper maintains this connection to the church through the presence the pastor and a church member who together represent the church. However, Extended Serving links the serving of communion outside the church with the congregation's celebration of the sacrament in the sanctuary. In both practices, the unity of Word and Sacrament is maintained by the provision for Scripture reading and prayer.

In no instance should the Extended Serving provision be used to excuse ministers from their pastoral obligation both to visit and to share in communion with isolated church members. In Extended Serving, and in Special Observances, the burden for including isolated

church members in the Lord's Supper must not be placed on the member making a request, but on the church extending an invitation. So, although church members may, at any time, request a home communion visit, the church must not wait to be asked before it offers, lest we violate our understanding of the unity of the entire body of Christ.

Provision W-3.3616e directs sessions to the liturgical resources of the church (W-6.3011) in carrying out a ministry of Extended Serving of the Church's Communion. This resource is designed to suggest the kind of liturgy by which the practice of Extended Serving can be faithfully and fruitfully carried out. A sample order of service for use by elders and deacons is accompanied by explanatory notes and practical suggestions. Local custom and preference will dictate specific local practices and adaptation of these resources. Further resources may be found in the *Book of Common Worship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

HISTORY, THEOLOGY, AND PRACTICE

History

Extended Serving is an ancient practice of the early church with much to commend it to contemporary congregations. The practice of serving the bread and cup from the Lord's Table to those "absent" is attested twice in the First Apology of Justin the Martyr (dating from approximately 155 A.D., in the city of Rome). Paragraph 67 describes a typical Lord's Day service of Word and Table:

When we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water. The presider likewise offers up prayer and thanksgiving, as much as he can, and the people sing out their assent saying the "amen." There is a distribution of the things over which thanks have been said and each person participates, *and those things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present.* (Italics added for emphasis)

Paragraph 65 describes a celebration of the Lord's Supper following Baptism:

When the presider has given thanks and the whole congregation has assented, those whom we call deacons give to each of those present a portion of the bread and wine and water over which thanks have been said, *and they take it to the absent.* (Italics added for emphasis)

While it is important to understand there is precedent for this practice in the history of the church, the reason for us to emulate that practice today is not merely because the early church did it. Extended Serving embodies the essence of communion with the risen Lord. For the early Christians who lived in the wake of the resurrection, it was unthinkable that any member of the body of Christ be excluded or omitted from participation at the Lord's Table. For them, the Lord's Supper was the vital living sign of the church's unity in Christ. The bread and wine were distributed to each and every member of the congregation, even to those who were missing from worship on any given Lord's Day. This ancient understanding offers the contemporary church a corrective for the inclination to limit the importance of the Lord's Supper to the personal meaning it has for individual believers. For our time, as for the early church, the significance of the Sacrament as a sign of our unity is no small matter.

There is good reason why the churches of the sixteenth century Reformation did not practice Extended Serving, or make other provision for taking communion to those who were absent from worship. By the time of the Reformation, abuses in the sacramental practice of the medieval church were widespread, including the "private mass" and "reservation" of the sacrament for devotional use.

Proliferation of "private masses" had given rise to the misunderstanding that while a

presiding priest was essential, a participating congregation was not. Veneration of the communion elements mis-located Christ in the bread and wine apart from his presence in and with the gathered church. In this context, the sixteenth century Reformers insisted that Christ was present in the celebration at the Lord's Table only as he was present in the church, the assembled congregation.

Among Presbyterians, there was no provision for communing the sick or homebound for almost 400 years. It was not until 1932 that the *Book of Common Worship* first included "A Brief Order of the Communion" to be used at the pastor's discretion for ministry to the sick. Twenty-five years later, the Presbyterian Directory for Worship (UPCUSA) added the current provision (W-2.4010).

It could be argued that the practice of Extended Serving has certain similarities to the medieval practice of "reservation" of the sacrament, where consecrated bread and wine were carried outside the sanctuary for later use. However, Extended Serving is significantly different from sacramental reservation. Its purpose is not to meet private devotional needs apart from Lord's Day worship. Instead, Extended Serving includes isolated people in that worship and the church's resulting common life.

For the sake of both the unity of the whole body of Christ, and the integrity of the church's ministry to each of its members, the practice today of taking communion to those who are unable to join the worshipping community is compelling. Whether accomplished through Special Observances or Extended Serving, the pastoral need is evident.

Theology

Unity of the Word and Sacrament is basic to Reformed theology and liturgical practice. While there are many ways homebound church members can hear the Word of God proclaimed, they can only share in the Sacrament when the church brings it to them. This is a sobering reminder of our pastoral and spiritual obligation to all the members of the church's fellowship. Extended Serving imagines the extension of both the Word and the Sacrament to those unable to gather with the church. The Sacrament is extended through serving the bread and the cup from the congregation's celebration at the Lord's Table. The Word is extended in Scripture and prayer, and other appropriate forms of preparation or proclamation. Both the recent provision for Extended Serving and the older provision for Special Observance take seriously Calvin's essential teaching: "the true church is found wherever the Word of God is purely preached and heard, and the sacraments rightly administered." (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.9).

The Great Thanksgiving at the Lord's Table does not make bread and wine holy. In offering that prayer, we acknowledge that the bread and wine are holy gifts, and we give thanks to God. When we take these sacramental signs of the presence of Christ to isolated church members, Christ is present, not in the elements themselves but in the church that bears them.

Practice

The practice of Extended Serving carefully preserves the authority of a Minister of the Word and Sacrament to preside at the Lord's Table (W2.4012c) and the role of officers (and others appointed by the session) to serve the bread and cup to the people (W-3.3616d). Extended Serving offers elders and deacons a venue in which to exercise their proper pastoral ministry. Extended Serving is one concrete, practical act where elders and deacons can serve as more than corporate decision-makers on a church board or administrators of congregational programs.

As participants in Extended Serving, elders can "strengthen and nurture the faith and life of the congregation committed to their charge," "encourage the people in the worship and

service of God,” and “visit and comfort and care for the people” (G-6.0304), exercising the spiritual dimensions of their office. In addition, since elders are encouraged to “cultivate their ability to teach the Bible and may be authorized to [preach]” (G-6.0304), Extended Serving visits, notably with persons who are still mentally and physically alert, provide opportunity for elders to carry out this calling, offering brief interpretations of the Word.

Deacons are called to “minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress” (G-6.0402). Specifically, the ministry of deacons includes “leading the people in worship through the prayers of intercession, reading the Scriptures, presenting the gifts of the people, and assisting with the Lord’s Supper” (G-6.0402). The Extended Serving of the Church’s Communion provides a vital opportunity to exercise these spiritual gifts.

The role of the Minister of the Word and Sacrament as presider at the Lord’s Table remains unchanged. Ministers must not allow the involvement of elders and deacons in Extended Serving to excuse them from their own pastoral obligation to visit isolated church members and to share in the gifts of the Lord’s Table with them. Ministers must exercise careful judgment in deciding when particular needs are better met through the ministry of Extended Serving, and when it is more appropriate to offer a Special Observance of the Lord’s Supper. When Extended Serving is implemented as a ministry of a particular church, opportunities for pastoral interpretation of the Lord’s Supper abound through the training of elders and deacons and careful interpretation of the meaning of the Sacrament to the entire congregation.

Considerations

It is the responsibility of the pastor to instruct those who will participate in Extended Serving in basic sacramental theology. The Office of Theology and Worship recommends study of Chapters 2 and 3 in the Directory for Worship, with special attention to the sections on Scripture and the Lord’s Supper. Further study on The Lord’s Supper in the *Book of Confessions* (4.075-4.082, 5.193-5.210, 6.161-6.168 and 9.52) is also recommended. *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table*, the 2006 sacrament study of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is another useful resource for understanding the church’s sacramental theology and practice.

As has been emphasized earlier, Extended Serving of the Communion of the Church is an extension of the blessing and fellowship of the Lord’s Table to those who are unable to be present in the sanctuary. This should at no time be regarded as a separate time of worship or an act of private devotion for an individual or a group. If elders and deacons are inexperienced in calling, especially when communion is celebrated, the pastor may consider including them in traditional home communion visits as preparation for their own ministry of Extended Serving.

A Session may decide to have a portion of the communion elements set apart for use in Extended Serving as an action at the Lord’s Table. This is entirely appropriate, and provides a visual reminder to the congregation of those who are not able to be present. Prepared “kits” for Extended Serving may be placed on the Table along with the accustomed communion vessels. The presiding minister may simply set aside bread and wine to be used in Extended Serving immediately following the Lord’s Day service, or may opt to give bread and wine to designated elders and deacons at the Communion of the People, enabling them to leave the sanctuary immediately and begin their Extended Serving. These actions are fitting reminders for the gathered congregation of the inclusion of those who are absent from the Table.

Care should be taken to schedule the Extended Serving visit. Allowance must also be made for mealtimes, treatment schedules, and other activities over which the isolated communicants have little or no control. It is appropriate that elders and deacons who are participating in Extended Serving gather for prayer with the pastor and those who will serve the gathered congregation. Extended Serving teams must be comprised of two or more elders

or deacons as a tangible sign that this is a celebration by the whole church. Each team should have sufficient orders of worship from the Service for the Lord's Day to leave one with each communicant. If a congregation does not ordinarily use a printed order of worship, thought should be given to providing each communicant with a record of the church's worship.

COMMENTARY ON THE ORDER OF WORSHIP

The order of worship suggested here for the Extended Serving is adapted from the Service for the Lord's Day in the *Book of Common Worship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993). The service is brief, but maintains the critical link between the Word and the Sacrament. Care should be taken that communion is not delivered casually or apologetically. This is the Lord's Supper. It is a visible sign of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The elders and deacons who come offering Extended Serving of the Communion of the Church are literally messengers of the Gospel. Prayers, Scripture, and the communion elements should be shared with joy and thanksgiving. Elders should memorize the Assurance of Forgiveness and Blessing, in order to deliver these significant words with authority, authenticity, and confidence. Your session may elect to add other elements to the service that reflect your congregations worship practices more fully.

While each communicant's circumstances will require the Extended Serving team to be thoughtfully creative in their adaptation of the order of service, the following order is recommended as a basic pattern for worship. Particular attention must be given to the physical condition of each communicant as well as to their age and level of comprehension.

Because the Lord's Supper is a celebration for the whole church with Jesus Christ as the host, bringing communion to a home or health care facility is not simply conveying bread and cup to the isolated; rather, it is a way of including individuals in the worship of the whole church. Prior to the Extended Service team leaving the church, the presiding minister may pray these or similar words:

Loving God,
as you sent the angel to minister to Elijah
with the bread of heaven,
send us out in this ministry of love and grace.
Strengthen and nourish
all who celebrate this sacrament
that through our communion
in the body and blood of Christ,
we all may know the comfort
of your eternal presence. Amen.

Order for the Extended Serving of the Communion of the Church

Team members should always identify themselves by name with these or similar words:

We are N. and N. from N. church, here to visit and to enable you to share in the communion of your church.

Elders and deacons should take time to visit with the Communicant. As you visit, listen for concerns and joys to remember in prayer.

When all are ready for communion, prepare the elements by uncovering the bread and pouring the cup. Elders and deacons may invite others present to join in this service.

GREETING

Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

EXTENDING THE LORD'S TABLE

Then an elder says these words:

When our congregation gathered this morning for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we heard again the story of God's mighty acts of love, embodied in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. With thanksgiving we remembered that:

On the night he was betrayed,
Jesus took bread, and gave thanks, broke it,
and gave it to his disciples saying,
"This is my body, given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

Again, after supper, he took the cup,
gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples saying,
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood,
shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.
Do this in remembrance of me."

We were also given assurance of the Lord's presence through the gift of his Holy Spirit.

Now we bring you this same bread of life and this same cup of blessing, that you may be strengthened through our communion in the Body of Christ.

CONFESSION

When circumstances permit, this or a similar prayer of confession may be said:

Almighty and merciful God,
we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against your holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.

O Lord, have mercy upon us
Spare those who confess their faults.
Restore those who are penitent, according to your promises
declared to the world in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, O merciful God, for his sake

that we may live a holy, just, and humble life
to the glory of your holy name.

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

An elder says:

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.
The old life has gone: a new life has begun.
Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. **Amen.**
May the peace of Christ always be with you.

SCRIPTURE READING

The reading from Scripture upon which the morning sermon was based may be read. It is especially appropriate for a deacon to read the Scripture lesson.

INTERPRETATION OF THE WORD

*Pastors should supply the Extended Serving teams with a brief synopsis of the morning sermon, or teams may offer their own recollection of the proclamation of the Word.
The Opening Prayer or Prayer of the Day from the Lord's Day service may then be said, followed by the Lord's Prayer.*

COMMUNION

The bread and cup are given saying:

The body of Christ, given for you.
The blood of Christ, shed for you.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Join hands to offer this or a similar prayer. It is especially appropriate for a deacon to lead the prayer. Specific prayers for the individual or the church may be added.

Mighty God of mercy,
we thank you for the resurrection dawn
bringing the glory of our risen Lord
who makes every day new.

Especially we thank you for
the beauty of your creation ...
the new creation in Christ ...
all gifts of healing and forgiveness ...
the sustaining love of family and friends ...
the fellowship of faith in your church ...

Merciful God of might,
renew this weary world,
heal the hurts of all your children,
and bring about your peace for all
in Christ Jesus, the living Lord.

Especially we pray for
those who govern nations of the world ...

people in countries ravaged by strife or warfare ...
all who work for peace and harmony ...
all who strive to restore the earth ...
the church of Jesus Christ in every land ...

Eternal God,
our beginning and our end,
be our starting point and our haven,
and accompany us in each day's journey.
Use our hands
to do the work of your creation
and use our lives
to bring others the new life you give this world
in Jesus Christ, Redeemer of all.
Amen.

BLESSING

An elder says:

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord be kind and gracious to you.
The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.

Upon leaving, identify the next date the team will return with communion.

Normally, the visit should take between 20 and 30 minutes. Team members should be alert for signs of fatigue or discomfort and should adapt the service accordingly.