

Why Do We Do That?

This is the Sixth in a series of articles on Lutheran customs and practices. Do you have an idea for a church practice you would like to have explained? Suggest it to Pastor Becker

Communion Distribution

There are various customs for how Holy Communion is distributed.

When Jesus took bread and broke it to give to his disciples at the Last Supper, he was using a flat piece of unleavened bread, as was always eaten at Passover. It is necessary that bread be used for communion, although which kind is used is not a doctrinal issue. Some churches use a large piece of bread from which pieces are broken off, as did the early church. Paul refers to the one loaf as a sign of our unity in Christ. Some use individual unleavened wafers, as we do. Some use a large wafer, which is then broken into pieces. Whichever is used, we treat the consecrated bread as including the body of Christ, which is given to us to eat. Individual wafers are probably the easiest way to distribute the bread without concern about crumbs.

In some churches the bread is placed directly into the mouth of the communicant by the one distributing it. This may symbolize that this blessing is received through no act of our own. In other churches, as ours, communicants hold out an open hand to receive the bread and place it into their mouth.

When Jesus first observed the Lord's Supper, he referred to the contents of the cup as fruit of the vine. Wine, fermented from grapes harvested the previous year was used in the Passover meal. Grape wine is used for Holy Communion. Since the invention of unfermented grape juice, some churches, which consider the use of alcohol to be sinful, have substituted this for wine, but this is not accepted as proper in Lutheran churches.

It seems that Jesus' disciples likely drank from a single cup or "chalice". Use of the "common cup" is the historic practice of the church and may symbolize the unity of faith which we share. The cup may be made of silver, pottery, or other material. When the use of grape juice was introduced, small individual cups began to be used out of concern about spreading disease, but it is biologically impossible to spread disease by drinking wine from a silver chalice, since both alcohol and silver disinfect on contact. In our church we offer both types of cup. Some find the individual cups easier to drink from, while others prefer the common cup. In our church, some of the individual cups contain "dealcoholized" wine for those who cannot drink regular wine for health reasons, such as alcoholics and some diabetics. This wine has been distilled to remove most of the alcohol. This wine is a lighter color so that it can be recognized.

Communion is sometimes referred to as the Sacrament of the Altar. When we commune,

we come up to the altar, which represents the table from which Jesus distributes to us his Lord's Supper. In some churches, the communion elements are simply passed down the pew like an offering plate. This is not appropriate in churches like ours, which practice close communion. Close communion means that, since the act of communing together is an expression of unity in the faith, only those who are members of the same faith as the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod commune with us.

In many churches, people kneel to receive Holy Communion. Kneeling is a sign of humbly seeking to receive a blessing. In our church we do not kneel simply because we do not yet have a communion rail at which to kneel. Even when there is a kneeler, it is appropriate for those with knee problems to remain standing.

In some churches, Holy Communion is celebrated every Sunday or in every service. This was the practice in the early church and through the time of the Lutheran Reformation. Due to the influence of some Protestants who deemphasized the value of sacraments, many Lutherans also began to celebrate it less often. At one time, some offered it only four times a year. Some still offer it only once each month, while more are returning to the practice of every Sunday communion. In our church, Holy Communion is included in worship on the second and last Sundays of each month and in holiday services.