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Church Polity and Online Sacraments in the Christian Reformed Church

Kathy Smith, Adjunct Professor of Church Polity at Calvin Theological Seminary, reflects on the administration of sacraments in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. She advises Christian Reformed churches to practice pastoral flexibility while still abiding by church polity, and provides a historical example from World War II, related by her predecessor Henry De Moor.

By: [Kathy Smith](#)

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As most churches have moved to some sort of online worship services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, questions about how to administer sacraments have popped up in social media forums as well as in virtual council rooms and online worship planning team meetings. How do we serve the Lord's Supper? How do we administer baptisms? Are we allowed to do these remotely by video or livestream, or should we abstain for a time and wait until we are together again? Does it fit our theology to not be gathered with the communal body of Christ in the presence of Christ when we partake of the elements? How can the elders supervise the Lord's Supper if they aren't bodily present to serve it?

Pastoral Flexibility

The big question is, how can we be flexible in this unique situation while still abiding by our church polity? The Church Order was not written with this kind of situation in mind, of course, but how can we apply its principles and provisions to our practice today? It is important to remember that the Church Order is meant to serve the church, not the other way around. But how best can it serve the church in this crisis situation?

The key provision in the Christian Reformed Church's Church Order is Article 55, which says that "the sacraments shall be administered upon the authority of the consistory in the public worship service by a minister of the Word, a commissioned pastor, or, in the case of need, an ordained person who has received the approval of classis, with the use of the prescribed forms or adaptations of them that conform to synodical guidelines."

The key phrases in that article are "upon the authority of the consistory" (the ministers and elders), and "in the public worship service." Reformed polity insists that sacraments should be celebrated in public worship, so we are gathered with the body of Christ when we partake of the body of Christ together. But there are a great variety of online public worship gatherings happening now! In fact, I "attended" two different churches this past Sunday through my laptop. I'm sure each

church's pastors and elders can figure out the best way to administer communion in these unusual circumstances, even if the participants are providing their own elements, which seems to me the safest way, given the need to be mindful of cleanliness.

As we have time in this unusual season and for the future, and as multi-site churches and others experiment more with video and livestream services, we need to continue to reflect on our theology of sacraments and how they should always be connected to the Word of God. That's why we administer sacraments in worship rather than in private gatherings and why they are to be administered by ordained persons who bring the Word. When we bring communion to nursing homes, hospital rooms, and hospice facilities, we do so as an extension of the corporate worship service to persons who are unable to attend. Certainly, in the context of this pandemic, many, if not most of us, are unable to attend.

So, as far as serving communion, ministers and elders could do so in a livestream service that is viewed by the congregation, and those viewers could partake along with them either simultaneously or whenever they view the service. If housemates are present, they could serve each other, much as is done when communion plates are passed down the pews in church. The ordained person presiding would be at a distance, yes, but through video or audio, and perhaps with a simple printed liturgy sent out ahead by the elders that includes readings from the Word of God, could be granting permission for their congregants to partake of the sacrament who are gathered in an unusual and virtual way—but in community and in communion with each other, and in the presence of the triune God.

Historical Example

You may wonder how this has gone historically in the Reformed churches. For example, how did Germany and the Eastern European countries engage the sacraments in World War II? What wisdom can we learn from the experiences of Reformed communities who administered the sacraments during such long seasons when they could not gather publicly?

Henry De Moor, Professor Emeritus of Church Polity at Calvin Theological Seminary, offers these reflections:

It was not unusual during World War II, yes, but especially in times of persecution of Christians and/or Reformed Christians, to have "house baptism" where the ordained minister baptizes a child and announces in whatever way that this has occurred. In our day, modern technology can be employed to have all members present for the occasion by way of livestreaming. As for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we have always had ordained persons administering it to persons in nursing homes, to those at home as shut-ins, the dying in hospice care. I have often requested that new technologies need to be used here too. To maintain the principle that Word and sacrament belong together and to celebrate unity in our diversity, it is desirable to livestream or to "videotape" an actual communion service and share that with such folks in their circumstances. An elder could be "extending" the meal to them on these occasions.

Last Sunday one of our pastors brought with him only a few volunteering choir members and organist/pianist and we all stayed at home and participated by way of livestreaming. He even did a children's message. My son sent a picture to a Facebook page of his daughter listening attentively in her nightgown on the floor of their living room in front of the computer screen. The pastor even announced that this might be the way we worship for the next who-knows-how-many Sundays of the year.

De Moor's observations about worship and sacraments in the past and in the present offer both reflections on the importance of our theology and polity, and the need to adjust our practice in ways that help the faith of our church members to flourish today, and in future generations.



Kathy Smith

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As containment of COVID-19 forces your worshipping community to implement shelter-in-place worship and practice social isolation, we offer these resources to help you plan and cope in ways that encourage and support your community. These resources were initially created from events and in response to different situations and can be adapted for worship that encourages prayer and Christian community during this time of social distancing necessary to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

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Ramon L. Orostizaga

Thank you for this. It is really helpful. Thanks.

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Jeric Cotillion Cortado

Enlightening... thank you.

Like · Reply · 16w



Manasseh Wilson

nice article

Like · Reply · 15w



Chad Werkhoven

Thank you for this article. I have been struggling with this. The second to last paragraph of Art. 35 of the Belgic Confession is the closest prescription we have for how to properly partake of the sacrament: "we receive this sacrament in the assembly of the people of God... making there a confession of our faith and the Christian religion... In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God --and our neighbor--.

Our church has and will continue with online worship during this trying time, and I've tried to keep our services as much the same as possible,
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George Denhartigh

I would wait till we could be together.

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