

FAQ on the Practice of Closed Communion

What is closed communion?

Closed Communion is the practice of giving the Lord's Supper only to communicant members of congregations that are in pulpit and altar fellowship with one another. In short, closed communion means just that – our communion is closed, not open, to those who do not believe the same doctrine that we teach.

Who is a communicant member?

A communicant member is one who has been catechized or taught concerning the beliefs of a particular congregation, and who has been admitted to the Lord's Supper in that place.

What is meant by pulpit and altar fellowship?

Churches and congregations who are in pulpit and altar fellowship are in agreement on doctrine and practice and have declared that they are of one mind, such that they are willing to share each other's pulpits (preach in each other's churches), and commune at each other's altars.

What churches are we, in the LCMS, in altar and pulpit fellowship with?

For the most up to date list, see here:

LCMS Partner Church Bodies - The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Is this a new practice in the church?

No. Closed Communion has always been the official practice of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and of the Lutheran Church in general since the days of Martin Luther.

"The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved [1 Corinthians 11:27-28]." - (Augsburg Confession XXV:1).

"Resolved, That the Synod reaffirm 1967 Resolution 2-19 that pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us;" and be it further resolved, that the Synod reaffirm 1986 Resolution 3-08, "that the pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod continue to abide by the practice of close communion, which includes the necessity of exercising responsible pastoral care in extraordinary situations and circumstances," and beseech one another in love to remember that "situations of emergency and special

cases of pastoral care” or “extraordinary situations and circumstances” are, by their nature, relatively rare” (CITATION).

Not only has this always been the predominant position within the Lutheran churches, past and present, closed communion has also been the predominant practice since the very beginning of the church.

“Let no one eat or drink of the Eucharist with you except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord; for it was in reference to this that the Lord said: ‘Do not give that which is holy to dogs.’” – Didache (Late 1st Century)

“We call this food Eucharist; and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration, and is thereby living as Christ has enjoined.” – Justin Martyr (Mid 2nd Century)

Until fairly recently (in the last couple hundred years) all the major denominations practiced closed communion. “Open” communion is a recent development in church history.

If Holy Communion is such a wonderful gift, why would we want someone to be deprived of it?

We don’t! We want everyone to participate in this wonderful gift of Christ to His Church. However, we also want to honor and obey Christ in the giving out of the gift. Christ wants to give this gift to everyone in such a way that it does them good and builds up the church.

What makes the pastor think he’s qualified to make decisions about who should receive the sacrament?

God’s Word teaches about pastors that they are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Servants are obedient to their masters and do their master’s will. Stewards are the master’s representatives. They speak for him. They manage the master’s resources. When it comes to giving the Lord’s Supper, the pastors, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, cannot follow their own will. They can only do the will of the master. Pastors who practice closed communion do so in obedience to their Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. They remember that it is not their supper to do with as they wish, rather, it is the Lord’s Supper.

How does a pastor make decisions about who should and should not receive the sacrament?

Pastors cannot read hearts and minds. It would be wrong of them to try. They can only hear a person's confession. A person's confession is what a person says they believe or shows they believe by their actions. Pastors make judgments about who may or may not commune based upon three things which are representative of a person's confession:

1. What a person says about what they believe. This means that pastors are called to ask questions and to listen to people. If someone says they disagree with our teaching or in speaking shows that they are confused about our teaching he ought not be admitted to the Lord's Supper until he is able to state his understanding of and agreement with our teaching.
2. What church a person belongs to and/or where they take communion. When someone takes communion at a church he is stating his agreement with the teachings of that church. Pastors should not commune people who take the Lord's Supper at churches whose teachings are not in agreement with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.
3. What a person displays in their life. Occasionally pastors are required to withhold communion from individuals who are in open and unrepentant sin. This only happens after every effort has been made by the pastor and/or elders of the church to bring the individual to repentance and faith.

How much of the LCMS doctrine must I agree with before communing at Living Word?

The short answer is this: everything. That's what it means to be "of the same mind" (Philippians 2:2). However, we also recognize that not everyone is a professional theologian. We recognize that people are in many different places when it comes to their level of understanding of Lutheran doctrine. Being "of the same mind" doesn't mean that we all know everything, or that we never have doubts or questions. It means that those who commune with us:

1. Have been instructed in our beliefs.
2. Have committed themselves to our teaching by being confirmed.
3. Are not consciously opposed to the teaching of our congregation and the LCMS.
4. Are not also communing at churches whose teachings contradict ours.

Note the commitment made by those who are confirmed in the LCMS:

"Do you hold all the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures to be the inspired Word of God? Do you confess the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Scriptures, as you have learned to know it from the Small Catechism, to be faithful and true?"

What about “pastoral exceptions”?

Our church recognizes the importance of allowing for pastoral exceptions to the regular practice of closed communion. These exceptions are only made when the pastor is certain that the individual desiring communion knows, understands, and agrees with the teachings of our church and has an earnest desire to be a part of our church, including the desire to be confirmed in the faith. While such exceptions do occur, they are exceptionally rare.

What’s the big deal anyway? What is it about the Lord’s Supper that necessitates such care and caution in its distribution?

1. The Lord’s Supper is a participation or communion in the body and blood of Christ. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16). The Lord’s Supper is not a game, nor is it merely a mid service snack! The Lord’s Supper is as serious as it is glorious and wonderful. It is eating and drinking the body and blood of God almighty. We are in the presence of God. We are receiving forgiveness, life, and salvation. We should never think of Holy Communion as “no big deal.”
2. St. Paul teaches that the body and blood of the Lord could be consumed in an unworthy manner: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). As Christians who genuinely love our neighbors, we seek to protect people from “profaning the body and blood of the Lord” and from “eating and drinking judgment.”

Is it not safe for everyone to receive the body and blood of the Lord?

No, it is not. As shown in the previous question, everyone who partakes of Holy Communion receives the body and blood of Jesus Christ, whether they are believing or unbelieving, repentant or unrepentant. People who eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus in unbelief and without repentance receive it for their judgment. Thus, it has the opposite effect than what was intended (1 Corinthians 11:30). On the other hand, those who receive the sacrament in repentance and faith receive it for their salvation. It is the responsibility of the pastor as a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1-2) to refuse communion for those who he knows are unrepentant or without faith.

Why don’t all churches practice closed communion?

1. Many pastors and churches simply don't understand the importance of the Lord's Supper. These pastors and churches teach that Holy Communion isn't the body and blood of Jesus and that it doesn't give the forgiveness of sins. To these churches communion is just memorial meal or re-enactment of the Last Supper. With that understanding there is no real reason to practice closed communion since nothing that special is happening anyway.
2. They don't want to offend people. While many people, even from other churches, understand and accept the practice of closed communion, others struggle with the teaching and practice. Out of a misguided understanding of love and the genuine desire for the opportunity to serve and build

relationships with visitors to the church pastors and churches have allowed the practice of closed communion to slip. What these pastors and congregations have forgotten is that faithfulness to God's word is also the most loving thing they could do for those who visit and attend their church.

What's the difference between "close" communion and "closed" communion?

The official position of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and of this congregation is to recognize that both terms "close" and "closed" are different words that refer to the same practice. That is to say, that no matter which term a congregation chooses to use the practice ought to be the same. Our congregation has chosen not to use either term. We do this because both terms have baggage connected with them. Rather, we simply state the teaching, letting it speak for itself. However, if we were to use one of these terms, the word "closed" would most accurately describe our practice for the following reasons:

1. Historical Accuracy: The word "closed" comes from the early church practice where, just before the service of the Sacrament, all visitors and those who had not been instructed would be excused from the worship service. The doors would then be closed for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.
2. Clarity of Teaching: There is a grammatical problem with using the word "close." The opposite of "close" is "far." Who ever heard of "far communion?" The opposite of "closed communion" is "open communion," and we all know what "open communion" is. The word "close" also begs the question, "How close?" How close should we be in order to be practicing "close communion?" The word "closed" more accurately describes our teaching, that Holy Communion is closed to those who do not share our beliefs.

Aren't Lutherans just trying to be an exclusive club, claiming that they are the only ones going to heaven?

Not at all! Closed Communion is practiced out of loving concern for the souls of others and out of faithfulness to God. We don't want anyone to receive something that might

be harmful to them (1 Corinthians 11:27-31). We don't want to treat God's gifts with disrespect. We want to live in faithfulness to Christ by taking our unity seriously. In this we are simply following the will of Christ:

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21).

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Philippians 2:2).

Unfortunately, many people believe that unity means pretending there are no differences between churches and denominations, when there really are. Christ wants us to be one, not simply by agreeing to be one, but by agreeing on his teaching. In the meantime Lutherans are always active in dialogue with other denominations. Lutherans are always actively seeking true unity on the basis of the word of God. Lutherans sincerely believe in and look forward to the unity that will only be expressed in heaven where believers from every tribe and nation (even from every denomination) will worship together before the throne of God (Revelation 7:9-17). Until that time, we must take seriously the Word of God, which commands us to seek true unity of teaching and confession prior to receiving communion together (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:16-18).

But isn't the Lord's Supper something between me and God?

Holy Scripture clearly teaches that when we partake of the Lord's Supper we commune with God and with each other (1 Corinthians 10:16-18, Acts 2:42, Romans 16:17). 1 Corinthians 11:26 highlights this fact: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you [all] proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The plural "you" in "you proclaim the Lord's death" shows us that Holy Communion is something that we do, together as a community of believers. Holy Communion is not private, it is a very public matter. An illustration of this is the arms of the cross, which extend upward and outward. The vertical arm represents our communion with God. The horizontal arm represents our communion with one another. Holy Communion involves standing with Christ our savior, and our standing with those who gather with us at the altar of the Lord. We show our unity with Christ and with one another as we go to the table of the

Lord. Our unity is based not only on a common faith and a common love for one another (Matthew 5:23- 24), but also a common confession of faith (we believe the same things).

How do I respond when non-Lutheran friends or family are offended at our practice of closed communion?

For every person who is offended by our teaching there is another who respects our commitment to the Word of God and our high view of the Lord's Supper. However, people are occasionally offended when they are told they cannot take communion at our church. They might think that our practice is insinuating that they are not in fact Christians. This is not the case as stated above. Lutherans recognize the power of God's word to produce genuine Christians even in erring denominations. Lutherans also recognize that there are false Christians within Lutheran churches. We can explain to them that by practicing closed Communion we are simply being honest by acknowledging the divisions that exist within Christendom. We do not try to pretend that there is doctrinal unity where there is none. We are not questioning anyone's individual faith in Jesus. Our churches simply do not teach the same thing concerning the Lord's Supper, and we ask them to respect our beliefs and practices just as we respect theirs. By the way, you can always direct them to your pastors if they have further questions.

What if a visitor who is not a member of an LCMS congregation but believes the true teaching concerning the Lord's Supper wishes to take Communion? Should pastors make exceptions in such cases?

Most likely not. Jesus desire for unity was best expressed in his high priestly prayer where he prayed for the church saying, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth... I do not ask for these only [namely, the disciples], but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:11, 17, 20-21). The pastor ought to be certain that the visitor not only agrees with the Lutheran teaching on the Lord's Supper, but with all the teachings of the Lutheran Church. In this way we manifest the unity that Christ desired for the whole church at our altar.

What about when I visit another church that is not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod? May I commune there?

When you participate in Holy Communion you are publicly declaring your agreement with the teaching of the pastor and congregation where the Lord's Supper is being offered. Can one who believes that Christ's true body and blood are given, eaten, and

drunk in the Supper also partake in a church that does not teach this? Can one who believes that baptism washes away sins honestly declare his agreement with a church that teaches the exact opposite? When members of LCMS churches commune at churches with a different confession, they are simply being dishonest.

How can I support the pastors and leadership of our church in upholding the teaching and practice of closed Communion?

When you invite a non-LCMS friend or family member to church you can do the following:

First, inform them that Holy Communion is being offered in the service.

Next, patiently and lovingly explain to them that they are welcome to participate in the service but that Holy Communion is given only to communicant members of LCMS congregations or congregations in fellowship with the LCMS. If they ask why, you may tell them that your pastor and congregation are not in fellowship with theirs, should they belong to another Christian congregation, and that agreement in doctrine is necessary before fellowship at Holy Communion may be enjoyed.

You may also briefly explain your belief that Christ's true body and blood are given, eaten, and drunk in the Lord's Supper, and not all Christian congregations believe this, teach it, or confess it. If they continue to ask questions, you may invite them to have a meeting with your pastor.