

**CTCR Document**

**May a Vicar Celebrate The Lord's Supper in an Emergency Situation?**

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the 2008 Convention of the Lutheran Church-Canada Resolution 08.1.05b: “To Request a Study from the CTCR on Whether A Vicar May Celebrate the Lord’s Supper in An Emergency Situation” (ref Overture 1.05) was passed. That Resolution read as follows:

**WHEREAS** a thorough study of the matter of whether or not a vicar may celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar in an emergency situation will be helpful in assisting the church-at-large to determine the appropriateness of such a practice; therefore be it

**RESOLVED** that the CTCR be asked to provide a study on whether a vicar, in an emergency situation, with the approval from the vicarage congregation, the seminary and the Council of Presidents, may celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar; and be it further

**RESOLVED** that the study be submitted to the next Synodical convention for consideration; and be it further

**RESOLVED** that the Council of Presidents and the seminaries be mindful of the discussion and concerns expressed at this Convention and of the pending study in any consideration of a request for a vicar to celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar based on emergency; and be it finally

**RESOLVED** that for the time being, in any apparent emergency, the Council of Presidents in conjunction with the respective District and circuit shall continue to seek all possible means to provide sacramental ministry by an ordained pastor.

This Resolution was adopted in Session 6.

Upon reflection on the task assigned to the CTCR it became clear to the members that there were a number of related questions that needed to be answered in order for the original question contained in the Resolution of the Convention to be considered. Significant among those questions are the following:

Since the Office of the Keys has been given by Christ to the Church, is the celebration of the Eucharist publically a unique function of the Office of the Pastoral ministry?

Can a lay person be permitted to celebrate Holy Communion in a public worship service?

What is the status of a Vicar?

What would constitute an “emergency” situation in which a Vicar might be the celebrant at a Communion Service?

Based upon the Scriptures, the teachings of Martin Luther, the Book of Concord of 1580, the writings of notable Lutheran Theologians of old (e.g. Chemnitz; Gerhard, C.F.W. Walther, et. al) and recent papers presented by recognized contemporary confessional theologians and pastors of the Lutheran Church-Canada, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Lutheran Church of Australia, the following is a concise, Biblical and Confessional opinion on the question at hand as to whether Vicars, in an emergency situation, may celebrate Holy Communion.

### **I. The Four Questions**

To be able to answer these questions honestly and forthrightly we must look at the evidence of Scripture, the Confessions and orthodox Lutheran theologians as they put down on paper their understanding of the Office of the Holy Ministry and the priesthood of all believers or, as some would prefer, the priesthood of the baptized.

In Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession (Augustana) Luther and the Reformers of the 16th Century clearly state: **“Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call (ohne ordentlichen Beruf, nisi rite vocatus).”** <sup>1</sup>

This “rightly ordered Call” has always been understood in our Synod as a Call from the Church into the Holy Ministry after a Candidate successfully completed his course of studies and has been duly certified by one of our Seminary faculties. Only then does the Board of Assignments place such a Candidate into a parish of Lutheran Church – Canada. Although Vicars receive a temporary “call” to minister, it is not a permanent Call to Ministry in a particular place and it is not received by one who is ordained. Therein lies an important distinction. A Vicar is always “Inducted” into his temporary service at his vicarage parish but never “Installed”, as is a Called and Ordained Pastor. For the Vicar is in reality a man in training for the Holy Ministry.

He does not in any way hold the Office of the Pastoral Ministry. However, he is given permission by Lutheran Church-Canada and one of its congregations to perform, in a limited way, some of the functions of Office of the Pastoral Ministry in that place, under the strict supervision of one who does hold the Pastoral Office. Again, he is only given this permission and this opportunity to practise and develop pastoral skills under the strict supervision of a Called and Ordained Pastor of Lutheran Church-Canada. For that reason he may preach and teach, but not preside at Holy Communion.

The formal concept of “Vicarage”, also known in some denominations as an “Internship” is actually a relatively new innovation in the North American Church when viewed against the entire history of the Christian Church from the first century forward. Today a problem has arisen in recent history in that men in training for the Pastoral Ministry (Vicars) have been placed into remote congregations that by themselves cannot afford a Called and Ordained Pastor. These men have had little supervision by supervisory pastors who sometimes are half a day’s drive or more away. For ten months to a year the Vicar carries on “pastoral ministry” in an isolated community, is then perceived by many of the laity as a “Pastor”, and often functions as a pastor even though he is but a lowly intern with no pastoral authority as regards the Office of Keys. He is a man who carries out some of the functions of Holy Ministry in the same way that a student teacher carries out some of the functions of a full-fledged teacher in a school. His authority to proclaim the word of God and bring that word to the people comes only from his position as one who is part of the priesthood of all believers on account of his baptism, not by virtue of any claim to the Office of the Pastoral Ministry.

The problem has become even more serious with the acute shortage of Clergy and the inability or unwillingness of the larger Church (District and Synod) to provide qualified clergy to serve these remote congregations.

Quite rightly there is a great concern amongst both the lay people and the clergy of Lutheran Church-Canada that people in remote areas of Canada in congregations be able to receive the Lord’s Supper. However, one does not meet that deep need for the strengthening of people’s faith through the Holy Supper by undermining a long held Scriptural and Confessional standard as regards the public ministry of the church and its functioning through the Called and Ordained pastorate.

That this is the case is obvious from the Confessional and historical writing of the early Church Fathers, Luther and the Reformers of the sixteenth century. As one of our own theologians and professors, Dr. John R. Stephenson writes: “And who can suppose that the lay or diaconal celebration of the Holy Supper can find even a shred of support in the catholic tradition of the Church, eastern or western?” <sup>2</sup> The early church simply did not engage in this practise. Since prior to his Call and Ordination a man remains part of the Priesthood of all Believers and does not hold the Office of the Holy Ministry, therefore until he does receive a Call and is Ordained, he remains a lay person, not a Pastor.

In modern times support for the lay administration of Holy Communion as well as a host of other public functions of the Office of Holy Ministry is espoused and put forth both by modern day enthusiasts and practitioners of the Church Growth Movement. In both cases there is a serious blurring of the distinction between the Priesthood of

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<sup>1</sup> *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions (A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord)*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Stephenson, John, *Who is The Rightful Celebrant of Holy Communion?* LTR II (Fall/Winter 1989-90) pp. 25-32

all Believers and the Office of the Holy Ministry which is wholly unbiblical, un-Lutheran and an error much practised today in a large part of Protestant Christianity in Canada.

On the other hand, Christ has graciously given us the Office of the Public Ministry for the oversight, teaching, and care of His Bride, the Church.

Therefore we ought to use that which He has authorized and not short-circuit His plan by giving Pastoral oversight and authority to Vicars who are laymen in training for the Office of the Pastoral Ministry.

But then the question arises as at the Convention: “What about “emergency situations”? Unlike baptizing, one cannot conceive of an emergency situation in which Holy Communion would be required for the salvation of an individual. Jesus says to all Christians: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19) and, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16) but no such statement can be found regarding Holy Communion. Rather our Lord’s words and those of the Apostles as regards Holy Communion always focus on the faith strengthening, not the faith creating power of the Lord’s Supper.

The only situation that one can think of where there might be an “emergency” situation is if an individual is dying and requests Holy Communion for comfort and strengthening. In such a situation the church has never authorized a lay person or a lay person in training for the ministry (a Vicar) to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. However what every lay person and Vicar has been authorized to do is to read and proclaim the Gospel of our Lord found in the Holy Scriptures which St. Paul reminds us “is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe” (Romans 1:16). As the Priesthood of all Believers, the lay members of the Holy Christian Church have the authorization and in fact, the obligation individually (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8) to proclaim the Gospel on a daily basis where they live and work and therefore the church in its long history has never had a problem with a Vicar or lay person preaching the Word under the direct supervision of a Called and Ordained Pastor.

However, there is no similar authorization given by Scripture or the Confessions or the orthodox Lutheran Church down through the years as regards the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

In his second sermon preached in the year 1522 on the John 20:19-21 text, Dr. Martin Luther says: “This power is here given to all Christians (i.e. the spiritual power and rule)... when you shall speak a word concerning a sinner, it shall be spoken in heaven [as well]) and in 1540 on the same text: “This (whatsoever sins you forgive, etc.) is not said alone to ministers or servants of the church, but to every Christian. Here each may serve another in the hour of death, or wherever there is need and give him absolution...”<sup>3</sup>. It is interesting to note that there is no consideration by Luther whatsoever of a lay person ministering to a dying person by celebrating the Lord’s Supper. If the authors of the Synodical resolution requesting this paper from the CTCR are suggesting that in and of itself, a congregation of believers in a remote part of Canada constitutes an “emergency”, we simply could not concur. Such a group of believers has the written Word of God and the remembrance of their Baptism, that is, their incorporation into the family of God thereby, and may be daily and weekly strengthened by the proclamation of that Word.

That congregation of LCC, however, should not be ignored regarding their inability to receive the Holy Sacrament on a regular basis because they cannot support a full-time Pastor. Surely the three hundred plus congregations of the LCC, through its Council of Presidents ought be able to find a way to provide them with a qualified Called and Ordained Pastor who can preside at a monthly or bi-monthly Service of the Sacrament in that remote community. But to ask a Vicar to do so is to violate, undermine and weaken the Biblical and Confessional position of our Synod as outlined in AC XIV and practised throughout our history. It also leads to a gross confusion of the distinct biblical character of the Priesthood of all Believers and the Office of the Holy Ministry.

Dr. John Kleinig of the Lutheran Church of Australia writes: “Christ authorises and empowers pastors to exercise the keys in the congregations that they serve by baptising and withholding baptism, by forgiving and retaining sins, by preaching God’s word as law and gospel, administering and distributing the Lord’s Supper, by judging doctrine and condemning false doctrine, by admitting and excluding from the Lord’s Table (Matthew 16:18-

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<sup>3</sup> *Sermons of Martin Luther* Vol. 2 Ed. John Nickolas Lenker. 1983 Grand Rapids, MI Baker, p. 362

19; John 20:21-23; Apology 28:5-6,21). This means that the administration of Holy Communion cannot and must not be done apart from the full, public exercise of the keys.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Kleinig’s words clearly point out the importance of having clergymen who are Called by the church to care for the souls of God’s redeemed people... men who know the hearts of their people and can responsibly administer the Lord’s Supper to them. In the same way that Luther spoke strongly against the Roman Catholic Church of his day which had turned the Holy Sacrament into a mere commodity of the Church by licensing laymen and Nuns to speak the Words’ of Institution, so we must avoid this practise today by not licensing Vicars to do the same.

Dr. C.F.W. Walther, the first President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and eminent orthodox Lutheran theologian of the nineteenth century in the fifth edition of his *Americanish-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*(Concordia: St. Louis, 1906, 175) writes: “The great majority of our theologians, with Luther at their head, are of the opinion that the Holy Supper should never be administered by someone who does not stand in the public preaching office or by a so-called layman. This is so partly from the fact that with the Lord’s Supper – unlike Baptism and Absolution – no emergency situation can arise which would justify departure from God’s order (1 Cor 4:1; Rom 10:15; Heb 5:4), partly from the fact that the Holy Supper is a public confession which ought to have public ministers, and partly from the fact that such clandestine Communion can easily beget schisms.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the clearest statement that sums up our position is given by Dr. John Kleinig: “The ministry of the word and sacrament does not just create a congregation and build it up as a holy community; it also includes that congregation in the heavenly assembly and its service together with the angels and the whole communion of saints in God’s presence (Heb 2:22-24). The administration of the Lord’s Supper involves the congregation in the one holy catholic and apostolic church through *communio in sacris*, communion by right participation in the holy things of God. So those who administer Holy Communion thereby hold a public position of leadership with ecumenical responsibilities. To fulfil their task they need to have the authority to admit or exclude people from other congregations and denominations to the Lord’s Table. This cannot be done without proper authorisation and due accountability. No lay person has that ecumenical authority.”<sup>6</sup>

## II. Conclusion

Since historically the celebration of Holy Communion publically has been a unique function of the Office of the Holy Ministry, and since a Vicar is a lay person in training for the Office of the Holy Ministry and not a Pastor, and since no incidence of an “emergency” can be suggested in which the historical practice of the Church should be abrogated, therefore, Vicars should not be allowed to celebrate Holy Communion other than as an assistant to the presiding Pastor who alone has the right by means of his Call and Ordination to speak the Words of Institution publically on behalf of the entire congregation prior to the communing of the saints of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. John Kleinig, *Lay Presidency: Does a layman have the authority to administer Holy Communion?* December 2008

<sup>5</sup> This translation comes from John Stephenson, *The Lord’s Supper*(The Lutheran Academy: St. Louis, 2003), 86

<sup>6</sup> Dr. John Kleinig, *Lay Presidency: Does a layman have the authority to administer Holy Communion?*, December 2008

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