

THE BLESSING OF PEOPLE IN THE DIVINE SERVICE

Adopted by the Commission on Worship, October 2002. This statement was prepared by the Department of Liturgics.

Reason for this statement

Within the Lutheran Church of Australia, it is relatively common for children who have not yet been admitted to the sacrament of the altar to attend the Lord's table to receive a blessing. The practice has been established over the past 20 years and in 1986 the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations presented points to be considered when blessing children at the Lord's table (E12). In many congregations of the church, all those attending worship are invited at the time of the distribution to come forward either to commune or to receive a blessing. This statement considers the issue of the blessing of people in the divine service, in this situation and others. We are not referring here to the final blessing (benediction) of the congregation in the service.

Attention is drawn to *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care* and the material on blessings (see Introduction to rites of blessing p16; Rites of blessing, noting pp186–190; and the suggestions for blessings provided for the rites and counselling situations).

Issues

- 1 The involvement of non-communing attenders in the worship service, particularly during the distribution of holy communion.
- 2 The combination of factors: increasing sensitivity to inclusivity; diminishing confessional practice; and the increased frequency of the celebration of holy communion.
- 3 The general absence of personal blessing in public worship or in pastoral care.
- 4 The desire to 'offer something personally' to all people who attend the divine service.
- 5 The apparent desire for increasing family solidarity at the time of receiving holy communion, so that all members of the family come to the altar.
- 6 The wording of the blessing appropriate to the individual seeking the blessing.
- 7 The different categories of people who may present themselves or be presented for a blessing – unborn children, infants, children, those with special needs, the unbaptised, those involved in other Christian churches, visitors.
- 8 The questions that arise when people see different practices in the church.

Responses

- 1 It may be desirable to separate more clearly the distribution of holy communion and the blessing of people, so that both acts of God are treasured for what they are rather than being presented as optional choices for different types of attenders at worship. The two activities, as gracious acts of God, perform different functions. The benefits of holy communion are forgiveness of sins, healing of the body, and strengthening of faith. Holy communion is for repentant sinners who desire the Lord's body and blood. The benefits of blessings are varied and contextual and focus on our physical and spiritual wellbeing. Appropriate blessings may be received by any person.

- 2 The blessing of people may occur at a number of places in the divine service, and in general should follow a time of prayer which is a preparation for blessing:
 - before or after the absolution
 - at the time of the dismissal of the children to Sunday school
 - at the time of offering
 - before or after intercessory prayer
 - before or after thanksgiving prayer
 - during the distribution of holy communion
 - before the final blessing of the congregation
 - after the final blessing of the congregation, as part of it
 - after the final blessing of the congregation, as a separate rite
- 3 The blessing of people could also be organised around life events such as pregnancy, beginning school, undertaking exams, facing danger or situations of risk, vocational themes, and transferring membership.
- 4 The wording of the blessing of people needs to be clear and preferably known by those coming forward to receive it. The blessing must include the name of God (preferably either the trinitarian name or Jesus) and the performative statement which imparts the blessing. A scriptural promise of God may be announced before the blessing. An example is: 'God is our refuge and strength in times of trouble. I bless you, N, (in/for [situation]), in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'
- 5 Where the blessing of people occurs during the distribution of holy communion, it is normally the presiding minister who blesses the people. Where more than one person is involved in the distribution, there should be agreement beforehand as to who gives the blessing. An example of a blessing given during the distribution is 'The Lord Jesus bless you and keep you close to him always'.
- 6 Often the most appropriate time for the blessing of people is after the congregation is dismissed. This provides an opportunity for dialogue and prayer to precede the blessing. Individuals may request a blessing and explain the reason for their request. It is also a good time for family groups to gather together and be present, even if only one person is being blessed.
- 7 It is important to note the opportunities within the divine service when personal blessing may occur. These moments within the public service need not draw much attention to themselves. Should the blessing of individuals have a corporate emphasis to which all the members or a particular group of members of the congregation are invited, then sensitivity is needed so that other members of the congregation are not marginalised (eg blessing all mothers on Mother's Day may be hurtful to those women who cannot be mothers).