

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2

E. THE SACRAMENTS

The distribution of the Lord's supper to the sick by deacons, elders or lay servers

Adopted by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, 1995.

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1. The pastors of the Victoria District of the Lutheran Church of Australia addressed the following question to the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations: *May an elder distribute the consecrated elements to the sick as an extension of the worship service?*
2. In their consideration of this question the members of the Commission made use of a paper entitled 'Some Sources and Comments re the Communication of the Sick and the Viaticum.' This paper had been prepared in 1987 for the Commission in connection with a similar question.
3. The Commission also took into consideration the current practice in some other Lutheran churches, for example, the churches in Papua New Guinea.
4. Of major significance in the overall discussion was the guidance given by the Lutheran Confessions. The Commission realised that these writings, although not giving a direct answer to the precise question raised by the Victorian pastors, do clearly set down the parameters for a proper and true administration of the Lord's supper.
5. In particular, the following sections of the Confessions provided the background to the theological position set down in section 8 below:

Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration [SD] VII, 14-15

Formula of Concord, SD VII, 73-75 ('the common rule')

Formula of Concord, SD VII, 83-84 ('the whole action')

Formula of Concord, SD VII, 85 ('useful rule and norm')

Formula of Concord, SD VII, 86 ('consecration...distribution...reception')

6. The study also involved a consideration of Luther's commentary on the 'common rule' that nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ.

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On the one hand, Luther clearly rejected the extreme practices that were derived from the doctrine or theory of transubstantiation, such as 'when the bread is laid aside or reserved in the tabernacle or carried about and exposed in procession' (SD VII, 15).

On the other hand, Luther by no means discounted the possibility of the continuation of the practice of the early church in Rome, as described by Justin Martyr. Recounting what happens when Christians gather for worship, Justin wrote: '...the distribution and reception of the consecrated elements by each one takes place, and they are sent to the absent by the deacons' (Apology I, 67).

In 1540 Luther was asked much the same question as has now been addressed to the Commission. He pointed to the difficulty of limiting the sacrament (and therefore of limiting the presence of the body and blood of Christ) to the short period between the consecration and the moment the last communicant at the service has received the bread and the wine. Luther wrote:

One must never be so precise and say that the sacrament remains a sacrament when carried four or five steps or when kept so-and-so many hours. What does it matter? How can one bless the bread for each and every one?... As long as one is engaged in the action, even if it extends for an hour or two, or even if one carries it to another altar, or, as you do [he said this to Cordatus], across the street, it is and remains the body of Christ (Luther's Works 54, 407-8).

7. An important part of the study centred around the fact that from the earliest times in the history of the church, theologians have emphasised the oneness of the eucharistic celebration within the congregation united in the faith. This emphasis on the fact that there is one eucharist within the one congregation has gone hand in hand with a rejection of the practice of conducting numerous individual and isolated communions in private homes.

The consecrated elements are carried to the sick from the altar from which the gathered people of God have been nourished. This good practice has grown out of the strong conviction concerning the oneness of the administration of the Lord's supper for those united in faith and worship (including those who are prevented by sickness from assembling with the main body).

8. The Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations makes the following statements in answering the question of the pastors of the Victoria District:

8.1 We, together with the Lutheran Confessions

- do not limit the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's supper merely to a whole succession of moments when each individual communicant receives the consecrated bread and wine.
- do not approve of a doctrine of the real presence which holds that the consecrated bread remains permanently the body of Christ and so may be reserved for an unlimited period of time.
- do not say that the presence of the body and blood of Christ is due to the fact that we have faith in their presence. 'It is not our faith which makes the sacrament, but solely the Word and institution of our almighty God and Saviour' (SD VII, 89).
- teach that where the sacrament of the Lord's supper is administered in full accord with Christ's institution, the body and blood of Christ are 'really present...under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received' (Augsburg Confession X, 1).

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- hold that 'nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ or apart from the divinely instituted action' (SD VII, 85). And, with the Confessions we likewise add: 'In this context "use" or "action" does not primarily mean faith, or the oral eating alone, but the entire external and visible action of the Supper as ordained by Christ: the consecration or words of institution, the distribution and reception or the oral eating of the blessed bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ' (SD VII, 86).
- 8.2 We therefore affirm that the ancient practice of taking to the absent sick and infirm the consecrated elements from the church where the Lord's supper has been rightly administered, is a fitting and proper part of the total *use or action* of that sacrament in the local congregation.
- 8.3 We encourage the practice of having congregationally-authorised elders, deacons, or lay servers take the duly consecrated elements to the sick and infirm **with such ritual** and **in such a way** as to emphasise **the unbroken communication of these absent sick with the body gathered at the Lord's altar**.
- 8.4 While we do not wish pedantically to prescribe the temporal limits of this 'use' of the Lord's supper, we envisage its taking place within several hours of the congregation's celebration, and certainly on the same day.
9. The Commission, having answered in this way the theological question posed by the pastors of the Victoria District, now passes this statement to the Commission on Worship with the request that the latter body prepare the appropriate instructions and directions to be followed by such lay servers.