

May Women Serve Communion at Prince of Peace?

A Position Paper from the Board of Elders of
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church—Palatine, Illinois

From time to time over the last several years, the question has been raised in our congregation: “May women serve as communion assistants at Prince of Peace?” In February of 2003, the Board of Elders drafted a position paper on the issue that concluded,

“After much prayer, discussion and study on this issue, we find no words of Scripture that would forbid women from serving as communion assistants. We also believe that being a communion assistant is not a distinctive function of the pastoral office. It is an area of service that is open to qualified men and women. However, at this time, it is the decision of the Board of Elders that our current practice (restricting women from serving communion) be maintained. Why? The following reasons became very compelling as we prayed about, studied, and discussed the question:

- *We have not sensed the Holy Spirit leading us in a new direction. This was a major consideration for the board. We felt a strong sense of wrong timing and discomfort in implementing this practice. There was a consensus that it would not be the best way to serve the church at this time. The words of Jesus in John 16:13 were a guiding point for us, “But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”*
- *The elders had a sense that our current practice would lift up, and provide a very visible model of, male servant leadership. We felt a strong leading to encourage this loving servant role of men in a society that desperately needs such leadership.*

The Board of Elders offers these reflections in the hope that they will bring greater understanding of the issues involved and help preserve the unity of spirit and purpose we enjoy at Prince of Peace. This document is in no way intended to be a “final position” on the issue for our congregation. The day may come when we do feel the Spirit leading us in a new direction in these matters.”¹

Since the publication of the position paper, the Board of Elders has, from time to time, received feedback from congregational members asking the board to reconsider its position. After several months of additional prayer, discussion and study on this issue, the Board of Elders now feels that the Holy Spirit is leading us in a new direction. Our intention is to have women begin assisting in the distribution of communion at Prince of Peace in April, 2008.

It is important to the board that Prince of Peace members have a clear understanding of the rationale behind this decision. And so, the board offers the following answers to some frequently asked questions:

1. What has been the traditional position on this issue at Prince of Peace?

The practice of how communion is distributed and by whom has changed often throughout the history of Prince of Peace. Initially, when the church was small, the pastor alone consecrated and distributed all the elements by himself. As the church grew and this practice became impractical, elders were called upon to assist in the distribution of the sacrament. As the church continued to grow, this practice also became impractical, which led to the establishment of “communion assistants.” Communion assistants initially were composed of elders and former elders only. Again, as need increased, the position was opened to other men, who were not former elders, but who met all the qualifications to be an elder at Prince of Peace.

¹ “May Women Serve As Communion Assistants at Prince of Peace?”, Board of Elders position paper, adopted February 12, 2003.

2. Do the Scriptures forbid women from serving as communion assistants?

This, of course, is the primary consideration when answering any question in the church. As Lutheran Christians, we affirm Luther's principle of "Sola Scriptura"—that Scripture is the sole authority for the life and teaching of the church. That is to say, where God's word clearly speaks to a given issue, we are bound to believe, teach, and practice in accordance with that Word. However, Lutherans have also always affirmed that God has not clearly and directly spoken to every possible issue in the Bible. These issues are called by our theologians, "adiaphora" or "things indifferent", which is to say, that sincere Christians may differ in opinion on such issues, and the church ought not legislate a "correct" opinion. These issues are considered matters of Christian freedom.

The Scriptures do not directly speak to the issue of women serving as communion assistants. There was no such office in the early church. Therefore, this is a matter where there is no clear right or wrong answer, and we must seek the Spirit's wisdom and guidance to determine what is best for His church.

3. Is this issue related to the question of whether women may serve as pastors?

Yes. The Scriptures clearly say that gender has no effect on one's salvation or standing before God. For example,

- **Galatians 3:26-28**, "*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

However, the Scriptures also teach clearly that God has limited the pastoral office to qualified men. For example,

- **1 Timothy 3:1-2**, "*Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife. . .*"
- **1 Timothy 2:12**, "*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. . .*"
- **1 Corinthians 14:33-34**, "*As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.*"²

The elders affirm both these teachings in this position paper.

4. What is the position of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on this issue?

There is no official position on the issue of women serving as communion assistants within the L.C.M.S. Actually, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has very few "official positions" on issues such as these. However, the L.C.M.S.'s Commission on Theology and Church Relations has several study documents that are worthy of review. The Board of Elders carefully reviewed and discussed these documents and recommends them to the congregation for further study.³

In 1985, the C.T.C.R., in their document, "Women in the Church—Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice" directly addressed the question, "*May women serve as assistants in the distribution of the Lord's Supper?*" The commission answered the question as follows:

² The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has traditionally understood these verses to mean that women are not to hold the formal position of the authoritative public teaching office in the church, that is, the office of the pastor. The L.C.M.S. does not believe that the apostle Paul, in these verses, forbids all teaching by women.

³ These documents include, "Women in the Church—Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice" (1985) and "The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical offices." (1994). These documents are available at www.lcms.org.

“While some might argue that assisting the presiding minister in the distribution of the elements is not necessarily a distinctive function of the pastoral office, the commission strongly recommends that, to avoid confusion regarding the office of the public ministry and to avoid giving offense to the church, such assistance be limited to men.”⁴

However, despite the commission’s “strong recommendation”, the Board of Elders found this response lacking for the following reasons:

- The response of the C.T.C.R. assumes that offense can be given by allowing women to serve as communion assistants. It is equally possible, however, that our current practice of limiting the position to men only could also be giving offense. In fact, the Board of Elders has been informed that it is offensive to some of our members.
- Rather than producing “*confusion regarding the office of the public ministry*”, allowing women to serve as communion assistants at Prince of Peace may actually clarify confusion that already exists. In reality, young women in our Faith Alive student ministry already serve as communion assistants at Prince of Peace. Is it not confusing to say that a young woman can assist in taking care of the empty cup trays at communion, but not assist with them when they are full?
- It should also be noted that in “Women in the Church”, the commission gives other strong recommendations against practices that are already commonplace at Prince of Peace. For example, it states, “*that the reading of the Scriptures (in public worship) is most properly the function of the pastoral office and should therefore not ordinarily be delegated to a lay person, woman or man.*”⁵

Finally, the LCMS, at its 62nd Regular Convention in 2004 adopted a resolution which affirms its understanding that the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions permit women to hold all humanly established congregational and synodical offices, so long as these offices do not call upon the holders of these offices to “*perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacraments*” or to carry out “*official functions that would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office.*”

It is the opinion of the Board of Elders that serving as a communion assistant at Prince of Peace violates neither of these exceptions.

5. What, then, do the Prince of Peace by-laws mean when they state that “the pastor is to administrate the sacraments?”

It is the opinion of the Board of Elders that this reference intends to say that the pastor(s) of the congregation shall see to it that the sacraments are offered and distributed regularly and properly in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. It also means that a pastor should preside at the Lord’s Table. (i.e. consecrating elements). It does not mean that no one else may assist the pastor(s) in distributing the elements to the congregation.

6. Do other LCMS churches allow women to serve communion?

Yes. Immanuel Lutheran Church in Palatine, for example, has allowed women to serve communion for many years.

7. What is the position of the Board of Elders on this matter?

After much prayer, discussion and study on this issue, we are convinced that no words of Scripture forbid women from serving as communion assistants. We also believe that being a communion assistant is not a distinctive function of the pastoral office and therefore is an area of service that should be open to qualified men and women.

⁴ “Women in the Church”, p. 47.

⁵ “Women in the Church”, p. 45.

We believe that lay men and women together assisting the pastor(s) in distributing the Lord's Supper is the best way for us to model oneness, equality, and unity in our Lord and Savior. For, *"In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).*

The board recognizes that some Prince of Peace members may feel uncomfortable with this change of practice. In this issue, as in all issues, it is our hope and prayer that we would all honor the Lord by walking together as one, as Paul says in Philippians 1:27,

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel."

Signed,

The Prince of Peace Board of Elders
Adopted, December 12, 2007