

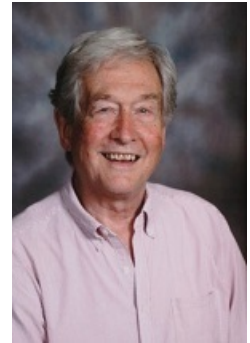
Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]

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## USHERS AT COMMUNION Part Two

- 1 Has this happened to you? We've prayed the Lord's Prayer after the Thanksgiving at Table, and taken our seats. You're sitting in one of the forward rows of seats at church as the Communion is about to be distributed. Sure enough, here come the ushers to escort you to the Table. But you're unconscious of their approach.
- 2 You're totally caught up in singing the first of the Communion hymns, and it's a favourite of yours. Your entire being is transported at the moment into the text and music of the hymn. You're unconscious of anything else.
- 3 Suddenly you feel a rude poke on the shoulder. It's an usher. "Hey, you! Get up there! It's your turn to commune! You shouldn't be singing a hymn!" Your reverie is shattered. You stagger to your feet and stumble forward to the Table, muttering imprecations.
- 4 I've exaggerated the situation a bit, of course. (Me? Exaggerate? Heaven forbid!) But it's too often almost as bad as my example above.
- 5 Now: Do we really need ushers at the Communion to escort people row by row to the Table? I've addressed this issue before in [Essay 57](#) above - what you might think of as Part One. But I'm moved to elaborate this month on the same question. Hear me out.
- 6 There are at least two good reasons for doing away with ushers at the Communion. I'll add two explanations for how and why the practice developed among us in the first place. And I'll add two notes of caution.
- 7 The first good reason for not requiring ushers to escort people row by row to the Table at Communion is laid out above. It can shatter your reverie. It can intrude on your meditation. Those hymns we sing in many churches as people commune: They're intended to be aids to prayer.
- 8 Lord knows, there are few enough moments in the worship of most of our churches

when worshippers have the opportunity to be alone with the thoughts of their hearts, to be silent in prayer, to be caught up in Spirit-directed meditation on a hymn text or tune.

9 Aside: There are two specific moments in our liturgies when worshippers are encouraged to devote themselves to silent meditation. After the sermon - see *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 103. And in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, just before the Blessing – see *LBW* page 74, rubric number 41. In how many of our churches are those moments observed? The Quakers have something to teach us.

10 I myself make it a point to meditate or to reflect – or simply to listen with full attention – during the Postlude at worship's end. And I close my eyes and have been known to walk forward to the chancel to stand there, eyes closed, so as to discourage other worshippers from trying to engage me in conversation then. And I am royally annoyed when other worshippers violate that reverie.

11 Same during the distribution of communion. I should be encouraged, *by my parish's practice*, to meditate, to reflect, to pray at any moment that is appropriate during worship. Surely during the distribution of Bread and Cup it would be appropriate for worshippers to be encouraged to reflect, to meditate on the Day's Prayers, on its Readings, on its Sermon, on its Hymn tunes and texts. And not dissuaded or violated in that attempt!

12 That's first. Ushers at communion can intrude on worshippers' moments of private prayer and reflection.

13 This is second: Ushers at communion, escorting worshippers to the Table row by row, present an unnecessary and unseemly social pressure to worshippers sitting in those rows.

14 An example: I have dear childhood friends who live in Buffalo, and they visit me from time to time in Waterloo. I've invited them to worship with me in my parish church on Sunday.

15 But they're Unitarians. They'd feel uncomfortable communing in my congregation. When an usher approaches to escort them row by row to the Table, they'd feel terrific social pressure to do whatever everyone else in their row is doing: get up and walk forward. ("Hey, am I making a mistake by sitting here, when everyone else in my row is walking forward? Am I offending my hosts?")

16 You see the social pressure involved in ushers dismissing people row by row to the Table? It's not necessary to embarrass my Buffalo friends this way. It would be the same if you had a Muslim friend, or a Buddhist. They'd feel enormous social pressure to conform, to appear to be gracious guests, to do what everyone else is doing. Perhaps even contrary to their conscience. I wouldn't want to put my non-Christian friends in that position.

17 Now. How did we get in this predicament? I see two explanations.

18 The first explanation is historical. We Lutherans simply haven't had enough experience with every-Sunday Communion. In my childhood, we had Holy Communion four times a year. *Four times!* When Communion was that exotic, I suppose it's natural to feel that people needed a little help, a little shepherding, to know how and when to approach the Table.

19 Same with Anglicans, incidentally, who were accustomed, in those days, to Morning Prayer on Sundays, and not Eucharist. So every-Sunday Eucharist was exotic to them as well. And they too provided ushers to assist.

20 But through the intervening years, thankfully, we've all increased the frequency of Communion, following Apostolic practice and even our own Lutheran Confessions. We began with once-a-month Communion. And now we celebrate the Mass every Sunday. It's an ecumenical convergence: Even Methodists and Presbyterians and mega-churches are celebrating the Lord's Supper more frequently. It's about time!

21 That's my first explanation. We're new at this. We needed help.

22 But do we need that help any longer? I'm hoping we do not.

23 You've been to Roman Catholic churches, perhaps, where at the reception of the Communion the communicants will simply come forward of their own accord, without direction from anyone, some from the first rows of seats, some from the back of the hall, in a wonderful but reverent hodge-podge of comings and goings. They've been at it for centuries, to their credit, unlike us. They know what they're doing.

24 And there's no social pressure. If you want to linger and meditate, that's your affair. If you're sitting in the front row and want to engage fully in that communion hymn, that's your privilege. You can commune later. No problem.

25 The second explanation I'll offer is a little closer to home, and may strike some as politically incorrect. Most of us Lutherans are Teutonic. We like all things decent and in order. Especially in worship. There's more than a little of the authoritarian in our make-up. "You vill now schtandt und zing..." That kind of thing. In the parish church of my wife's childhood, ushers dismissed the congregation row by row at the conclusion of worship! (They don't now.)

26 Teutonics are lovely people. Hey, I'm one! But we're sometimes unnecessarily concerned about, shall we say, regularities in propriety. There are less polite ways to describe our Teutonic temperament. But it doesn't have to be so. We can relax a little. People will find their way forward to the Table without regimentation.

27 Which brings me to my two final words of caution.

28 First, our rows of seats must not be too long. Even if we retain ushers at communion, many churches have pews or rows of seats that are too long. A respected church architect friend maintains that in a church, no row be longer than seven seats.

29 You can get away with long rows of seats in a theatre or in a concert hall, where customers are paying good money for their place. But a church is a voluntary association of people. They might not be there if they have to climb over ten sets of knees to find a place. So a rule of thumb: In a church, no row longer than seven seats abreast. To accomplish this may require significant re-disposition of your worship space.

30 A final caution: Ushers (Surprise!) may still be needed at the communion. Not to escort communicants to the Table, but simply to stand, one at the head of each aisle, at the chancel, relaxed but alert, in case there's need for any assistance by the aged or by parents with young children who are coming forward. Ushers might actually direct worshippers unobtrusively to right or left at the chancel, depending on the "traffic flow" in your particular parish "choreography" at communion.

31 And ushers serve an enormously important ministry greeting people at the door before worship, passing out hymnals and bulletins, helping newcomers to find a place to sit in the nave – maybe even pointing out the page where our worship begins!

32 Ushers: I love you! You have an important ministry! Even without herding cattle!

