

believers present; participation is not restricted only to those who hold membership in that specific congregation. In some congregations children who are not yet communicant members are invited to come forward with their families for a blessing.

Holy Communion is a precious gift given for the nurture of the people of God. Each local congregation should celebrate Holy Communion a minimum four times annually. Understanding the historical and practical reasons for the practice of quarterly Communion it is important to note that there is no Biblical restraint on the frequency of this sacramental meal. John Wesley wrote that “no man can have any pretence of Christian piety, who does not receive it as often as he can.” Consequently, recent trends to increase the frequency of these services are healthy and are encouraged especially during the main festivals of the Church namely Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

Historically and theologically the preferred mode of receiving Holy Communion is at the altar rail of the sanctuary. However, a local congregation may celebrate the sacrament using other acceptable modes as the occasion may require.

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## *The Sacraments*

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# What the Evangelical Congregational Church Believes

The Evangelical Congregational Church affirms the conviction and tradition of historic Protestantism that Christ has given two great sacraments to His Church: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. These sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace. The Church further affirms that grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, renews our minds, transforms our hearts, and strengthens our wills.

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## The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

*The sacrament of baptism is the formal application of water to an infant, or to an adult believer, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as a visible sign and seal that the person so consecrated stands in a holy covenant relation to God and His people.* (Article 21, Articles of Faith)

**The Outward, Visible Sign:** Water applied to the candidate, or into which he/she is immersed, together with the Trinitarian pronouncement, and the stating of the candidate's name.

**The Inward, Spiritual Grace:** The act represents that grace which has already been extended to the candidate—the cleansing from sin and the recognition of the covenant relationship of the candidate to God and the Church through the merits of the blood of Jesus Christ.

The Article of Faith very clearly states the identity of appropriate candidates for Holy Baptism: infants, or **adult believers**. This indicates the Church's teaching that they are the same in the sight of God. Children of believing parents are under the blood of Christ and have a hope of heaven. They are part of His covenant of grace and entitled to receive the sign of that new covenant. The Churches does not believe that it is **necessary** to their salvation that they be baptized, since infant condemnation is denied. However, believing parents are encouraged to consider baptism for their children.

It is clear by the use of the words, "and His people," that baptism is believed to mark the entrance into the Body of

Christ, the Church. Therefore, baptism is recognized as a wonderful corporate experience, whereby children become a special responsibility of the Family of God which then helps to nurture them and to assist in leading them to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, whereby they confirm their baptism.

The family responsibility is no less important with regard to adult believers, who prior to their baptism, must give evidence that they have in the depths of their hearts and souls, sought forgiveness of sin, renounced evil in all its forms, and have accepted the gracious invitation of Christ to come to Him and not only become heirs of eternal life, but also, in this life to follow the commandments of God and walk in His holy ways. It is the Church's joyful privilege to accept the task of loving and nurturing these newly baptized believers through sound Biblical preaching and teaching, faithful Christian practice, and Godly example.

The Evangelical Congregational Church affirms the use of any one of three modes of baptism. Sprinkling is, perhaps, the most common; however, pouring the water on the candidate is also an ancient and acceptable mode. Furthermore, if the candidate so desires and requests, immersion in the water, is also a valid way of administering the sacrament.

Because baptism, whether received as an infant or an adult believer, is the mark of **the** covenant between the candidate and God, the Evangelical Congregational Church does not encourage rebaptism. The Nicene Creed acknowledges, "one baptism for the remission of sins." Baptism cannot be undone, and does not need to be repeated. It may be that there are occasions when baptismal **vows** may be meaningfully renewed, but the "outward, visible sign" should not be repeated.

For the Evangelical Congregational Church, then, Holy Baptism can **never** be a mere ceremony in which there is a sprinkle of water, and phrases repeated by parents speaking for a child, or an adult speaking for him/herself. It is, rather, something that is uniquely **God's** business. Its symbolism is from **Him**, the commandment to do it is from **Him**, the grace conveyed is **His** grace, and the person so consecrated stands in a relationship to **Him** and to His people. It is something over which the Holy Spirit presides and which He enables.

Since baptism initiates us into Christ's whole church and not only into a denomination, the Evangelical Congregational Church recognizes all Trinitarian baptisms and looks upon baptism as something that should unite rather than divide the Church, God's Covenant people.

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## The Sacrament of Holy Communion

*"The Lord's Supper is not merely a token of love and union that Christians ought to have among themselves but it is a sacrament instituted in memory of the sufferings and death of Christ, whereby those who rightly and worthily receive the same partake of the body and blood of Christ by faith, not in a bodily but in a spiritual manner, in eating the broken bread and in drinking the blessed cup. We thereby also continually show forth our Christian faith and hope."* (Article 22, Articles of Faith)

Holy Communion is the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again. The outward and visible sign in Holy Communion is the bread and grape juice, given and received according to Christ's command and the inward and spiritual grace is the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith. The Evangelical Congregational Church reflects her Wesleyan heritage in affirming the "Real Presence" of Christ in Holy Communion not in a bodily, but in a spiritual manner.

Holy Communion is a celebration of God's grace, not human achievement. It is a means of grace through which God acts to seal the promises of the gospel. It is not an end in itself, but always points beyond itself to celebrate God's grace and covenant faithfulness; it is a sign of our covenantal relationship. Further, Holy Communion is deeply personal, but never private. It is a communal meal of the gathered congregation, which represents the church in all times and places. To prepare to receive Holy Communion it is necessary that we should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people. The Evangelical Congregational Church practices "open communion" that is the invitation to commune is given to all baptized, professing