



Grand Canyon Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

September 14, 2020

I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

—Joshua 1:9

Dear Church,

WE HAVE BEEN LIVING IN PANDEMIC MODE SINCE MARCH. We hoped this would disappear and we could quickly go back to daily life as it was. Instead, we find ourselves more deeply in a “forest fire”—as Dr. Michael Osterholm described the pandemic in his [July podcast](#)—spreading wherever there is “wood to burn.”

The image of a forest fire is far too real as we watch wildfires spread in the West. Additionally, flames of political division—the presidential election, racial justice, climate change—continue to polarize our nation.

Amidst it all, we are pulled between weariness and hope, resignation and new possibility. We fear seeing no easy end in sight, even as we find ourselves eager to actually doing life differently. We are reminded of our calling as people of faith to work for peace and justice in the world. With the Psalmist we cry out, “How long, O Lord,” even as we learn to sing a new song!

WHY I AM WRITING.

I know we are all eager to gather again. I write this letter for congregations and ministries struggling with the decisions of how and when to gather in-person. I am grateful for the many bishops who have written similar letters, notably Bishop Jim Gonia. Their words and advice clarify my thoughts.

There is still so much we do not know about COVID-19. We know the coronavirus is airborne. We look around the world and see cases can subside for a time, then suddenly recur when preventative measures are relaxed.

Wishing away the virus will not change our reality. Our only options to mitigate viral spread are behaviors quite familiar by now:

- Avoid large gatherings, especially indoors.
- Maintain physical distance with others.
- Use face coverings in public spaces.
- Regularly wash and sanitize hands and surfaces.

With the pandemic’s end not in sight, we must continue to adapt our life not only as individuals, but as the church. Dr. Osterholm suggests we anticipate the next twelve months as being a “COVID year” and plan accordingly. While this is not what we desire, it IS possible for us to continue adapting our daily practices in our homes, schools, and places of work and worship. Like generations before us that faced significant challenges, we summon and find determination and resiliency.

THANK YOU!

The members of the Synod Council and I want to recognize and affirm the hard work of our rostered ministers, church professionals, congregations, and ministries during this time. You are rising to the occasion. You continue to adapt your practices and routines. You work diligently to safeguard the health and well-being of your neighbors while still living out your calling as Christ's Church. We are grateful for every one of you, and for the amazing efforts you have made.

We also witness that in some places, disagreements are arising between pastoral leadership and lay leadership over matters like gathering in-person for worship, or the use of face coverings. Online fatigue grows for many of us as our desire to be physically together deepens. Online worship and ministry—initially a temporary, novel experience—now feels more burdensome.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

How do we move forward in this next chapter of our pandemic story? Based on best practices, science, and CDC recommendations, here are some suggestions:

1. It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to prioritize worship opportunities that are safe, accessible, invitational, meaningful, and sustainable. The use of an online/digital platform remains the highest recommended format for corporate worship.
2. Any in-person worship experience should prioritize an outdoor venue, small groups, physical distancing, and the use of face coverings while you are gathered. I also direct you to the best practices from elca.org/publichealth, including no singing and no corporate responses. If you chose to celebrate Holy Communion, there is a recommendation of one kind: bread.
3. Be prepared to quickly adapt your gatherings as outbreaks recede and recur. The randomness of infections is cruel. As schools and businesses reopen, and with the fall and winter flu season approaching, localized outbreaks will continue. Be ready for the dance of opening, closing, and reopening.

QUESTIONS FOR GOD'S PEOPLE.

Here are some common-sense questions we can ask as we choose how to worship:

- Is the worship choice *safe*?
- Is the worship choice *accessible*?
- Is the worship choice *invitational*? How is worship experienced by someone showing up for the first time?
- Is the worship choice *meaningful*?
- Is our worship choice *sustainable*? Can we maintain what we're doing for the near future?
- Can we make *adaptations* as needed?
- Are we *collaborating and sharing* worship opportunities and leadership with other congregations, near and far?
- Are we *experimenting* with opportunities to be church better together through worship in this time of pandemic, knowing we can collaborate with those who are geographically far from our location?

Pay attention to the values and priorities that are informing your decisions about worship, as well as to the pressures that may be at work to influence an outcome not aligned with your values. For those sharing building space with other communities or organizations, it's

important to be clear about your own values and priorities and to determine whether they will take precedence when determining the use of your building by others. Be sure to check with your insurance company, and consult any written building use agreements to determine where liability resides.

In planning any in-person gathering, it helps to ask clarifying questions.

- Why is this gathering needed?
- What are we hoping to accomplish?
- Who should be included/invited to attend?

We must rely on a both/and approach. We must both maintain our commitment to preventing the spread of the virus in every way possible, and we must find lower risk opportunities to be together in-person, even when it's not the same as it used to be.

QUESTIONS FOR GOD.

I encourage every congregation and ministry of our synod to take advantage of this disorienting time to intentionally ask God questions. For the life of God's beloved world, how can we more fully become the church the Spirit needs us to be? As the Body of Christ in our time and place, what conversations, partners, and resources help us explore the future we are being called to embrace?

The question is not if we are being changed, but how we are stewarding this change for the sake of God's mission. Every congregation and ministry will need to determine: where is God calling us to communicate Jesus?

CONTEXTS ACROSS OUR SYNOD VARY WIDELY. COLLABORATION WILL BE KEY.

Although no location in our synod is immune from this pandemic, rates of infection rise and fall depending on the particular location and time, allowing for differences in response at any particular moment. Access to the internet and computer competence is not uniform across our synod, meaning that the use of digital technology cannot be considered a given without mitigation. The size of congregations or ministries also varies, which means that capacity for engagement in adaptive practices will not be equal.

As we move forward, it will be helpful for congregations or ministries of similar size or type to network together for an exchange of ideas and support. Congregations with greater capacity in terms of resources or staff might be able to offer support and accompaniment to smaller congregations and ministries. Several communities of faith working together can avoid duplication of work.

OUR CHURCH AND OUR SCHOOLS.

Pastors, deacons and church professionals who are also parents of school-aged children will be caught in the same dilemma as their peers: navigating work life and the need to provide for children's education. Many students may be unable to return to in-class learning at the start of the school year or may be required to engage in a hybrid program of education that includes time in the classroom and time at home. Congregations and ministries served by pastors and deacons with children in school will need to exercise maximum grace and flexibility in their expectations. It is recommended that congregations and ministries have intentional conversation with rostered ministers and church professionals about what will need to be changed or adapted if they are also caring for children's educational needs.

WE CAN DO THIS.

Navigating the next chapter of this pandemic landscape will often feel overwhelming. It's important that we pace ourselves for the long journey. Take ample time to rest and renew. Treat one another with grace and kindness. Adjust expectations. Seek hybrid options for being a church that both protects our collective health and well-being, and also tends to our human need for relationship and activity.

We can do this because we are not alone. We are promised time and time again that the crucified and risen Jesus walks with us. We are assured that God's abundant love, grace, and presence are unfailing. We are met in each moment by a Spirit who casts out fear and whose power energizes our mission.



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