



**North/West Lower Michigan Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

New Realities in the Wake of COVID-19

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We are all adjusting to a new normal. There is no roadmap and there is no getting back to the way things used to be. In some areas, this is frightening and in other areas it might bring new possibilities. Congregational and Rostered Leaders have had to switch priorities and learn new things overnight. And the things we do right now will affect the direction and health of our churches and communities in the future. This will not be over in a matter of days, it will be weeks or months. And when normal returns it will be different.

### **Pray**

It is important to pray. Prayer is one of our essential spiritual disciplines. How is the congregation praying in this time? Before we do anything else, we pray asking God to love and protect us, Jesus to be with us, and the Holy Spirit to lead us. Of course, our God does these things without our asking but asking helps us to remember our God. Then, we need to pay attention so the prayer is part of everything we do. Are there ways that people can pray together? On-line, at the same time? How can people submit prayer requests (keeping in mind confidentiality)? In on-line worship are prayers said for the community, health care workers, the pastor, first responders, kids, parents, teachers, store shelves stockers, those laid off, etc.?

### **Digital Worship**

There have been many creative and innovative online services and ways to connect. Some congregations are experiencing more online worshipers than “in-person” Sunday worshippers. Some congregations without a digital presence seem lost. If digital worship does not seem possible, I have heard of congregations doing conference call worship via phone. The synod has used [freeconferencecall.com](http://freeconferencecall.com) for many years. All a person needs for a group call is a phone, not even a cell phone. A landline works fine.

This is a great time to work together. Congregations can worship with another congregation online and then discuss it and pray together afterwards. Congregations can cooperate in working on-line. This is not a competition. It is a time to work together, help each other, and be, not just your church, but the body of Christ for the World.

There are many platforms for digital worship. The technology is not my expertise, but here are some suggestions that might make it more appealing:

- Think about who the audience will be. Who do you want to reach? Simply going live with worship from the sanctuary might be good for members to feel like they have connected with their church. But people who are searching might want something more

creative, inspiring, and relational. People are asked to shelter in place. The best place to broadcast worship and other resources should be from home. It reinforces that we need to be home. It shows solidarity with everyone else who is keeping social distancing and staying home. I see many national TV personalities and news anchors broadcasting from home. We should not be broadcasting from the sanctuary if there is a stay at home order. Broadcasting/videoing from home models appropriate behavior and reminds us that even the pastor, bishop, and church leaders need to be at home. Pastors are not invincible. Some pastors are in the high risk category. Be at home. Experience the awkwardness. Wait until we can all be together again.

- Live versus recorded? Live at the regular worship time is an option, especially now that people are home. It looks like online worship will trend upward and continue. Recording a service and making it available online gives folks the flexibility to view when they have the time. It might also give the flexibility to make a recording of the regular service for members, and to also do a shortened, to-the-point service for people looking for inspiration and invitation. Plus recording gives the option of starting over. That can't be done with "live".
- Watch your service. Review the video. What is the sound quality? How about the music? What is the display quality? Can people hear what is being said? Where is it broadcast from? Is an empty sanctuary the best place? Home is where the people are. Do folks hear the Gospel? Do they hear words of hope? Do they hear that Jesus is with them, really present with them, even when they cannot gather for worship or communion?
- How are you telling the God's story and how the congregation relates to it in the broadcast? Tell about God's presence and being inspirational and also telling how the staff and members are helping others in the midst of crisis.
- Promote special online services such as Easter and Holy Week events. Use Facebook advertising as a promotion tool. It is easy and inexpensive.
- Some added advice from by friend, Pastor Katie Kerrigan, DEM in Southern Ohio: "One extra piece of advice that I've heard recently is that this new medium requires adaptation- it is primarily visual, but with a fairly narrow frame of vision at any one moment, but it can also be used to expand the view beyond what is easily possible in in-person worship. It may be more art than science—but there probably is some science involved as well. Recognizing both those things—the art and the science—should lead us to draw in folks who are trained in the effective use of visual mediums. A lot of poor production can be forgiven in this crisis (it's a miracle so many got online so quickly!), but since it's here to stay, we can be learning how to be both more comfortable and more effective in this medium. It probably also requires the adaptation of worship to the medium as well—not everything in our worship services (as we usually do them) translates well to this medium. Narrowing in on essentials (what Lutherans think are essential in an online worship service!) and doing those creatively and well will be an important discipline."

## **Telling the Story**

Whether it is stewardship, evangelism, or public relations, it is always about telling the story. It is always about telling the story of Jesus. We are trying to have people meet Jesus, not grow the institution. An important part of telling the story of Jesus is telling how Jesus is at work in the congregation and, through the congregation, in the neighborhood, community, and world. But it begins and ends with Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega. Share stories of the people, faith, hope, and most importantly, how God is with us through this.

Churches get lumped into one big bundle. We hear of churches still holding worship because they do not believe in the science of social distancing. We need to tell our stories to show that the church is a place of welcome and grace. How does the church practice grace? How are we serving others in this time of need? How is our social distancing a reflection of our care for all God's children. How do we serve others as a regular part of who we are, and not just in crisis? Church members and seekers both need to know that the church practices what it preaches, that the work of the church is touching lives and making a difference, and we do it, not to earn a special place with God, but because of the overwhelming grace God has already give us.

## **Online**

The internet is the new phonebook, the new encyclopedia, dialing "0" for the operator to get a number. Having a website is essential. It does not cost much, and it is the new face of the church to the world. There are resources for building a website. Right now a website is seen more often than people driving by the church building. It is the face of the church. The opening page should have a picture of the church (with people), the pastor's name, church address, and worship time. Right now there should be a link to digital worship, and resources for COVID-19. And have a link to kids' activities. The ELCA has a new page just for this:

<https://www.ministrylinks.online/faith-at-home.html>.

## **Faith Formation**

This can be as simple or complex as one chooses to make it. With more time at home many folks are looking for inspiring and inquisitive things to do. Folks are looking for resources to strengthen faith and hope. One of our congregations put together a digital package of learning materials and emailed them to the congregation list along with posting them on the webpage and Facebook page. Other congregations are doing virtual lessons and bible studies for adults and kids. I have seen pastors and lay leaders reading kid books on video and then the excellent work of Pastor Christen Fawcett and her daughter Louisa and their bible stories on the All Saints, Mason Facebook page. For adults, Pastors Christopher Laughlin and James Smith offer Theology Thursdays – it can be found on the Messiah Lutheran Church, Constantine Facebook page or usually the link is on the synod Facebook page. The ELCA has launched a new Faith Formation webpage: <https://bit.ly/2Xq095p>

Whatever your comfort level, if you can produce resources, they will get used. If you feel like digital resources are not your forte, post links to others who are doing it well. This is a time to share the creativity we all have. There also a link on the synod Facebook page to a free ELCA Generosity Project Faith at Home lesson. It is also available on The Generosity Project Facebook page under announcements: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/thegenerosityproject>

### **Stewardship**

New forms of electronic giving are here to stay. Online giving, credit card giving, texting to give, and giving on the phone are all going to remain and grow as a result of this pandemic. The ELCA works with two preferred vendors, VANCO and TITE.LY. They provide service for phone giving, texting, online, and automatic electronic withdrawal. You will find more on the synod webpage: <https://mittensynod.org/docs/COVIDStewardshipResources.pdf>

### **Look Ahead**

Once we get back to normal, normal will look different. Digital is here to stay. Digital worship, digital presence, digital giving, digital resources. Think about your digital presence and keep working on sharing on-line.

- Invite those who are following online to join in person. As the coronavirus winds down (we hope soon) think about ways of inviting your digital audience/congregation to join in face to face worship and activities. Not everyone will join. Keep telling the story and asking for feedback. Digital worship in one fashion or another, is here to stay.
- Invite folks online to join in service activities liked working in the food pantry, assisting with homeless and poverty ministries, and caring and connect with the community.
- Invite folks to safe places where they can talk and ask about Jesus. Practice and learn about being invitational.
- Don't worry right now about how to record worship attendance. Here is the recommendation from Deacon Sue Rothmeyer, Secretary of the ELCA: We have been in conversation with Planning, Research and Evaluation, and staff there will be working on questions for the 2020 congregational report that will take into account virtual worship "numbers" during this COVID-19 period. We would encourage congregations to keep track of the numbers of people who are joining online, separate from their "regular" worship throughout the year, and we'll hope to find ways to appropriately and consistently capture that data.

### **Serving**

In a recent article "Responding to Pandemics: 4 Lessons from Church History", Glen Scrivener of The Gospel Coalition reviews a portion of Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity*, where he explores the key factors that caused Christianity to grow. One of them was the response to plagues. The people of God were inspired by faith to serve. Stork writes, "Their

impulse to move toward the needy, displayed in heroic sacrifice, is entirely Christlike; we dare not be less sacrificial in the love we seek to embody.”

Plagues intensify the natural course of life. They intensify our own sense of mortality and frailty. They also intensify opportunities to display countercultural, counterconditional love. The church rose to the challenge in the second century, winning both admirers and also converts. Quoting Luther’s response to Matthew 25 “We must respect the word of Christ, “I was sick and you did not visit me. According to this passage we are bound to each other in such a way that no one may forsake the other in his distress but is obliged to assist and help him as he himself would like to be helped.” He concludes by holding up service to others as the way the early church grew. “Self-isolation can be the most loving thing to do, rather than infecting the ones we’re seeking to love. While the outworking of love may look different in different ages, love must still be the aim—a love directed by the Holy Spirit, not our self-centered flesh.”

People are watching to see who followed the science of self-isolation, who cared for the least, and who served others through this time of pandemic/plague. A link to Glen’s article: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-lessons-church-history/>

Also check out: <https://www.mittensynod.org/the-communication-mission-connection/> on the synod webpage for more details about webpages and digital communication.

For one person’s take on what the church will look like after the COVID-19 pandemic is over, check out Thom Rainer:

<https://thomrainer.com/2020/03/what-will-the-post-coronavirus-church-look-like/>

The North/West Lower Michigan Synod is your partner in this. We uphold you in prayer and we are working to provide support for what Congregational and Rostered Leaders need to navigate these times. We are working from home and we are ready to serve.

I am your resource. Please reach out. As Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reminds us: “We are church together.”

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