

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This letter is intended to be read along with the joint COVID-19 statement issued by the ELCA and the Episcopal Church bishops in Michigan. Given the information we have about the current spreading of the COVID-19 virus and our governor's advisory, I hope this will provide you with the resources needed to help you make an informed decision about Sunday gatherings.

Governor Whitmer's advisory discourages gatherings of 100 people or more. Not all of our congregations expect to see this level of attendance; however, nearly all of our congregations include a significant portion of members whose age or health condition makes them more vulnerable than others. This makes a difficult decision even more difficult.

While I will not and cannot mandate a suspension of worship in any congregation, I encourage rostered ministers to consider your members and make the best decision for your congregation. Consult with your congregational leadership before making any announcements and should you make a collective decision to suspend worship, I urge you to do so incrementally. Identify a time (for example, the remaining Sundays in March) and plan on a return to Sunday worship directly following, acknowledging that plans may change.

During this time, maintain active communication with your community. Employ weekly updates so that members and friends are informed. Websites and social media will be critical tools during this time, so make sure they are up to date and accurate. I encourage rostered ministers to plan for and announce times when you will be available for individual counseling, prayer, and communion for congregants who desire such. Designate a place in the building where individuals may come to pray by themselves. Simply allowing the building to go dark for an uncertain length of time risks damage to the community. Make arrangements for members to continue to give their offerings even if they are not present.

I do not encourage or support video Eucharist. Though we do not know how long the present situation will last, I am certain it will not last forever. We will gather in worship as a community again. We will be fed at God's table again. And we trust that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Let this time be a Lenten fast from the sacrament, so that our Easter joy may be even greater when we are welcomed again to taste and see that the Lord is good.

If you should thoughtfully decide to carry on with Sunday worship, please follow these practices in order to care for those who are at a higher risk.

- Avoid physical contact with others, including shaking hands, hugging, and kissing. Share the peace verbally, with a bow or with a wave.

- Eliminate the use of high-touch items. This may include printing hymns in bulletins vs. using hymnals; Not reusing bulletins for a second service; and collecting offering without passing the plate – instead, creating a station where offerings may be placed.
- Increase cleaning and sanitizing practices. Disinfect smooth surfaces, the communion rail, door handles, and bathrooms after every event.
- Offer only bread at communion during this time and distribute it from hand to hand only. As Lutherans, we trust that Christ is fully present in both elements of Holy Communion. All ministers and communion assistants must wash/sanitize hands before distributing.
- Consider that choir members may be particularly susceptible to infection because of the physical demands of singing. This may be a time to suspend choir practice and choral performance during worship.
- Fonts in which members to dip their hands as they enter or leave worship spaces should be emptied and cleaned during this time.
- And finally, if you are not well, stay home!

Additional updates and resources can be found at:

<https://www.mittensynod.org/news/coronavirus-resources/>

I and our Synod staff will do our best to keep you informed, offer advice, and keep you in our prayers.

Peace,

The Rev. Craig A. Satterlee, Ph.D., Bishop