



Northwest Washington Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

May 9, 2020

Dear Beloveds of Northwest Washington Synod,

By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. (Psalm 137)

When the people were exiled in Babylon, they grieved for what they once had. The practices and comfort of what they'd known through worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem were not available to them in that foreign land. In that time of exile they were challenged by prophets and re-formed as God's people. When they returned to Jerusalem, the temple they longed to gather in did not exist anymore. Their homes were gone. Much had to be rebuilt.

This scripture speaks of our time right now.

Truthfully, we are not going to go back to what we had before. And I am grieving this as I am sure you are. The verse from Psalm 137 speaks so clearly to me as we all weep for what was. The longing to be with all of you continues and I hope for the day when we can gather bodily again.

But let me also say this: While we long for what was, we also are living now. We are in worship now. We are in community now. Yes, it feels different. Yes, it is not the same. But rostered ministers are preaching God's word, people are gathering together, the gospel of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed and prayers, singing, community and fellowship have never stopped.

Yes, we are not in church buildings right now. And yes, we all would love to be gathered in-person in worship. However, when you start figuring out logistics of masks, six feet of space, sanitizing each and every part of the church after every group gathers, deciding who can come and who cannot come, and so much more, it begins to get overwhelming. As we start looking at these factors, we begin to understand that for the safety of others – for loving our neighbor – we need to think carefully about worshiping online and worshiping in-person.

Further, scientists inform us we will be in this pandemic for at least another year if not longer. An online presentation hosted by the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod in which Dr. Michael Osterholm, a Lutheran, an epidemiologist and the Director of the University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, presented and answered questions about COVID-19. I highly recommend listening to his presentation. [You can find the link here.](#)

Dr. Osterholm stressed the long-term nature of this global health crisis and the importance of our taking steps to mitigate the rapid spread of the virus. He stressed that “we live in virus time and the virus will continue to seek out and attach to humans.” His understanding is that we will need to deal with the virus for a long time to come. We will have this health crisis until either a vaccine is developed, produced and distributed widely, or 70-80% of the population is infected and herd immunity is developed. Until then we are all susceptible but especially the more vulnerable in our midst. That means people of any age with underlying health conditions (e.g. asthma, diabetes, heart conditions) and older people (65+) are especially at risk of the disease and even death.

Lastly, the State of Washington has the responsibility to protect public health. The guidelines of the CDC, the state, and each local municipality should be strictly followed. When we all follow these guidelines, we all

benefit. As leaders, we are to be both responsible and loving to our people. Keep this in mind. Talk with your insurance provider about their recommendations for the use of your facility. Many insurance carriers are refusing to cover churches if they are going against state or local recommendations. *Please know that the Northwest Washington Synod highly recommends following CDC, Washington state, and local guidelines.*

So, with all of that in mind, here are some facts and some considerations as we look to carefully and judiciously re-open buildings and gather in-person again. Please keep in mind that these recommendations may change depending on world events. We will keep you updated as we hear more.

The Bishop's Counsel for Congregations and Ministry Sites:

The Northwest Washington Synod recommends the following considerations during the COVID-19 crisis.

1. Pay attention to the Governor's Plan to Re-Open

Governor Inslee has put in place Safe Start Washington:

www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SafeStartWA_4May20_1pm.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery. Please refer to this plan. Keep in mind, even when your county might permit a more lenient stance, you have both the freedom and the responsibility to consider your context.

Phase One: Online worship continues. The one exception Governor Inslee has given is for drive-in worship. Here are his guidelines: www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Spiritual%20Drive-in%20Services%20Guidance%20Memo.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery. If you have more questions regarding these services, please contact the synod office.

Phase Two: Online worship continues. Five or less people may gather in-person.

Phase Three: Online worship continues. Less than 50 people may gather in-person.

Phase Four: Online worship continues. More than 50 people may gather in-person.

2. Create a Thoughtful Plan for How to Open Your Congregation

Use your leadership team or create a team to thoughtfully create a plan for how and when to open. It would be wise to keep in mind CDC recommendations and the phases from Washington state. A thoughtful plan should address the following questions (and perhaps more):

- How will opening accomplish your primary mission as a congregation?
- Do you have the capacity to clean the building thoroughly according to CDC guidelines between each use? <https://www.cdc.gov>
 - Keep in mind that the virus has been found to remain active for three days on hard surfaces.
 - The virus also spreads through the air. How will this be addressed?
 - Give serious consideration to this: If you have more than one service, the pastor, worship leaders and janitor (or whoever is cleaning between services) will be exposed to all those who enter the building, even with sanitary measures in place. *Your pastor and worship leaders do not have to agree to accept this risk.*
- How will you maintain physical distancing?
 - Will you mark off 6' distances in your building?
 - Will you have hand sanitizer throughout the building and in the worship space?
 - How will you ensure that there is no embracing or shaking hands or physical touch?
 - Will you rope off pews? – Keep in mind front, back, and both sides for 6 foot physical distancing.
 - Will you only allow a certain number of people to attend in-person worship?
 - Will quarantined family members only be allowed to sit next to one another?
 - How will you greet people at the door?
 - How will you hand out bulletins?
 - How will you sanitize hymnals, Bibles, etc. in the pews?
 - How will you collect offering?

- How will the counters count the offering?
- What will be your safe mask policy?
 - Are masks required for attending?
 - Will you have extra face masks on hand to provide for those who come without them?
 - Will speakers, singers, pastors, deacons, assisting ministers, etc. all be required to wear a mask when leading the service?
- Will you restrict singing as a further precaution?
 - While singing is an integral part of worship, it has been made clear to us that the virus is transmitted through breathing by people who show no signs of being sick.
 - Consider using instrumental music, or a soloist standing far from those gathered (I'm not even sure if this is safe).
 - Singing is like coughing on someone; a singer can spray up to twenty-seven feet.
 - www.infectioncontroltoday.com/covid-19/churches-could-be-deadliest-places-covid-19-pandemic.
- If you have in-person Holy Communion, how will you administer the elements safely?
 - Will you hold non-sacramental worship at first?
 - Can you assure no transmission through distributing elements?
 - How can you distribute Holy Communion to those who are masked? How is your safety and their safety being impacted in the distribution?
- How will you respond if people do not follow the practices you expect them to follow?
- How will you continue to minister and include those who are unable to participate in in-person worship?
 - Consider continuing online worship experiences, Bible studies, etc. so those with underlying health conditions may continue to participate.
- How will you advertise what you are offering as a congregation?
 - Signage, social media, your website (and other ways of communicating) should offer consistent information for those interested in online or in-person worship, what groups a person can join, financial support, prayer support, etc.
- What will you do if more people show up than are allowed?
- How will you keep track of who has entered your building?
 - Keep track of each person in the building in case one of them contracts COVID-19.
 - Have a plan to inform all those exposed to COVID-19 in your building.
- How are you working with renters or other outside groups who use the building?
 - For instance, write to each of your building's user groups your expectations for the care of those who gather and for the facility. In the letter it should be stated that user groups are expected to abide by CDC, state, and local mandates as well as the requests of the local congregation. Breaching the conditions of the letter voids their use agreement with the congregation.
- How will the nursery, Sunday School, etc. be run?
- Should there be potlucks or any food exchanged?
- Will you be ready to close again if needed?
- Is your leadership team prepared to stand by the plan you have constructed?
 - Can you take responsibility for your plan, change it as often as you need to, and refrain from speaking ill of the plans that other congregations put in place?
- How are you conducting weddings? Funerals? Other special services?
- Have you checked with your insurance carrier to see if any of your choices have negative implications for your congregation's liability?

I'm sure there are other questions and considerations not on this list

3. Meet Weekly to Evaluate Your Situation

Some questions to consider in your weekly meeting:

- How is this plan furthering God's mission of loving God and loving neighbor?
- Are there new facts to consider?
- What unexpected challenges and joys did you encounter?
- Do you see a problem that needs to be addressed before next week?
- How are you updating the congregation on changes to your safety practices depending on the changing situation?

Each congregation or ministry site's rostered minister, along with the congregational leadership, should focus on the congregation's work and use of resources during this pandemic. This is a time to re-think what the congregation is called to do. The question has gone from "How to do online what we used to do in person" to "What is God's Spirit calling us to in our ministry now? How shall we worship, learn, serve, grow, and explore?"

Remember that "you are called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as opportunities for self-indulgence, but become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14)

Remember that while all things may be lawful for you, not all things are beneficial. Nor do all things build up the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23 – Paul says this twice so it must be important)

Remember that the neighbor always comes first and that what we do to the least of these who are members of our family [in Christ], we do to Christ. (Matthew 25:40)

Our labor of love continues. May all that we say and do reflect the light and love of Jesus Christ.

In Christ's Love,



Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee