



East Central Synod of Wisconsin

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



May 6, 2020

Dear Pastors, Deacons and Lay Leaders,

**Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
We are illumined by the brightness of his rising.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Death has no more dominion over us.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

These dialog verses from the liturgy for Morning Prayer remind us we are in the Easter season. Though we live in the days of the COVID-19 outbreak, the comfort and assurance of God's victory in raising Jesus from the dead surrounds and strengthens us. Thanks be to God!

I write to thank and encourage you in the work you are doing in these trying days. From what I have seen pastors, deacons and lay leaders have been providing exemplary leadership in caring for the people of our congregations and responding to the needs of the community. These are difficult days to be sure. But the grace and mercy of God is seeing us through these times. Thank you to all of you and thanks be to God for the life and hope we share.

I also write to give counsel and direction as we contemplate the gradual reopening of our congregations for public worship. I want to emphasize the word gradual. **We should not look upon these days as a sprint to the finish line when everything will return to normal but a marathon that is going to last at least a year but more likely 18-24 months.**

Yesterday I participated in an online presentation hosted by the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod in which **Dr. Michael Osterholm** talked about the coronavirus and COVID-19. Dr. Osterholm is a member of one of our ELCA congregations, Edina Community Lutheran Church, and on the Board of Regents for Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. Most importantly, however, he is an epidemiologist and the **Director of the University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy**. He has worked with Republican and Democratic administrations at both the state and national level. 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."

While new cases of the coronavirus may decline periodically, we will need to deal with the virus for a long time to come. **We will have this health crisis until one of the following occurs:**

- 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.

Dr. Osterholm stressed the unpredictability and yet the certainty of the virus. Using visual images the activity of the virus could be like any of the following:

- A slow burn of a fire across a field of grass
- Waves of differing size that come crashing periodically with lulls between
- One huge sudden outbreak

The purpose of physical distancing and the recent stay at home order has been to prevent the huge sudden outbreak. **Whatever scenario unfolds he stressed we need to be prepared for some tumultuous months ahead.** While restrictions may be lessened for a time, we may also need to impose them upon ourselves at a later time.

On April 20 Governor Evers issued **Badger Bounce Back**, a phased approach at lessening the restrictions of the Safer at Home Order issued on March 24. Phase One would allow gatherings of up to 10 people. Phase Two would allow gatherings up to 50 people. Phase Three would allow for the resumption of mass gatherings with minimal protective and preventative measures. Each of these phases is dependent upon a decline in the symptoms and cases reported and the capacity of the health care system to move forward. I have attached a copy of the Badger Bounce Back for people who would like to read it in more detail. From what I have read and heard I do not expect a movement to Phase Three until sometime in 2021 at the earliest.

I know this order is being challenged in the courts and as I write we await a decision. Whatever the outcome **it is incumbent upon us in the Church to exercise our Christian moral sensibilities in these matters.** My colleague Bishop John Roth of the Central-Southern Illinois Synod offers these helpful words:

Lutherans have always recognized that God calls upon us, both individually and collectively, to recognize and to act on our responsibilities for the wellbeing of our communities. At a minimum, this means complying with health and safety orders issued by state and local officials. But this compliance alone may not be enough. The Apostle Paul's reasoning in Romans 12-13 is that the law restricts conduct, but sometimes the law does not go far enough. You may be keeping the law, but you may nevertheless be injuring someone. Love should restrict your conduct to the point where your conduct will not cause someone harm or cause someone to doubt the credibility of the gospel message you proclaim. **Consequently, if some form of gathering is permitted, but that form of gathering at this time may pose a significant health risk in your context, love ought to compel you to refrain yet from that form of gathering.**

In other words should the Badger Bounce Back order be ruled unconstitutional and invalid, we as Christians must still wrestle with these matters and seek to do what most contributes to the health and well-being our congregations and communities.

It has been my privilege to serve on the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Council of Churches for nearly 6 years, including a term as President of the Board. The Reverend

Kerri Parker, Executive Director of the Council, and her staff have put together a document, **“Returning to Church: Ministry During the COVID-19 Outbreak”**. This document, prepared in consultation with public health experts and church leaders, has been widely praised across the country in Lutheran and ecumenical circles. I have attached a copy with this letter. I encourage you to read it thoroughly and take to heart the guidance being offered. The document lays out recommendations to consider for each phase of Badger Bounce Back and poses questions to be considered for congregational life.

There are several points I will lift up for emphasis:

- **Plan on a gradual or phased return to worship.** During Phase One all congregations should continue online worship, maintain physical distancing, and keep office activity to a minimum. In Phase Two congregations will need to consider how to limit the size of the gathering, maintain physical distance, and properly cleanse the worship space.
- **Encourage high risk people to continue to shelter in place** throughout the pandemic. I have often been inspired by the hardy elderly who weather ice and snow to come to worship. But now is the time to encourage faithful yet vulnerable folk to remain at home.
- **Physical distancing and modification of behaviors.** Shaking hands, hugging, the sharing of the peace, passing out of printed bulletins, holding hands during the Lord’s Prayer, the passing of offering plates—all these are behaviors that need to change so the spread of the virus is restricted.
- **Refrain from singing.** This is so difficult for me to write and yet so necessary. This tiny coronavirus spreads in tiny droplets while coughing or sneezing and in even smaller aerosols while breathing. Dr. Osterholm told us to think of sunlight coming through a window that exposes all those particles hanging in the air. Singing propels aerosols along with the virus to much greater distances. Singing also brings the virus more deeply into our lungs when inhaling. There was a story from outside the Seattle area in March where 42 of 51 community chorale members became infected though they were practicing physical distancing.
- **Protect your congregation from liability.** Consult your insurance carrier. For the sake of those we love and for the protection of our congregational corporate life follow the guidance of public health officials. To put it more bluntly: don’t risk the publicity and legal issues that could follow an outbreak caused by negligence or ignoring recommended practices.
- **New normal not without risks.** We don’t know how the weeks and months ahead will unfold. We cannot live with the economic life of the country shut down. Yet we must also work to keep the impact of the virus from overcoming the health care

system. While we navigate dangerous waters, let us pray wise decisions and actions for our governmental leaders, our public health officials and all those who serve in essential services and supply lines. Let us use our best thinking and reasoning to plot a way forward both in our communities and in our churches. We must adapt to continue our lives while reducing risks as much as possible.

· **Be Gentle, Be Kind, Reach Out, Stay Connected.** These are exceedingly hard and difficult days. People will have different opinions, expectations, and reactions to the upheaval going on around them. I pray our love for one another and those in the communities around us will be deeply rooted in the love of Christ. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” (Romans 12:9-10)

I wish we were done with the coronavirus, and I wish we could just go back to being Church and doing Church like we were doing just two months ago. I really do! I miss corporate worship, hymn singing, coffee hours and hanging out with people who love Jesus and want to serve and witness in response to the Easter Gospel.

But we are living in the midst of a pandemic that is going to be with us for a long time. When I first addressed the synod about the coronavirus, I said “**for these days we have been baptized.**” This remains my mantra. While the way of doing Church has changed, we are still the Church, a people baptized into the life and death of Jesus Christ. We are an Easter people who know all about navigating the treacherous waters of death. We have the promise of God whose final word is one of forgiveness, life and salvation.

The Holy Gospel appointed for this coming Sunday is from John 14: “**Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.**” Jesus goes on speak about the many dwelling places in the Father’s house and how he goes to prepare a place for us. The Risen Jesus is already in our future, preparing life abundant for us. We pray for long lives and health here on earth but undergirding our journey is the Promise of life eternal.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In peace and love for all,

Bp Jerry

Gerald L Mansholt
Bishop