



Rocky Mountain Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Friday, March 13, 2020

To Pastors, Deacons and Congregational Councils of the Rocky Mountain Synod

Colleagues in Christ,

Having prayerfully considered our current situation with respect to COVID-19 and in light of the quickly evolving nature of this pandemic, ***I am recommending that all ELCA congregations in the Rocky Mountain Synod, regardless of location or number of congregants, suspend public worship gatherings, events and meetings beginning immediately until at least April 1, possibly longer.*** While our church polity doesn't permit me to issue a mandate, this recommendation comes at my strongest possible urging in light of all current available information. I trust you as congregational leaders – pastors, staff and Council – to consult with one another as you make decisions and implement plans in your particular context.

We are reminded often that we are Christ's Church, Better Together; the way we can be better together with our local communities, our nation and our world is to reduce all possible risk of transmission of this virus about which we still know relatively little and which can be lethal for our most vulnerable citizens. We must act in solidarity for the sake of the neighbor. To think "this doesn't apply to me and my community" does not take seriously enough our responsibility to the neighbor under these circumstances. I realize that some congregations already have plans to still gather this coming Sunday: if so, please take maximum care to ensure the safety of those most susceptible to this illness.

Let me be clear: this time of social distancing – or better said, physical distancing – does NOT mean we are suspending being the church! On the contrary, this means is that we become church in new ways. It's ironic but true that the best of who we are as church has always flourished under adversity. How will this moment invite us to reframe who and why and how we are as Christ's Body for the life of the world?

Here are some steps to take during this period:

- Plan ways to foster spiritual life and a sense of community that don't involve being in the same physical space. This may be an opportunity to deepen relationships as we reach out to each other more intentionally and as we engage in a pause from our relentless pace to reflect on God's presence with us in Christ.

Christ's Church, Better Together

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- Be creative in planning for virtual/home worship experiences. In lieu of a service of Holy Communion, help reintroduce people to varieties of a Service of the Word. Consider a Lenten focus on prayer, fasting and self-reflection. Start thinking about how to frame a Holy Week experience that people can experience in their homes or what an Easter experience might include if we are not able to gather together.
- Consider how to provide care for vulnerable members and neighbors. What can be done to be sure that we as the church are tending to the needs of those most impacted by this crisis?
- Imagine new ways to be church for the life of the world in your context in this moment. If our times of worship have always been about equipping the saints for their ministry, how do we now unleash that potential?

Here are some ways the Office of the Bishop will support you:

- We are asking our Deans to hold weekly conference check-in ZOOM meetings both to receive updates from every congregation and to help problem solve. A member of the Office of the Bishop staff will participate in each ZOOM.
- We have a page on our website for resource sharing and idea exchanges, seeking to address particular issues as they arise.
- We will hold webinars to keep folks updated as this situation evolves.

In the midst of it all, we will care for one another, we will pray for one another, and we will be Christ's Church, Better Together.

I want to close with this familiar prayer adapted for this moment:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to continue becoming your church in new ways, not yet knowing what that might look like, but trusting that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. -ELW Evening Prayer

Yours in Faith,



Bishop Jim Gonia

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