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Bishop's Memo 2

March 25, 2020

Dear Friends of Southeast Michigan:

This is the second of this series of regular communications from the Bishop's Office during this time of pandemic. Again, this text will go out through Constant Contact, the Southeast Michigan Facebook page, (<https://www.facebook.com/Semisynod/>) as well as our webpage (<https://semisynod.com>).

I also want to be clear that this is our plan during this extraordinary time of pandemic, and not a blueprint for our regular ministry going forward.

Let us pray: Good God, I give thanks for the courage of my sisters and brothers in Christ who serve as leaders in your church. For the strength of their backs and their wills, for their grit and trustworthiness, for their spirit and determination, for their integrity and their skill, I give you thanks. May I stand with them as faithfully as they have stood with me, and may your strong arm defend and empower us daily. Amen

(Adapted from *ELCA Prayer Book for the Armed Services*, Prayers for Unit Life: Fellow Service Members--Thanksgiving pg. 40.)

Synod Office:

Following Governor Whitmer's Executive Order that took effect March 24, we have closed the Synod office for the next 21 days. We will continue to meet remotely: Deans on Tuesdays at 11:00; Pastoral leaders on Wednesdays at 2:00--look for your weekly Zoom invitations. Please check your spam folder if you can't find your invitation. We will continue to respond to emails, texts and phone messages in a timely fashion. Synod staff contact information is included in each Constant Contact. Letters and packages sent to the Office through the USPS will be collected at regular intervals and delivered to the correct person as soon as possible. We ask for your patience as we develop protocols for maintaining communication with you.

Congregation Offices:

In consultation with their leadership and other staff members, pastors or those serving as pastoral presences will need to make arrangements for collecting mail, checking on the building, and managing aspects of the regular life of the parish: paying bills, arranging for regular maintenance or cleaning, making payroll and keeping up with Synod benevolence. I am keenly aware that many parishes are experiencing a sharp drop in income while their buildings are closed, but I still ask you to send on what you are able, and am grateful for your partnership.

I ask also that you consider the financial situation of those who work part time for the church: musicians, custodians, child care workers, office staff, and do your best to make certain that their inability to work on Sundays does not force them into extreme hardship.

Further, this time is pushing those already on the margins to be even more reliant on local food banks or feeding programs. Check with your community leaders to discover how (and if) those needs are being met.

Staying Connected:

Members of Synod staff will be contacting rostered leaders and LLM's just to check in. Please do not hesitate to reach out to one of us (or your Dean) if you have an issue or concern.

I urge congregational leaders to undertake a regular call in their members for a similar purpose, though I invite you to consider how you can use lay members' talents and time to accomplish this. Lots of us are getting a crash course in "distance worship leadership" and are figuring out how to work cameras, microphones, and how to develop a liturgy that makes sense remotely. Again, I am so proud of your efforts, and deeply grateful for your willingness to reach out in new ways. I have seen sermons, Bible studies, music, and even a coffee hour done remotely. This is great!

At the same time, and depending on your constituency, please do not overlook traditional means of staying in touch: newsletters, sending a copy of the bulletin (or something similar) with the texts and perhaps a copy of your sermon, reviving your "card ministry." Establish a weekly (or daily) time for members of your congregation to pause for collective prayer. Use your church bells (if you have them) to invite the neighborhood to prayer at a time that is mutually agreeable.

And please, keep your Facebook pages updated and the message on your answering machine current as well.

Sunday Gathering:

Gov. Whitmer's Executive Order exempts churches from the penalties that are associated with gatherings of 50 or more. I appreciate the nod to religious freedom, but regret the confusion this may cause for leaders making faithful and difficult decisions.

Let me be clear: *I do not and will not endorse any Sunday gathering during this time.* Further, I am beginning to work on protocols for funerals and weddings that honor the call for social distancing and very small gatherings. It is my understanding that at least some funeral homes are prohibiting visitation (of any size) and requiring that funeral services take place graveside. You may want to check with your local provider before you meet (remotely) with a grieving family, in order to talk about what is possible in terms of funeral services.

Finally, while we are all learning new technology that allows us to stay virtually connected through Facebook, live streaming, etc., please be careful that you do not ask staff or volunteers to compromise their own health while working to provide support. Consider how to achieve what you need with as few folks as possible involved in the process and maintain social distance!

Easter Sunday: President Trump has expressed the hope that we will be able to gather again on April 12. I heard his words as an encouragement, but not in any way as the basis of a doctor endorsed plan going forward. We must rely upon our health care professionals to make this announcement. ***It is my strongest***

recommendation that local leaders follow the most recent guidelines provided by Gov. Whitmer precluding large gatherings, even though churches have been given an exemption. Remember, Easter lasts 7 weeks, and we've got lots of time available to us after that as well.

Holy Week:

(This update provided by Pr. Jen Kiefer and the Synod Worship Planning Team,)

The synod worship planning team met today and here are the ideas we came up with for Holy Week worship resources.

For Maundy Thursday -

We will put out a request for clergy to send in photos of them washing feet - either from previous Maundy Thursday liturgies, or washing the feet of a family member at home. Sarah Altenburg will put this to music for a "prelude." We will then use stock photos of foot washing, paired with Taize music as a way to lead into a sermon offered by Bishop Kreiss.

Sarah Altenburg is going to share Spotify and YouTube playlists that she has made for Trinity, Ann Arbor for folks to use.

Pr. Kiefer will share the Dinner church liturgy she is working on.

For Good Friday -

Steve Archinal (from St. Paul, GPF, who just completed a degree in video editing) is willing to help us do some video editing of devotions on the 7 Last Words of Christ.

These devotions will be uploaded to a synod YouTube channel and can be scheduled to be posted to Facebook, 1 per hour, from 1pm until 7pm.

Holy Saturday -

Pr. Beth Birkholz (Samaritas) is on board to do a 5 to10-minute body prayer on the grief of Holy Saturday

Easter -

Pr. Lauren Kirsh-Carr has agreed to memorize and be filmed proclaiming John's Easter Gospel in a cemetery early in the morning. We can schedule that to be posted early on Easter morning.

Sarah Altenburg is going to create a sign up for a virtual synod choir and will make practice tracks, etc, available for those who want to join.

Bishop Kreiss will preach.

Finally, I am reaching out to Lisa Jeffries to ask her to get word out to our youth workers to ask their youth to send in pictures of Alleluia drawings and videos of youth and children shouting alleluia which Sarah A will then set to music and we will publish that during Easter week.

About Holy Communion:

I have asked our pastoral leaders and their congregations to join me in a Lenten fast from the Eucharist. I also understand that local leadership may determine, on the basis of their context and pastoral concern, that such a fast is not appropriate. I look forward to a broad conversation about the nature of the Eucharist and the limits (if there are any) and the nature of virtual gathering sometime when we can gather face to face in order to talk together. (And I hear the irony in that statement.)

Even as we approach Easter, however, I remain deeply concerned about the unintended exclusion of our siblings in Christ who do not have access to the technology or the (literal) bandwidth to experience virtual gatherings. I remain concerned for those pastoral leaders whose Eucharistic theology prevents them from virtually celebrating, and for members whose conscience does not allow them to take part virtually. And as your bishop I am both aware of and responsible for our ecumenical partnerships and the mutual expectations we have with and for each other around the celebration of the sacraments--we do not operate in a vacuum, even as we practice social distancing.

This is a fast that has been forced upon us. None of us would have chosen it. However, we have in our Lutheran theology a robust sense of the presence of Christ in the Word preached, and the assurance that Christ is with us when we gather--remotely or face-to-face. The “Service of the Word” is different from the Celebration of Holy Communion, but it is not therefore deficient. I commend this time to you as leaders of your faith community to reflect together about the meaning of the Eucharist, both corporately and as individual Christians. Do we understand it as a gift or an entitlement? And have we wrongfully discounted the “Word” even as we have placed emphasis on the “Meal”?

Meanwhile, I and Pr. Jen Kiefer (Synod Director for Worship) are working on a family appropriate “liturgy” that can be used around the dinner table as families gather to celebrate Easter. I hope that this will offer both guidance and comfort as we gather separately.

I remain grateful for you, and urge you to follow medical protocols in order to increase your chances of remaining healthy and helpful to others during this time.

Peace!

Bishop Don