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Lent 2021

Dear Friends of Southeast Michigan Synod,

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Savior Jesus Christ!

We have now passed a significant milestone in our life together: as of last Sunday (Lent 4) we have lived an entire year of a pandemic. We all know, to our great sorrow and sense of loss, what this time has cost us. We have had to make adaptations to our congregational life that would have been unthinkable eighteen months ago. We have become adept at new technologies, suffered from a lack of human contact, adjusted to new social norms, postponed weddings, cancelled birthday parties, and tried to reconcile ourselves to not being present with those we love. We have learned to wear masks and to wash our hands compulsively.

In this country alone, more than one half million of our sisters and brothers have died, many of them without loved ones keeping vigil, in order to stop the infection from spreading further. We carry with us an enormous amount of grief that will take time for us to process.

And now we begin to see the possibility of a return to a more social life, and a life that once again includes gathering together for worship. We give thanks to God and thanks for the tremendous work of doctors, scientists and researchers who have developed vaccines that effectively fight COVID-19. We are grateful for those folks who answered the call to care for the health and safety of others. We have seen grace in action, even as we have struggled to keep moving forward in hope and faith.

Meanwhile, as we draw close to Holy Week and Easter, I want to urge all of us to have patience, to continue observing the wise practices that have helped keep infection numbers low, and to remember that love of neighbor is one of marks of our faith.

To that end, recognizing that all of us are very tired of these limits and boundaries, I also want to offer the following guidelines from the Synod Office as a model for best practices in the congregation. I recognize also that congregational leadership may not be



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God's work. Our hands.

of one mind regarding the best way to proceed, and that members may need to make decisions on the basis of their own personal health issues or the needs of those in their household. I ask that conversations about finding a way forward be grounded in love and respect, accepting that there is no one answer that will be correct for every situation or member.

In terms of Gathering:

- It is still safest to refrain from indoor in-person worship. Almost every congregation in the Synod has found some form of technology that allows us to gather virtually, and many members have learned that virtual gatherings can be powerfully spiritual.
- Gathering outdoors (especially as the weather begins to warm up) is very safe.
- Indoor in-person worship requires many thoughtful and careful adjustments to lower the risk of infection. Keeping safe distance between households, wearing masks properly, having lots of hand sanitizer, refraining from physical contact, and maintaining limits on the number of worshippers present are all essential.
- Shortening the length of a service (45 minutes or less) is a helpful measure.
- Schedule as much time as possible (two hours or more) between worship services.
- Keep windows and doors open (as possible).
- Those present should sign in to provide information for contact tracing if necessary. Those records should be kept for at least a month.

In terms of Music:

- Congregational singing is still very unsafe. As many as four singers, spaced 16 feet from the rest of the congregation, may help lead worship with low risk.
- Recorded music (with the appropriate licenses as necessary) is very safe.

In terms of the Sacraments:

- Pre-packaged individual serving communion ‘set ups’ may be placed in congregational seating before worship. Communicants may follow along with the celebrant during the Eucharistic liturgy without leaving their places.
- Baptisms must be carefully negotiated with worship leaders, including conversation about who will be physically present and where they will stand.



In terms of Vaccinations:

- As increasing number of folks are vaccinated, congregational leadership will need to make thoughtful and faithful decisions about how to be welcoming and hospitable to members and friends who are unable or choose not to be vaccinated.

As always, I advise congregational leaders to pay close attention to their local Health Departments, the Governor's Office, and CDC Guidelines for more comprehensive information as well as more detailed guidelines for ways to help stop the spread of COVID. There are links below that can help leaders make more informed decisions; be aware that recommendations and conditions are likely to change as our circumstances change also.

Grace and peace,  
Bishop Don Kreiss

[Coronavirus - Coronavirus \(michigan.gov\)](https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)

<https://www.facebook.com/worshipsafely>



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