



## Northwest Intermountain Synod ELCA

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To God's Beloveds in the Northwest Intermountain Synod,

We are living in interesting times. Any one of the issues we are actively dealing with would warrant the label "chaotic" and we are dealing with multiple issues at the same time. We are frazzled. We are fragile. We are forlorn.

Many of our congregational leaders are considering whether to suspend holding services for a time. Let me assure you that this is for the safety of the members of your congregational community. Let me further assure you that not one of these decisions is made lightly or without a great deal of emotional conflict and fervent prayer. As your bishop, I ask you to refrain from criticizing your congregational leaders for choices they make around this issue. You are free to disagree, but I ask that you keep Luther's explanation to the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment in mind: *we are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and **interpret everything they do in the best possible light.*** None of us are at our best right now, but we can take the opportunity to be the Body of Christ with and for one another in beautiful ways.

I convened a meeting of the Northwest Intermountain Synod Executive Council this morning. We have agreed on the following recommendations:

1. Because of the size of our synod, the Executive Committee strongly urges that you monitor your county health offices for relevant, local information. Some of our areas are being hit by COVID-19. Some are not. Make decisions that are reasonable for your area.
2. If congregational leadership feels it is prudent to cancel worship, you are empowered to do so. There are a few congregations in our synod that have already made this decision in order to protect the vulnerable in the community. This is a faithful decision to make and should not be criticized or second-guessed but supported with gratitude.
3. If you decide to continue to hold worship, please do the following:
  - a. Discontinue the Sacrament of Holy Communion for a season
  - b. Do not keep water in the baptismal font
  - c. Do not pass the offering plates. Instead put the offering plates in a stationary location & allow people to place their offering in the plate that way
  - d. Refrain from passing the peace. Options are a corporate verbal peace; elbow bumps; waves; the peace sign; etc.
  - e. Discontinue coffee hour for a season
  - f. Do not use hymnals. It is easy for a congregant to cough into their hand, wipe their eyes, etc. then hold the hymnal. We know the virus stays alive on surfaces for five days—which means that someone using the hymnal at the next service could be exposed. One License is offering a FREE license membership to churches starting now-April 15. You can take advantage of this generous offer to put hymns on screens or in the bulletin.
  - g. If you feel ill in any way: do NOT attend church!

4. We are canceling all staff travel effective immediately. The Executive Committee will meet again on March 31 to evaluate the need for this travel ban to continue. This means if a synod staff person was scheduled to be with you between now and 3/31: they will no longer be making that trip and will be in touch with you to reschedule.
5. The Synod Council Meeting scheduled for April 23 & 24 will be held via Zoom, further limiting the travel & potential exposure of our Synod Council members.

We did not decide whether to postpone our Spring Regional Gatherings. We felt those are important times for us to be together and decided to wait to see how things continue to develop. For the time being, registration for those events remains open, and we encourage you to register your congregations to attend. We will decide on whether to postpone those events by April 1, 2020. If postponement seems the wisest course of action, refunds of registration fees will be made available.

Your congregation may oversee ministries to the marginalized in your communities—clothing closets, food pantries, feeding programs. We strongly encourage you to continue these ministries if you can do so in a manner that protects the ministry volunteers and those the ministry serves. However, if you are unable to do safely: suspending such ministries may be preferable to potentially contracting or passing COVID-19.

Many folks believe that practices such as these are an over-reaction. That may well be. However, we know that the section of our population most vulnerable to the fatal effects of COVID-19 are people aged 60 and older. This is the largest demographic in our congregations. I do not take that lightly and will encourage an over-abundance of caution over disregard of safety in every situation. This response is about the safety and well-being of our neighbors. As Martin Luther reminded us of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment (You Shall Not Kill): *We are to fear and love God so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.* This is a time when the proper application of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment is abundantly clear, and we ignore it at our neighbor's peril.

None of these decisions are easy. But we make these decisions believing they are the best way to keep the people we love and the people we serve safe and healthy.

The following is a prayer I invite you to use in this time of uncertainty.

**Eternal God, amid all the turmoil and changes of the world your love is steadfast and your strength never fails. In this time of danger and trouble, be to us a sure guardian and rock of defense. Guide the leaders of our nation, our churches, and those who provide medical care with your wisdom. Comfort those in distress, and grant us courage and hope to face the future; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

May the God of peace and healing be close to us all in these days,



Bishop Kristen Kuempel