



Northeastern Ohio Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The God who made the world and everything in it, [God] who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands...though indeed [God] is not far from each one of us. For 'In [God] we live and move and have our being...' [Acts 17:24, 27-28 NRSV]

May 21, 2020

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Risen Savior Jesus Christ!

Paul's words to the Greeks in Athens, quoted above, also serve as a reminder to us who have not worshipped in a church building for over two months due to the restrictions imposed by the novel Coronavirus. Thanks to the gift of technology, and the creativity of all of our rostered ministers and worship leaders, God has indeed not been far from any of us during this pandemic. Even though we have missed the physical fellowship – and we lament that – we have been able to stay in touch with each other, perhaps even more frequently than we would have under other circumstances.

As we approach the end of May, and the COVID-19 restrictions are being lifted throughout Ohio, many eagerly yearn for renewing the fellowship of in-person public worship. However, we are also mindful that life is a gift from God that we are to treasure and hold dear. To treat it as such requires that we proceed into this resumption of worship with an abundance of caution. That is the main message of this letter.

Like most of you, I watch Governor Mike DeWine's daily briefings regularly, if not every day, looking for nuggets of assurance that we are moving in the right direction. It is difficult, though, to watch and hear the numbers of reported cases, hospitalizations, and deaths from the novel Coronavirus, and feel confident that the situation is improving or that our churches are ready to reopen. Northeastern Ohio is the smallest of the three Ohio synods, yet this area has recorded more than half the number of deaths in the state.

This office is not setting any target dates for reopening, but rather, urging rostered ministers and congregational leaders to establish building use and meeting protocols, if you have not done so already, before considering reopening for public gatherings. Again, the Apostle Paul advises us, "*All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial.*" [1 Corinthians 10:23 NRSV]. In other words, just because you can reopen does not mean you should.

Likewise, bear in mind that due to age, or underlying health conditions, not everyone should risk returning to a large gathering, even with physical distance measures in place. This includes ministers! Practice good common sense. If you don't feel well, if you don't feel safe, don't go to worship – not only for your sake, but for the sake of others. Worship is a means of grace, not an obligation.

What follows are suggestions in preparation for reopening, realizing that each congregation will proceed at a different pace and things will look different in every one. This will not be a linear process. We need to be open to the possibility that in some cases, reopening may lead to closing again if the infections show signs of increase.

Above all, form a Reopening Team, made up of leaders in your congregation. I strongly encourage selecting individuals for this task who demonstrate patience, insight, and the ability to take a long-term view. A health care professional would make an ideal member of this team, if at all possible. These people will be responsible for developing the reopening procedures. It is important that these plans not be made in a vacuum, and that decisions be made with the physical and spiritual safety of your parishioners in mind.

1890 Bailey Road
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio 44221
Web Site: www.neos-elca.org

330-929-9022
FAX: 330-929-9018
E-Mail: office@neos-elca.org

The ELCA has issued a comprehensive document to guide that process, [Considerations for Returning to In-Person Worship](#). It covers far more detail than I am able to provide in this letter. It is important that you read it in its entirety and discuss it with your leadership group.

The [Wisconsin Council of Churches](#) was one of the early leaders in developing similar guidelines. Some of their suggestions are repetitive, but helpful.

Many of our ecumenical and full-communion partners have also developed similar resources. These, along with others, can be found on our Northeastern Ohio Synod [COVID-19 Updates and Resources for Congregations](#) page.

In addition I would encourage you to engage in conversation with any ecumenical or full-communion partners you may know. Sharing different perspectives often has a way of stimulating ideas one hasn't yet considered.

As you develop guidelines for your congregation, and are willing to share, please forward them to our office. We will make those available on our resource page for the benefit of others who may lack the capacity to develop their own. Keep in mind, however, that there is no uniform approach. Each plan should and must be suitable to one's particular ministry setting.

Even though you may resume public worship, be sure to maintain an online presence. While technology doesn't solve all the problems, many of you have discovered a whole new community that is eager to hear the word proclaimed. And it bears repeating that not everyone will return to worship immediately after reopening.

Maintain frequent communication with the members of your congregation. Be clear and direct. Information calms anxiety.

Here, I feel a need to acknowledge my own lack of clarity on a significant matter.

At the beginning of the suspension of in-person public worship, I discouraged the practice of online or "virtual" communion. I voiced then, and am still of the belief, that it is not good theological practice, along with other concerns. I recommended abstaining from communion and expressed my views verbally to several of you in conference gatherings, but only to a few of you in email exchanges. However, in all of my written communication I never expressed that clearly to everyone. Going forward, I will try to be more consistent when questions on this, or similar issues, arise.

We have, for the most part, been without the sacrament for far too long, and I understand that many of you are grieving that visible sign of God's forgiveness and grace. However, as we go forward, please read the recommendations for in-person communion on **page four** of the ELCA considerations document. I would add that, at least for a few weeks, my strong recommendation would be to limit public worship to Service of the Word liturgies.

By now you may feel overwhelmed with information as to what to do and what not to do. I pray this is not adding to the overload.

I also pray that we can harvest some of the deep learning from this experience that will benefit us as a community and as a church going forward. Hopefully, it has and will continue to provide an opportunity to deepen our faith and our understanding of what it means to be the church.

And I end with more words from the Apostle Paul, "*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*" [Philippians 4:8 NRSV]

Peace and blessings,



+Bishop Abraham Allende
The Ascension of Our Lord 2020