



Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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Pastoral Message to the People and Communities of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA Bishop Bill Gafkjen + May 2021

We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action...and this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. [1 John 3:16-24]

Dear People of God,

Have you been vaccinated? Which one did you get? How'd you feel afterward?

Who among us ever imagined a year ago that such questions would become standard entry-points for conversation? Yet here we are, nearing what we hope and pray is the far side of the coronavirus wilderness, with vaccines playing a major role in whether, when, and how we can gather in-person safely and comfortably.

Medical experts tell us that achieving a high percentage of vaccinated people (70% or more), along with continued compliance with established health and safety protocols, is the key to unlocking the doors of our isolation from one another. Yet, as of April 30th only 31% of Kentuckians and only 26% of Hoosiers were fully vaccinated. Kentucky is 25th in the country by percentage of people vaccinated. Indiana is 45th.

If you have been vaccinated, thank you for – as John might put it – expressing your trust in Jesus and love for your neighbor by enduring the poke or pokes in the arm. If you have not been vaccinated (and you are able to receive the vaccine), please get vaccinated as soon as you can. Please also help others get their vaccinations. Perhaps someone you know needs help navigating the appointment scheduling system, or needs transportation or comforting accompaniment to a vaccination site, or needs an encouraging nudge from a friend to overcome their indifference or resistance. Being vaccinated, like continuing to observe other health and safety protocols and helping our neighbors to do so, is love beyond word or speech taking flesh “in truth and action.”

The latest recommendations from the CDC also suggest that as we work our way toward the majority of folks in this country being vaccinated, it is important that we also continue on the cautious and patient path toward in-person gatherings and ministry, including worship. The CDC's latest chart of guidelines is included as an addendum to this message. That chart makes it clear that attending a full-capacity indoor worship service and singing in an indoor chorus are among the “least safe” activities for people who have not been vaccinated. In addition, for now fully vaccinated people should still wear masks in such situations.

As disappointing as it may be after more than fourteen months of care and caution, the most prudent path forward toward in-person ministry, including worship, will be shaped by continued careful adherence to recommended protocols, slow and thoughtful movement toward flinging wide the doors and flinging off the masks in our life together, and care-filled attention to the most vulnerable among us,

even to the point of “laying down” our own desires and demands for one another, so we can all get to the other side.

An extremely helpful guide and companion for decision-making and planning for ministry on this far edge of the wilderness is The Ecumenical Consultation on Protocols for Worship, Fellowship, and Sacraments (<https://bit.ly/3vtmsEX>). ELCA leaders are active participants in this Consultation which recently raised some crucial questions and offered a bit of guidance for congregations on their Facebook page in response to the latest CDC guidelines (<https://www.facebook.com/worshipsafely/>):

- *Do congregations continue to ask all to wear masks, indoors or outdoors, for the sake of those present who may be unvaccinated?*
- *Do they allow some or nearly all ministries to be ONLY for those who are vaccinated? What does that do? What does that say?*
- *Do they allow a chorus to sing indoors for worship or other events since, even with masks, this is considered least safe for those who are not vaccinated?*
- *Do they allow vaccinated persons NOT to wear masks outdoors except for larger gatherings, or, for the sake of not pointing out or endangering those not vaccinated, continue to require masks at all gatherings, indoors or outdoors?*

The answers are not easy. All involve some form of trade-off. Let us all seek kindness toward all, including congregations who may make different decisions about different forms of ministry as long as they are not endangering the lives or health of others.

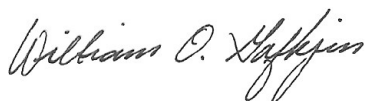
The answers certainly are not easy. And they will likely vary from context to context. Thankfully, as the author of 1 John suggests, we make these decisions together with the guidance of the Holy Spirit at the intersection where trusting in Jesus meets loving our neighbor.

In this spirit, the Synod Executive Committee has affirmed that the suspension of synod staff travel will continue through the month of May, with a few exceptions. We will use the month of May to discuss and discern guidelines and practices that will shape our ministry with you in the new world that is emerging.

Finally, beloved of God, on this far edge of the coronavirus wilderness I trust that along with synod leadership you and the leadership of your local congregation or other mission center are not only carefully planning for in-person ministry, but also dreaming, discussing, and discerning together the ways God is shaping and guiding you to be church in the emerging world. What have you learned from the journey through this wilderness that might offer direction for the ways you will engage gospel ministry together and with others into the future? What have you discovered that you can do without or do differently to faithfully follow Jesus, share the good news with others, and serve the neighbor? What new skills, perspectives, or practices have you picked up along the way that will serve well into the future? How can you continue to reach, serve, and accompany those who became connected to the congregation and its ministry in new ways over the last year? How might this sojourn in the wilderness shape the ways you will express your belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and love one another, just as God has commanded us?

May the Spirit of the crucified and risen One fill you, surround you, and empower you, that you may find rest for your weariness and renewed purpose in your heart as you continue walking together in the Spirit toward God’s promised and emerging Easter world.





























Peace be with you,



The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop

Choosing Safer Activities

Accessible link: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/participate-in-activities.html>

| | Unvaccinated People | Your Activity | Fully Vaccinated People |
|------------|---|---|---|
| | | Outdoor | |
| Safest |  | Walk, run, wheelchair roll, or bike outdoors with members of your household |  |
| |  | Attend a small, outdoor gathering with fully vaccinated family and friends |  |
| |  | Attend a small, outdoor gathering with fully vaccinated and unvaccinated people |  |
| Less Safe |  | Dine at an outdoor restaurant with friends from multiple households |  |
| Least Safe |  | Attend a crowded, outdoor event, like a live performance, parade, or sports event |  |
| | | Indoor | |
| Less Safe |  | Visit a barber or hair salon |  |
| |  | Go to an uncrowded, indoor shopping center or museum |  |
| |  | Ride public transport with limited occupancy |  |
| |  | Attend a small, indoor gathering of fully vaccinated and unvaccinated people from multiple households |  |
| Least Safe |  | Go to an indoor movie theater |  |
| |  | Attend a full-capacity worship service |  |
| |  | Sing in an indoor chorus |  |
| |  | Eat at an indoor restaurant or bar |  |
| |  | Participate in an indoor, high intensity exercise class |  |

Get a COVID-19 vaccine



Prevention measures not needed



Take prevention measures

Fully vaccinated people: wear a mask
Unvaccinated people: wear a mask, stay 6 feet apart, and wash your hands.

- Safety levels assume the recommended prevention measures are followed, both by the individual and the venue (if applicable).
- CDC cannot provide the specific risk level for every activity in every community. It is important to consider your own personal situation and the risk to you, your family, and your community before venturing out.



cdc.gov/coronavirus

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