

May 23, 2020

Dear Pastors, Deacons and SAMs serving in the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin,

Yesterday, May 22, 2020 the President of the United States declared that churches should reopen immediately and that churches should be considered essential businesses. In response I'd like to highlight a few key thoughts that many of you already know but bear repeating:

1. St. Paul writes in the letter to Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, we are all one in Christ Jesus." In the same way we are neither Democrats or Republicans or Independents we are all beloved children of God. As spiritual leaders we are to care for the health and well-being of all people. A pandemic is a health crisis not a political situation. Because of the separation of church and state, the government cannot prevent us from worshipping, or order us to worship, at any time.
2. Yes, the church is essential. The Church has never shut down. The church is not a building. It is the people of faith. We know we are essential, but it is not essential to gather in person at this time. I encourage you to continue to offer online worship opportunities.
3. It is not recommended for our congregations to gather at this time. I recommend you put together a team or committee that will prepare your building and congregation for a time in the future when you can safely gather. The Badger Bounce Back plan limits gatherings to 10 until we enter phase 2. In phase 2 gatherings are to be under 50. We are currently in phase 1. Badger Bounce Back Plan <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02653a.pdf>
4. Once we are able to safely gather, follow the ELCA guide for Returning to Worship. We are encouraging social distancing procedures sitting 6 feet apart and avoid practices which can contribute to spread of the virus such as communion, singing, shaking hands, or passing offering plates. https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Returning_to_In-person_Worship.pdf
5. Undeniably, it would be a blessing to gather, but reports from across the country have shown congregations that have gathered have also become hotspots of the coronavirus, multiple deaths in a single congregation. We don't want that to happen in our synod. St. Peters, an ELCA congregation in New York lost 44 members to the Coronavirus.

6. Take time to prepare for face to face worship. Do what is necessary to put in place policies and procedures so that members of your congregation can safely gather. Continue online worship. It is dangerous to rush back to in person worship without a plan.

7. Many have asked about outdoor worship. While it is safer to gather outdoors because there is more space, there are still risks. It is difficult to enforce social distancing, keep people in their cars or 6 feet apart. Singing and communion are particularly risky even outdoors.

Dear friends, as leaders of the church, when faced with making decisions, I encourage you to keep asking, "What would love do? How can we best love our neighbors? How can we keep our members safe?" I am praying for you all. I trust that you will do what is best to care for your congregation.

In Christ,

Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson