

Statement from ELCA Congregations about Not Reopening Buildings Yet



Dear Members of the Eau Claire Community,

Almost three months ago we closed our church buildings to be Safer At Home, in accordance with Governor Evers' directive. The novel Coronavirus COVID-19 had arrived, and while there was a lot we did not know about it, staying home was recommended as the safest option to keep ourselves, our congregations, and the wider community healthy and reduce, or at least slow down, the spread of this virus. These many weeks later, we know more about health and safety around the virus, how it is spread, and the variety of reactions for those who are exposed or infected. We know and grieve that over 100,000 people have died in the U.S., even though numbers of positive cases in our county remain relatively low.

Like most people we know who are part of a group, organization, or congregation, we pastors long to open the doors of our church buildings for worship, singing, fellowship, and service to the community. We miss potlucks and preschool children, holy meals and daily meals, baptisms and big events we usually celebrate together. We miss weddings and dances and funerals and storytelling. We miss hearing voices singing liturgy and welcoming people to Christ's table. We miss YOU. But we hold to some commitments, and the best practices for safety compel us not to open our buildings yet.

We are committed to:

- Loving our neighbors and serving all people in Christ's name, which means we will make decisions for the good of the whole based on current scientific research and in consultation with local, state, and national health authorities;
- Creating community in which our faith is nurtured and all are respected, which means providing safe ways for all to participate in worship, service, and spiritual practices, all of which are happening through a variety of media and in our own homes at this time and for the foreseeable future;
- Following Jesus even when the way is uncomfortable, exhausting, or not what we'd prefer to be doing, which means that new life in Christ's name happens by doing what we can to keep one another safe and not contributing to the spread of COVID-19. This includes members of our congregations and others in our community who are served by our volunteers and the use of our buildings;
- Remaining open to the amazing ways the Spirit is at work in our world, even as we remain open to the rapidly changing information about this virus, which means we continue our ministries based on best practices for safety.

Our buildings are closed, but church is not closed, for we are the body of Christ even from home. We are called to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus, and to make that love known in thought, word, and deed. We continue to deepen our faith and grow in that holy relationship as we worship and serve God as we are able while also supporting our community and world in good health practices in the midst of this pandemic. The virus is not stopping our ministry or our faith, but we make decisions about how to be faithful in this time and place based on the situation we are in, trusting with absolute certainty that God is present with us every step of the way.

As leaders of congregations in Eau Claire, we encourage you to continue your good habits as recommended by local, state, national, and global health officials. In so doing, we love our neighbor, and Christ is made known among us. Thank you for your diligence, your trust, and your prayers.

The Peace of God be with you!

ELCA pastors

The Rev. Jim Ahlquist, Spirit Lutheran

The Rev. Mary Kaye Ashley, Trinity Lutheran

The Rev. Julie Brenden, St. John's Lutheran

The Rev. Jamie Brieske, Immanuel Lutheran

The Rev. Christine Emerson, St. John's Lutheran

The Rev. Mary Erickson, Hope Lutheran

The Rev. Patrick Patterson, Trinity Lutheran

The Rev. Lori Ruge-Jones, University Lutheran

The Rev. Phil Ruge-Jones, Grace Lutheran

The Rev. Josh Toufar, Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd