



Northeastern Minnesota Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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May 1, 2020

Dear beloved members of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod,
Grace and peace to you in Christ our brother and Lord.

Martin Luther's writings have been “gold” for me lately:

“Since God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation so that from now on I need nothing except faith, why should I not therefore freely, with all my heart do all things pleasing to God who has overwhelmed me with irresistible riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor and do nothing in this life except what is necessary, profitable, and salutary for my neighbor.” (From "The Freedom of the Christian" 1520)

I am strongly recommending that no worship or other in-person gatherings take place in our church buildings throughout the month of May, at the very least. I urge us instead, to focus on what Luther learned from Scripture and preached during widespread sickness in his day: live out your faith by serving your neighbor. Our neighbor is everyone. Serving as Christ to our neighbor right now is slowing the pandemic we all live in these days. Make no mistake the COVID-19 pandemic will be with us yet for a long time, beyond the summer months, into the fall, and beyond. It is vital that we be mature Christians here, and pay attention to the world as it is and keep on slowing the virus spread, in spite of our deep desire to gather with others “like we used to.” I know it is difficult to wait to gather. I sent out, last week, a pastoral letter than included the Wisconsin Council of Churches Document entitled, “RETURNING TO CHURCH: Ministry during the COVID-19 outbreak.” A huge thank you to my staff and our five Conference Deans: Pr. Brenda Wicklund, Pr. Mike Pancoast, Pr. Amanda Kossow, Pr. Kevin Olson, and Pr. Joyce Piper for their good and salutary teamwork with me in getting resources from me and our synod office to Rostered Ministers. Please discuss these resources with our congregational leadership in the months, not just weeks ahead, as medical experts and our ELCA continue to guide our practices together.

Our National Center for Disease Control has released documents, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Guidelines-for-Opening-Up-America-Again.pdf?mod=article_inline and our Governor is releasing revisions on previous executive orders for retailers and organizations to gradually return to a new and careful kind of gathering mode *when it is safe to do so*. As of Thursday, April 30 Governor Walz signed Executive Order 20-48 to extend the stay at home order until Monday, May 18. That doesn't mean everything opens up

like “business as usual” at all. This means Minnesotans need to continue to stay home except for essential needs to decrease the spread of COVID-19. For more information and answers to frequently asked questions, visit [COVID-19 Updates and Information](#). Here you will see that as of April 30th, there were 5,136 confirmed cases and 343 deaths due to COVID-19 virus in Minnesota which include counties in our Synod. By the time you read this – those numbers will have changed already.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgxwHNCtxGGRVsRrJIXdTbBjRPDq>

I am committed to be your encouraging Bishop for this extended time. I believe that in Christ the Savior of the world, we have all we need for this time we live in. I’ve talked with your Synod Council executive committee and your entire Synod council will be working with contingency plans for our Synod Assembly and Election of the new Bishop details and contingency plans for our Synod’s ministries. I’ll keep you apprised of our conversations and decisions.

I along with all the bishops of the ELCA gather each week via zoom. We are grateful to the Synod Bishops serving in Texas and Louisiana (states pushing early re-opening) for providing information which is the framework for the recommendations you find attached that are contextual to our reality here in Minnesota. These recommendations are given to you to study and discuss with your leadership in each congregation along with this pastoral letter. They include these two important resources on our Website:

- 1) Guidelines for Returning to Gatherings In-Person
- 2) Returning to the Sanctuary

Martin Luther, once again: “Behold, from faith flows love that serves one's neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. We do not distinguish friends from enemies because God's love makes us free.” (Freedom of the Christian)

Yours in Christ and in faith, hope, and love,

+Bishop Aitken
Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA