



LOWER SUSQUEHANNA SYNOD

WHERE THE HUNGRY ARE FED AS WE HAVE BEEN FED BY CHRIST.

The Rev. James S. Dunlop
Bishop

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“but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” – Isaiah 40:31

Dear Lower Susquehanna Synod Rostered Ministers,

As the new year is upon us and our COVID-19 weariness continues to grow, I would like to first extend an invitation for us to meet by Zoom on **Thursday, January 20 at 1:30 p.m.** or, **Tuesday, January 25, at 1:30 p.m.** (Zoom links provided in a separate email.) I have deeply missed gathering with all of you, and hope that you will be able to join me in one or both sessions.

This letter is coming to you as I am personally recovering from COVID-19. Although I have tried to follow safe guidelines, I contracted COVID-19 during a family gathering. I am fully vaccinated and have the booster and I was laid low with this illness. I know people believe that the vaccination and booster will protect them from serious illness; however, that was not my experience. I also had to isolate myself from family for ten days. Isolation did prevent further illness in my family and close contacts. Vaccination is not protection from getting or spreading this disease, it only lessens the risks associated with disease. I am grateful I was not hospitalized. I encourage everyone to be vaccinated because I am convinced it saved my life.

The Omicron surge is expected to continue through the winter months. Because all counties in our synod have severe outbreaks and remain at a high level of community transmission, diligence in maintaining the following mitigation practices and safety guidelines are offered for your prayerful consideration:

- Continue regular assessments of best practices and communicate your guidelines and protocols as often as possible and using as many formats as possible. If your congregation maintains a website and/or social media pages, be sure the information and content are accurate and timely.
- When accessible, consider home testing the day before worship. While not failproof, we understand that the rapid antigen tests effectively detect people carrying elevated levels of the virus. In the event of a positive result, please have alternate worship plans in place such as lay-led worship or moving to an online gathering only. Due to the overwhelming demands, supply preachers are limited in availability.
- After vaccinations, masking and social distancing remain the next best tools in slowing the spread of the coronavirus. Encourage everyone, regardless of vaccination status, to mask while indoors and socially distance.
- Minimize or eliminate indoor congregation singing. Consider a smaller choir or worship team masked and socially distanced from the congregation. If singing indoors, ensure leaders wear masks.
- When possible, consider hosting meetings or other gatherings online.
- Eating together remains a significant source of our community spread. Please consider postponing fellowship hours or community meals to a later date when transmission rates significantly decrease.
- If you exhibit symptoms after known contact with someone who is positive for COVID-19, please follow CDC guidelines: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html>

- Many of our rostered ministers and their families are experiencing isolation, loss of loved ones, and COVID fatigue. Please continue to hold all who are currently affected by this virus in prayer.

We are lamenting that the United States reached 1.35 million new COVID-19 cases per day on January 10. In her January 4 blog post, [The New Year Straight Up: A Pep Talk We Need](#), Diana Butler Bass offers a special word to faith leaders that might be food for our journey right now.

“We are called to preach and teach truth in pulpits, classrooms, online, and on social media — consistently and with regard for the care of our neighbors. I know that you are exhausted. I also know that MANY people — people in your communities and congregations — are angry, in denial, and have lost their capacity to hear what is true and factual ... The anger and anxiety of some, however, does not mitigate the calling to continue speaking truth and to care for those for whom we bear some spiritual responsibility. Truth heals. Even when people throw it back in the faces of those who deliver it. **IN SHORT, THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WILL BE HARD.** Do not panic. Do not give up. Instead, be prepared. Exercise leadership that models truthfulness, care, and healing.”

Please remember that we are not the anxieties and worries that we feel or experience. We are children of God and members of Christ’s body called to act with compassion and courage in doing what is right -- loving God and our neighbors. I look forward to being with you later this month on Zoom.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James S. Dunlop". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

† James S. Dunlop, bishop
Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA