



May 4, 2020

Monica, mother of Augustine, died 387

A Pastoral Message from Bishop James S. Dunlop to the Lower Susquehanna Synod

Resetting our Thinking

Siblings in Christ,

Like the rest of our nation, Pennsylvanians are weary of COVID-19 and the restrictions that we have lived with in order to reduce the virus' harm. So it is with profound joy and relief that we hear that our Commonwealth is moving towards reopening businesses and churches and allowing public gatherings.

At the same time, we cannot allow our eagerness for "normalcy" to rush the process and put ourselves and our neighbors at risk.

The state government has announced a phased in lifting of restrictions, based on three color-codes that correspond to a traffic light (see chart¹). The entire state is will be under "Red Phase" restrictions until May 8.

On May 8 the state will put 24 counties² in the "Yellow Phase," but **NONE of the 24 counties is in Lower Susquehanna Synod.**

Please watch for details and announcements from the Governor's office (www.governor.pa.gov/) on when your county will move from one phase to the other and make your plans accordingly.

Early in this process we were looking forward to returning to our previous life together with joyous celebrations. It is time for us to reset our thinking. The COVID-19 virus is not going away in the next 12 to 24 months. As the state reopens, we as the church must discern what is best for our congregations, remembering we are communities centered on the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Explaining the fifth commandment, "you are not to kill," Martin Luther said the implications are deep and profound. In *The Small Catechism* he observed, "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs."

In our eagerness to resume church life, we must carefully weigh what we want against the needs of others. Practices that were once routine may now be risky to our vulnerable neighbor, such as shaking hands, sharing time over a coffee, and passing the peace.

COVID-19 REOPENING PHASES		
	WORK & CONGREGATE SETTINGS	SOCIAL SETTINGS
RED PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LIFE-SUSTAINING BUSINESSES ONLY RESTRICTIONS IN PLACE FOR PRISON + CONGREGATE CARE SCHOOLS CLOSED FOR IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION MOST CHILD CARE CLOSED 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STAY AT HOME ORDERED LARGE GATHERINGS PROHIBITED RESTAURANTS/BARS LIMITED TO CARRY-OUT + DELIVERY ONLY TRAVEL FOR LIFE-SUSTAINING PURPOSES
YELLOW PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TELEWORK MUST CONTINUE WHERE FEASIBLE BUSINESSES WITH IN-PERSON OPERATIONS MUST FOLLOW SAFETY ORDERS CHILD CARE OPEN WITH WORKER + BUILDING SAFETY ORDERS RESTRICTIONS IN PLACE FOR PRISON + CONGREGATE CARE SCHOOLS CLOSED FOR IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STAY AT HOME RESTRICTIONS LIFTED IN FAVOR OF AGGRESSIVE MITIGATION LARGE GATHERINGS PROHIBITED IN-PERSON RETAIL ALLOWED CURBSIDE/DELIVERY PREFERRED INDOOR RECREATION, HEALTH AND WELLNESS FACILITIES (SUCH AS GYMS, SPAS), AND ALL ENTERTAINMENT (SUCH AS CASINOS, THEATERS) REMAIN CLOSED RESTAURANTS/BARS LIMITED TO CARRY-OUT + DELIVERY
GREEN PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ALL BUSINESSES MUST FOLLOW CDC AND PA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH GUIDELINES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AGGRESSIVE MITIGATION ORDERS LIFTED INDIVIDUALS MUST FOLLOW CDC AND PA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH GUIDELINES

As congregations of the Lower Susquehanna Synod resume “normalcy,” I pray that our leaders will make careful, wise decisions. Our synod has prepared some recommendations and questions to consider. I will pray for you, you, your congregations and God’s people you serve.

¹ Chart source: Governor Tom Wolf’s office.

² Counties reopening on May 8 are Bradford, Cameron, Centre, Clarion, Clearfield, Clinton, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lycoming, McKean, Mercer, Montour, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga, Union, Venango, and Warren.

Returning to “Normal” - Things to consider:

As you contemplate reopening, here are some recommendations and questions to consider:

Appoint a COVID-19 task force: Keeping God’s people safe as we resume worship and activities will require careful thought, planning, oversight, follow-through and attention to changing conditions and government instructions. What people in your congregation are most qualified to work on this? How will they meet? Who will review and approve their strategies? Who will implement the strategies? Who will oversee the work of those implementing the strategies? How will their work be reviewed, evaluated and revised as the pandemic response progresses?

Devise a decision-making strategy: Who will make the decisions about resuming worship and congregational activities? How will decisions be made? Similarly, in the case of a new outbreak, who will make the decision to once again suspend worship and church activities?

Establish a communication plan: How will congregants be informed on a timely basis? Who will be responsible to ensure the communication reaches everyone? How will you inform visitors of safety precautions?

Phase in worship and activities: Given the state’s mandates for your county, what activities are safe to resume? What needs to stay closed? How often will you revisit the issue?

Comply with federal, state and local restrictions: As the pandemic has evolved, so have the mandates and guidelines from government and public health officials. Who will be responsible for staying up to date with mandates and guidelines? Who will be responsible for making sure the church stays in compliance with them?

Stock hygiene and cleaning supplies: Do you have enough soap, disposable hand towels, hand sanitizer, disinfectant and other supplies in stock? If you do not have a sufficient supply, can you readily get them?

Keep the spaces clean: What is your plan for thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting bathrooms and meeting spaces after each gathering, keeping in mind that all surfaces need to be disinfected—pews, hymnals, doorknobs, altar rails, lecterns, pulpits, etc. Who will be responsible to ensure this is done, done well, and done consistently?

Set a maximum gathering capacity: Given physical distancing and other official guidelines, how many can safely gather in your space? How will you set, monitor and maintain the limit?

Draft guidelines for physical distance: Official recommendations call for six feet between people. What measures will you have to keep non-family members apart? How will you publicize and enforce the measures? Will you block off pews? Will you have separate doors for entry and exit? Who will monitor “traffic flow” to prevent “bottlenecks” at doorways?

Singing is discouraged: The virus is transmitted by breath vapor. Medical authorities say singing facilitates transmission of the virus even when singers are wearing a mask. Some studies have suggested that the vapor from singing spreads up to 26 feet. Please refrain from group singing.

Communion is discouraged: Our office recommends abstaining from the Sacrament of Holy Communion until the threat is well behind us. There is no easy and safe way to celebrate the Eucharist. (If communion is celebrated, we discourage communion that involves intinction or common cup, places bread in communicants' hands, or that requires people to come within six feet of one another.)

Baptism is discouraged: If the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is celebrated, how will you maintain the safe six-foot distance? How will you assure the safety of the water in the font? How will the water be safely disposed of afterward?

Pass the peace without touching: The six-foot distance rule precludes physical passing of the peace: no hugs, no handshakes, no high fives, no elbow bumps.

Masks are recommended for all: Medical authorities say masks reduce risk of transmission. Will you require them? Who will enforce the guideline? Can your congregation provide masks for those who need them?

Do not pass the offering plate: Viruses and germs are transmitted by touch, so do not pass the offering plate. Encourage electronic and online giving or ask people to mail in checks (provide self-addressed envelopes, perhaps with a stamp). Or, set up a stationary box or plate where donations can be safely and securely dropped off.

Limit church activities: Will you allow congregational groups (Sunday school, youth, Bible studies, WELCA, etc.) to meet at church? If so, what guidelines will you give them to follow on hygiene, cleaning and distancing? Who will be responsible for making sure the spaces are clean and disinfected? What are the legal liability implications?

Limit non-church use: Will you allow outside groups (civic bodies, 12-step organizations, scouts, etc.) to meet in church buildings? If so, what guidelines will you require for hygiene, cleaning and distancing? What are the legal liability implications? How will they let you know if one of their members becomes ill with COVID-19?

Restrict fellowship: Will you serve communal meals or hold coffee hour? How will you ensure that these activities are conducted safely? Would cancelling fellowship be safer?

Caution on visitation: When will you resume home visits? What precautions will you take?

Plan in case of infection: How will leaders respond if a member or visitor contracts the virus? How will you work with medical authorities? How will you alert the congregation? How will you inform those who use your space? How will you protect confidentiality?

The COVID-19 crisis will not last forever, but it will be with us for the foreseeable future. Until public health authorities say the coast is clear, we need to remain cautious, diligent and wise to keep God's people safe. *May God bless and keep you, may God's face shine upon you with grace and mercy. May God look upon you with favor and give you peace, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Go in peace. Stay healthy!



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