



**Lower Susquehanna Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

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The Rev. James S. Dunlop  
Bishop

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December 10, 2020  
*Second Week of Advent*

*For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.*

**- Galatians 5:13-15**

Dear Lower Susquehanna Synod Rostered Ministers:

Over the past few weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to worsen. Yesterday 3,011 people died from COVID. This is more lives lost than the tragedy of 9/11/2001. As we watch the rate of daily deaths, it is as if 9/11 is happening day after day in this country. We are seeing record number of cases, not just around the country, but here in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. Some believe that the increase in cases is solely related to increased testing. This is only partially true. The positive test rates are soaring. To limit community spread, the goal is less than 5% positivity rate. Rates in Lower Susquehanna Synod counties are as follows: Adams 13.8%, Cumberland 16.2%, Dauphin 16.8%, Franklin 21.2%, Fulton 12.2%, Lancaster 13.7%, Lebanon 16.1%, Perry 19%, and York 14.8%.

Hospitals continue to fill at an alarming rate; some of our local hospitals are already at capacity. Local hospitals and senior care facilities' staff members are stressed to the point of breaking. As they work to contain the virus, hospitals have resumed postponing elective surgeries.

Our Pennsylvania Governor, who now has COVID, expressed the following advice this week, "We all need to take a hard look at our choices and take every precaution to protect our neighbors, families, and friends. Please, stay home unless you need to go out. Don't attend gatherings with people outside your household. And if you need to leave home, wear a mask."

In the spring, we understood very little about the virus. Now, we know coronavirus is spread through airborne particles. The single most effective thing we can do to stop this pandemic in its tracks is to wear a mask. Gathering in groups adds to community spread. Singing in groups is highly dangerous.

It is true that the Governor cannot restrict church activity. I, as your bishop, also cannot mandate congregations take any particular action. We have continually advised congregations to have COVID task forces make rational decisions based on the community spread in your location, the size of your parish, the air filtration and air movement in your building, and the willingness of members to comply with CDC safety protocols. We continue to recommend these protocols for every congregation.

I cannot tell you what action to take; however, if I could, I would recommend that you suspend all in-person gathering including worship in our buildings. The community spread is at a dangerous level. Our gatherings put your congregation at risk; they put our neighbors at risk and contribute to the strain on our overburdened health care system. Our whole understanding of God's law rests on loving our neighbor. We must, for the love of neighbor, not gather.

As the Christmas season approaches, this becomes even more critical. It will be impossible to limit the size of Christmas worship gatherings. The temptation to sing as a group will be too great. We cannot turn this sacred celebration into a super spreader event for the coronavirus. I would implore you to consider alternative celebrations to indoor worship. Online worship, brief outdoor worship events, and home-based worship alternatives should be considered.

I give thanks for your faithfulness and wisdom as we navigate this challenging pandemic. I pray that all of you will have a blessed and safe Christmas season. May God's light break into the world in this dark, bleak season.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James S. Dunlop". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a prominent "S".

† James S. Dunlop, bishop  
Lower Susquehanna Synod ELCA