



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

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The Rev. James S. Dunlop  
Bishop

[jdunlop@lss-elca.org](mailto:jdunlop@lss-elca.org)

April 3, 2020  
*Friday of the Fifth Week in Lent*

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Thank you for your faithful ministry.

This COVID-19 emergency is lasting longer than anyone expected, and there is still no clear indication when things will return to normal. Yet across our synod I see how diligently, creatively and heroically you are working to serve God's people. Thank you!

Here are some thoughts I have as we continue together in God's ministry.

**Worship:** To help contain the virus and save lives, our state and federal governments have extended travel and gathering restrictions through April. As a result, my recommendation is that congregations resume regular worship and gathering on Sunday, May 3. (Of course, we will see how things develop.)

Recent developments have led me to withdraw my suggestion of outdoor worship as a possibility. News reports tell us that people find it impossible to maintain safe physical distancing when gathered, even outside. It takes just one ill person disregarding the guidelines to infect a crowd. As a result, any group gathering is just too risky.

Experts say this virus will infect millions and kill thousands of our brothers and sisters. We need to use extreme caution to keep everyone safe. I urge deacons, pastors and congregational leaders to stay on top of developments and make prudent decisions. One leader told me he was too busy to stay abreast of the latest news and updates. Things are happening so fast that staying informed needs to be a priority.

**Finances:** The emergency is already putting a tremendous strain on church budgets. Leaders can find a number of helpful resources on our synod website's [COVID-19 Stewardship & Finance Resource](#) page.

Of particular interest are "forgivable" loans that churches can obtain from the federal government to keep their employees working. The Payroll Protection Provision of the CARES Act, passed by Congress only last week, provides for small businesses and nonprofits to obtain loans that they do not have to pay back if they meet certain criteria. Apparently, the loans are going to be "first-come, first-served," so we advise looking into this right away. Information about the loan program is on this [synod webpage](#).

Also, our synod and churchwide offices have money available in the form of Hunger Grants and Disaster Response Grants (COVID-19 is a disaster). Information about these is also available on this [synod webpage](#).

**Eucharist:** Questions continue to arise about communion practices. There are some helpful reflections on our synod's [Coronavirus Resource Page](#). To summarize: Our tradition upholds Eucharist in gathered community and does not allow for "virtual" communion during video worship. I would also discourage churches offering online worship from communing the few who are gathered for the livestreaming session. Finally, I would also discourage giving "drive in" communion to people in their cars. I understand the pastoral instinct for us to feed God's people with the body and blood of Christ, however it is safest and best if we fast from Eucharist until this crisis is over.

**Synod Assembly:** Because of the coronavirus-related restrictions on travel and gathering, and because we do not know when things will return to normal, my office is recommending to Synod Council that Synod Assembly be postponed until the fall. The Synod Council will take up that recommendation at its April 18 meeting, so an update one way or the other will follow immediately. And remember that we have already postponed the Assembly Days of Edification that were scheduled on May 16 and May 30. No new dates have been proposed for either the Synod Assembly or Days of Edification. Stay tuned!

**Care for you:** Please know that I and the whole synod staff are holding you in prayer as this coronavirus emergency drags on. I know how hard you have been working.

In the emergency's first few weeks we were working on pure adrenalin. Now that the adrenaline rush is over, people are starting to show signs of stress, including fatigue, burnout, loneliness, frustration, anxiety. I have experienced some of these signs myself.

Remembering that we cannot care for others if we are not healthy ourselves, I encourage everyone to practice good self-care. Please take time for rest, recreation and renewal. Please connect with family and friends, trusted colleagues. Please call the bishop's office if you need help. Please find counselors and spiritual directors if that would be helpful.

Take time, pray, read, breathe deeply – this is going to be a marathon.

Remember that we are in this together as workers in God's vineyard. We need to rely on one another and be there for one another. And we ourselves are not in this alone. God is with us, too, giving us strength and guidance.

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