



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

The Rev. James S. Dunlop
Bishop

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April 16, 2020
First Week of Easter

Dear Siblings in Christ,

As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches longer than we had hoped, there is a growing sense of restlessness in our culture and a desire to get things back to “normal” as soon as possible. While that is understandable, we need to show patience and wisdom, keeping in mind that this is primarily a public-health emergency, and tens of thousands of lives are at stake. COVID-19 spreads quickly and silently, and the more people who are infected, the more will die. Rushing “back to normal” risks the lives of ourselves, our families and our neighbors.

Our media gives voice to differing opinions about how long we should hunker down, however it is wisest and safest to listen to the medical experts. The federal Centers for Disease Control and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are telling us to stay low for the foreseeable future, at least until testing for Coronavirus is widely available – something still weeks away. I am recommending that our synod continue to follow their guidance and to prepare for the likelihood that gathering restrictions will continue well into May.

Please join me in counseling our restless parishioners and leaders to show patience, wisdom and prudence. This is a once-in-a-lifetime emergency. We will get through it.

Meanwhile, the pandemic is causing us to rethink how we “are” church and how we “do” church. It seems clear that when things get back to “normal,” we will actually encounter a “new normal” different from what we’ve always known. It is certain that digital ministry will permanently be a larger part of church life, and we will have to think through what that means. Anticipating these issues, our church’s bishops and theologians are exploring how we might better handle Eucharist in the digital age.

As we adjust to ministry in a pandemic and prepare for the “new normal” that awaits, our synod is using Zoom to offer education and training for ministers and lay leaders to learn new skills and take in new information. Topics include youth ministry, preaching in a pandemic, tips for digital worship, the Paycheck Protection Program, working with food pantries and hunger ministries, being a church in an emergency, fully funding ministry in a time of social distancing. You can find a complete listing of meetings and webinars, as well as links to recorded past webinars, under [Faith Formation Events](#) on our synod website. If you have expertise to share in a particular area of ministry, or if you have a suggestion for a topic to be explored, please contact [Assistant to the Bishop Beth Martini](#).

It is no surprise that this emergency is causing financial difficulties for our congregations. To help us through, our synod has assembled [a webpage](#) with a number of resources. Please check it out. There you will also find information about hunger and disaster grant funds our synod offers, as well as financial help from our denomination and our government. So far, our synod has granted \$7,000 for ministries to feed the hungry and homeless.

At the same time, the federal government is now disbursing the COVID-19 relief checks that will put up to \$1,200 into the bank accounts of many of us. The money is intended to help people struggling with income disruptions and is truly a bonus for me and for many of us who have not lost income. To help put this money where it is needed, my wife Connie and I are donating our relief check to a ministry to help those who are suffering. If you are in a similar situation, blessed with steady incomes, please consider donating the money to your congregation, our synod or a worthwhile charity.

Finally, as you care for the people in our congregations, please be sure to feed yourselves. All are invited to take part in our synod office's weekly chapel service at 9 a.m. Wednesday. Simply go to our synod [Facebook page](#) for the livestreamed service.

Self-care is so important. Some of our ministry colleagues say that working at home presents challenges in setting boundaries and they are working all the time. Commenting on this phenomenon, Bishop Matthew Riegel of the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod put it succinctly: "Jesus already died for the church; you don't have to."

Please do your best to limit working hours and reserve plenty of time for renewal, rest and recreation. Be sure to take Sabbath time. Getting away from your computer and phone goes a long way.

Thank you for all you do. Please remember that you are always in my prayers and that of our synod staff. Please let us know if we can help in any way.

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