



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

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Bishop

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May 14, 2020  
*Matthias, Apostle*

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Thank you so much, again, for your hard work and creativity as you lead God's people in this time of uncertainty and disruption. To some degree, all of us are feeling anxious and tired as this crisis continues with no clear end in sight. I applaud and celebrate your energy and passion for ministry, even as I pray that God will give you strength and the ability to slow down and take care of yourself.

With that in mind, I want to encourage everyone to be sure to take your vacation. Please resist the temptation (or pressure from the congregation) to count your work-at-home as "vacation." Learning new ways to lead the church amid unprecedented challenges requires enormous mental, emotional and physical energy. You need and deserve your vacation to refresh, renew and relax. Now, if you decide to take vacation while sheltering at home, please establish good boundaries to make it a real vacation: ask a colleague to cover for pastoral emergencies, refrain from looking at email or answering the phone, and plan non-church activities you enjoy. Please take care of yourselves so that you can best care for others.

**Guidance on reopening**

Many of our leaders and congregations are understandably anxious about reopening – both the timing and the procedures we will have to observe to safely resume in-person worship. Ramping up church life will require a great deal of planning and preparation. I encourage leaders not to take on this task alone but to form and work with a COVID-19 Task Force to be fully informed, weigh carefully the risks and make prudent decisions.

There may be some people in your congregation who, unconvinced that the virus is a serious threat, are pushing for your church to reopen quickly, without careful planning. Please resist these pressures. Be aware of and follow restrictions and guidelines from government and medical authorities. Virtually all of our synod continues under the state's "Red Phase" restrictions, but that will change in the weeks to come as more counties are designated "Yellow Phase." Remember that even in the "Yellow Phase" it will not be safe to gather in person for worship. Up-to-date guidance can be found on the [Pennsylvania Department of Health Website](#).

And if you are like me, you have been inundated with information about how to reopen your congregations safely. To guide your planning process, I highly recommend the ELCA's May 12 publication, "[Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship](#)," as your primary

source of guidance; it is comprehensive and insightful. It may also be helpful for leaders to understand more fully how the disease spreads and infects a population. I recommend [this blog post](#) by Erin Bromage, an immunology expert, who explains in clear language the dynamics of COVID-19.

Our thoughts and prayers are especially with those who are most vulnerable to the coronavirus because of their age or health concerns. These are the people for whom returning to in-person worship may be too risky, even after we enter the “Green Phase.” Anticipating that some of our deacons, pastors and lay worship leaders fall into this category, some congregational COVID-19 Task Forces may have to plan accordingly. In all matters, we place priority on the health and safety of God’s people, and especially the most vulnerable.

### **Worship assistance**

By way of reminder, in order to give our leaders a respite from worship planning and preaching, I am preparing a virtual worship service for May 24, the Sunday of Memorial Day Weekend. Congregations that wish to use the whole service may simply download it and make it available on their digital platforms. For those who wish to use only the sermon as part of their own virtual worship, a recorded sermon will be available as well. I will preach on the Epistle lesson for the Seventh Sunday of Easter (1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11). The service and sermon will be available on our synod website by Monday, May 18.

Similarly, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton is planning to provide ELCA congregations with a digital sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 7. Our synod office will spread the word as soon as we know when and how that sermon will be available.

### **Training and education**

This health emergency is stretching all of us in new directions as we are being asked to do and be church in new ways. To help equip our leaders, our synod and ministry partners are offering online webinars on a number of topics relating to church life. A full schedule can be found on our [Faith Formation Events](#) webpage, which is updated several times a week.

One training I recommend addresses small group ministry. Next Thursday, May 21, at 1:30 p.m., Charlie Roberts and the Rev. Richard Jorgensen from our synod staff will Zoom with author and small-group-ministry expert, the Rev. Dr. John Herman. [Click here](#) to register.

I will close this message by thanking you again for all you are doing to serve God’s people in this difficult time. Please be sure to be in contact with me or the synod staff if you want or need to talk. Remember, we are all in this together. And Jesus is with us, always to the end of the age.

Yours in Christ,



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