



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

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Bishop

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Ascension of Our Lord

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Grace and peace to you!

As I have since the COVID-19 health emergency began, I share the gratitude of our whole synod for the creativity and diligence that you have shown in serving God's people. **Thank you!** Our office has been working to keep you updated during this crisis. Today I bring no new information, however I want to clarify some of my previous recommendations and provide insight in light of numerous questions that have arisen.

When will things be better or back to normal?

Authorities tell us that something approaching "normal" will occur when 70 percent of the population is immune from COVID-19. For that to happen, a vaccine needs to have been developed and given to 230 million people, or that 70 percent of Americans will have had the disease and recovered. However, looking at the latter scenario, if 230 million people contract the virus, then millions of people will die. Nobody wants that.

So, how long will that take? Probably well into 2021 at the earliest. Am I certain? No. Even the best minds in medical immunology cannot predict with certainty. What we can say is that the virus is not contained now, and it is unlikely that it will be contained in the foreseeable future. Until then, we are living in a different reality than we have ever known.

When are you going to allow us to go back to our churches?

The leadership of each congregation must decide when to open and how. The ELCA constitutions invest congregation councils and local pastors, not synodical bishops, with the authority to make those kinds of local decisions. However, I am grateful that my recommendations are being carefully considered.

As I have expressed previously, congregations need to proceed slowly and carefully in making plans to reopen. To do this properly, every congregation should form a COVID-19 Task Force consisting of level-headed leaders who can stay current on the latest information from medical and governmental authorities and present the congregation council with prudent and wise recommendations. Ideally, the task force would include people with expertise in health and law.

Previous communications from our synod have suggested resources that raise pertinent issues and questions to discuss. Those resources are archived on our website's [Coronavirus Resource Page](#). To reinforce several points, it is crucial that you speak with your liability insurance carrier. There are reports that insurance companies have canceled or are ready to cancel insurance policies of congregations that cannot or will not comply with guidelines issued by the federal Centers for Disease Control. The CDC has detailed a regimen for cleaning and disinfecting that specifies approved disinfectants and procedures. (In other words, it's more than a volunteer with a damp rag.)

Can we worship while we are in the state's "Yellow Phase"?

You can, but I recommend that you do not because it raises too many complications and risks. Worship would have to be limited to 25 people, all of whom would need to wear masks and stay six feet apart. Moreover, the congregation would have to refrain from singing. Complications include how to limit worship to 25 participants, how to ensure that they stay apart from one another, how to disinfect the church between services according to CDC standards (which requires both supplies and trained personnel), and how to handle the parishioners who are noncompliant with mask or social distancing.

Yes, keeping churches closed does seem very unfair and onerous, however the safety of God's people must be our top priority. Our church membership tends to be older than the population at large, which means that we have a disproportionate number who are especially at risk of death from COVID-19. Many of our ministers and lay leaders are also in the high-risk pool.

Health experts tell us that the most dangerous situation is when a number of people are gathered in a room for a prolonged period of time, breathing the same air. This is precisely the scenario present during congregational worship. By contrast, passing someone on the street or a grocery store carries much less risk.

I am sorry that this is the case. I share your grief and that of your parishioners.

Didn't you say we could be back in our congregations by the end of May?

Yes, I did say that. I was wrong. My projections were (and will always be) based on the best advice we have at any given time. Government and medical experts have been constantly updating their recommendations as they themselves learn new information about COVID-19. You can expect my advice to change as well.

What will never change is my and our church's commitment to minimize the risk to God's people, and especially the most vulnerable. Our older members usually rank among the most ardent supporters of our congregations. Because they will likely be among the first ones back when we reopen our churches, it's crucial that we take pains not to resume worship until it is safer to do so. Opening prematurely would expose them to unnecessary risk of infection and death.

Have any churches been seriously affected by COVID-19?

Yes. [*The Washington Post* reported](#) on churches that opened for worship with devastating consequences, only to close again. One church in Arkansas, whose pastor was asymptomatic, opened its doors for worship and saw 35 of its 92 attendees infected with the disease, and three deaths. Members, in turn, helped spread the disease to the community, infecting 26 others and claiming one. Church worship presents a perfect environment for spreading COVID-19. This disease is not to be trifled with.

Are we ever going to have communion again?

Yes, of course. The question is when. Communion is a topic of deep conversation throughout our church by bishops, pastors, theologians and laity. I myself am in dialogue with seminary professors and bishops.

Our Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion holds that Eucharist is a meal shared in the assembled body of Christ. Because of the virus, we cannot share the meal without endangering the lives of one another. We hope and pray that the discussions underway across our church may lead us to discern a way for Holy Communion that neither sacrifices our traditional understanding nor settles for an "easy fix" that would only be abandoned later.

I pray that everyone will join me in asking God for patience and grace and allowing the Holy Spirit to teach us lessons that are learned only in the longing and suffering created by abstinence and fasting.

OK, so what can we do?

The first thing is to continue the very thing you and your congregations are already doing – *serve God's people* as best you can, using telephone and digital technology to connect and serve.

Be sure to *establish your COVID-19 Task Force* and plan carefully for when we enter the “Green Phase” – probably some months from now. Even when we are in the “green,” it will not be like turning the clocks back to 2019. We will need to continue diligence in personal protection practices. Because of lingering health risks, many of our vulnerable congregants and leaders will need to stay away from church even when we are in the Green Phase. For them, and for future planning, it would be wise to continue online church even as people gather.

In fact, congregations would be wise to *plan for a “new normal”* of offering both online and in-person worship and activities. In this emergency, many parishioners have found digital offerings to be both enriching and convenient, enabling wider participation in church life. Wise congregations will prepare to offer both in-person and digital activities.

Please *spend time in prayer and in Scripture*. Pray on what a renewed and resurrected church would look like.

Like you, I want this whole crisis to go away. I want things to go back to normal, and I want it today. But that's not how reality unfolds. We need to give ourselves and our churches time to grieve and process.

On this day, when we remember the Ascension of Our Lord, we are reminded of Jesus' parting words to the disciples:

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He [Jesus] replied, ‘The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.’

–Acts 1:6-8

We have work to do. We face challenges. But we are not alone. God is with us.

God's blessings,

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