



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

The Rev. James S. Dunlop
Bishop

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June 11, 2020
Barnabas, Apostle

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Care for God's people, bear their burdens, and do not betray their confidence. So, discipline yourselves in life and teaching that you preserve the truth, giving no occasion for false security or illusory hope. Witness faithfully in word and deed to all people. Give and receive comfort as you serve within the church. And be of good courage, for God has called you, and your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

I'm reminded of the words above from the service of ordination as the COVID-19 crisis continues ... and continues and continues! Pastors, deacons and other church staff are serving heroically under extremely difficult conditions.

Coronavirus has taken from our church life some of the things we cherish – worshipping together, sharing Eucharist, singing, hugging or shaking hands in a passing of the peace. We all feel a sense of loss and grief, as well as confusion of how we can be church without them.

At the same time, you have stretched yourselves to learn new ways to be the church, serve God's people and gather in community. And it has been exhausting for you and for all of us. So, as we continue in this public health emergency, please take care of yourselves. Breathe deeply. Spend more time in prayer.

The challenges we face come not only from the virus but also from the people we serve. Eager to resume “normal” church life, many people want our church buildings to open too quickly, without making adequate plans or taking proper precautions.

The words from ordination remind us we have promised to preserve the truth and refrain from giving false or illusory hope. We are also called to not betray their confidence. In all things, I urge our leaders, especially ordained ministers, to be careful, wise, truthful and prudent in their judgments as this public health emergency continues.

GREEN PHASE

Excitement is rising in our synod as our state declares more and more counties in the “Green Phase,” the least restrictive. My first comment is that the Green Phase does not signify a return to pre-COVID-19. The virus is still very much with us, and a threat particularly to the most vulnerable -- the elderly and those with chronic health conditions. For them, COVID-19 can be lethal.

The restrictions we observed in the last several months have slowed the progress but not stopped it. And now we are better equipped to step out of our homes.

I liken the progress to the early days of the automobile. When cars first came on the scene there were no safety guidelines, no traffic signs, no speed limits. Thousands of people died as a result. But as a

nation we learned, and set rules, regulations and guidelines to keep people safer. Safer, not safe, because there is always some risk in driving. The only way to eliminate the risk is not to drive.

Similarly, the only way to insure that you will never get COVID-19 is to stay home. But taking practical steps and observing sensible guidelines can make the risk tolerable.

As your congregations plan to move to the Green Phase, I urge you to continue to follow guidelines of government and medical authorities to minimize risk. My office continues to provide the best guidance we can find and post it on our synod's [Coronavirus Resources Page](#). If you look at nothing else, please carefully review these three excellent resources:

[Resuming Care-filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic](#) – This comprehensive resource provides excellent guidance on the wide range of concerns involved in reopening your congregation. This resource was developed by a collaboration of leaders from the ELCA and other denominations.

[When Can We Sing](#) – This 13-minute video message from the Moravian Music Foundation talks about the risks to choirs and musicians and explains why *singing must be avoided* in worship for the foreseeable future.

[Returning to In-person Worship](#) – This ELCA guide will assist your COVID-19 Task Force in formulating procedures and timetables to resume in-person worship.

Although our commonwealth will determine when your county will enter the Green Phase, it is not offering specific guidelines for opening. I would like to offer mine:

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Do everything to reduce risk.
- The safest plan is for parishioners to stay home.
- Gatherings should be limited to 250 people, **or** 50 percent of capacity – whichever is lower! Each building has its own capacity, so your COVID-19 Task Force needs to calculate carefully.
- Masks should be required of all who enter the building for any reason. It same as wearing seat belts, except that seat belts protect you; masks protect those around you.
- Open windows and doors when and if possible, since fresh air reduces risk.
- Do not sing, even outdoors. Experts say singing is very risky, like driving 100 mph with no seat belt. (Please watch the video referenced above.)
- No gathering children for the children's message. They may stay in the pews.
- Insist that congregants stay home if they feel sick, were exposed to anyone who had COVID-19 in the prior two weeks, or if they have a fever.
- Keep hand sanitizer readily available.
- Ask congregants to cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing.
- Remove materials that could be handled, such as hymnals, Bibles and visitor cards.
- Provide single-use bulletins.
- Disinfect all surfaces between services.
- Allow six hours between services. For multiple services, consider using different rooms.
- Consider how you will communicate if you need to cancel or change plans.

HOLY COMMUNION

There is NOT a completely safe way to distribute. Here are some ideas to minimize risk:

- Commune with only bread. Christ is fully present in just one element.
- Practice thorough hand-washing before distribution.
- While distributing, do not touch hands. If this happens, stop and rewash.
- If communing with wine, use a pouring chalice and cups. Provide a way for communicants to receive cups with minimal risk of infection. A communion assistant with clean hands might distribute them, being careful to avoid touching. Or, the cups could be placed in a space that enables communicants to safely take them.

Quite a lot to take in, isn't it? Obviously, your COVID-19 Task Force has much to consider. Opening for in-person worship involves risk, and like driving on the highway, risk can be managed by being careful and paying attention to safety guidelines.

After making a detailed strategy, your congregation might make "trial runs" and be willing to change if something is not working. And please remember that it is perfectly acceptable not to begin in-person corporate worship if it is too much to manage.

Even when we are up and running, some people may not return to in-person worship, believing it too risky or because they have found their congregation's new digital worship a better option for them. In fact, many congregations have been surprised with the positive response they have received with online and digital worship offerings.

As we face the "new normal," it seems clear that digital church will be a permanent part of our church life, and congregations will adjust to a "hybrid" model of offering both in-person and digital church.

RACISM

COVID-19 is not the only pressing issue of national concern. Outraged over the death of George Floyd, yet another unarmed Black man who perished at the hands of White police officers, tens of thousands of Americans have taken to the streets in sustained protests. Racial justice issues, which have been simmering in our nation for 400 years, may finally be gaining the attention they so clearly deserve.

I urge leaders and congregations to harness the interest and energy of the protests to begin engaging God's people in racial justice matters. Our synod and churchwide organization have assembled some excellent resources:

[June 10 Special Message](#) from our Toward Racial Justice Task Force.

[Our synod Toward Racial Justice webpage.](#)

[Bishop Dunlop's June 3 Pastoral Letter on Racism.](#)

[ELCA Racial Justice Resources.](#)

[ELCA Resources for June 17](#) – Emanuel Nine Commemoration and Day of Repentance.

[ELCA Resources for June 19](#) – "Juneteenth" observes the end of slavery in United States.

[May 29 Statement](#) from the ELCA Conference of Bishops.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELVES

The COVID-19 crisis will continue for much longer than any of us expected. Please remember the church is in this for the long haul. This means we will continue to innovate and rethink how we serve God's people, and it means that we all will be working very hard.

My concern is for you as dedicated and creative ministers serving God's people. As I have said before, please take care of yourselves. Take your vacation time, even if you stay home. You need Sabbath.

I was pleased that many congregations took advantage of the sermon and worship service our synod made available for Sunday, May 24, but saddened that so many ministers reported that it provided their first break from ministry since Christmas.

You cannot keep that up. That is an unsustainable pace. You need to rest and take care. To lessen the stress, you might consider sharing worship with neighboring congregations. And if it becomes too overwhelming for you, please seek the help of a counselor, therapist or spiritual director. I and our synod staff members are also available to talk. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help.

May God guide your footsteps and light your path in this time of challenge and uncertainty.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James S. Dunlop". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "D".

† James S. Dunlop, bishop
Lower Susquehanna Synod ELCA