



Central / Southern Illinois Synod

524 South Fifth Street
Springfield IL 62701

Toll-free: 844.330.2747
Phone: 217.753.7915
Fax: 217.753.7976

May 13, 2020

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

The rich grace of our risen Lord Jesus be with you in this Easter season.

Let me begin by expressing my awe and admiration for the Christ-centered, faithful devotion to worship and ministry of all of you as you have continued to glorify God and serve the gospel throughout this pandemic. Please allow me to lift up our pastors, deacons, and persons serving in synodically authorized ministry. They have responded to the call to innovate and adapt pastoral ministry with extraordinary investments of time, energy, and caring. Please be generous with your pastor if she or he shows some fatigue. We all feel the burden of this pandemic in our particular contexts, and pastors shoulder theirs as well in their call to shepherd God's people.

In this pastoral letter, I am offering both theological and practical guidance for preparing to renew gathered worship in our congregations. We are renewing gathered worship; we are not reopening churches. Our churches have been open for business throughout the pandemic. We will be renewing gathered worship, because simply reproducing the past is not an option. What I am offering is not comprehensive, nor could it be. There are many decisions that need to be made locally by you in your congregations. I offer this as my guidance and as an invitation to further conversation. There are many printed checklists and guidelines available online, geared for gatherings in general and for churches in particular. I recommend that you peruse a number of them, since no one resource addresses every angle of our deliberation. At the outset, I encourage you to look at a piece produced by the Wisconsin Council of Churches.¹ A set of guidelines for returning to in-person worship produced by the ELCA Churchwide Organization will be available as early as tomorrow; check the ELCA website.

I am grateful for the wonderful input from synod staff and from a number of pastors that has gone into this Pastoral Letter. This letter is not simply an individual effort, though I am responsible for everything set forward here.

So, here you are, four considerations and two addenda. God bless your worship and ministry.

In Christ,

Bishop John Roth

¹ See <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/?fbclid=IwAR1B93zcx-55oolYhQxFuLSJGDcTphV9ZIPANOfDkdKkA7DNdPzEoXoTz8>.

1. **Three Epidemiological Considerations** that are foundational for our planning, drawn from the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.²
 - a. Because of a longer incubation period, more asymptomatic spread, and a higher basic reproductive number, COVID-19 appears to spread more easily than flu.
 - b. Based on the most recent flu pandemics, this outbreak will likely last 18 to 24 months.
 - c. Depending on control measures and other factors, cases may come in waves of different heights and in different intervals.

2. **Considerations for when and in what form to renew gathered worship:**
 - a. **Undertake planning based on Christian moral sensibility.** Lutherans have always recognized that God calls upon us, both individually and collectively, to recognize and to act on our responsibilities for the wellbeing of our communities. At a minimum, this means complying with health and safety orders issued by state and local officials. But this compliance alone may not be enough. The Apostle Paul's reasoning in Romans 12-13 is that the law restricts conduct, but sometimes the law does not go far enough. You may be keeping the law, but you may nevertheless be injuring someone. Love should restrict your conduct to the point where your conduct will not cause someone harm or cause someone to doubt the credibility of the gospel message you proclaim. Consequently, if some form of gathering is permitted, but that form of gathering at this time may pose a significant health risk in your context, love ought to compel you to refrain yet from that form of gathering.
 - b. **Plan for a gradual, phased or staged, return to gatherings.** Throughout the United States, churches are planning for a phased return to gatherings. In his Restore Illinois plan³, Illinois Governor Pritzker identified five phases that will determine the pace and extent of reopening businesses and other activities. In addition to being a phased plan, Restore Illinois also intends to be a regionally ordered plan, and separates the state into four health regions. The Central/Southern Illinois Synod has congregations in all four health regions. I ask you to familiarize yourself with the five phases of the governor's plan, to identify which health region your congregation is located in, and to comply with the phasing conditions and restrictions for gathering. Again, however, a gathering that is permitted by civil orders may not be

² See https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/sites/default/files/public/downloads/cidrap-covid19-viewpoint-part1_0.pdf . It is also well worth your time to watch this video of a meeting with Dr. Michael Osterholm, https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/play/620ucrr-z43TtDG4QSDA_EqW466f6is2yVL-vALmky9U3BQO1DwY7pDYEtnc86r_1FTMzLcRO-xQs63?continueMode=true&x_zm_rtaid=emSjOZaWTqOHKDOHi0MIng.1588960478492.b295447d358b809e89ae28bb30f619db&x_zm_rhtaid=30 .

³ See <https://coronavirus.illinois.gov/sfc/servlet.shepherd/document/download/069t000000BadS0AAJ?operationContext=S1> .

advisable as a congregational gathering or it may need to be modified significantly to be advisable. For example, we are accustomed to singing often in worship and to enjoy robust singing. This virus, like influenza viruses, is spread directly into the respiratory system by moisture exhaled in an infected person's breath and inhaled by another person. When singing, a person breathes in more deeply than when at rest and expels small water droplets and aerosols further and more widely, thus making the person more susceptible to infection from someone nearby and more capable of infecting those around her or him if he or she is carrying the virus. Love compels us to modify our gathered worship to take this into account.

- c. **Initially returning to gathered worship will require the most modification of practices.** For example, to maintain social distancing and to accommodate smaller gatherings, provide more worship services than previously. Blocking off pews so that no one sits directly behind someone else is an option, but the better option is removing pews or chairs and rearranging the nave so that distancing does not make the space feel quite so empty. In this phase it would be wise for congregations currently providing sermons or worship services online to maintain an online worship practice in some manner, both for the sake of high-risk individuals who should stay home at this time and to stay within the attendance ceiling. Wear cloth face masks. Modify the singing in the service; I hesitate to say eliminate singing entirely, though this may be the wisest option.⁴ Do not greet worshipers after the service. Omit the coffee hour. Go as far as you can toward "touch-less" worship. Also, do not yet resume Sunday School or other children's ministries; it is simply not feasible to conduct such ministries while maintaining social distancing practices among children.

Let me use mask wearing as an example of the evangelism aspect to our care for our neighbor. Of course, you should mask if that is what is called for by civil authority. But in the spirit of the love envisioned in Romans 12-13, I urge you to go beyond that. Have all worship leaders, readers, staff, and volunteers of any sort wear masks, and show the mask wearing in your online broadcasts. Why? Because we want people in the community to see us and to know us as a church that takes people's safety seriously; we want the community perception of our church to be "that is a safe place." At a time when so many people wrestle with anxieties, fears, uncertainties, and insecurities, don't we want to make it as welcoming and as possible for them to come to where they can hear the gospel of God's hope and love? So, I recommend that all your online worship leaders wear masks for several weeks prior to your congregation's return to gathered worship, to acclimate worshipers to seeing

⁴ See

https://www.drheathnelson.com/singingandcovid19?fbclid=IwAR33oWSOTBe9UTKyBtsLPXuMuqcWewXr0DuVXQfWFw4oaOldztowISW_Enw and https://www.middleclassartist.com/post/nats-panel-of-experts-lays-out-sobering-future-for-singers-no-vaccine-no-safe-public-singing?fbclid=IwAR2xuAO67-fK_B0fAV5qn3pKSj47TzjhsIBsk2sMrR8XJHbpZLZ2EK-2RRc .

leaders wearing masks. Then, when your congregation renews gathered worship, have extra cloth masks on hand and prominently identify them as available for worshipers. Please apply this outreach/evangelism/community perception thinking to all your planning.

- d. **Be aware that the degree of change in gathered worship will be experienced differently in our varying congregations.** For example, congregations that formerly did a lot of handshaking and holding hands (e.g., for prayer) will find it more disruptive to eliminate this high-risk hand-to-hand contact than other congregations will. And the size of the worship space as well as the size of the worshiping group affects the degree of change. Congregations that previously had about 50 worshipers spread out in a nave with a seating capacity of 200 will sense little noteworthy change (when a gathering of up to 50 is permitted; phase 4 in Restore Illinois) to maintain six feet of distancing; but a congregation that previously averaged 50 worshipers where the seating capacity is 100 will have to incorporate significant change into its worship gatherings. All congregations have a limited capacity to accommodate change well. Prepare to overcommunicate about change and to weather pushback that may be an expression of change overload than a substantial objection to a specific change.
- e. **Protect your congregation from liability.** Check with your insurance carrier to see if it has guidance regarding renewed gathering and your coverage.

3. Considerations for “the new normal”:

- a. **As of May 2020, whatever “new normal” will emerge is at least 24 months down the road from us.** I am acutely aware that there are people who will dispute the 24-month timeframe. I will not argue that timeframe here, but only make the point that we allow ourselves to recognize a tentativeness to all that we will change or re-introduce into our ministries, including worship, through the rest of 2020. As much as we desire to establish familiar routines again, we are better positioned to respond to the unknowns of this COVID-19 era if we cultivate a sense of being with one another on the way to “a new normal” that is yet beyond the horizon.
- b. **Incorporate ongoing mitigation practices** in order to establish a baseline of COVID-19 mitigation that will be consistent through the up-and-down waves in new infections over the next two years. For example, prepare a plan for repeatedly disinfecting everything a worshiper would touch, e.g., hymnal, pew in front of her or him, door handles, and washroom fixtures. Also, to mitigate risk of infection from aerosolized virus, keep air circulating, open doors and windows, weather permitting, and consider having worship outdoors.
- c. **Some needed changes in worship are likely to be long term, if not permanent,** such as “no-touch” Holy Communion distribution, bulletin distribution, offering collection, and welcoming.

- d. **A new normal, whatever it is, will likely not be a COVID-19 zero-risk environment.** As this pandemic recedes, the virus will likely continue to circulate, with infections breaking out periodically in varying locations or even developing a seasonal cycle. This would be a good time for Lutherans to reflect on the theology and moral sensibility needed here for discerning equitable distribution of risk. For example, if access to testing for the virus is critical for mitigating the spread of the disease, Lutherans would consider the moral obligation for equitable availability of testing in light of God’s sacrificial love for all people.

4. Ministry Considerations:

- a. As we renew gathered worship, we address two basic questions from two distinguishable perspectives. The questions are straight forward: **“What will we keep?” and “What will we not keep?”** We ask from the perspective of what we will do in our ministry, including gathered worship, going forward compared with what we did in ministry, in the past. And what might we do, including online worship, based on lessons learned during the shelter-in-place time, from this point forward.
- b. Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic, for all of the sickness, death, and other harm it has caused (and I do not mean to downplay this in the least), has also given us **the space to explore some of the adaptive challenges that were already upon us.** For example, we were already struggling to define “congregational vitality” even as we sought to renew it; COVID-19 gave this challenge greater urgency, and it has been a gift from God to see ministers and congregations find vitality – not because they were seeking vitality, per se – but as a byproduct of seeking to be faithful worshipers, stewards, care givers, and sisters and brothers in Christ. We have a broader picture now within which to consider what to keep and what not to keep.
- c. We also have new challenges. The “success” of new forays into online worship services has created a widespread expectation that ministers and congregations can and should continue these online worship services. (Not everyone is equally eager to “get back together.”) **Now is the time for each congregation to clarify what its purpose or purposes would be – and would not be – for broadcasting online worship services.**

Online worship in some form can be worth keeping. I envision online worship as an enormous opportunity for evangelism, particularly with an eye toward never-churched people in our communities. This is more important than ever in our lifetimes. We live among two generations of people who in large numbers have no church experience or memory. For these people, going through the doorway into a church building is as intimidating as being dropped on Mars. For them, the chance to look inside our churches – to experience the language, the actions, the culture – can go a long way toward alleviating the anxiety of making that first trip through the doors. Also, online worship can

be a blessing for those who are homebound or ill, for whom it is impractical or unwise to participate in gathered worship, though we should keep in mind that online worship will not be available to everyone homebound.

At the same time, maintaining an online service that has functioned as replacement worship for existing members may not be good stewardship of pastoral and staff preparation time and effort. As congregations move back to providing high quality gathered worship, it will be important to discern the purpose and direction of online worship services, and the time, energy and (perhaps) expense involved in continuing to offer online worship. Comprehensive online worship can easily be reinstated if and when shelter-in-place orders are reissued.

- d. Make time in the next few weeks for **conversation within the congregation** (video conferencing will work for this) to reflect on these questions:
1. What have we learned about ourselves and our congregation over the past six weeks – or better expressed, what might God be teaching us over the past six to eight weeks?
 2. What ministries do we do well through phone calling and online resourcing, and in what ministries are we not as effective through these technologies?
 3. How might we focus our efforts in order to build on the blessings and strengths God has provided us as a congregation?

Addressing these questions can help us discern what to keep and what not to keep.

- e. **Have a plan in place for what to do if your pastor or anyone in the pastor's household contracts COVID-19.** I know we don't want to think about this, but planning now is far better than scrambling later when there will already be heightened anxiety if this happens.
1. Inform the synod office. The president of the congregation would serve as liaison with the bishop and synod staff. If the president is not able to do this, the Congregation Council should designate one person to do it. The bishop will be in touch with the pastor or the pastor's family. With the consent of the pastor or family, the bishop will contact the conference dean.
 2. With appropriate consent, the conference dean will inform pastors in the conference and gauge local resources for pastoral care for the congregation.
 3. If your congregation has been gathering for worship, seriously consider returning to online worship only or suspending worship altogether for at least three Sundays following the COVID-19 diagnosis. Questions to ask: who has been around the pastor? how many people have been in the vicinity of the pastor? what surfaces in the church building has the pastor touched? Synod staff can assist the congregation with worship

options. Since the incubation period for COVID-19 can range from 3 to 11 days (if not longer), people who have been around the pastor during the pastor's pre-symptomatic period should absent themselves from gathered worship for 14 days. To repeat an earlier point, a key consideration is to communicate to your community that your congregation values the safety of your worshipers.

4. The pastor's return to in-person ministry will be affected by many factors. Do not presume that the pastor will be able to return to in-person ministry within three weeks.
- f. **What if our pastor is in a high-risk group?** If you are rightly applauding members in high risk groups for staying away from gatherings, including worship, you should likewise encourage and applaud your pastor to stay away. I recognize that this puts a strain on providing worship leadership, especially given the number of worship leaders whose age puts them at high risk. Synod staff can help the congregation develop worship leadership options.

Addendum 1

A consideration of the purposes for online worship when gathered worship is available. Online worship is an enormous opportunity for evangelism and a blessing for those who are homebound or ill. That said, I ask for caution if one of the purposes of online worship services becomes providing an alternative worship option to members of the congregation when gathered worship is available. There are several reasons for this, but the most compelling to me is treatment of the Lord's Supper. I am grateful to God that members of our congregations earnestly desire Holy Communion. This desire is a mark of spiritual health and vitality. I recognize that when some members request online "communion", the request flows from this holy desire. It truly is a joy that people dearly want to be fed and nourished by the body and blood of Christ. Also, I recognize that for some pastors, offering online "communion" appears to be an appropriate way to provide that nourishment. I do not question in any way the pastoral hearts and motivations of pastors who have provided online "communion" for their congregations during shelter in place. God's church needs pastors with such a pastoral heart. My gratitude for their ministries continues. At the same time, I grieve two things. I grieve the presumption that online "communion" is the Holy Communion. For example, the ELCA's statement "Use of the Means of Grace" reminds us that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly. The nature of an assembly is that it expresses both community and event. As we consider the new challenges to providing the Lord's Supper during this pandemic, it should be acknowledged that the community and event aspects of worship differ vastly between a Zoom gathering of a congregation and a service recorded on Friday to be broadcast on Sunday. Is it genuinely an assembly, when there is essentially a one-way broadcast taking place? Prerecording services strains the community and event aspects of worship even further. How can the event being replayed Sunday on the computer screen be the same community and event that was recorded on Friday, keeping in mind that the pastor and other participants are sitting in their homes watching themselves on Sunday? The second thing that I grieve is

what looks like a lack of consideration for broader Lutheran and other Christian fellowships when we ELCA pastors/congregations make ad hoc decisions about the Sacrament that are not consistent with the ELCA's public "Use of the Means of Grace" position. Viewed globally, the presumption of privilege becomes even more glaring when we assume the availability of online access for reception of the sacrament.

Please remember what I said earlier, that broadcasting and posting worship services can be a blessing to those who listen to or view them and can be an effective vehicle for reaching people whom the church is otherwise not reaching, connecting them to God and perhaps to your congregation. Nothing I have said about online "communion" diminishes this valuable resource.

Addendum 2 – Communion Preparation and Distribution

What a privilege God has given us, to be stewards of the Eucharistic body and blood of our Lord Jesus. The challenge now is to steward this sacrament in the context of COVID-19. While we cannot eliminate risk of infection, we can reduce that risk significantly.

Minimization of risk starts with a commitment to wash your hands thoroughly before, during, and after preparation, distribution, and clean up of the Lord's Supper. Wash with soap and water at least 20 seconds (the time it takes to sing one verse of "I Know that My Redeemer Lives" at a majestic tempo). Using hand sanitizer is not as effective as washing with soap and water, but if soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.⁵

For the foreseeable future, use wafers and individual cups. Those distributing the communion elements should wear face masks. Provide a touchless blessing to those not communing.

Wafers

Use wafers, not loaves. Place wafers in small, individual plastic bags. Do not zip-lock these mini-bags; some communicants would have difficulty opening the ziplock. Many of us are already familiar with distributing gluten-free wafers wrapped in plastic. Those who distribute the wafer drop the bagged wafer into the communicant's open hands; the communion minister should not touch the communicant's hand. The communicant takes the wafer out of the bag, consumes the wafer, and disposes of the bag.

Wine

Both glass and plastic individual cups can be used. The individual cups are placed upside down on trays. Communicants take a cup and turn it over. Those who distribute the wine pour it from a pouring chalice, flagon, or small bottle. The same process can be used with grape juice. Both glass and plastic cups can also be washed and reused.

Health scientists caution that we still have much to learn about the transmission of this virus. Outlined below is one procedure for preparation and distribution. This is offered, not as the only low-risk procedure available, but as a benchmark for Holy

⁵ See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html> .

Communion preparation and distribution that is respectful to the sacrament and minimizes risk.

Preparation

1. Preparers wash their hands thoroughly. (Preparers may then put on plastic gloves. But keep in mind that a glove that touches a contaminated surface will pass along that contamination as effectively as the touch of a contaminated hand. Also, gloves have to be removed properly.⁶)
2. Preparers place clean individual cups upside down on trays that will be placed where communicants will pick up the cups.
3. Preparers place wafers in individual small plastic bags and put them in the containers from which the communion minister will distribute them.

Distribution

1. Communion ministers wash their hands thoroughly, or if need be, use an appropriate hand sanitizer.
2. Communion ministers wear protective masks.
3. Wafers and wine go from the altar to the places of distribution.
4. Communion is continuous, with communion ministers standing at least six feet apart from each other.
5. Communicants maintain at least six feet between one another.
6. The communion minister distributing the wafer drops the bagged wafer a few inches into the communicant's hands. The communicant takes the wafer from the bag, adjusts her or his mask from her or his mouth to eat the wafer, and puts her or his mask back in place. Communicants say a soft "Amen" after reception of the bread and move toward the wine distribution.
7. The communion minister distributing the wine pours wine into the communicant's cup. The communicant adjusts her or his mask from her or his face to drink the wine and puts her or his mask back in place. Communicants say a soft "Amen" after reception of wine and pass receptacles for the bags and cups on their way to their seats or to the exit, if the service is ending with communion distribution.
8. Communicants dispose of the small bag and place the cup in or on a tray provided.
9. Communion ministers wash their hands thoroughly at any time they think their hand cleanliness has been compromised and at the close of the service.

Clean up

1. Clean up crew washes their hands thoroughly.
2. Soak and wash the individual cups in soapy water.
3. Dry and store the cups.

⁶ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kesQF_G3pQ8 .