



Greater Milwaukee Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's Work. Our Hands.

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Paul Erickson
Greater Milwaukee Synod, ELCA
May 12, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ:

On April 23, I sent a letter regarding the extension of the Wisconsin Safer at Home executive order, and the need for us to make decisions guided by our love of our neighbors. This is a consistent ethical standard throughout scripture and the history of our church. In the coming days, we will likely hear the ruling from the Wisconsin Supreme Court regarding the legality of this extension and future guidance and directives from the governor's office. It is also likely that our exit from this time of restrictions will not be a straight line but will include various adjustments as cases of COVID-19 rise and fall.

In addition to the rulings and directives from our elected and appointed leaders, we in the Church need to continue to be guided by scripture, our theology, and the best scientific knowledge we can gather. I, like many of you, have been reading and listening and having conversations about how to make sense of all of the information coming at us, and my hope in this letter is to lift up some general guidelines and considerations for us as we move into the next phases of this crisis.

With regard to scripture, in addition to the texts that I cited in my earlier letter, my thinking is shaped by the Apostle Paul's words to the church in Corinth, in which he is discussing whether it is appropriate for Christians to eat meat offered to idols. He writes:

"All things are lawful," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others. (I Corinthians 10:23-24)

Our clarion call to love and serve our neighbors remains the same, and our challenge is to find ways to be the church without placing our neighbors at risk, especially those most vulnerable.

With regard to the scientific and public health community, we need to recognize that we are still learning a great deal about this virus, how it spreads, and how to manage the risks of engaging in normal social interactions. I will share several brief sentences that summarize much of what I have read and heard in recent weeks, along with the relevant links to the longer articles and interviews from which these statements come. I encourage you to read these documents, as they go into greater detail than I am able to do in this letter. These are the "takeaways" that guide my thinking and, I believe, should guide our actions in the months to come.

- ***"We're going to have to learn how to live with this virus."*** Dr. Michael Osterholm, an infectious disease epidemiologist, Regents professor, and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, is also a member of an ELCA congregation in Edina, MN. His interview with Minneapolis Area Synod

Bishop Ann Svennungsen is available here: http://mpls-synod.org/?fbclid=IwAR366DJZT1N6Igs3Lc7IW5vHQ_n2_RQA9vQU8eBW94wQWg8dNU_ODfGZ4EE. He describes how the language of “controlling” or “defeating” this virus is misleading, as the virus will continue to impact our lives in significant ways until approximately 60-70% of the population has been infected or a vaccine is readily available. This is likely 9-18 months from now.

- **“Any environment that is enclosed, with poor air circulation and high density of people, spells trouble.”** Dr. Erin Bromage is a Comparative Immunologist and Professor of Biology (specializing in Immunology) at the [University of Massachusetts Dartmouth](https://www.umass.edu/dartmouth). His recent blog post (available here: https://erinbromage.wixsite.com/covid19/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them?fbclid=IwAR18cdaJD_r0_CrvjNr6v81NL8W1z1HsMS7gcARJDq38qFsRtOB7Rp0mJuw) details how we are learning that this novel Coronavirus is primarily spread through respiratory transmission. While washing hands and wearing masks and cleaning surfaces are all important, breathing, speaking, and singing add virus particles to the air which take hours to dissipate in closed settings. He also describes how there are varying levels of exposure to the virus, not all of which will lead to becoming ill.
- **“We’re not going back to normal.”** “Leading Beyond a Blizzard” is an article published by Praxis, “a creative engine for redemptive entrepreneurship” (<https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>). The article describes why thinking of this crisis as a really bad blizzard that we just need to endure or even a long winter that we know will someday end may well be inadequate. We are in the midst of a transition that has much deeper and longer-lasting implications. This is not to say that we will never experience a sense of normalcy, only that the new normal will look different from what we used to know.

Given these insights, I believe we need to formulate plans that will allow us to operate our faith communities in a safe and responsible manner as we move through the various phases of recovery and into an uncertain future. It is clear that we cannot eliminate all risk of spreading the virus, but I would also hope that we find ways to reduce the risk as much as possible. The ELCA is also publishing a “Returning to Public Worship” guide, available by May 14 at <https://www.elca.org/publichealth>. Additional resources and links are posted on the synod website at www.milwaukeesynod.org/covid. I also encourage congregations to be in touch with their insurance providers and local health officials for additional guidance.

I am urging all congregations and leaders in the Greater Milwaukee Synod to consider the following:

1. **Online worship is here to stay.** Given the fact that there is no way to completely eliminate the risk of transmitting the virus while gathering for worship, and that the restrictions on physical contact, singing, Holy Communion, etc., will still be significant, some congregations will choose to refrain from in person worship until a vaccine is available. When congregations resume in person worship, those people in vulnerable populations (those over 65 or with underlying health conditions) should avoid such

gatherings for a longer period of time. Congregations should continue offering ways for people to worship and connect through various digital means of communication.

2. **Outdoor Worship is an option.** Much of what we are learning is that the virus is most frequently spread through aerosol transmission in enclosed spaces. Can we find a way to worship outdoors at a “drive-in” service, with people remaining in their cars and the service being broadcast to their radios? (Please note that the requirements for broadcasting such services over the radio are important to consider. Here is the link to the FCC site that explains what is legal and illegal <https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/low-power-radio-general-information#CARRIER>.) Or, for those places where drive-in services are not possible or desired, is there an outdoor space large enough for folks to gather while maintaining social/physical distancing? Keeping the service to 30-35 minutes, not allowing folks inside the building, and making sure that people remain in their vehicles and physically distant from others are all important ways to reduce the potential for transmission.
3. **Indoor worship will look quite different.** When we are allowed to return to our church buildings for worship and other gatherings, the experience will likely be very different from what we are used to. It would be wise to begin with small, simple gatherings until people become accustomed to the various restrictions and requirements. Congregations will need to consider the following:
 - a. **Gathering size.** The Governor’s “Badger Bounce Back” plan limits gatherings to less than 10 individuals until Phase Two, which allows for gatherings of up to 50 people, and this is likely several months from now. Congregations may need to consider offering multiple options for smaller groups to gather. It will also be important to keep track of who is present for each gathering in the event that someone is diagnosed with COVID-19 and contact tracing is needed.
 - b. **Social/physical distancing.** Maintaining at least a six-foot distance between individuals and family groups is essential, as well as finding new ways to greet one another and share the peace without making physical contact or coming close to others. People should also be encouraged to enter and exit the worship space in family groups and not linger in the narthex. Coffee hours and communal meals should not occur in this time. Cloth masks should also be required, and congregations should have extra masks available for those who do not bring them to worship. Attention should be given to how to respond to individuals who do not wear masks in worship.
 - c. **Cleaning.** The spaces used should be cleaned and disinfected after each use, and the use of hymnals or other objects that would be shared should be discouraged or discontinued.
 - d. **Air flow.** Since the respiratory particles that transmit the virus can remain in the air for hours, attention needs to be given to the time and circulation required to allow for the air to be clean, as well.
 - e. **Singing.** Many choral groups are recommending that group singing not occur until a vaccine is readily available. (<https://acda.org/resources-for-choral-professionals-during-a-pandemic/>). Even using masks only partially reduces the risk.

- f. **Holy Communion.** It is difficult to imagine a way to distribute Holy Communion that completely eliminates the risk of transmitting the virus. One option may be to commune people in family groups or as individuals with wafers and pre-filled glasses, with the presider or communion assistant wearing a mask and maintaining strict hygiene measures (handwashing, gloves, etc.). Another option may be to invite people to bring their own elements from home or having them made available in the pews so that people do not need to walk to the front to receive.
 - g. **Vulnerable populations.** Many of our congregations have significant percentages of their worshipping population who, because of their age or medical history would be considered vulnerable, and many pastors who are actively serving in congregations are also in this category. What may be acceptable levels of risk for some may not be acceptable for all. I strongly encourage pastors, councils, and leaders to be thoughtful, compassionate, and respectful as they engage in what may be difficult conversations about how to move forward. The synod staff is available to assist in these conversations as necessary.
 - h. **Newcomers.** This may be a time when people who have not been a part of your congregation have discovered your community online or are searching for a community of faith as they seek meaning and belonging. How will you be able to welcome newcomers and help them engage?
4. **We need to take our time.** Even if we are soon permitted to return to indoor worship and other gatherings, and even if many people in our communities are longing for a return, I am hoping that our congregations, pastors, and leaders can be thoughtful and deliberate as you consider your options and make the decisions that are right for your communities and the people you are called to serve.

These are challenging and uncertain times, and the decisions we make today may need to evolve as we learn more about this virus and our communities. I pray that, through it all, we can continue to be grounded in our respect for our leaders, our concern for the most vulnerable members of our society, and our love for one another.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul D. Erickson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Bishop Paul D. Erickson