

Wednesday, June 10, 2020

Today, Phase III of Stay Safe MN goes into effect, permitting in-person worship with 50% capacity, no more than 250 people, and strict adherence to protocols for disease prevention.

**Today, with the support of the Synod Council Executive Committee, I urge you to refrain from indoor, in-person worship until the number of new cases declines to April levels.**

As in every season, we live with a deep, God-given need **to be together**, to share the peace of Christ with a handshake or hug, and to gather together around table and font (and coffee pot). I praise God for that yearning. And, I know we will need to grow ever more creative in providing the spiritual encouragement and pastoral care that are needed as we respond to the pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism.

However, I do not believe we are ready for indoor, in-person worship.

Rather, let us make June 10 the day in which we can say that every one of our 145 congregations has formed a “Pandemic Preparedness Team,” a group of diverse individuals who vigorously commit to study and keep up-to-date with accurate information from medicine and public health; a group that brings wisdom needed to guide us for that time we return to indoor, in-person worship.

I know that several congregations already have such a team in place, and that some congregations have found ways to safely gather for outdoor or drive-in worship. Yet, each congregational context is unique. And our planning will be ongoing. The ELCA has **excellent materials** to guide us.

Our synod staff is now preparing protocols to allow a maximum of 5 staff members to return to the synod office at a future date. Even those protocols are exhausting to compile. Imagine preparing for 250 people, while your leaders are still exhausted from the learning curves of preparing online worship services and building online networks for care and encouragement.

Consistently, we hear that COVID-19 spread is dependent upon three variables:

1. Time spent together
2. Distance between people
3. The unpredictability of the environment

When I think of in-person worship, I am especially mindful of the third variable. The habits of welcome and affection when we gather are almost impossible to resist. This was especially apparent to me while participating in the Clergy March last week.

There is much we are still learning about this virus. I urge you to watch [\*\*Living in a COVID-19 World\*\*](#). Presented by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota, it features ELCA member, Michael Osterholm, as well as Neel Kashkari, Sir Jeremy Farrar, Julie Gerberding, Larry Sommers, and others, and is moderated by Tom Brokaw. It addresses not only medical realities but economic issues.

**I also urge everyone who participated in a march or mass gathering to protest the killing of George Floyd or in food distribution efforts in affected communities [\*\*to get tested this week\*\*](#) (or between 5 and 7 days after your participation). Testing is key to preventing the spread of COVID-19.**

We are church together. And, we are doing the work of the church, even while physically distancing. We are worshiping and praying together, serving the neighbor, caring for the sick, and advocating for justice. We continue this vital work – always guided by the centrality of Jesus’ call to love God and neighbor, especially the most vulnerable among us.

Rev. Ann M. Svennungsen  
Bishop