



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

... cultivating leaders intentionally engaged in the mission of God

March 17, 2020

Dear Brothers,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, our rock and refuge, our ever-present help in every time of trouble.

These are times that try our souls. Yet Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9, ESV). Still, this is new to us, and so we struggle under the weight and complexity of our circumstances. In a matter of 24 hours, the CDC and our government leaders went from limiting public gatherings to 250 then to 50, and now the recommendation is 10.

With yesterday's request by President Trump to limit our gatherings to 10 people or fewer, this creates a crisis for all our congregations—even the smallest among us. My heart hurts along with you. The idea of canceling worship goes against everything we stand for! The pressing question that follows is the same one for all of us: "What do we do now?"

The first thing I would suggest we do is pray together these verses from Psalm 91:1-6:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

As I have noted in my previous letters, this is not the time to back away from the means of grace our Lord has given us. Yet with these new temporary government requests, you and I are forced to wrestle with balancing our two kingdom theology. My fellow district presidents and I have been wrestling deeply and sharing with one another much mutual conversation and consolation as we each look to care for the beloved saints of the Lord. LCMS President Matthew Harrison has shared a concise and helpful perspective in his [statement posted yesterday](#). I have gleaned much wisdom from all these conversations and resources, and I want to share that with you here as we consider what these temporary requests might mean for you and your congregations in the MN South District.

This is not government intrusion.

Even though these recommendations (or mandates in some states) might be viewed by some as government intrusion, this does not currently appear to be an Acts 5:29 situation: "*We must obey God rather than man.*"

Rather, this is a Romans 13:1-4a situation:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers

are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good.

Additionally, this is also a Philippians 2:3-4 situation:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

As Lutherans, we have a robust theology, rooted in the truth of Scripture, that compels us toward love of God and love for our neighbor while honoring those in authority over us. As Luther himself demonstrated, the whole of the Christian life is one held in tension: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone" (On *the Freedom of a Christian*, 1520).

Even in times of pestilence, Luther was consistent in teaching and living with this tension:

Everybody must take this to heart: first of all, if he feels bound to remain where death rages in order to serve his neighbor, let him commend himself to God and say, "Lord, I am in thy hands; thou hast kept me here; thy will be done. I am thy lowly creature. Thou canst kill me or preserve me in this pestilence in the same way as if I were in fire, water, drought, or any other danger." If a man is free, however, and can escape, let him commend himself and say, "Lord God, I am weak and fearful. Therefore I am running away from evil and am doing what I can to protect myself against it. I am nevertheless in thy hands in this danger as in any other which might overtake me. Thy will be done." (*Whether One May Flee from A Deadly Plague*, 1527)

Perceivably, the dilemma for us is whether or not to temporarily "flee" the virus by ceasing to hold community worship services or to continue to hold regular worship services of gatherings of more than 10 people, but to do so against the request of our governing authorities, particularly the president of the United States. So how do we balance this tension? I wrestle and struggle with this mightily. Here is how I continue to think it through.

We should consider this request as one made in good faith—namely, to help slow the rate of infection and help our healthcare community prepare for the inevitable surge of infections that likely will occur in our communities and potentially swamp our hospitals. Our doctrine of vocation is to be celebrated. Many of our parishioners are doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers who are willing to remain in harm's way to serve and fulfill their God-created vocation to care for others in need. Let's help them in their vocation. According to our theology, it seems to me that we have a responsibility to help them better care for people's bodies while we as pastors care for their souls.

We can find creative ways to continue delivering the means of grace.

Certainly, we can never forsake the means of grace. But perhaps as spiritual physicians, we can best serve our neighbor in love during this crisis period by being more creative in how we continue to administer the means of grace happily, willingly, and readily, yet also comply with President Trump's temporary request.

The concerns of the weakest among us should be uppermost in this moment, even though we and everyone around us might be feeling just fine. Thus, let's consider how we are both free to act and yet bound to serve under these extraordinary circumstances. How do we best balance our God-given responsibilities in His right-hand kingdom (spiritual responsibilities) with our God-given responsibilities under His left-hand kingdom (earthly responsibilities)?

Jesus says he is present where two or three are gathered together in his name (Matthew 18:20). Can multiple family-sized, staggered gatherings be considered or implemented throughout the week? Since for

the time being, most boards and committee meetings need to be put on hold, the 2020 Paschal season will enable you to emphasize the one thing needful in your parish: God's Holy Word and Sacraments and the corporate and private prayer that flows from these sacred gifts—even though these services take place in multiple smaller gatherings for a time. How can your elders assist to organize this? Can technology be utilized during this crisis? How can you work together with brother pastors and sister congregations to meet the spiritual needs of your people and boldly deliver the forgiveness of sins, even as we honor the request of our governing authorities?

I believe we can work our way through this together, with patience and love, and with the confidence of our Lord Jesus Christ and the encouragement of His Holy Spirit.

Your financial concerns are valid.

I know there are many more concerns. In particular, I know many of you are also concerned about finances. A number of our congregations are only “one bad offering” from going under financially. To be sure, we have the promise of our Lord Christ that the Holy Christian Church will carry on, that not even the gates of hell can prevail against her (Matt. 16:18). However, that does not mean we have to give up reason and common sense. We should be bold and prepare accordingly.

Therefore, consider reminding your people about the importance of their continued stewardship partnership, even in these moments. Appeal to them—they will respond. Ask them to mail or drop off their offerings. Many people handle their finances electronically. This may be the time to make online methods for giving available. (We will be working to provide you such giving resources for assisting your people if you do not already have them in place.) If you have a loan with LCEF or are interested in learning what they can do for you, please contact Kai Larson at the MN South District office (kai.larson@lcef.org). LCEF can help you through a challenging financial season; there are options. The MN South District also has some modest reserves to stand with you in a time of need—please just let me know.

We stand united by Christ.

Above all, remember you are not alone in these difficult days. You have brothers in office to care for you and assist you; call on them. We all need each other; there is strength in numbers as we share our burdens and joys with each other. Next week, I hope to be meeting with our circuit visitors via a Zoom video conference to hear from them, to talk together, and to seek God's direction in prayer. I also hope to post a pastoral video on our District website that will be a gift of peace and clarity for you and your people. Additional communications and resources are also in development.

This is a fluid situation and constantly changing. But we know that our Lord is ever unchanging—He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He is with you. As the Psalmist declares, He is our refuge and our fortress, our God, in whom we trust (Psalm 91:2).

The God of peace sanctify you wholly, dear brother, and preserve your whole spirit, soul, and body, sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Your Pastor and Brother in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford
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