March 2, 2020

Dear Brothers in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

I write this brief note to you because it will serve us well as pastors of God’s people to prepare ourselves and our congregations for an intelligent pastoral response to the growing worldwide concern over the spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). This letter includes questions for you to consider, resources to utilize, and encouragement to stand confidently as a servant of the Lord.

Let’s face it, when you put together the unknowns of a potential pandemic with an election year here in the U.S. and add in the element of social media pundits, you have a recipe for panic on your hands.

This is an opportunity for us to reflect on our calling as shepherds of God’s flock and ambassadors for Christ in our communities. So here is my pastoral counsel on these matters that may guide your thinking in the weeks and months ahead:

- **Don’t panic.**
  Be a steady voice of reason.

- **Stick with your calling.**
  The Lord Jesus has given His sheep and lambs into your care. Remain steady in-season and out-of-season: preaching, sacraments, visitation—rebuking, exhorting, forgiving, consoling, and encouraging are your God-given duties. You are a Good-News man in a bad-news world. Never forget that, and don’t ever take off your pastoral hat even as you evangelize a world without hope.

- **Remain calm.**
  When rumors spread, remind people to get the facts. Our Center for Disease Control is a good source of reliable information. [Here](#), for example are the stats on influenza over the last ten years in America. Deaths from the annual flu epidemics in our country have ranged up to 60,000 annually in our country alone. Though a serious health threat, to date, COVID-19 thus far has resulted in far fewer fatalities.

- **Keep this in perspective.**
  The flu pandemic of 1918 claimed more casualties than the horrors of trench warfare in France and Belgium. Your great-grandparents lived through those times. Your grandparents in the 1950s prior to the discovery of the Salk vaccine had friends and playmates who succumbed to poliomyelitis and faced temporary or permanent paralysis as a result. Yet in both these frightening eras, their pastors remained at their posts, and the
LORD served their families each and every week in the Divine Service in their local congregations.

- **Pray for those whose vocation it is to protect us.**
  In the prayers of the church, remember the doctors, nurses, microbiologists, and those whose God-given responsibility it is to monitor and address public health. Pray for mothers and fathers, that they may teach their children to know and trust their Father in heaven for everything good in this world and the world to come.

- **Prepare for contingencies.**
  If officials recommend the closing of schools or discourage public gatherings, consult with community leaders to see what steps they will be taking. Explore with your elders and church councils how electronic media may be used if the time comes when church attendance is temporarily disrupted as a means of controlling the spread of the virus.

  Other similar questions to consider:
  
  - According to our two-kingdom theology, what is your congregation’s responsibility with respect to complying with the CDC or other government agencies trying to prevent the spread of this disease?
  
  - If you had to quarantine, whether self-imposed or demanded by the government, for a period of time, how would you care for your non-salaried workers who would basically be put on a furlough and without income?
  
  - If your congregation were to find itself in a situation where many members were sick, would it be advisable to self-quarantine by canceling services?
  
  - How can you teach your members and lead them in home devotion and prayer if they’re not able to be in church?

- **Take precautions.**
  You as a steward of God’s mysteries and servant of Christ are to visit the sick and comfort the dying. Yet you are not called upon to deliberately jeopardize your own health. Just as medical personnel remain on duty but guard against the spread of dangerous viral infection, you can and should follow suit. Don’t abandon your post by staying home, in other words, but guard the health of your body as you tend the souls of others who are in bodily distress.

- **Take courage.**
  Despite all the uncertainties, one foundational truth remains unshaken: “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19, ESV). You are bought with a price; the Savior’s holy body and precious blood were given and shed for you. He has called you as His brother and servant to tend His lambs and sheep. Do what you’ve been given to do with calm confidence and quiet hope.

In addition, [here](#) is a link to an article other LCMS districts are sharing to help congregations think through potential preparations.
Finally, some pastoral counsel from Luther, who advised his colleagues during the ongoing outbreaks of bubonic plague that continued to devastate medieval Europe in the 1500s following the Black Death pandemic of the mid-1300s. Note how Luther suggests that health epidemics are to be regarded not merely as chastisement from God, but his test of both faith and love (click here to read the entire pamphlet):

Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together... so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another. First, we can be sure that God’s punishment has come upon us, not only to chastise us for our sins but also to test our faith and love—our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor.

Get in touch with a brother pastor or with me if you desire any more direct guidance or encouragement. The Lord Jesus give you the peace and joy of His Spirit in serving His people in these days and always!

Your pastor and brother in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford
President, Minnesota South District—LCMS