



Indiana-Kentucky Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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Guidelines for Gathering In-Person

Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA + May 2020

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. [Philippians 1:8-11]

As we begin to consider returning to some form of in-person gatherings for worship across the territory of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, it is crucial that we plan together and with intentionality, taking into consideration the wide range of medical, scientific, theological, and pastoral dimensions and implications for our gatherings. It is also clear that for most faith communities gathering in-person for worship and other activities as the body of Christ will need to be done in stages and will be very different from gatherings before we entered the coronavirus wilderness. In fact, most experts suggest that the process of living into the unfolding future may take as long as 18 to 24 months.

Consequently, as much as we long to be together in person, for the sake of our own well-being and the well-being of others, especially those who are most at risk, it is crucial that we be patient, disciplined, and wise in coming back together. As the the Mid-Kentucky Presbytery's guidelines for being "[Healthy at God's House](#)" puts it, "The first question for spiritual leaders is not so much when shall we return for in-person worship, but how will we make sure that whenever we return for in-person worship that we will do so in ways that build up the body and show love for neighbor—all of our neighbors?" **I continue to strongly recommend that the first phase of in-person worship and other congregational gatherings not commence until at least some time in June, perhaps even later.**

The guidelines below are neither definitive nor exhaustive. They are intended to assist you, along with other leaders in your local setting, to make good decisions that tend to the common good. As you plan, your bishop, synod staff, and other synod leaders pray along with the ancient apostle "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Preliminary Considerations and Questions

In some ways, this tragic time has accelerated the movement of the church into the profoundly adaptive changes and challenges that we have needed to address in order to be vital communities of witness to Jesus in the 21st century. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead is active even in this challenging time to do new things in, through and around the church so that the people whom God formed for God's self will declare God's praise faithfully and with evangelical fervor in the unfolding future (see Isaiah 43, especially vv. 18-21). As we plan for in-person gatherings, we are not just focused on initial gatherings, we are laying foundations for the new ways in which we will be the body of Christ and declare God's praise for the foreseeable future.

With God's promises in mind, consideration of the following series of questions will provide a good foundation for planning the eventual and gradual coming together in-person of your local community of faith, whenever and however that will be. In considering these questions, keep in mind not just worship, but spiritual life, faith formation, service to the neighbors, and relationships in general as the body of Christ along the continuum that includes both physical and "virtual" presence to one another and so much in between. And do not forget that you are laying foundations upon which you will build for a long time to come.

- What is God calling us to be and do in the time ahead? What is God's purpose for us as a congregation – what is God' mission through us – moving forward?
- What have we learned during the last few months about what is most important in our life together as the body of Christ that can shape how we live, work, and serve together from here forward? What might we bring forward into the future from this experience?
- What new skills have we picked up? What other skills and gifts do we need to embrace a new future?
- How might our theological, denominational, and biblical perspectives and traditions inform how we move forward?
- What among the things that seemed so important before the coronavirus crisis might we give less attention to or let go of altogether?

Along the way, remember, too, that not everyone will be pleased with the outcomes of your planning or find them immediately meaningful or inspiring. Many people, including you, will likely feel a sense of loss of what once was or might have been. Study of Ezra 3 might be helpful in this regard. There we glimpse the big celebration of the laying of the foundation for the new temple after God's people returned from exile in Babylon. Note, by the way, that this was in the second year after their return.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

We will not be able to simply flip a switch and return to what was before. Our life together as the body of Christ and in service to our neighbors is going to be very different moving forward. Be humble and gentle with one another in your planning. Honor each other's emotional responses to changes in your life as a community of faith. Make space for lament. Welcome moments of joy. Help each other live into hope. Learn from this journey through the coronavirus wilderness and let the learning lead you forward. Trust that God is at work in this time and look for the new things God is doing even now.

Peace be with you,

Bishop Bill Gafkjen

Guidelines for In-Person Worship Gatherings

General Considerations

- Civic authorities refer to this time as a “re-opening.” That may be appropriate for many businesses, but **the church is not re-opening; the church – the body of Christ – has been open and working all along.** Most of the congregations and other ministries of this synod have continued to engage in active proclamation of the Word, fellowship, faith formation, and service to and with the neighbor throughout this wilderness, albeit in different ways. We can continue to engage these ministries for the time-being even as we begin to plan to gather in-person and in new ways.
- In fact, **for now, worship at a distance is still preferred over in-person worship**, at least into June and perhaps longer. The danger of infection is still great and church settings pose special problems for sanitizing, safe seating, traffic management, etc. At the writing of these guidelines (early May), it is still not safe for any at-risk parishioners or leaders, including deacons and pastors, to worship or gather in any group of any size. Those who live with and care for at-risk persons should also refrain, lest the virus be carried back by the extension of contacts.
 - *Pastors, deacons, and other ministers and leaders who are at-risk by age and/or physical condition should follow medical and governmental guidelines and not attend or lead in-person worship until it is appropriate to do so. Congregations should support them with grace and creativity. In fact, if your congregation consists primarily of at-risk members you should delay the commencement of in-person worship until such a time as most folks can participate.*
 - If your congregation has the ability to offer worship via webcast, teleconferencing, or conference call, we encourage you to continue. If you are not able to offer worship in these ways, find a neighboring congregation that does and participate with them, or use the synod-provided worship and other materials available through <https://iksynod.org>.
- **Deacons, pastors, and other ministers should work with Congregation Councils and other lay leaders as appropriate to prayerfully and carefully discern and plan for when and how to phase in in-person worship and other gatherings.** Think theologically as well as practically and hygienically. What we do both reflects and shapes what we believe. Communicate with congregation members clearly and often about this process. When you have plans in place and are ready for implementation, communicate clearly with congregation members and friends about new practices and requirements for participation in worship. Hold to your commitments, even amid impatience, anxiety, and confusion.
- **Consider offering a series of small “welcome back” listening gatherings before actually gathering as a congregation for in-person worship.** Such gatherings may help members to begin integration into the new ways of being together, including what social distancing looks like in the church context. Such sessions could also provide opportunities to reconnect, small group worship experiences, and opportunities to begin processing feelings about the time of staying at home as well as the prospect of gathering in person again.

- **Check with your congregation's insurance provider** and discuss with them risk management and liability issues related to worship and other in-person activities.
- In addition to guidelines from state authorities about how many people may gather and when, **social distancing requirements will dramatically reduce the seating capacity of a congregation's worship, fellowship and educational spaces.** What is possible will differ by building according to realities like the flexibility of the worship space, traffic flow into, out of, and through the building, etc. For example, to maintain a six-foot distance between households in the sanctuary, every other pew or row of chairs will be empty. Each pew or row will be no more than half-filled. The capacity of the worship space will likely be reduced by two-thirds or even three-fourths. Of course, this also means that **those returning to worship may not be able to sit in their regular spot!**
- **Think about how to include those who cannot or should not come to worship during this phasing in of in-person gatherings,** especially those who are considered to be at-risk. For many of our congregations this includes a significant number of members. As mentioned above, it may be appropriate to not gather in-person at all until all who desire to attend are able to do so. At the very least it may mean the long-term continuation of live-streaming and other electronic means of sharing worship experiences.

A liturgical exploration of guidelines, considerations, and possibilities for in-person gathered worship once it is safe and appropriate to gather

Prelude

- ✓ Anyone who does not feel well should stay home, including deacons, pastors and other worship leaders.
- ✓ Do not offer nursery, childcare, or children's Sunday School until schools are again open. Because it is nearly impossible to help young children socially distance, childcare imposes on them a greater risk from caregivers. Similarly, their play with each other ultimately exposes anyone they live with to any infection carried by anyone in any house of any child in the care room.
- ✓ Prop open inside and outside doors (and if possible, bathroom doors), so no one touches a doorknob or handle. If your space allows it, consider one-way entry and exit patterns. In fact, if it's possible, consider worshipping outside.
- ✓ Consider placing signage telling staff, members, and guests not to enter if they are symptomatic or if they have tested positive for COVID-19 and asking them to put on a face covering before entering the building.
- ✓ Face coverings should be worn by all persons at all times, except when speaking at a long distance (e.g. from the pulpit), ensuring that no vapor or droplet travel is possible at that distance. The congregation should have face coverings available for those who don't bring their own.
- ✓ All surfaces, including door handles, light switches, tabletops, chairs, etc., should be disinfected before and after every gathering. A plan to disinfect each restroom after each use is strongly encouraged. Some congregations may consider installing touch-free restroom fixtures.
- ✓ Place touchless hand sanitizers in high-contact locations (e.g. bathroom, entry, exit) and ask staff, members, and guests to sanitize their hands before entering the building. Encourage folks to bring their own sanitizer.

- ✓ Because of distancing requirements, decisions will need to be made about managing numbers. Will participants need to register beforehand? How will you deal with folks who just show up? You might need to offer more worship opportunities over a span of time or days.
- ✓ The use of printed bulletins is discouraged. If bulletins are used, they should be for one-time use only. Consider placing them in pews or chairs – marking appropriate distancing – by Tuesday or Wednesday before a Sunday service, as viruses don't live on the paper for more than 4-5 days. Of course, this will not work if there are to be multiple services in the same space on the same day. Bulletins should be avoided if at all possible.
- ✓ Consider worshipping with various (non-Eucharistic) liturgies of the Word in the first phase or two of gathering in person. As will be seen below, the celebration and distribution of Holy Communion will be quite challenging if we are to be careful and safe for all.

Gathering

- ✓ Maintain a minimum 6' distance in all directions between individuals or family units of the same households at all times. Consider signage of various sorts, including spacing and marking seating, that will help people maintain the distance. Pay careful attention to hallways, entrances and exits, and times when a number of people might normally be moving at the same time.
- ✓ Greeters and ushers will have different roles. They should not shake hands or hand out bulletins. They should also be prepared for addressing folks who arrive after the stated number of persons has been met or who do not have a face covering. Greeters and ushers will need to be among those who encourage others to honor physical distancing. They may also check in with people, at a distance, listening for needs and concerns.
- ✓ If there is a procession, those processing must also observe appropriate distancing from each other and from other worshippers in all directions. This will be nearly impossible to do in most worship spaces.
- ✓ Hymnals and other worship books should not be used or handled by worshippers, unless they bring their own and take them back home with them. It may be best to remove such hymnals and other worship aids from the worship space altogether.
- ✓ During announcements consider thanking people for coming, and politely instructing them to observe proper sanitation and hygiene practices while together, including abstinence from shaking hands and hugging, as difficult as that may be.

Word

- ✓ Pastors, deacons, readers, assisting ministers, and others should not share common books or binders, including lectionary books, but, rather, read from their own paper or digital device.
- ✓ Speakers and preachers may remove their face covering while speaking only if they are 10 feet or more from others.
- ✓ Singing should be prohibited for the time being, even when wearing face coverings. As difficult as this will be for Lutherans, singing is known to cast virus-laden aerosols even further than 6 feet. Recently, a laryngologist who presented to the American Choral Directors Association said that singing together in public will not be safe until there is a vaccine for COVID-19 or a treatment that is 95% effective. Singing projects the aerosolized virus much farther and when singing we inhale more deeply, thus drawing the air and whatever else is in it more deeply into our lungs.

The Prayers and Peace

- ✓ Congregations in the habit of holding hands for prayer or during the Lord's Prayer, should refrain from doing so for the time being.
- ✓ Consider either omitting the passing of peace in early phases of in person worship (it's not usually part of a Service of the Word anyway) or require folks to pass the peace with a simple bow and greeting to those on their right and left, behind and in front, without moving around the space or breaching physical distance.

Offering

- ✓ Offering plates or other offering receptacles should not be passed among the congregation. Rather, consider placing receptacles on tables or stands for people to drop offerings in as they enter and exit.
- ✓ The offering time could be used to talk about the church's vital ongoing ministries and to let people write checks for dropping in the receptacles when they exit the space. Fill folks in on what's still happening and why it matters. How are lives being impacted? How is your congregation serving people physically and spiritually during this time?
- ✓ Offering counters should use the same protocols as bank tellers, sanitizing frequently, and sitting at a distance from one another.
- ✓ Continue to adopt/encourage electronic giving.

Holy Communion

- ✓ As recommended above, consider non-Eucharistic worship in the early phases of in-person gatherings. The distribution of communion elements in sanitary, hygienically appropriate ways may well be the most challenging and complicated aspect of worshipping in person. Even parking lot communion is not recommended until your community has had at least 14 days of declining cases.
- ✓ When the time comes for the celebration of Holy Communion in person it will be crucial to continue to observe very careful hygienic practices that protect all, especially those most at risk.. A number of creative ways to do this are in the resources collected on the synod's COVID-19 resource web page: <https://iksynod.org/covid-19-resources/>.
- ✓ Because this virus is passed on by airborne droplets, common cup and intinction are out of the question (off the table, so to speak) until a much later phase in gathering, if ever.
 - Plastic and glass individual cups are both equally clean. Glass and reusable plastic cups should be soaked for a minute in soapy water after the service. Consider using a diluted chlorine soak after washing.
- ✓ The wafer is safer. Using bread, whether homemade or from the store, is discouraged for the time being. Bread requires more handling than wafers.
- ✓ Those who prepare the Table for a more traditional way of distributing communion should think of their work in terms of food service preparation and distribution. In fact, does anyone in your congregation work in the restaurant industry? Have any had food handing training? They could be a helpful resource.
 - Communion preparers must wash hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds prior to and after preparing communion. Washing with soap and water is twice as effective as hand sanitizer.

- Gloves may be used to prepare the table, but gloves can be deceiving. If a glove touches a contaminated space and then then a plate or tray, it still passes the contamination on. It is best to wash hands thoroughly and frequently.
 - Those preparing communion wash their hands, then place glasses in trays sufficiently spaced so that communicants can take their cup without touching any others. After filling the cups with wine, the trays are placed on the altar.
 - Plastic-wrapped wafers can be emptied onto patens without touching them. There should be separate patens for each communion assistant distributing bread.
- ✓ Pastor and communion assistants should wash hands before consecrating the elements and before distributing. Again, washing is significantly more effective than hand sanitizer.
 - The pastor should consecrate the elements without touching them. The fraction and elevation are optional and should be omitted for the time being.
- ✓ The most significant medical concern regarding infection is proximity to others and breathing the same air. Consequently, however communion elements are distributed appropriate physical distancing must be maintained, especially since communicants will need to lower their face covering to consume.
- ✓ Those distributing wafers should try to avoid touching communicants' hands as much as possible. For example, a gentle drop of the wafer into the communicant's hand will be better than placement. Hand sanitizer should be nearby in case a hand is touched.
- ✓ Those distributing wine only touch the trays, holding them out for communicants to take a cup.
- ✓ It is best, for a number of reasons, for communion assistants to commune last, again washing or sanitizing their hands before and after communing.
- ✓ Lutheran theology reminds us that communing in one kind (that is with either bread or wine) is acceptable and appropriate. The crucified and risen Christ is fully present for communicants in, with, and under one element. For the sake of careful hygienic practice, it may be best to remind worshippers of this and encourage them to participate with the element most comfortable for them. Those who choose not to receive either element should not be chastised in any way, but rather honored for their choice, mindful that Christ is fully present and active in the proclamation and hearing of the Word.

Dismissal

- ✓ Worshippers may drop off their offerings on the way out.
- ✓ Physical distance must be maintained as people leave the worship space and in the narthex. Face coverings should be worn until they have left the building or finished parking lot conversations (at a distance).
- ✓ Pastors and other worship leaders should not shake hands or touch folks in any way after worship. Greetings and conversations should be done at the appropriate 6' distance.

Postlude

- ✓ There should be no sharing of food, including coffee hours, potlucks, or other typical forms of food-based fellowship before or after worship. This one may be most difficult sacrifices for Lutherans!
- ✓ If there will be another service following this one, schedule the services with enough time in between to ensure that appropriate distancing can be observed between those leaving and arriving and for the sanitizing of the spaces.