



Indiana-Kentucky Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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Pastoral Message to the People and Communities of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA
Bishop Bill Gafkjen + January 2021

You need my hands, my exhaustion, working love for the rest of the weary – a love that's willing to go on loving. Sweet Lord, you have looked into my eyes; kindly smiling, you've called out my name. On the sand I have abandoned my small boat; now with you, I will seek other seas.
[“You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore,” by Cesareo Gabarain, ELW #817]

Dear People of God,

We are not out of the wilderness yet and we won't be for some time.

Thanks be to God, vaccines are beginning to find their way into welcoming arms. Unfortunately, the process is slow and chaotic and medical experts remind us that “herd immunity” is still months away. As I write in mid-January, nearly every county in Kentucky is in the “red” category. The state's recommendations for red include “Do not host or attend gatherings of any size.” More than a third of counties in Indiana are also red; those that aren't red are orange, the next most critical category. Indiana's recommendations for red counties are very similar to Kentucky's. While the spread of the virus seems to be slowing a bit in some places, new, more contagious mutations are making their way across the country.

Unfortunately, along the way, we have discovered that gatherings for worship, even careful gatherings, have been among the spreaders of the virus. Linger longer than a few minutes with one another in a closed and often poorly ventilated, poorly filtered indoor space (unlike the few minutes of moving through a large store, for example), speaking and singing with vigor in such space and proximity, and unintentional breaches of hygiene protocols have all contributed to church gatherings being among those that spread the virus. A number of our pastors, deacons, and other leaders have contracted the virus, as have many members of congregations, some of whom have died.

Like you, I crave being in the physical presence of others for worship and other aspects of life together in the body of Christ. Yet, in love and service to one another and for our neighbors, I encourage the congregations and leaders of this synod to continue to be slow and extremely cautious in returning to in-person gatherings. As tempting as it may be to look toward Ash Wednesday as a possible time to worship together in person, for example, it may actually be best to look toward Easter, at the earliest, and to walk through the sacrificial season of Lent together-at-a-distance trusting the promises of resurrection – new and abundant life – that draw us toward the far horizon of this exhausting wilderness.

As you make decisions about when and how to return to in-person worship in coming weeks and months, I ask four other disciplines of you:

- Pay close attention to the virus statistics and color categories in your county and strictly adhere to the requirements and recommendations that accompany your county's category. This information can be found at <https://www.coronavirus.in.gov/2393.htm> and <https://govstatus.egov.com/kycovid19>.

- Keep wearing a mask, maintaining appropriate physical distance, and washing your hands.
- Get the vaccine when it's your turn.
- Be kind and forbearing with one another and with your ministry leaders about these things. Too many of our congregations are in conflict with one another and/or with their leaders around differences of perspective on when and how to gather in-person. It breaks my heart when I see the sort of divisive derision and demanding dismissiveness that erupt in society manifesting themselves in our congregations; I grieve...deeply.

I reflect on the demand of the aptly tagged Sons of Thunder that Jesus do for them what they want, namely give them place and privilege and power in his kingdom, and the way it angered their fellow disciples. Jesus' response echoes through the centuries to reach us: That might be the way people treat each other in the world, but "it shall not be so among you." [Mark10:35ff]

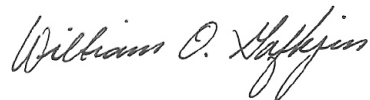
Dear people of God, please honor your pastors, deacons and other leaders. Be humble and collaborative with one another. Place the concerns of the most vulnerable at the center of your own concerns. Be kind and forgiving toward one another in the name of Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve. The world needs this witness much more than just another reflection of its own demanding, demeaning, death-dealing dismissiveness and division.

In disciplined and patient partnership with you and with the support of the synod's Executive Committee, synod staff will continue the suspension of travel at least through February and probably longer. We will continue for the foreseeable future to provide the wide variety of weekly and regular resources that we have provided throughout our sojourn in this coronavirus wilderness. We will continue to be available via teleconference, phone, and other means of communicating and working with one another at a distance.

Beloved people of God, we have made so many painful sacrifices – we have had to let go of so many of our "small boats" – in this wilderness. We do so trusting that the God of promise and new life will use these sacrifices to bring new, abundant, and lasting life to all with whom we sail these wilderness seas. There have been so many losses, so many profound challenges, and the pilgrimage through this wilderness now extends into Lent...again. Yet, as weary as we may be, as the song suggests, God calls us to look into the eyes of Jesus and give him our hands, our hearts, even our exhaustion, so God can keep working love for the rest of the weary through us. With you I pray, dear God, give us the patience, persistence, and perspective that we need to stay disciplined for the sake of your beloved community.

In fact, I "have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." [Colossians 1:9-14]

Peace be with you,



The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop