



A Pastoral Message from Bishop Bill Gafkjen
To the People and Communities of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod
August 5, 2021

The way through any wilderness is full of twists and turns, uncertainty about what might be around each bend, moments of hopeful expectation that the journey is nearing its end followed by deep disappointment at the realization that it may be far from over, and the uneasy feeling of déjà vu that inspires resistance to having to do any part of the difficult journey over again.

So it is with this enduring coronavirus wilderness. The most recent bend in the wilderness way, which feels more like a U-turn in too many ways, makes it very clear that we are not out of the wilderness yet. In fact, we may very well be turning toward another more challenging leg of the trek.

The rapidly accelerating spread of the Delta variant, which some medical experts tell us is as communicable as chicken pox, raises the specter of serious illness, hospitalization, and death for unvaccinated people. While being vaccinated greatly reduces the likelihood of contracting COVID and of being hospitalized or dying from the virus, research is also revealing that a vaccinated person can both contract and transmit COVID. The risk of this is greatest in areas where transmission rates are high and where appropriate safety and health protocols like mask-wearing and physical distancing are not practiced.

Consequently, with the support of the Synod Executive Committee, I offer the following counsel to the people, leaders, and communities of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod.

If you have not been vaccinated and are able to be vaccinated, please get those shots in the arm as soon as possible. If you have friends or family members who have not been vaccinated, please encourage them to do so and do whatever you can to help them do it. Despite what some are trying to make of it, vaccination is not a political issue. It is a matter of human health and the common good. If you are concerned that getting vaccinated is somehow a violation of your personal rights or freedom, consider the counsel of scripture:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Galatians 5:1, 13-14]

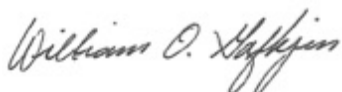
We strongly recommend that current CDC guidelines be followed in all in-person gatherings of the body of Christ, including worship. Faith communities should continue or reimplement the wearing of face-coverings and physical distancing for all present for indoor gatherings and to limit high risk activities like corporate singing and speaking and some communion practices. These protocols may be loosened a bit for outdoor gatherings, but care should still be taken to minimize the risk of spreading the virus. For example, face coverings for unvaccinated people and physical distancing may still be best outdoors. These practices are especially important in areas of high levels of spread of the virus as suggested by data like rising positivity rates. The

CDC website and both the Kentucky and Indiana state COVID sites present this information county by county. Links to these sites are included at the end of this message.

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” [1 Peter 3:8] The world desperately needs the witness of communities of Christ that can walk together with humility and grace through this wilderness, rather than turning on each other, each insisting on their own way, and flinging vitriol at each other across chasms created by competing claims. The cross etched on our foreheads and the Spirit that seals us in Christ beckon and empower us to be a different kind of community. Please offer gracious, care-filled attention to the deacons, pastors, and other leaders who have borne particular burdens throughout this long sojourn. Offer them some time away. Respect them as servants of Christ. As the congregation pledges on behalf of the whole church at every ordination, “pray for them, help and honor them for their work's sake, and in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ.”

Beloved of God, together and in the power of the Holy Spirit we will find our way through the twists and turns, ups and downs, forward movements and disappointing roundabouts of this coronavirus wilderness. Even at this late leg of the journey, God still promises nourishing and sustaining water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. This sustenance comes to us most often through one another and our neighbors. “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” [1 Corinthians 4:1]

Peace be with you,



Bishop Bill Gatkjen

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Indiana: <https://www.coronavirus.in.gov/2393.htm>

Kentucky: <https://govstatus.egov.com/kycovid19>

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