



Grand Canyon Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

July 30, 2020

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

—Genesis 1:1-3

It has been a while since I wrote about in-person gathering for worship. I was waiting for certainty before I grabbed my pen. I was waiting for clarity from the federal government and the CDC, from health scientists, and from our state health departments and governors. I waited for a common-sense consensus amongst the citizens of our nation. I turned to the books of wisdom in the Old Testament, hoping for a revelation. I am still waiting.

We are all still waiting. We are all grieving our ability to gather in-person. And in that pain and mourning, our resources of patience grow weaker.

Our resources of understanding also grow weaker in the face of an overwhelming array of varying and paradoxical information. We argue about which sources to trust. Even our personally trustworthy sources have contradicted themselves many times since March.

While I find no comfort in this chaos, I do feel our confusion is only natural, as this new and unknown coronavirus continues to work its way through our world, upsetting long-established order in the process.

Yet as fast as confusion spreads, we humans learn, share, and adapt. Time is our sorting filter of knowledge, and we must be thankful for our new understanding of so many things. To give one example, in March there was great concern about a lack of ventilators. Now we know that simply turning a Covid patient onto their stomach helps open airways in lungs filled with fluid and inflammation, often eliminating the need for a ventilator. An easy low-tech solution upends traditional medical theory. Knowledge and innovation grow as this pandemic stays with us.

I see similar innovations breathing new life into our synod. Some churches, like Christ the Servant in Henderson, had well-established digital presences in place at the start of the pandemic. Since then, Christ the Servant's pastors, Diane and Dave Drach-Meinell, have gone all-in with online worship and vacation bible school, created their own video and recording studio, and seen the numbers of people reached actually increasing. And they are not the only pastors sharing these kinds of stories of increased online engagement.

Many churches fine-tune their digital presence each week and initiate new ways to reach their community and neighbors. Simple solutions—phone calls, letters, prayer partners, bible studies—are making some of our community connections stronger than at the start of this year. Some of us are focused on prayer like never before.

The stories of Spirit-led innovation, creativity and collaboration are countless and growing in momentum. We continue to communicate Jesus, connect people, and create possibilities. Like the story in Genesis, I see the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing over and through this chaos. I see our synod answering God's command in the darkness, "Let there be light."

With great hope, I expect this work to continue, as we continue refraining from large in-person gatherings. As I consider all of the unknowns in our current situation and see the number of cases in our synod grow—we wait.

There are some who have the opportunity and space to gather. I trust you are moving forward wisely and safely, ready to modify plans with changes in health and government recommendations, or increased hospital use. If you do decide to have in-person worship, visit elca.org/publichealth for recommendations and procedures to consider.

The coronavirus outbreak has become not just one outbreak, but many. We have seen coronavirus go from a problem in the greater world to a national crisis, then finding ourselves in state hotspots as it struck our cities, before finally finding us in our own individual small communities. More and more of our friends and family contract COVID-19. We ourselves contract it and struggle in recovery. Some of us have gone through the surreal and isolated grieving process when a loved one dies in a time of physical distancing. Your Grand Canyon Synod staff and their families have been affected.

We like to make decisions based on what we know. We want our responses to be faithful, wise, and safe. As Lutherans we live by faith and use our reason. Most importantly, we want to come from a place of loving our neighbor. It is because of all the unknowns that I encourage you err on the side of caution. Not all risk is avoidable in life, but when a risk can be avoided to protect ourselves and our neighbors, we must do so.

In March, we thought this wait would be a few weeks. Easter filled us with the hope of gathering in-person, which was unfulfilled. Yet Easter reminded us of the greater and truer hope: a risen Christ.

And so we continue, each month, to have our hopes of in-person gathering unfulfilled. We continue, each month, to find greater hopes, other examples of God's love, and to come up with yet more ways to be the body of Christ in a time of great need.

We will gather again when we have clarity on how coronavirus is spread, and how best we can protect ourselves and our neighbors. It seems especially cruel that some of our most cherished church practices seem to be the most efficient way to spread coronavirus and endanger the people we care for the most.

We will continue to watch, listen, and learn as schools, companies, and churches experiment in opening, closing, and reopening. Many mainline denominations continue to refrain from gathering in-person, some declaring they will continue to do so through the end of the year. Our Episcopal siblings are now using a guideline of 77% capacity at surrounding hospitals in their decision to gather in-person. In the ELCA, we will continue to seek clarity on our reopening parameters.

As bishop, I share your impatience and unease. Almost all of the established tasks of the Office of the Bishop center on in-person gathering. As we struggle to adapt, I would like nothing more to return to those pre-pandemic days.

Yet I am thankful for the blessings that have come to fruition in this time of tragedy.

Since the pandemic started, the Office of the Bishop team pivoted from a monthly in-person gathering to a Zoom meeting every weekday morning. Starting our workday together has brought the team far closer than I could have hoped for, as we enter each other's homes virtually and share our small daily struggles and larger-than-life joys in these unusual times.

For months now, we've also shared hopeful stories of our ministries in action, one story after another, day after day. I am overwhelmed with gratitude at what I see at play in the Grand Canyon Synod. I am blessed to have a unique view of God's servants going forth boldly and courageously doing God's work. I await the start of each day to hear the Good News again.

I am grateful and uplifted by your hopefulness, your steadfastness, and your faithfulness—fruits of the Spirit which is certainly moving through us.

I look forward to these coming months with you, as church together we share in God's abundance.



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