



Grand Canyon Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We all want to go back to in-person worship. We also want to be safe. We want our neighbors to be safe. Many have asked me when we can gather for in-person worship. Last week I strongly urged each of you to continue your online worship and presence. I have seen many examples, and what people in our synod are doing is superb. I also encouraged no in-person worship until June 1, 2020 at the earliest.

As I talk with Bishops across the ELCA, our local ecumenical colleagues (Disciples of Christ, UCC, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal), and with GCS pastors, perhaps there is a better question than on what date can we gather. We need to ask ourselves, under what known conditions is it safe to open our buildings?

In a time of so many unknowns with so much at risk, I feel it would be ill-advised to project yet another date. As we decide when to proceed, I suggest we wait for the CDC guideline of a “downward trajectory of documented cases within a 14-day period.”

It is important to be aware of that this CDC guideline of downward trajectory, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/, has not yet been met in Nevada or Arizona. According to each state’s health department, from April 15-30, the statistics are alarming.

- In Nevada, confirmed cases rose from 3,321 to 5,594, the number of deaths from 137 to 276.
- In Arizona, confirmed cases rose from 3,962 to 9,305, the number of deaths from 142 to 395.
- To date, Utah has been relatively stable with 5317 cases and 50 deaths.

It may be months before we see a decline in cases. For public health, this is a good thing, as it means we have flattened the curve and kept our medical community from being overwhelmed. The best science says cases will stop growing when we reach a herd immunity of 60-70% of the population either through infection or vaccination.

When we do reopen, we need to be aware that there may be a resurgence of cases, especially in the fall. With cases no longer on a downward trajectory, we would again need to cease in-person gathering.

I encourage you to watch Dr. Michael Osterholm’s conversation with Bishop Ann Svennungsen of the Minneapolis Area Synod. You may have seen Dr. Osterholm and his rational and accurate pandemic forecasts on many news outlets. Not only is Osterholm an infectious disease epidemiologist and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, he is a plain-spoken ELCA member who cares deeply for the church.

“Sobering” is the most common word used to describe Dr. Osterholm’s advice to be ready for months of uncertainty. View at www.facebook.com/mplssynod/videos/619998971928161/

Considerations for when and in what form to gather is based on Christian moral sensibility. Lutherans have always operated on the basis of faith and reason. God has given us hearts to receive faith and heads to think through decisions—especially when they impact other individuals and communities. At a minimum, this means complying with health and safety guidelines and recommendations. Compliance with the bare minimum, though, may not be enough. We want to do all we can as we love our neighbors as ourselves to keep everyone safe and healthy.

As a medical professional said, “This is happening in COVID-19 time.” As much as we want to plan things on our time, we cannot control COVID-19. As we use our heads to discern facts and information, we use our hearts to trust that Christ is leading and guiding us. And, God’s own Spirit gives us peace to calm our fears, and hope to sustain our future.

In the coming weeks, the Office of the Bishop will be sharing many resources to help you be ready for the joyous day when we will gather again in person for worship. Next week, Presiding Bishop Eaton will share resources for gathering in person and I will forward them to you as well. Until then, we continue to worship and love and pray in new ways.

*O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope.
Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance.
Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance.
Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination.
Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams.
All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW 76)*

Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Deborah K. Hutterer".

The Rev. Deborah K. Hutterer
Bishop
Grand Canyon Synod of the ELCA