



Southeastern Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

May 23, 2020

Dear church,

In light of what President Donald Trump said Friday, May 22nd about faith communities gathering in-person for worship immediately, I continue to stand by my asking that our synod congregations do not gather for in-person worship through May and to use the well thought out phased in approach for what physically gathering back may look like for each congregation. There will be many places around our four states that it will not be wise to even gather in early June, due to the age demographic and health of the congregations or given the heightened peak of COVID-19 cases in places that have already “opened back”.

As Bishop William O. Gafkjen of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod has said and I concur:

“The church does not need to re-open. 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 as long as we need to, even as we begin to plan to gather in-person and in new ways when it is safer and we are better prepared to protect God’s beloved. Yes, the ministries of the body of Christ are “essential services,” but we don’t need to sit in a sanctuary to experience and share them.”

“All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). While something like gathering in-person for worship might be “lawful,” that does not mean we should necessarily do it. Rather, we are called to keep our focus on doing what is beneficial, what builds up, and what addresses not only our own needs and well-being, but the needs and well-being of others.

“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 5:13f).

It is not “essential” that churches all reopen for Memorial Day Weekend, or by any specific date that all should rush to. What is essential is that we make wise, smart, safe decisions to ensure the health and well-being of people to ensure that when the church does gather physically; no one becomes sick or dies as a result.

There absolutely has to be a phased in approach to our gathering back. More people will become infected and die if the we don't continue to take this virus serious. The marathon for this continues and we can't sprint through it.

If you are in the Southeastern Synod please look at our COVID-19 gathering back plan for churches. This also includes the guidance from the ELCA. The website is located here: <https://www.elca-ses.org/covid>.

I know that it's not easy to stay at a distance from siblings in Christ. But by doing so, we truly are what we as church have been called to be, those who love our neighbors as ourselves. Love continues to look like an empty church building, but not a closed church. It's incredibly difficult for many of us to not be worshipping together in person. It's incredibly hard for me, too. I am just as eager as you are to be in the physical presence of congregations, leaders and ministries, to gather in person with groups of deacons and pastors, to preach and preside in person, to pass the peace, to share a cup of coffee in the narthex, to laugh and pray and dream and lament together.

But we know and will continue to show our church is open. Open to patience and wisdom. Open to science and common sense. Open to discovering new ways to connect when it is unsafe to "do it the way we've always done it." Open to saving lives by giving up some of the ways we live out traditions we hold dear. Open to wearing masks to show we love our neighbor. Open to keeping the sanctuary closed so more of us can come back together safely when it is time. Our church is open to following Jesus who, himself, spent time in the wilderness. We will remain open, and someday, by the grace of God, we will be able to worship together again. May that be so!

Journeying together with you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin L. Strickland". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+Bishop Kevin L. Strickland