



Southeastern Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

May 14, 2020

Dear church,

The following recommendations for gathering back physically as a congregation are based on the interpretations of our Southeastern Synod's COVID-19 Taskforce from current information and guidance from health agencies, federal and state plans. It offers congregations relevant guidance and a strategy for supporting a safe phased reopening for the physical life of a congregation. Given that this medical crisis is continually changing and the rate of infection varies from community to community we cannot predict what the future may be like or what the additional challenges might be.

The recommendations for congregations to implement a phased strategy to safely gather together again is not a return to pre-pandemic normal. Until there is a cure or vaccine to this virus, we are attempting to help guide your congregation in determining safe ways to continue doing ministry. These recommendations rely on actions we must all consistently take to reduce the spread of COVID-19. They include physically distancing, wearing cloth face coverings, handwashing, cleaning surfaces and staying home if you are sick or instructed to isolate/quarantine. We will only be able to safely maintain our phased strategy efforts if all of us commit to maintaining these recommendations.

Again, these are recommendations to phase back in your local physical buildings but you will want to continue to listen to your local authorities and your congregational members to determine what your next steps will be.

Phasing back into physically meeting for ministries will require your congregation to: 1) continue being flexible to each phase to reduce the likelihood of relapse to a previous phase, and 2) avoid threats that may prevent movement into the next phase. This is a framework; each phase may be adjusted as the understanding of local transmission changes over time. A mid-phase adjustment example might be that after an asymptomatic carrier attended an event and later tested positive, a congregation might adjust back to less programming or physical gatherings until it is determined whether others have been affected. Another example might be that if within your local community hospital capacity and the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) becomes stretched and the local authorities recommend no in-person gatherings, your congregation might need to phase back in-person activities. Remember, flexibility will be key to the health and wellbeing of the community at large.

These recommendations are focused on the ways individuals and congregations can work to protect the safety of our communities while advancing through a phased reopening. Continuing to understand your local concerns is critical to our ministries; thus, the role of a COVID-19

Team for your congregation introduced in a later section will play a vital role in advising and directing your individual congregation through the remainder of this crisis.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has also offered guidance in their document “Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: Returning to Public Worship Being Church Together during COVID-19 Pandemic” please click [HERE](#) for their guidance.

I commend these resources to you to enable your congregation to best prepare for what it means to live into this new normal. I also encourage you, as your phase back into physical gatherings that we do not totally disband all virtual means for worship, bible study, and such. These virtual means are forming communities and are a means for ministry tools for sharing the good news of Jesus. They are also going to be needed more than ever as we continue to keep our communities as safe as possible.

Lastly, I give thanks for each of you and the many ways you continue to be church together and church for the sake of the world. As scripture reminds us, “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” (1 Corinthians 4:1) Siblings in Christ, I am grateful we are engaged in this ministry together and knowing that God’s mercy will see us through; we do not lose heart.

Journeying together with you!

+Bishop Kevin Strickland