



Southeastern Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

April 20, 2020

Dear church,

On the second Sunday of Easter we heard these words: *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* (John 20:19-20)

For over five weeks now, many of us have been like those early disciples, the doors of our houses locked. Sheltering in place. Being church in place. Maybe, like the disciples, we have locked our doors out of fear of the unknown with this virus. More so, we have sheltered in place to save lives literally. This practice has been an opportunity to "love our neighbors as ourselves" by not being with them physically.

In my last correspondence with you, with the urging of the Synod Council, I implored you not to gather for in-person worship through April and possibly May. This was before any of the four governors in our synod made shelter in place orders. Each state's government is handling this differently and choosing to lift their shelter in place by some measures or creating a tiered approach for "opening" back up soon. I have even heard it said, "I can't wait until we get back to normal."

Moving forward, "normal" will have to be drastically different. We now must live into a "new normal." I, like you, desperately pray for an end to this virus, for no more infections, for no more job loss, for no more events and plans canceled, for no more deaths to occur as a result of COVID-19. For that to happen, we cannot, and we must not enter into this "new normal" lightly or hurriedly.

Yes, it is true that in some places, there are less reported cases of infections and, yes, fewer deaths due to this virus. That is because sheltering in place is doing its job and flattening the curve. However, more and more people are also reporting that they are asymptomatic carriers of this virus, which is even more reason to be concerned. Recognizing that we are all antsy to return to worshipping in person, it would be risky at best and irresponsible to do so with sheer urgency. This virus continues to spread and will do so unless precautionary methods are extended.

I, along with the Synod Council, strongly implore and encourage you not to physically gather in worship through May. As you make this decision, please also continue to heed what the CDC, local, and state governments are suggesting. Some restrictions of smaller group gatherings may be lifted in your areas; even so, we encourage you to make the wisest decisions regarding the

health and wellbeing of all those who might be present. We all grieve this decision, but the health and welfare of all of our members are of the utmost importance.

It has been said that we are in a liminal space as a world and a church. Liminal spaces are described as being in the already but not yet moment. We live through what is, knowing what was, and yearn for what is not yet. As one pastor pointed out: “Liminal seasons are thin spaces, where the presence of the divine is palpable. Liminal seasons are ripe opportunities for communities of faith to deepen their practices of group discernment, to watch for the movement of God.”¹

I have been overjoyed watching and witnessing how each of you live in those “thin spaces” and continue to offer places for worship in which people can deepen their faith and watch for the movement of God. You show the world and one another what it means for love to look like an empty church building. You are the Body of Christ alive and active in the world, in your homes, behind locked doors. And there, there Jesus meets you, as he did the disciples and says, “Peace be with you.”

On the synod website (www.elca-ses.org), we have a host of resources available concerning public health information, worship resources with sermons from staff, lists of food and medical assistance, faith formation resources, and pastoral letters from the bishop.

As 1 Peter 1:3a reminds us: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”* We are people who have a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dear pilgrims on this journey, as we move together to the other side of this virus, hold onto the hope of the resurrection and new life that keeps springing up all around. You are not alone! We are in this together!

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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

¹ Susan Beaumont, “How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season” Rowan and Littlefield: London, 2019.