



**Southeastern Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

Dear Southeastern Synod Leaders,

The coronavirus has caused quite a scare for many people, and rightly so. We are taking this virus very seriously, and we encourage all of you to discern the most faithful next step in your context.

On March 12, the Governor of Tennessee (Bill Lee) declared a state of emergency in response to the coronavirus, and perhaps others will follow. All across our synod, college campuses are closing down, and even some city and county schools, are as well. We have already made the decision to cancel a few synod events, including our annual SESLYO Assembly. We do this out of an abundance of caution.

Here is our response to the questions we are receiving as a synod staff:

**Should we cancel worship?**

The decision to cancel worship is made by pastor and council together. It will depend on local circumstances. Congregations should heed the recommendations of health officials and elected leaders. You may want to think of cancelling public worship until Palm Sunday (April 5) and reassess again as Palm Sunday approaches. Encourage people to stay home if they are not feeling well. Others who might consider staying home include the elderly and those with preexisting conditions.

**What if some of our members are quarantined or self-quarantined?**

The ministry of the church continues and even intensifies when people are sick. Ask your parishioners to notify you if they are experiencing health challenges so that you can provide appropriate pastoral care. Visiting the sick, whether at home or in the hospital, should be done judiciously. The quarantined may need groceries or meals delivered. They may need medications. Home communion can be offered with care. Make sure to have the most current household records on file for contact purposes.

**How should we handle communion?**

Pastors should make distribution decisions with their councils. Keep in mind that most germs are passed by hands. Those who prepare communion (altar guild/worship team) should wash hands and perhaps wear gloves. Those who distribute communion should wash hands prior to distribution, especially if they have shaken hands before or during worship.

**Should we pass the peace?**

This is a local decision. A simple bow, and the words, "Peace be with you," to those on either side of you is sufficient. We have also seen folks learn how to use sign language for the passing of the peace.

### **Should we pass an offering plate?**

You can simply leave offering plates in the aisles or have folks process up to the altar to avoid most of the congregation touching the plates. This is an excellent time to promote electronic giving in the congregation - even the synod offers electronic giving for your congregation's mission support.

### **What about our upcoming synod events in June, like Synod Assembly or AFFIRM?**

At this time, we wish to keep these events in place with the hopes that the virus will be contained. We are holding off on making any changes at this time, because the situation is likely to change a few times between now and then.

### **What is the ELCA saying regarding COVID-19?**

<https://elca.org/publichealth> - Bishop Eaton has "emphasized the duty to care for the neighbor, the responsibility of government to protect and provide services to its citizens, a caution about recklessness, and the importance of science, medicine and common sense."

### **What other considerations are there?**

- Stay up on the spread of coronavirus, and recommendations from health officials and elected leaders in your area. Facts and resources can be found at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). We have also curated lots of information here on our synod website: <https://www.elca-ses.org/newsdetail/southeastern-synods-response-to-coronavirus-13430007>.
- See what you can do to care for your neighbor. If someone chooses to stay home, be sure you have their contact information and find out their needs. Seek volunteers to help those in need. Consider making a food collection the next few Sundays so you have food to give to those who may be quarantined. When the crisis abates, unused food can be donated to a food pantry.
- If you hold worship services, tell folks of the changes you may have made for a safer worship experience, like what is being cleaned and what norms are being changed (passing the peace, offering, Communion distribution, etc.).
- If you live stream your services, let your parishioners know how to access the live stream; let them know if the entire service will be streamed, or just the sermon. Also, be sure to let the synod know that you have these services available so that we can curate a list of churches that provide live streams. Make sure that you have the proper licensing to live stream any music performed during your services. Sermons will not require a live stream license.
- If you are a pastor or deacon and test positive for coronavirus, please notify the synod office as soon as possible. We need to know, and we may be able to help you get pastoral coverage.
- If you have meetings coming up, consider if they are necessary, or if you could meet by conference call or video call. Although we don't know with certainty, it may be that the danger zone is March-May. Now is the time to make contingency plans.

- Develop a giving plan. Encourage people to continue their giving so that the ministry of the church can continue, and staff are supported. Promote online giving and sending tithes and offerings in by mail.

We are wise to spend time being prepared for these moments and to respond in a calm manner. As time progresses, we will share new updates with more current information and suggestions.

And so, we pray...

*God of the present moment,  
God who in Jesus stills the storm and soothes the frantic heart,  
bring hope and courage to all who wait or work in uncertainty.  
Bring hope that you will make them the equal of whatever lies ahead.  
Bring them courage to endure what cannot be avoided, for your will is health and wholeness;  
you are God, and we need you.  
Amen.*

*-New Zealand Prayer Book 747*

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Kevin Strickland, Staff, and the Disaster Team of the Southeastern Synod

*This letter is taken in large part from an email from Bishop Mike Rinehart, Staff and the Disaster Team of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod.*