



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

2 July 2021

Dear pastors, deacons, chaplains and church members,

Once again, I thank you for all that you do to bring God's love, wisdom, and strength to all those around you! In this challenging time as we move through and hopefully beyond the pandemic, your life of ministry is especially crucial.

This past Tuesday, Governor Inslee announced the new guidelines for pandemic safety which eliminated nearly all previous restrictions to in-person gatherings and activities. Specifically, the guidelines state:

- Vaccine verification/negative testing: Recommended but not required for large indoor and outdoor events
- Capacity limitations: No restrictions in restaurants, bars, stores, businesses, theaters etc. (except large indoor events of over 10,000 people)
- Physical distancing: No requirements
- Facial coverings: Not required for **vaccinated** individuals, unless required by individual business

I conclude from these guidelines that all of our congregations may now resume indoor worship, Bible studies and all activities. Worship services can include the singing of hymns and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

I encourage you to have open conversations with as many of your leaders and church members as possible about returning to in-person worship, in order to work towards group consensus on how to best do that. The context and factors in each one of your congregations will be different and each one of you will need to decide what is wisest in your situation as you reopen.

For example, thought should be given regarding the safest way to offer the bread and wine in Holy Communion. The new guidelines do not require vaccinated people to wear masks, but still recommend that un-vaccinated people wear masks. Thoughtful care must be given to children and adults who wish to be vaccinated, but are unable to do so. This may lead some congregations to require masks until all are vaccinated.

Many of you are already having those conversations and I applaud you for doing so. As I have said in previous letters, when open conversation and consensus-building takes place, not everyone gets everything they want, but people know that their voice counts, everyone is more knowledgeable about the issues, and good compromises can be reached. (continued)

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The mission of the Southwestern Washington Synod is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ by empowering congregations and Church leaders to grow in worship, education, outreach, stewardship and other ministries.

By the end of July, I believe that all of the congregations in the Synod will have returned to some form of in-person worship, either inside or outside. Many pastors continue to report that only about one-third of their congregation are attending in-person worship. It's natural that many members will still have health concerns and want to wait longer to return in person. Others have gotten used to watching the recorded service later in the week. I believe that the Holy Spirit is leading us to see that online worship is part of the future for many of our congregations. (That's not true for everyone, particularly where the internet is spotty.) I know that this presents a whole new challenge to us. Providing both a live, in-person worship and also an online worship is double work. Many pastors are understandably exhausted from all of the demands already. Yet, our involuntary experimentation with online worship this past year has opened new possibilities for us. Therefore, I am convinced that we need to support each other as we explore the best ways to be both in-person and online. Like the disciples on the roads of Galilee, we are entering yet another time of learning and discovery.

I value so much your commitment and faithfulness in bringing the love, joy, and justice of God to your congregations and communities.

May Christ be with you in every way!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rev. Richard Jaech". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Bishop Rick Jaech