



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

4 June 2021

Dear pastors, deacons and church members,

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.

Last week I met with many of our Synod's pastors and deacons to discuss the matter of returning to in-person worship, which most of our congregations have already begun or are planning to do in the next few weeks. I benefitted from hearing the good ideas, questions, and dilemmas voiced by those in the group and now want to summarize what I learned and offer my own recommendations.

1. This phase of transitioning out of the pandemic is probably more complicated than the phase last year when we all entered the pandemic. There are more variables and options now to sort through, such as vaccination rates in different communities and age groups. Therefore, 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. I promise to support you and pray for you as you do that.
2. I encourage you to have open conversations with as many of your church members as possible about returning to in-person worship, in order to work towards group consensus on how to best do that. Many of you are already having those conversations and I applaud you for doing so. 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.
3. Up until now I have generally cautioned against rushing back to in-person worship too quickly. However, our situation has changed. Vaccination rates are rising. Therefore, I now wish to encourage you to return as soon as possible to in-person worship, Bible study and events. This still must be done thoughtfully, attentive to people's health needs, including church staff. However, people are clearly yearning to be more connected again and gathering for worship is a crucial part of that. As I said before, the exact way you do that will depend on your context and I support the variety of decisions you will make with your leadership.
4. The most recent guidelines from the State of Washington are useful in many ways and should be followed as much as possible. However, there are a few details in those guidelines that present practical and theological challenges that should be considered. The recent ruling from the Washington State Supreme Court grants to churches the right to

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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.

worship in conformance to their own practice and theology. Therefore, we have freedom to make some adjustments to the guidelines, if we have good reasons for doing so.

5. For example, the guidelines say that vaccinated and unvaccinated people must sit in different sections of the church during worship. I think that St. Paul and Martin Luther would shudder at worshippers being screened and divided into groups of the “just” and “unjust”, or the “healthy” and the “impure”. Any groups of people who have ever been labeled as dangerous or unworthy and forced to sit apart (people of color, gay people, women, disabled) will have reactions to this kind of division. Therefore, I advise you to not follow this practice. I think that it is better to have all worshippers wear masks and stay physically distanced, rather than dividing people into groups. However, if you do follow the practice of dividing vaccinated from unvaccinated, it is crucial to have conversation and 100% agreement with all of your members in order to explicitly avoid people feeling judged or pushed away.

6. Another way of phrasing this theological issue is considering the questions, “Who is my neighbor?” and “Who is Jesus referring to when he teaches us to care for ‘the least of these’?” As we return to in-person worship and other events, who are the particularly vulnerable people that we need to think about: children under 12, people who are immune compromised or cannot be vaccinated because of allergies, people who do not have the social support to get vaccinated? It will be important to weigh the needs of the often-forgotten people when making decisions. However, these complications should not freeze us into immobility. Another group at risk of being forgotten are people who live alone and deeply long to return to their church community in an “incarnate” way and celebrate Holy Communion together. This compels us to move towards in-person worship in a deliberate way.

7. When we talked last week, many pastors reported that only about one-third of their congregation attended when they began 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. Other worshippers actually live in Ohio, but started worshipping with you online because their Aunt told them about the good services you were having! 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.

Those are my thoughts. I invite your reactions and suggestions! More than anything, 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!



Bishop Rick Jaech