**Alaska Synod**

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God’s work. Our hands.



May 2, 2020

**On the Possibility of Gathering for Worship While in a Pandemic**

*How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?*(Psalm 137) asked the people exiled in Babylon.  The practices and comfort of what they'd known through worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem where not available to them in that foreign land. In that time of exile they were challenged by prophets and re-formed as God’s people. When they returned to Jerusalem, the temple they longed to gather in had to be rebuilt.

Are we not in a similar time? We will be in this pandemic for at least another year if not longer.  Pandemics usually have 2-3 waves; it is predicted that we will see another wave of infection this fall. Alaskans have done a good job of flattening the curve of infection but we are still in the midst of a global pandemic. We will likely see restrictions on daily life lifted then re-imposed.

The State of Alaska and your local municipality have the responsibility to protect public health. The guidelines of the CDC, the state and your local municipality should be strictly followed. When we all follow these guidelines, we all benefit. This is our labor of love. Talk with your insurance provider about their recommendations for the use of your facility. We are not going back to “normal” any time soon. As we prepare for gathering in limited numbers as a congregation, please consider the following recommendations.

First, the council and pastor will focus the congregation's work and use of resources during this pandemic. This is a time to re-think what the congregation is called to do. The question has gone from “How to do online what we used to do in person” to “What is our ministry now? How shall we worship, learn and serve?”

If you choose to open your building as restrictions loosen, appoint a team who will be responsible for interpreting CDC, state and local guidelines for the use and maintenance of the building and those who gather in it.

Online platforms or conference calls should continue so that those over sixty-five or with health conditions can participate in the life of the congregation. This is a time to expand the connectedness of the congregation through phone conversations, prayer partners, Zoom studies, Zoom coffee hours, etc… We’re about to have a second congregation use the local radio station to broadcast worship so that more people can join in. It is rare that everyone in a congregation is online.

Plans for sanitizing every space (and handle, knob, railing,..) after each use of your building should be developed and followed. Insure that your janitor or volunteers have the needed supplies to thoroughly sanitize everything a person has touched or breathed on. Follow the CDC guidelines.

Have a person keep track of who is in and out of the building in case someone does develop COVID-19 and others need to be informed of that exposure.

While we are practicing physical distance, people should enter and exit the building at different times and by different doorways. Worship leaders should not greet people at the door.  Hand sanitizer or hand washing stands should be at the door.

Bulletins should be placed in the rows prior to worship. Remove hymnals, bibles and anything else normally in the row. Use projection or have everything in a bulletin that is thrown away after one use.

If masks are recommended, expect that people walk through the door of the church with a mask on. Provide disposable masks for those who've forgotten or be ready to ask that person to leave.  A masked usher should be appointed to watch over this.

Nursery care, potlucks and Coffee Hour will not be offered while we are required to be masked and practice physical distancing.

The offering should be received in a way that maintains physical distance. Having an offering basket by a door that people will walk by anyway is an option. The counters should maintain physical distance while counting.

The sharing of peace becomes a greeting done from six feet away.

If the state recommendation is for groups of no more than 10, remember that the pastor and any other worship leaders are in that count. (1 pastor + 9 others = 10)  Household members can sit together but they each count in the total. (Family of six + pastor + 13 others = 20)  Care is needed in scheduling in-person worship so that the requirements of the state and local municipality are not exceeded. Consider how newcomers might participate. Maintain physical distance north, south, east and west. Consider what you will do if more people come to worship than allowed.

Please let me know if you figure out a way to serve communion to people who are masked.

Lutherans are used to singing the liturgy and hymns but during this pandemic, when it is clear that the virus is transmitted through breathing by people who show no signs of being sick, singing is not advised. Consider using instrumental music, or a soloist standing far from those gathered. Singing is like coughing on someone; a singer can spray up to twenty-seven feet.

Signage, Facebook, websites should offer consistent information for those interested in worship, interested in hands-on service, what groups a person can join, financial support, prayer support,...

Give serious consideration to the viral load you are exposing your pastor, worship leaders and janitor to by having multiple services (with cleaning between services). Your pastor and worship leaders do not have to agree to accept that risk.

A graveside service can be followed by a memorial service when more can gather. A small wedding can be followed by a reception when more can gather. If you film it, more people can participate in the live event.

Write to each of your building’s user groups your expectations for the care of those who gather and for the facility. User groups are expected to abide by CDC, state and local mandates as well as the requests of the local congregation.  Breaching the conditions of the letter voids their use agreement with the congregation.

Remember that “you are called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as opportunities for self-indulgence, but become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal 5:13-14)

Remember that while all things may be lawful for you, not all things are beneficial. Nor do all things build up the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23 – Paul says this twice so it must be important)

Remember that the neighbor always comes first and that what we do to the least of these who are members of our family [in Christ], we do to Christ. (Mt 25:40)

Our labor of love continues. May all that we say and do reflect the light and love of Jesus Christ.

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