



Upstate New York Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord, and Savior Jesus Christ.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, ...” These words, taken from the opening chapter of Charles Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities* seem appropriate to me this day as we reflect on the realities in which we find ourselves. It appears that one can choose one or the other regarding the times, I’m going to choose that “These are the best of times.”

While the past six weeks (or is it months?) have been challenging, placed some of us in uncomfortable places with technology, found us making mistakes, competing with others and wondering what is going on, among other things, they have also been weeks that have taught us some good lessons.

We can rise to challenges when they present themselves. So many of you have gone from 0-100 with technology, learning how to Live Stream, FB Live and Zoom. Others have found new ways to connect with parishioner when technology does not work for them. It has been amazing! We have learned that we can conduct the business of the church via meetings that are not in person with great success. We have discovered another gear available to us when things have gotten to be too much. And we have lived into the phrase that has been shared for years and years, “The Church is not a building.” To be sure these days have been difficult and stressful and sometimes left us feeling less than capable but we have survived and grown and learned lessons that will bode well for our future as we move into the next chapter of this pandemic. I am so thankful and proud of all of you, you’ve stepped up and stepped out to meet the needs of your people in new ways. You are a gift to God’s Church. I want you to hear this clearly, you are enough, in fact, you are more than enough.

Now, it is on to the next steps! We are beginning conversations around ‘Lifting the Pause’ or “Re-opening.” I am not a fan of the use of the term “Re-opening”. It suggests that we are going back to what was and we are not. What has been has been, a completely new future awaits. How we get there, wherever there is, will be an indicator of how well we plan for and work with those plans to get us to wherever God is leading us. It is going to be hard work, lots of work, and challenging but we have the opportunity to reshape the church and its ministry in new and amazing ways if we keep our ears open and learn from others and from our mistakes. I look forward to the journey.

Let me begin with a sobering quote:

(The best estimate of epidemiologists is that some social distancing may need to persist into 2022 in the USA to keep the surge of people severely sickened by COVID-19 from overwhelming the health care system. – Journal of Science, April 14, 2020)

That is not what I wanted to read and hear but it is what it is. We are not going back to pre-March church, whatever that looked like. Gone, I’m afraid, will be handshaking or greeters at the

door welcoming folks. Size will matter as regards attendance as those numbers are revealed. How the Eucharist is cared for from start to finish will be a critical issue as well as how our buildings are set up to assure social distancing. The Exchange of the Peace will take on new form if it takes on any form at all and how we receive and process offerings on a weekly basis will change. These are just some of the items to care for in the coming year. The list is long and the task daunting, but it will be necessary to do all of those things and more.

So, where do we begin? Let us begin by remembering that early on in the pandemic all the scientists pretty much agreed that we would be in this for 12-18 months. One of the questions that is raised with greater rapidity regards when we can open our building for worship. In conversations across the synod with Rostered Leaders, Staff and Deans and in light of the Phase One including construction and manufacturing and not churches there is consensus around the fact that **we do not anticipate opening worship before the end of June**. That is my recommendation right now. **Take a deep breath**. Given that the Governor cancelled school for the remainder of the school year on Friday, May 1, more questions have arisen.

The following is from a news briefing earlier this week. "The first phase of a reopening strategy for New York will begin with construction and manufacturing workforces, the governor said. Before moving to the second phase, which is focused on additional essential workforces with low-risk of spread, Cuomo says two weeks will be needed between each phase to monitor its effects.

"One caveat is you can't do anything in any region that would increase the number of visitors to that region," Cuomo warned. "It's possible that you open something in Syracuse or you open something in the north country, where you now see license plates coming in from Connecticut, New Jersey, people from downstate all coming to that area because people they've been locked down and they're looking for an activity."

Cuomo did not provide any reopening timeline beyond suggesting upstate New York could begin reopening in slow phases as soon as May 15, the deadline for his "Pause" order, and will likely start reopening procedures ahead of downstate New York." (News 4 NBC, New York)

The fact of the matter is that the 'Lifting' will be a regional reality. As I write this, Erie County leads the upstate area in confirmed cases of Covid 19 followed by Monroe then Albany, Onondaga and Schenectady. The major urban areas have been hardest hit, as you know and may affect the 'Lifting'. In a briefing on 4/30, the Governor indicated that it is likely that the pause will be extended with some exceptions as he talked about an army of tracers, up to 17,000, covering the state. Throw into that testing and Anti-body testing and it is mindboggling to say the least.

You can begin to understand the challenges we will face and the work that will need to be done. Nowhere in the Governor's plan does he specifically talk about houses of worship, yet, so it's unclear as to what phase we will be involved in. Beyond that, there is going to be a lot of work to do before the doors open and then, the question will be how many people can come through those doors.

In reading regarding the "Lifting" it seems to me that there are a number of steps necessary to take before we can even think about opening doors. Following are some points to follow:



1. Make a plan for how we prepare our buildings to make them ready for people to enter. And then, make a plan for how we continue to clean them. Following is a hyper link to the CDC regarding what needs to be done. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>
2. Prepare those who are doing the work of worship and meetings and the use of the buildings for outside groups when that time comes. It's going to require some new skills and work done in different ways.
3. Make sure that access to the building is controlled. The Narthex of many churches is a gathering place, how do we make that space safe with social distancing?
4. Make a plan for social distancing throughout the worship space as well as the rest of the building, including office space.
5. Wonder about how to reduce touch points in the space so that fewer hands touch fewer items.
6. What will be done with restrooms to make them available? How does one keep those clean during the time people are present?
7. Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. These are going to be uncertain times ahead so clarity in the message being shared will be required.
8. Call your Insurance Company so you remain in compliant with their expectations during the pandemic. I know this seems tedious but some congregations, not in this synod to my knowledge, have been told by their insurance companies that drive-by Communion is not allowed. I'm guessing there are other things they will require in order that you remain compliant with them.

I'm attaching to this mailing, a separate document created by Pr. Aileen Robbins that begins to create a list of what some of the considerations are moving forward. Some of you have already seen this, I think it helps to collect the work in one space.

As you read the above and begin to look at what needs to be done the list is long and will grow longer. In and of itself that clearly indicates that we will not be opening for a while once the 'Lift' begins. Then we will need to listen to numbers and be in line with them moving forward.

Below are some hyperlinks that you might find helpful if you have not seen them yet, I share them with you for informational purposes. Please take a look. The first one is especially interesting as it looks at a possible way the church will move forward into the unknown.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=0uAKQXagwms>

I listed the CDC link above but am putting it here again.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

An article that has made its way around the internet from the Wisconsin Council of Churches

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

Three synods in Texas and Louisiana offer the following thoughts.

<http://bishop.nesynod.org/COVID%20guidelines%20TX-LA%20bishops.pdf>

From the Federal Government this talks about phases and important information to have in hand.

<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6840714/Guidelines.pdf>



Michael T. Osterholm, PhD, MPH from Minnesota

<https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/sites/default/files/public/downloads/cidrap-covid19-viewpoint-part1.pdf>

From the Georgia Conference Mission Board

<https://gabaptist.org/reopening-your-church-building/>

As we move forward, please be patient with yourself and one another, the people of God whom you are called to serve and the process. As you imagine this won't be easy but it will prove effective if we pay attention and follow directions. Remember that the majority of people in this synod who will return to worship are in the 'at risk' category and may not return to worship for quite a while or, as some have told me, 'not until there is a virus'.

If I can help in any way please do not hesitate to be in touch. I hold you each in prayer and hope and stand with you on this journey, just as does the One who has called us and set us apart. God is faithful and God's presence is the one constant in life that we can trust and hold fast to this day and all days.

Follow the facts, not the feelings. Be guided by what is, not what was. Reach out for help without hesitating, don't go it alone. Use your best judgement moving forward, the "lifting" will be regional and you will need to make wise decisions, based on where you are, regarding next steps. In addition, remember, these are the best of times. God is calling us, perhaps kicking and screaming, into the future God is holding out for us. God is with us and will give us the courage and strength needed.

In Christ's Peace and Hope,



John S. Macholz, Bishop

PS I will be hosting on Zoom a couple of conversations around the concerns regarding the celebration of the Eucharist. This will take place across the synod. When we began this journey, the expectation was that this would be a short duration, that is no longer the case.

