



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

*Shepherd me, O God,  
beyond my wants,  
beyond my fears,  
from death into life  
ELW 780*

Dear Friends in Christ,

I was privileged to help draft the [ecumenical response](#) to the governor's declaring that even as Iowa's rate of COVID-19 infection continues to grow, congregations are allowed to gather again for worship. To be sure, this increases some of the pressures people are feeling to resume in-person worship services. As promised, here are some thoughts and recommendations:

- First, the language of "opening up" is less helpful than "coming back" together. In these last weeks you have demonstrated that while buildings may be closed, the ministry of this church has never been shut down. I thank God for creative approaches to ministry that continue to emerge.
- The overwhelming evidence from the medical community makes it clear that it is still too soon for an unlimited return to in-person gatherings for worship. Determining the "right time" for balancing the risk and the need to be together is difficult discern. It will be at least three more weeks before infection trends, resulting from several aspects of communal life resuming this week, will be evident. Waiting at least that long to decide about when to gather makes sense. As for me personally, I will not participate in any in-person gatherings before June, and then I will reassess.
- It is not too soon to be thinking strategically about what is needed to resume in-person worship. Not all congregations will "come back" at the same time. Decision-makers, (this really needs to be a team effort), should work together in weighing possibilities in light of local contexts, including the way space for gathering can be utilized so that the principles of social distancing can be maintained. Remember, this virus is highly transmissible, which requires taking pain-staking steps to minimize the risk of transmission. So be cautious. Because something can be done, does not mean that it should be done. Safety of participants and, by extension, safety for the larger community is critically important. The wisest decision-making will always involve wrestling with the tension between our deep desire to be together and what is in the best interests of the neighbor.
- The governor's declaration assumes "deep cleaning" of church facilities. This is serious business and requires more attention than you might think. There are [specific guidelines provided by the CDC](#), state ([Iowa guidelines](#)), and local public health authorities. In addition to making sure you are adhering to

the guidelines for cleaning, check with your insurance carrier. Some congregations have been warned of additional liability if an outbreak is tied to churches that have not followed the recommended cleaning requirements.

- In addition to provisions for social distancing anywhere in a church building that will be occupied by people when in-person worship resumes, pay attention to other important components of mitigation. People in at-risk categories should be discouraged from attending. No one who exhibits any symptoms of respiratory illness, particularly COVID-19, should be allowed on the premises. For Christians, it is a particularly heavy, but necessary burden to acknowledge that for a time at least, we cannot claim that “all are welcome.” This is not about being exclusive. It is out of love for our neighbors and for the world.
- When the time comes to return, it is unwise to plan on doing everything that we have been missing while apart. First, learn what it means to be together under very different circumstances. Any “homecoming” to the church building should begin with a simple Service of the Word rather than with a service of Holy Communion. Celebrating the meal safely while social distancing is going to be complicated enough and will require careful planning and teaching before attempting it. It will be difficult to resist, given the hunger that has been building for the meal in gathered worship.
- Recent studies have indicated that congregational singing adds to the risk because of the ways people breathe while singing. Regular congregational singing may be akin to a room full of people coughing, which is particularly dangerous during a viral pandemic that attacks the respiratory system.
- Initially, a single service will be more manageable than multiple services because of the cleaning that will be required between services so that those who attend a later service do not face higher risks. This suggests starting smaller than you might initially envision. Multiple services also increase the risk to those worship leaders who are present for each gathering.
- The freedom to gather for worship will increase the pressure to host or lead funerals or weddings. Current practices related to these types of worship, (for funerals, generally graveside only, limited to 10 or fewer people), should remain in place until in-person worship resumes in the congregation. Regarding funerals, local funeral directors may be of assistance.
- Even as congregations prepare to “come back,” whether, in a few weeks or months, people should be honest about the high likelihood that we will spend time apart again. Even if the virus goes “quiet” during the summer (which will require all the social/physical distancing we can muster), almost all the infectious disease experts are warning of the challenge this fall of coping with COVID-19 simultaneously with influenza when it reemerges.

May is a month for taking stock, planning, and resisting the temptation to move too quickly. The challenges are daunting. Even as restrictions are being relaxed, some things will get harder before they get easier. Still, our hope abounds. Jesus, the Good Shepherd knows how people are hurting. Jesus, the gate, beckons us to safety, opening the way to God’s love. Even when we

cannot claim that “all are welcome” to be among us, we can rejoice in proclaiming that “all are welcome to God’s love.” Alleluia!

Peace to you, and life,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Burk". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bishop Michael L. Burk

