May 27, 2020

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

As the colored phases (red – yellow – green) across the state continue to change, so we continue to listen to COVID-19 updates and partners in ministry to offer guidance as you plan your next steps as responsible leaders of the church in communities that are “opening up.”

On Friday, May 22, the last three of our ten counties moved to the Yellow Phase for re-opening. On Friday, May 29, the first three of our ten counties will move to the Green Phase. As a reminder, the Yellow Phase allows for gatherings of up to 25 persons (or 1/3 capacity of the gathering space), with the strong recommendation that the CDC guidelines and precautions be followed. The Green Phase allows more businesses and recreational places to open but advise that gatherings be limited to ½ capacity of the gathering space. The Green Phase does not freely open the door to the way things were before. We still need to follow CDC guidelines and take necessary precautions to make our places safe for all who gather.

Resuming in-person worship presents a number of challenges so the first recommendation is to establish a Safety Team to coordinate all efforts to ensure the safest, physical space for in-person gatherings. That means having in place a plan for:

- sanitizing the space before and after gatherings
- limiting access to others parts of the building not being used
- designating which doors will be used to enter and exit, and can they be propped open
- marking off pews to allow for safe distancing, at least two pews between those being used
- spacing out chairs to allow for safe distancing, removing chairs to limit capacity
- removing items from the pew racks to limit contamination
- limiting restroom use for extreme needs only, or have a way to properly sanitize between each use
- signage offering information and direction
- providing hand sanitizer and additional masks
- communicating this plan to members by mail or email prior to the first gathering

Second recommendation is for the Worship leadership to take other things into consideration, make adjustments and be adaptive:

- folks will need to wear masks and sit in designated areas, family units can certainly stay together
- provide everything in a bulletin and ask folks to take that bulletin home with them
- limit physical contact, greet one another and share the peace at safe distances
- ask folks to not gather in groups in typical gathering spaces, such as the narthex or hallways
- limit the length of the service to 30 or 40 minutes to reduce the amount of time spent together indoors
- limit the use of responses, especially sung responses, and recitation, such as the Creed, and focus more on the Word and prayers
- no singing, humming to a musician’s playing of hymns would be better
- include instrumental music (no wind instruments)
• if a children’s message is included, have children remain seated where they are
• if communion is included, consider offering just one element (see ELCA guidelines for additional suggestions); also consider placing communion as the sending so folks can proceed out the door

As these plans and procedures are agreed upon and put into place by the Safety Team, Worship Team and/or Congregation Council of the congregation, that same leadership needs to be willing to ensure that the plans and procedures are followed by all who come into the worship setting. For now, all attendees need to wear masks and keep at a safe distance, especially when gathering indoors.

Some congregation are engaging in parking lot worship. Others are considering utilizing their pavilions and outdoor spaces that allow them to be in the open air. These are all adaptive ways for in-person worship that are working, especially as the weather gets nicer.

I encourage those who are offering opportunities for worship and gatherings online to continue doing that even if they are resuming in-person worship. I have heard such positive reactions to those videos and livestreamed services. The outreach is amazing.

As stated in earlier pastoral letters, consideration must be taken for the well-being of those most at risk. Encourage folks with existing health conditions or those at high risk due to their age to stay home, at least for the time being. Remember that this group includes some of our rostered leaders. Keep an ear to the reports of COVID-19 cases in your area and react accordingly if numbers spike. We remain responsible for one another.

Throughout this time, we have continued to offer guidance from the Office of the Bishop, most times with strong recommendations. Truth is, I cannot tell you what you can and cannot do in these circumstances. Though my control over your actions is limited, and I fully understand that you are responsible for your own actions, serving as the Bishop of this synod places me in the position of oversight. With that role, I feel responsible for whatever takes place in all of our worshipping communities. If people become ill or die of this virus because of our in-person gatherings, I will feel the weight of that. Above all, I ask that you please be safe and keep in mind your own well-being and the well-being of others as we continue to live into a new way of being the church in community.

Shalom,

+Bishop Barbara J. Collins

For more information and links to resources see www.uss-elca.org/coronavirus,