United as Christ’s Disciples, we Support one another; and Serve God in the World

November 20, 2020

Dear sisters and brothers,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Once again, we find ourselves in a critical situation with a resurgence of the COVID-19 virus in our country that has not left our communities unaffected. Local cases have increased dramatically, and local hospital beds are filling up again with more patients admitted with complications from the virus. This week, Secretary of Health, Dr. Levine, announced new restrictions that include mandatory mask wearing any time you gather with people from outside your household. And the CDC has called on citizens to refrain from gatherings for Thanksgiving that involve bringing households together – even those of the same family.

With these things in mind, I strongly urge our congregations to take all precautions to help protect our members from this deadly virus and, by doing so, also protect our neighbors. For some, this will mean suspending in person worship. Congregations have already found alternative ways to worship that work. I strongly support these efforts and hope congregational leaders and pastors will step back into those methods. For congregations that do not have alternative means for worship, now is a time to live into partnerships with sister congregations and join in with what they can provide. We all need to remember that the call to these actions are based on the two great commandments – to love God and to love our neighbor. These are fulfilled when we act out of concern for others rather than for our own comfort and desires.

Many of our congregations, in the face of this resurgence, have already decided to suspend in person gatherings until further notice, just as they did when the virus first struck our communities. Others continue to meet with strict procedures such as wearing masks, temperature checks, physical distancing, tracking attendance, limiting seating, and not singing. I thank God for the leaders who have made these difficult decisions and continue efforts to provide safe spaces for their members.

Regrettably, some of our congregations have chosen to take few or no precautions. I urge those congregations to change this behavior at least for the sake of their most vulnerable members. On my travels, some individuals have shared with me that they are afraid to attend their home congregation’s worship simply because people will not wear masks. Why is mask wearing such an issue? I understand some may not be happy, may even become angry, when told to take precautions; but we all need to understand that these measures are not about us and our preferences. These measures are about protecting the least among us.
As a final, important note, our congregations currently on the synod’s pulpit and altar supply list need to remember that all supply leaders (pastors and Authorized Lay Worship Leaders) may choose at any time to stay home rather than fulfill their assignment, whether for quarantine or concerns for their own health and safety. This is the same agreement made with them back in the spring. Congregations should have alternative plans ready in the event that a supply worship leader does cancel. Some worship leaders have already asked to not be assigned during this pandemic, so we do not have substitutes available from the synod office.

In addition to this, beginning Advent 1 (November 29) synod staff will not be going out to lead in person worship across the synod territory. It is not safe for us to travel from area to area and place ourselves and congregations in higher risk. We will also suspend in person meetings with councils and committees until at least the new year and will provide alternative ways to meet with groups and individuals.

I am confident that our relationships and love for each other can carry us well through this present time as we look toward the distribution of vaccines in the new year and hold on to the hope that we will once more gather in person without fear. Until then I urge you to keep safe and wear your mask.

Shalom

Bishop