

Our Life as Church Becoming and In-Person Gatherings during a time of Pandemic

Three key recommendations from Bishop Jim Gonia

May 23, 2020

Beloved in Christ in the Rocky Mountain Synod,

I am writing to share with you three key recommendations for our life as church becoming in the Rocky Mountain Synod during this time of pandemic, including guidance on the question of in-person gatherings for congregations and communities of faith. Let me begin with some overarching thoughts and a description of the process by which these recommendations were developed.

First, the question at hand is not about “reopening the church.” Although most of our buildings have been closed during this pandemic, the church itself is not a building. The church is the called people of God, marked by the cross of Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit for our life and witness in the world. The church of Jesus has never been closed; it has taken new shape and form during this pandemic. More than ever, in ways we could never have anticipated, we have been experiencing what it means to be church becoming. The pandemic is not an interruption in our life as the Body of Christ, after which we will return to “normal.” Rather, in the hands of our God who brings life from death, this pandemic—with all of its pain, suffering, disorientation, and frustration—is a serving as a means by which we are being reshaped for our ministry and witness. We will never be the same; we will not return to what we once knew. We are *Christ’s Church Becoming*, becoming what the Spirit needs us to be for the life of the world.

In that light, these recommendations will not guide you back to something that once was. These recommendations do not offer a step-by-step guide for “getting back to normal.” Instead, these recommendations—taken together—invite us to embrace our becoming and invest in the Spirit’s continuing work in and through us.

Second, the process by which these recommendations were developed began by engaging the most reliable resources available, relying on those with particular expertise to help us understand COVID-19 and the related dynamics of this pandemic. Key resources are noted at the end of the recommendations. I encourage you to review those carefully. Of particular importance is the work of noted epidemiologist, Dr. Michael Osterholm, an ELCA member from the Twin Cities. On May 5, the Minneapolis Area Synod hosted a conversation with Dr. Osterholm. Watching this conversation is essential for understanding these recommendations. [View the presentation at this link.](#)

It is also important to understand that these recommendations are a product of our life as *Christ’s Church, Better Together*. The initial draft was informed by my regular engagement with ministries and leaders across our synod as well as in conversation with other ELCA bishops and ecumenical partners. Your Synod Council then reviewed and endorsed the first draft of these recommendations, after which they were discussed by over 150 pastors, deacons, and ministry leaders gathered in a

Zoom conference on May 22. The insight, feedback, and collective wisdom of this group has shaped the version of the recommendations presented to you today.

Finally, I am aware of the variety of contexts within our synod. These recommendations are intentionally broad, offering some clear and specific guidance about essentials while creating space for local adaptation and application. There will be ample opportunity to access a variety of resources related to each of these three recommendations.

In order to assist congregations and ministries of our synod in engaging these recommendations, a Webinar for congregational presidents and council members is scheduled for Thursday, May 28, at 6 p.m. The Zoom meeting link is:

<https://zoom.us/j/933036592> Meeting ID: 933 036 592
Phone only: 1-669-900-6833 Meeting ID: 933 036 592

I am grateful for our life and ministry as Christ's Church as members of the ELCA here in the Rocky Mountain Synod. I am grateful for you and your faithful witness to the gospel, as together we proclaim and embody God's unconditional love for the sake of the world.

Yours in Faith,



Bishop Jim Gonia

Our Life as Church Becoming and In-Person Gatherings during a time of Pandemic: Recommendations for Congregations and Ministries of the ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to use an online/digital platform for corporate worship through at least August 31; there is a strong likelihood that such need will continue through the end of the calendar year or longer given public health requirements for all parishioners to safely gather for corporate in-person worship in church buildings. This recommendation will be reevaluated in mid-August in light of any new developments.**

Rationale:

- In-person worship has very high-risk factors for spreading COVID-19.
 - People are in close proximity in enclosed space for an extended period of time.
 - Given that COVID-19 is thought to be spread through the air or by contaminated surfaces, high risk activities include congregational singing/spoken liturgy, offering, passing of the peace, celebration of Holy Communion, post-worship fellowship, shared use of potentially contaminated surfaces from doors to restrooms.

- It is estimated that up to a third of people with COVID-19 are asymptomatic; without access to regular testing it is impossible to know who might spread the virus.
- The safe practices needed to reduce the risk factors are time-consuming, limit participation, and constrict what is possible for a meaningful community worship experience.
 - Attention must be given to the airflow of the worship space as well as adequate cleaning of all surfaces.
 - Limited numbers will be allowed in worship spaces in order to accommodate physical distancing.
 - Those over 65 and those with risk factors would be highly discouraged from attending.
 - Participants would be required to wear masks; activities involving touching shared surfaces would be discouraged.
 - Given the spread of COVID-19 through the air, there would be necessary restrictions on key activities such as congregational singing, spoken liturgy, and fellowship time.
 - There could be legal risks and/or insurance implications for congregations that used their buildings for in-person corporate worship, especially if safety protocols were not honored or if someone became infected by participating.
- Pastors and ministry leaders would face a potentially unsustainable increase in workload in order to provide multiple in-person worship options (due to the limitation of the number of participants at any single gathering) while also providing continued digital/online worship for those unable to gather in-person due to risk factors.

Encouragements:

- Use this time to invest deeply in online/digitally based worship.
 - Intentionally work to equip those in the congregation without adequate means or knowledge so that everyone has the option to participate in online/digital worship.
 - Experiment with different platforms and styles (live, recorded, mixture of both) to expand your options and extend your reach.
 - Be willing to learn what you don't yet know; there are many ways to be resourced for online/digital platforms.
 - Survey your community to see what is working best to nurture spiritual life. Be willing to change what is not effective.
 - Pursue collaborative efforts with other congregations, communities of faith, and ministries. Invite area ministers or partner ministries (campus ministry, outdoor ministries, ministry agencies) to preach or help lead your worship. Offer joint worship services with other congregations.
 - Maximize opportunities to invite and welcome those who have not or cannot worship in-person; consider how an online/digital worship might continue after the pandemic.
- Steward your sacramental ministry.
 - Holy Communion: for those who have been refraining from celebrating Holy Communion, continue offering alternative spiritual practices or consider offering Holy Communion using a digital/online platform (see [Holy Communion recommendations](#)).
 - Baptism: consider how baptisms can be celebrated meaningfully in the context of worship using a digital/online platform.

2. It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith consider how to offer low-risk in-person gatherings tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of the various people within your setting.

Rationale:

- Given the current length of this pandemic and the likelihood that it will continue for some time, people need opportunities and permission to engage in low-risk in-person contact in order to sustainably uphold the most important safety protocols that prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Members of our congregations and communities of faith miss being with each other in person and long to connect directly.
- While no in-person gathering during a pandemic is risk-free, there are ways to assess risk factors based on known vulnerabilities (ie. age, underlying health factors) and the availability of testing.

Encouragements

- Use this as a time to foster small group opportunities to nurture and deepen the spiritual life of the community, whether people meet online/digitally or in-person, or both.
- For those least at risk: consider offering opportunities to gather safely in small groups (up to ten) for activities such as:
 - sharing together in the online/digital worship;
 - Bible study or faith formation activities;
 - prayer and support;
 - addressing individual and collective grief;
 - sharing in a spiritual practice;
 - fellowship.
- Under current conditions, any in-person gatherings should prioritize:
 - Using outside venues whenever possible (parks, homes with large yards) respecting physical distancing and use of masks;
 - Making sure any inside venue is well-ventilated while respecting physical distancing and use of masks;
 - Refraining from sharing food as a group; everyone should bring their own nourishment;
 - Addressing the needs of any children in the group, including the challenge of requiring children to practice safety protocols such as physical distancing;
 - Addressing our human inclination to “lower our guard” when we’re together which can compromise safety protocols.
- For those at higher risk: consider forms of visitation that could be offered by lower risk members (an individual, couple or family) while respecting safety measures (physical distancing, use of masks, outside venues). Activities might include:
 - Family-to-family visits, such as children drawing cheerful chalk art on the driveway of seniors while physically distanced;
 - Visiting while delivering worship materials or a care package;
 - Picking up items for donation or sharing in a front yard prayer.
- Recognizing that pastoral care presents a particular challenge during this pandemic, consider the following:
 - Continue to foster a spirit of mutual care among members using phone or digital/online platforms, remembering that pastoral care is a ministry of the whole congregation;

- Evaluate when it is possible to offer low-risk, in-person care while tending to recommended practices;
- Evaluate when the use of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) may be appropriate for a pastoral care need.
- Recognize the personal risk factors for the pastor or deacon; any in-person pastoral care may need to be delegated to others.
- For funerals/memorial services: consider how to blend an in-person component with online accessibility for others.

3. It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith use this time to pay particular attention as people of faith to those in your community, in our nation, and in this world who are most vulnerable during the pandemic and let that inform your ministry efforts.

Rationale:

- Evidence indicates that communities of color in the US are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19; as church that is still 94% white and grappling with our understanding of racism and privilege, it is essential that we grapple to understand and address the systemic issues underlying this dynamic.
- Globally, the spread of COVID-19 will be hardest on nations with less economic means; refugee and migrant populations are particularly vulnerable during this time. As a church that values our glocal (global/local) identity, we are invested in the well-being of our global neighbors.
- The elderly have the highest COVID-19 death rate nationally and internationally. As a church that includes a high number of seniors, our intentional and focused care for all elderly neighbors in the face of the vulnerabilities caused by this pandemic is essential.
- People with existing emotional challenges are at high risk; as a church committed to welcoming the gifts of all people while also honestly addressing issues of mental health, we are positioned to accompany those facing the emotional challenges of these days. We must also be prepared to address the individual and collective experience of trauma and grief experienced by all people during this pandemic.
- The unemployment rate in the US is at historic highs, leaving many neighbors facing food insecurity; as a church committed to serving the neighbor in need as an expression of our faith, we can learn new ways to mobilize our generosity for the sake of serving.

Encouragements:

- Use this time to prioritize learning about the impact of racism and white privilege in the US as well as the underlying reasons for global disparities among nations. There are many excellent resources available through our churchwide organization and synod, including our ELCA Social Statements.
- Review your congregational ministries and ask how they might be realigned to directly address the vulnerabilities caused by this pandemic. In particular, pay attention to how your congregation can meaningfully engage with:
 - communities of color;
 - global companion churches;
 - the elderly;
 - those facing emotional or mental challenges
 - the unemployed.

Our Life as Church Becoming and In-Person Gatherings during a time of Pandemic RESOURCES

[ELCA: Considerations for Returning to In-Person Worship](#)

[When Your Church Reopens, Here's How to Meet Safely](#)

By Daniel Chin – Christianity Today, May 6, 2020

[The Risks - Know Them - Avoid Them](#)

Erin S. Bromage, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

[Americans Start To Feel Quarantine Fatigue](#)

Here & Now's Jeremy Hobson speaks with Julia Marcus (@JuliaLMarcus) is an infectious disease epidemiologist and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, who recently wrote about the idea of quarantine fatigue in The Atlantic. This segment aired on May 13, 2020.

[Quarantine Fatigue Is Real](#)

By Julia Marcus – The Atlantic, May 11, 2020

[Redefining vulnerability in the era of COVID-19](#)

The Lancet, April 4, 2020

[The COVID-19 Response Is Failing Communities of Color](#)

By Margaret S. Pichardo, Briana Christophers, Gezzer Ortega – May 7, 2020

[‘We’re angry and we’re hurting.’ Why communities of color suffer more from COVID-19](#)

PBS News Hour – May 12, 2020