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A congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

May 18, 2020

People of God at St Paul Lutheran Church-

Your council met last Saturday, May 16, and discussed our physical gathering strategy. Here are some things you should know.

#### What is a physical gathering strategy?

A physical gathering strategy is the plan for how and when a congregation will get back together for in-person activities like worship in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike a business, this is not about “re-opening” the church – because the church was never closed. As we have heard before, the building is not the church; the people are the church. (This is important, as you will see.)

#### What is the point of getting back together in person?

Before I share with you the council’s decision, we need to ask an important question. “What is the point of getting back together in person?” Yes, that is what we are used to. Yes, all of us like being physically present with one another for worship. However, think of it this way.

Some businesses in Ohio are starting to re-open with the recommendation that both the employees and customers wear masks. That’s fine. The event of that transaction between employee and customer is only able to happen in that particular in-person environment. For example, I recently had to ship a package so I went to the UPS store to do it. I had to go there in person to hand the package to them. I couldn’t do that online. I wore my mask, the employees wore their masks, we kept social distance, and it was fine. I was in and out of the store in 5 minutes. The reason businesses are re-opening is because they can’t have that interaction except in person. You cannot eat at an online restaurant, for example. Yes, you can talk to someone on video chat while you eat a meal at home – but that’s not being at a restaurant. You have to be at the restaurant for that particular interaction to happen.

Regarding the life of the church, is there a particular reason (other than, “This is the way we’ve always done it”) that we must be together in person? Is there something about our interaction and life together that we cannot do online? The obvious answer is Holy Communion. We cannot celebrate Holy Communion online. That is something that must be done in person.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, many of us miss gathering together for Holy Communion, and it will be wonderful when we can do that again. However, rushing to get back together for Holy Communion is not worth putting others at risk. Both ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and Southern Ohio Synod Bishop Suzanne Dillahunt have supported the idea of refraining from celebrating Holy Communion during this pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent explanation on why online communion is theologically inappropriate, especially from a Lutheran perspective, please read this 3-page article written by three modern Lutheran scholars entitled “Concerning Online Communion.” [https://associationdatabase.com/aws/SOS/asset\\_manager/get\\_file/439016?ver=2](https://associationdatabase.com/aws/SOS/asset_manager/get_file/439016?ver=2) It is also theologically inappropriate to do “drive through communion” as if communion were fast food that you could pick up through a window. It also does not work to “schedule a time” to receive Holy Communion – because this sacrament is intended to be something shared by the whole assembly when they are gathered together, not in small groups like family units.

Even without celebrating Holy Communion, we can still continue to worship together online with the Service of the Word. We can continue to share the peace through the comments section on Facebook Live. We can continue to sing the hymns during worship from our own homes. We can continue to pray. We can continue to call each other on the phone. We can continue to learn through online Bible studies. Most importantly, we can continue to keep each other safe.

Unlike a business – like the UPS store – that cannot function without in-person interaction, the church is able to adapt. We are still the church even when we cannot be physically together. As I mentioned earlier, the church is not the building. The church is the people. This pandemic has helped us get a much better sense of our identity as the church. Who are we when we are forced not to be together in a building? Well, we are still the church. That part hasn't changed at all. We just do our ministry in a slightly different way now. We can't get together in our building anymore, but the church is not closed!

### When will we start getting back together for in person worship?

This is the question all of you have been wondering about. After considering our identity as the church, after paying close attention to reports from Governor DeWine's office, after listening to important information from the synod office including some vital scientific information, and after prayerful discussion, your council has decided that **we will not be thinking about getting back together for in person activities such worship until the ban on mass gatherings of any size has been lifted. At that time, council will reevaluate the situation and discern appropriate next steps.**

### But that could be a very long time from now! Why can't we get back together sooner than that?

Yes, that could be a very long time from now. However, the safety of our members – especially the most vulnerable, like the older members – is our top priority in making this decision. Coming together any earlier than that could still expose any of us to catching this virus.

You may hear that some congregations are planning to resume in person worship earlier than this. However, each physical gathering strategy is different for each congregation. There is no one-size-fits-all. Just because one congregation does one thing in their context, that does not mean it will work in another context. It is the responsibility of each congregational leadership team to discern the wisest choice in their particular context for keeping their people safe.

Based upon my recommendation, your council has decided to wait because, if we were to gather together in person any earlier, there would be many health protocols that we would need to have in place. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Everyone, including children, would need to wear a mask.
- There would be no singing (because singing transmits aerosols – which are the particles from your mouth that float in the air and contain the virus).
- There wouldn't be any handshakes, hugs, or passing of the peace.
- There wouldn't be any passing of the offering plate.
- Greeters would have stand 6 feet away from people when welcoming them.
- Communion distribution would need to be different to prevent touch contamination.
- The children's messages would be eliminated because of the close proximity to the kids.
- Every other pew (or more) would need to be blocked off to encourage social distancing when people are seated.
- Hymnals, pew pads, pencils, prayer bears, printed bulletins, etc would be removed from the pews to reduce frequently touched items.
- All worship spaces and materials would need to be thoroughly cleaned after each service.

Although technically these procedures could be followed, your council, the Worship and Music team, and I have all agreed that it would not be a very worshipful experience. We would be more focused on keeping these safety protocols in place instead of being focused on God. Plus, staying on top of these protocols is not only a daunting task, but it would also very likely be financially expensive.

In talking with many of you on the phone over these last few weeks, I know that you want to get back together in person. I do too. However, I also know that you understand the importance of looking out for your neighbor. Although continuing to stay apart from one another is not the ideal situation and it makes many of us sad, it is still the wisest choice under these circumstances.

Here are some answers to other important questions you may have at this time.

#### I am unable to get on Facebook to participate in the online service. How can I stay connected?

If you are unable to join us for the Facebook Live service on Sunday mornings at 10am, please remember that I post the video of the service to YouTube as soon as I can. You are welcome to see the video of the service at a later time.

If you are technologically challenged or simply don't want to mess with computers at all, Marcie has been sending out hard copies of my sermons every week to those who would like to receive them. If you have not received them yet and would like to be put on this mailing list, please contact either Marcie or me and we will make sure you start receiving them. This will help you to still hear the message of the sermon each week. Also, some who are already receiving these hard copies have then passed them on to other family members or friends for them to read too. That's great.

Also, remember that phone calls and even handwritten letters are great ways to stay connected with others too. This pandemic is forcing us to be more intentional about how we are maintaining our relationships with one another. Feel free to call or write to other members to stay connected.

#### What will be done about Christian education?

Two Zoom classes have started on Sunday mornings for children's Christian education. Rachel Lammi is leading a group for the kids in grades 6 and under. Claire Corbett is leading one for youth in grades 7 and up. Both groups meet on Sunday morning at 11am through Zoom. If your children have not participated in these classes yet, please contact the appropriate leader for more information.

The adult Bible study is currently on break for the summer. However, we will resume with a study of the Psalms beginning in September. Whether we are gathering in person by then or not, the group that meets on Wednesdays from 3:30-4:30pm will continue to have online participation. Either all group members will participate online (if we're not physically together by then) or the class will include both in person and online participation. If you would like more information about participating in this study, please contact me.

#### What will we do about the first communion class?

Prior to this pandemic, we were planning on having the first communion class for Rose Lammi and Jensen Springer. However, that did not happen. Shortly after we are able to get back together in person, though, these two will have their class and then receive their first communion. Not only will all of us rejoice at being gathered around Christ's table again, it will be wonderful to welcome these two to the table with us.

What will we do about funerals and memorials?

Shortly after we are able to get back together in person, we will resume having funerals and memorials here. For example, we will have a memorial service for Larry Alspach once we are back together in person.

Will the building be sanitized and ready for us to get back together?

Yes, of course. Mark and Marcie Griffin are working hard to keep the building clean and sanitized to prepare for when we can return here in person.

Will we continue to livestream worship when we get back together in person?

Your council and I both support this idea, and it is currently being researched. Rob Leach is looking into what technology we would need to make this happen. We will keep you informed.

Final Thoughts

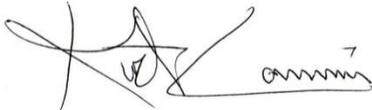
As I mentioned earlier, when thinking about our physical gathering strategy, the top priority is the safety and health of our members. I am very happy that no one here at St Paul has contracted COVID-19. Everyone is staying safe and healthy, and we want to keep it that way. Since mid-March, we have been able to worship together online, stay in contact with one another through phone calls and video chats, and do ministry together without putting anyone at risk. We will continue to do so.

Thank you all for your faithfulness, for your love of others here at St Paul, for your concern for those who are vulnerable, for the ways you live out being the church in the world, and for the ways you continue to share God's love with others – even in the midst of this pandemic.

Because of Christ, we are still the church.

I am praying for all of you.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kurt Lammi', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Pastor Kurt Lammi