

# COVID-19

## *CORONAVIRUS*

### Resources for Congregations



South-Central Synod of Wisconsin  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

March 7, 2020

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## **ELCA PRESIDING BISHOP ADDRESSES CONCERNS ABOUT COVID-19**

In 1527 the plague returned to Wittenberg, Germany. Two hundred years earlier the plague had swept across Europe killing up to 40% of the population. Understandably, people were anxious and wondered what a safe and faithful response might be. In answer to this, Martin Luther wrote "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague." In it, he emphasized the duty to care for the neighbor, the responsibility of government to protect and provide services to its citizens, a caution about recklessness, and the importance of science, medicine and common sense.

To provide care for the neighbor, Luther recommended that pastors, those in public office, doctors and public servants should remain in the city. Luther himself remained in Wittenberg to care for his people. He recommended that public hospitals be built to accommodate those with the plague. He condemned those who took unnecessary risks that put themselves and others in danger of contagion. Luther also encouraged the use of reason and medicine, writing, "God has created medicines and has provided us with intelligence to guard and take care of the body. ... Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence" ("Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," 1527).

We are living in the time of the coronavirus. We are also living in the time of social media and constant, relentless news coverage. Many of our people have the same concerns as those in Luther's day. Many of our people are anxious. Luther's counsel, based on Scripture, is still sound. Respect the disease. Do not take unnecessary risks. Provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the neighbor. Make use of medical aid. Care for one another, especially the most vulnerable.

The churchwide organization recommends the following for churchwide staff: Wash your hands, stay home when you are sick, wear a mask if you have symptoms, consult your medical provider. Bishops and pastors will provide guidelines for worship and church gatherings.

Luther also reminded his people and us that we should trust God's faithfulness and promises, particularly the promise eternal life. Paul writes: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8).

In peace,

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## RESPONSE FROM SYNOD BISHOP PETER ROGNES

In just the past few days I've seen many advisories in response to the spread of the coronavirus, including several letters from bishops to their synods, and from pastors to their congregation. This of course is understandable, as we seek to respond appropriately to concerns about how to exercise care over the gatherings of people in our care. Some are pretty long and some pretty technical.

I borrow – with permission – some advice from Bishop Guy Erwin in California, and Pastor Rebecca Ninke here in this synod.

Among Bishop Erwin's counsel:

Remain calm and encourage others to be calm. The spread of new flu-like viruses of varying virulence is an annual event. We can rely on public health agencies to keep us informed on the disease's progress and give us basic precautionary information. Be calm: there is every likelihood that this will be no more severe than the seasonal flu (which, people often forget, also brings a significant number of deaths each year). Constant repetition of media reports and news of illness throughout the world can make the situation seem much worse than it actually is. Our duty to our families and neighbors is to take the virus seriously, but to not allow ourselves to react in panic and alarm. Others may depend on your own calmness; practice it. Encourage everyone to monitor their own health; if someone develops any flu-like symptoms, they should seek medical help, let others know, and stay home.

Treat this like any flu epidemic. Be vigilant in washing your hands often and thoroughly, and/or use hand sanitizer. Try not to touch your face, be cautious about touching surfaces in public places; cover your coughs and sneezes with your elbow and avoid unnecessary handshaking and hugging. Be more aware than usual of things you touch and handle. Thorough hand washing with soap on a regular basis is much to be recommended, especially often after shaking hands, blowing your nose, using door handles, etc.

Continue to observe a holy Lent. Our public lives and churchgoing need not change significantly. Simply remember that in a public place, together with numbers of other people and touching many things that others have touched, it is important to be careful. In church, specifically...

- Suspend handshaking/sharing the peace until flu season is over
- Consider taking the offering in ways other than passing the plate along the pew
- Use individual cups for communion – more sanitary than either intinction or common cup. Remind people who may prefer to receive only the bread of our teaching that each element is complete and sufficient in itself to communicate to us God's grace and healing in the sacrament.

- Do extra cleaning of door handles, bathrooms, etc. with bleach and/or sanitizers
- Request Lenten dinner participants to use hand sanitizer generously and do frequent hand-washing. Avoid open bowls for chips, etc.; use utensils only for self-serving.

Bishop Erwin, a Reformation scholar, adds this (a similar piece appeared recently in *Christianity Today*): “Centuries ago in 1527, facing a virulent plague far more deadly than the one that challenges us right now, Martin Luther told his people that even when in danger themselves, their first duty is the love of neighbor to which Jesus calls us all. It is foolish, he taught, not to take common-sense precautions; it is equally foolish to allow exaggerated fears to separate us from those we might be able to help, or to cause us to be concerned only for ourselves. In this Lenten season we are already called to a deeper consciousness of our own fragility and mortality and our need for God and one another—let us pray and trust that God will bring us and all our people safely and in comfort to their Easter hope.”

Grace and Peace,

Rev. Peter Rogness  
Interim Bishop  
South-Central Synod of Wisconsin-ELCA

## **WORSHIP RESOURCES: WORSHIP IN TIMES OF PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS**

When anxiety is high in our culture, worship continues to be a primary location for the proclamation both of the good news of Jesus Christ and of the continuing compassion and care of God in the midst of our humanity. It is a place where we can find solace and reassurance in the midst of our fears. Great care should be taken to continue this central ministry of the church, especially in these times. Congregations are advised to use common sense and intentional action with regard to preventing the spread of pathogens while continuing to gather around the means of grace. In times of anxiety about the spread of such pathogens as COVID-19 (coronavirus) or influenza, churches are advised to follow the advice of the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and Prevention and the [World Health Organization](#) regarding gatherings of people. At this time, it is not necessary to cancel worship services or stop gathering around the means of grace. However, worship leaders should take some time to be well informed of the situation in their area and to examine worship practices with regard to the spread of pathogens, perhaps making small changes that will help alleviate the anxiety of the gathered assembly.

### *Passing of the peace*

The passing of the peace is an integral way that the assembly recognizes the presence of the peace of Christ in their midst. It is not necessary to eliminate the passing of the peace from the worship service. However, it may be advisable, based on your local situation, for the presider to suggest how the assembly may greet one another without handshakes. The verbal greeting paired with a reverent bow may be suggested. Alternatively, congregations may offer hand sanitizer for use after the passing of the peace in an inconspicuous way by placing sanitizer bottles at the ends of pews, in pew racks or under chairs. For more information, please see the ELCA Worship frequently asked question "[What is the Exchange of Peace?](#)"

### *Holy Communion*

Many of our worship concerns in times of fear concerning the spread of pathogens center around the means of distribution of the elements at communion. Consider your local situation and if the risk is real or imagined. There may be no reason in your area to alter your communion distribution practices. Local worshipping communities will make decisions that both reflect the nature and meaning of Holy Communion, and make sense in their context.

Some common-sense precautions may be all that is necessary:

- People (including pastors) who are ill with the virus or the flu should be encouraged to stay home from public worship.
- Servers of the meal should wash their hands before distributing the elements. This can be accomplished by providing on the credence table to the side of the altar a lavabo bowl that contains warm water and a small amount of antiseptic soap or by providing hand sanitizer in the sacristy or at another convenient location near the chancel.
- Thoroughly wash all communion vessels in hot water with disinfectant soap following each use.
- Since the earliest centuries, the church has made use of the common cup without credible evidence that the practice contributes to the spread of disease. However, any practice that uses one vessel that will be touched by a number of people is brought under scrutiny in times of public health concerns. Both the mouths that come in contact with a common cup and the hands that may come in contact with the bread and wine in intinction carry pathogens. Even so, given the strength of this symbol of unity in the meal and the historical precedent, the use of the common cup is preferable to intinction. Historically, the church has been served without ill effect by favoring sacramental wine with a higher alcohol content (18%), normally served in a metal cup, thoroughly wiped (on both the inside and the outside of the rim) and turned for each communicant.
- An alternative to intinction or drinking from a common cup may be provided. During times of great fear and concern, congregations may choose to distribute wine by pouring it from one common pouring chalice into small cups, thereby maintaining the symbol of the common cup.
- If individuals are particularly hesitant about the communion elements for pressing reasons of health, they may commune under one element ([“The Use of the Means of Grace,”](#) Application 44C). The pastor may assure them that the crucified and risen Christ is fully present in, with and under this one element. While our confessions speak against communion “in one form,” their intent is to protest the practice of withholding the cup from the whole assembly ([“The Use of the Means of Grace,”](#) Application 44D).

For more information, please see the ELCA Worship frequently asked question [“How do we distribute Holy Communion?”](#)

## *Conclusion*

Especially in times of need we are reminded that Jesus Christ is God's living bread come down from heaven for the life of the world. During these times, particularly with a communal health concern, the Sunday assembly of Christians around word and sacrament is an important sign of resurrection hope in the midst of fear and trouble. We taste and see the Risen Christ's presence in the community gathered around word and meal. In this eucharistic assembly we pray for the needs of a suffering world, and from this eucharistic assembly we are sent to care for all our neighbors who are sick, hurt and hungry.

Further questions may be directed to Worship team of the Office of the Presiding Bishop at 800- 638-3522, ext. 2590, or [worship@elca.org](mailto:worship@elca.org).

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# INFORMATION FOR FAITH & SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES FROM THE DANE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

## Preparing Faith & Spiritual Communities for Coronavirus

Tips to prevent its spread and prepare for possible disruption to your services and activities

Take time now to ensure your community is ready:

### Develop a plan.

Plan the strategies you will use to help keep members healthy. How will you share accurate information? How will you provide services—especially for vulnerable populations—if you are short staffed? See our fact sheet for workplaces for more ideas: [bit.ly/prepforworkplaces](https://bit.ly/prepforworkplaces).

### Encourage sick people to stay home.

Sick people should not come to services, classes, or other events. Encourage participation with remote options if you offer them. If you typically require attendance for certain classes, implement flexible attendance policies.

### Offer options to participate remotely.

Tape or livestream services, classes, and events. Communicate these options to members.

### Consider temporarily altering certain customs and rites.

Many communities have a time of greeting one another by shaking hands or embracing. Suggest members nod or smile instead. If your community emphasizes eating or drinking from shared dishes or cups, consider using single serve options instead. Offer hand sanitizer before these types of activities.

### Promote everyday prevention measures.

CDC has lots of resources: [bit.ly/cdcfluresources](https://bit.ly/cdcfluresources). Include reminders in bulletins, programs, and other materials about staying home when sick, covering cough/sneezes with tissues, and washing hands. Reinforce these messages with kids during their lessons, as appropriate.



**Work with your cleaning staff to make sure spaces are disinfected frequently and correctly.** The CDC has basic information on cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing: [bit.ly/cleaningworkspaces](https://bit.ly/cleaningworkspaces).

### Keep a supply of tissues, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes.

Stock these items in seating and gathering areas. Encourage members to use these items often.

### Suggest people spread out.

If you have the room, suggest people spread about three feet apart during services, classes, and events.

### Make a plan for when you would postpone or cancel services, classes, or events.

At what point would you postpone or cancel services? How would you communicate scheduling changes?

### Reinforce food safety practices.

Many communities prepare and serve meals together. Continue to follow the food preparation and handling traditions you already practice and add extra emphasis on cleaning surfaces and washing hands.

### Promote the flu shot.

Talk to members about the importance of getting a flu shot. In the future, consider hosting vaccination clinics.

### Promote accurate sources of information.

Stay informed through [the CDC](https://www.cdc.gov), [the Wisconsin Department of Health Services](https://www.wisconsin.gov), and [Public Health Madison & Dane County](https://www.danehealth.org).

## HELPFUL LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\) COVID-19 Website](#)
- [World Health Organization COVID-19 Website](#)
- [Bishop Elisabeth Eaton's Statement](#)
- [ELCA Worship Resources \(PDF\)](#)
- [Dane County Health Department Fact Sheet for Churches \(PDF\)](#)  
*Working links are located in this PDF*
- [Wisconsin Department of Health Services COVID-19 Website](#)
- South-Central Synod Area County Health Department Websites:
  - [Adams](#)
  - [Columbia](#)
  - [Dane](#)
  - [Dodge](#)
  - [Grant](#)
  - [Green](#)
  - [Iowa](#)
  - [Jefferson](#)
  - [Lafayette](#)
  - [Richland](#)
  - [Rock](#)
  - [Sauk](#)
  - [Walworth](#)