



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



April 1, 2020

Some Reflections on our Journey Together
An Occasional (pretty much monthly) Letter from Bishop Peter Rogness

Dear Ministry Partners,

In my early months here, I had conceived of letters like this being monthly, stay-in-touch communications. The swirling events of the past month have seen me writing often; in addition, our synod's website and *What Matters* newsletter have been overflowing with resources provided in order to be helpful as our church life so drastically changes. I have been heartened to see pastors and congregations responding faithfully to care for each community of faith that makes up our synod.

We are not a top-down, all-instructions-from-outside church, and we see that expressed in the variety of responses given in our synod. I see great creativity and variety in how leaders and congregations are finding ways to have each local congregation stay connected and alive. At the same time, we are a single church body, held together with a common theology and shared life, that inevitably holds us tied together by patterns of church life in which we are each reflected in each other's life and ministry. We share insights and how-to's in streaming worship, organizing communication networks, pastoral care of members. I've communicated counsel as to worship practices around Holy Communion, while at the same time recognizing that we have differing practices emerging in some of our churches. In the end, I have to trust pastoral leadership and congregational wisdom to care well for the people in each place.

Immediate and Long-Range Impact: Let's talk about money.

The rush to the federal [CARES Act](#) and its two trillion-dollar aid package came about because individual employees and businesses large and small are already feeling impacts, and those impacts are going to grow before they abate. Churches and church employees are no different. Income drops when one blizzard cancels one weekend's service; imagine what this impact of cancelled serves for several months could and likely will do to the financial health of our ministries.

So as loathe as Lutherans are to talk bluntly about money, let me use this space for some blunt talk about money!

1. Now is the time to be bold and frequent in conversation with our people about the need for our ministries to remain strong. We need not apologize; all that we do – the nurturing of the community of faith, the provision for gathering in worship and caring for the souls of our people, the presence we have in our communities – all of these are *vitaly important ministries*, and all of them exist because together people are paying the costs of these ministries. Congregational Councils should consider activating the kind of member-to-member encouraging contact that we usually reserve for the occasional stewardship appeal. "The costs of our ministry don't diminish at all during this time. The need for our ministries is more than ever. Obviously, some of you have been laid off or have already lost income, but many of you continue to have income. If you are able, this is a time to step up your financial support, to make up for those down the pew from you who are unable to support as they have. It's another way we support one another. The ministries we support not only in our own congregation but literally around the world depend on us now as always."

Some congregations are setting up phone trees for having people stay in touch, a wonderful effort. It is not out of line to have a part of those conversations be for the mutual encouragement of financial support of the church. Whether in conversation, Email Newsletters, Zoom meetings, or any other communication vehicles, the invitation to strong financial undergirding is an important piece of our moving toward health in trying times.

2. Regarding your own congregation's financial picture and recent government actions: The Families First Act and the 2.2 trillion [CARES \(Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security\)](#) Act both contain provisions which address aid to churches and their employees. Exclusions of churches and church employees in Unemployment Compensation are being lifted. So the good news is that there is considerable financial assistance available in these government actions. However, it is going to involve becoming learned about these complicated matters. We will continue to give assistance as we can, most often in the form of directing you to helpful resources. The Families First Act contains a number of provisions for payroll relief, leave provisions, financial support for employees who have to stay home due to children's schools or care centers closing, etc.

Of greater impact, the [CARES Act](#) promises financial help to organizations – including churches – that are impacted. I am attaching to this letter a document just released by the Church Alliance, of which the ELCA and Portico are members. Note particularly pages 6-8 that apply directly to churches. The implementation of these provisions is in the hands of the states, so further direction will be forthcoming. I am sure we will receive further information and guidance, which we will pass along as we get it. None of us in the synod office are experts in these matters but be assured we will seek to be quick in passing along expertise and guidance as it comes to us. David Moore, the synod attorney, has indicated his intent to assimilate further information as quickly as possible, as will the general counsel of our churchwide office. David, as synod attorney, is limited in his ability to serve as attorney for individual congregations, and for the time being will be assisting on these issues at the synod level only. We will pass along all guidance that can be helpful to congregations. We are moving to explore putting together a synod Task Force that could understand the complexities and provide more simplified guidance to congregations.

Let me state again my appreciation for all you do in these challenging times. As you seek to take care of the people under your care, don't neglect taking care of yourself as well. I suspect many of you have found, as I have, that working from a "stay at home" order can result in endless hours in front of a computer or on the phone, both good things, but overwhelming without time apart. "Sabbath" is not just for Sundays!

God's Grace and Peace be with you all –



Peter Rogness
Interim Bishop

[Read a Summary of the CARES Act online HERE](#)