

May 5, 2020



Dear Ministry Partners,

I am getting tired of this virus thing – we all are. Weariness is pressing at the door. So, the first (and last) word in this longer-than-usual monthly letter is this: Sabbath. Take care of yourself. Jesus unplugged periodically; the Creator rested after seven days. What is true of ministry generally is also true of ministry in this strange time: we will never be able to get to everything that warrants our attention. So, for your own sake and for the sake of the quality of the work you can get to, unplug. Take care of yourselves.

There are two sections to this letter. The first will deal with unfolding happenings in the days ahead in our synod. The second has to do with looking ahead at the prospect of “return” when the current time of isolation ends.

The Synod – Assembly and Election

This past Saturday, May 2 (when we had planned on being in assembly at Kalahari!), the Synod Council met via Zoom, and reviewed a number of decisions about moving forward, culminating weeks of preparation work by the Assembly Planning Committee, the Bishop Election Task Force, the Executive Committee, and the Bishop Call Committee. The decisions give an idea of what is in store in the coming months. To summarize:

Assembly -

- The 2020 Synod Assembly will be held in a multi-site fashion, with no more than 50 people at any given site. We will be interconnected through technology. (See “What Matters” 4/28 issue) for what is involved in doing this, and whether your congregation might consider being one of the sites.) Voting Members from each congregation will be given an assigned site to attend, in order to distribute attendance. The sites will have interactivity capability.
- The Agenda will include both the election of a bishop and other necessary business. The origination site will be Good Shepherd in Verona.
- We will hold an assembly when the state's “Badger Bounce Back” protocol moves us to Phase 2, allowing for gatherings of 50 people. We will still practice distancing and other safe practices. We will send notice 35 days ahead of the planned Saturday Assembly. At that time, registration and other assembly material will be mailed and made available on-line. Note that in the recent questionnaire to congregations we asked about numbers anticipated to come from each congregation – which will help us with our planning. “When will it be?” you may ask? We don't know. Obviously, by May 15 (35 days ahead) we would need to decide on the previously planned June 20 gathering, but it's unlikely the state will be in Phase 2 then since we're not yet in Phase 1. When a window appears to bring us to a point of being able to gather, we will. At this point we know it will be a Saturday, with registration opening at 7:00 a.m. opening worship beginning at 8:30, and a projected adjournment by 4:30.

Bishop Election -

- The Call Committee is now preparing to give a report of its work and announce the 4-6 nominees they have been charged with bringing forward to the congregations. They expect that announcement to go live at 4:00 p.m. on May 15. At the conclusion of that report, several things will be posted to the Synod Website: (1) the text of the report given by the Committee; (2) a five-minute introductory video from each of the nominees; and (3) written material produced by each of the nominees with their education and work history, and their responses to a number of questions posed by the Bishop Candidate Profile they completed for the Call Committee.
- The Bishop Election Task Force will conduct two on-line forums with the nominees. The first will come a week after the announcement, and will be posted at 11:00 a.m. Friday, May 22. The Task Force will focus the questions for the first forum on issues raised by the Synod Profile and Bishop Profile that came out of the January-February Town Hall Meetings. People from around the synod will be invited to submit questions for a second forum, to be held a month or so later.
- In the interest of having a fair and even process, the Task Force discourages people from the synod having other communications with all or any of the nominees apart from the public interactions available to all.
- At the Assembly, there will be a series of three ballots, with speeches or Q&A before each. ELCA Secretary Sue Rothmeyer or an appointee will run the election.

A great deal of thought and discussion have gone into these plans and will continue. Please watch for updates as time goes on.

Thoughts in anticipation of "return"

People in every congregation are understandably eager to be back together. We all are – we are eager for the return of our normal lives, patterns, and relationships. "Badge Bounce Back" anticipates that happening in stages – a bit of loosening in Phase 1, though the maximum gathering size of 10 will continue; a gathering size of no more than 50 in phase 2, and a full relaxation of size restrictions in Phase 3. But even though this delineation of "Phases" is helpful, there is no loud toggle switch that moves us from one reality to another. Science tells us that this dangerous virus is going to be with us for quite a while. "Normalcy" will look different, and while there is still much we don't know about the unfolding future, we're quite certain 2020 (and 2021) will not look like 2019.

Everyone in congregational leadership should familiarize themselves with the recent guidance document from the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Its caution and reasoning are well grounded. You can find it here:

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

My counsel:

- Don't rush into regathering. Initially I had envisioned the ban being lifted and we all have great packed-church celebrations when we are first allowed back. I am far more guarded now. I recently heard a comment to the effect that if one were to design a social setting to maximize the spread of a virus, it would look a lot like a Sunday morning church service: pack people into pews sitting beside/in front of/behind each other, have them do a lot of singing, pass the peace, pass an offering plate, share communion... and then mingle with each other for coffee conversations afterward. And on top of that is the demographic worry – our church-going population is older, often the most faithful! – the very at-risk demographic that should be most reticent about returning may well be the first through the door.
So how do we care for them? One way –
- When you do begin to gather, it would be good to continue to record and offer online Sunday worship services, and encourage any who for whatever reason should or would prefer to remain home to do so, knowing they can still be part of your worshipping community. Besides, a number of you have made comments about the online worship reaching people you haven't seen in church lately.
- Doing this may also provide an avenue for safely bringing back communion to those most strongly desiring it. I recently heard of one plan that I thought was promising: The pastor plans to continue doing online Sunday Worship, recording ahead and posting on Sunday morning. But on Sunday morning the pastor will be in the sanctuary, vested and prepared to lead a brief 10-12 devotional service with Communion, and people will be invited to sign up for appointments on the half-hour, 7-8 people at a time, who will be gone before the next group comes. Such a plan minimizes risk (there is still risk!), and provides for only a gradual return, while providing communion for those who have most desired it. But remember this: there is really no risk-free way to do communion. Any manner of distribution contains the possibility of contact from one person to another, elimination of six-foot distancing, etc. Creating the circumstance in which anyone might feel any pressure to commune is doing a disfavor to all, especially those in high-risk categories.
- If there are some in your congregation that want to rush a return, ignoring government guidelines, one very significant factor – in addition to the care of people's health – is to check with your church's insurance carrier. If people get sick and you have defied gathering guidelines, your insurance may not cover your liability.
- Whatever the gradual return might look like, I think we need to be robustly supportive of all who do not yet return out of their own concern for health and well-being. We should be fully supportive of those concerns.

These are challenging questions for consideration. Because of that, we are offering two opportunities for live on-line conversations that I'll host next week with our rostered ministers who are currently under call to a congregation.

- Tuesday, May 12, 2:00-3:00 p.m., and
- Thursday, May 14, 7:00-8:00 p.m.
- If you are a rostered minister currently serving in a congregation and you'd like to be in on these, email Robyn at robynz@scsw-elca.org and she will send you the link to participate in the Zoom meeting.

Final Words...

... are Thank You and Take Care. Thank you for the faithful work you do in these challenging times. And, please, Take Care of yourselves as you carry out the ministries entrusted to you. The second commandment was to Love your neighbor as yourself. Do so.

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Rogness". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter Rogness
Interim Bishop