



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

November 17, 2020

Today, Public Health for Madison and Dane County issued Emergency order #10, related to the pandemic. The order begins with a summary of what we know- cases of COVID are rising sharply. Due to the sharp increase new mandates are being ordered. Among these new restrictions is the mandate that no gatherings are to be held indoors; outdoor gatherings are to be limited to 10 persons. The current mask requirement is also in effect. Religious entities are excluded from the order only for the purposes of gathering for worship. They are not excluded for other purposes like staff or council meetings, education meetings, etc. You can read the whole order here: <https://publichealthmdc.com/coronavirus/forward-dane/current-order>.

Now certainly this is an order specific to only one part of our synod, however it is a topic that is of central concern to all of us. I have been in many conversations in the last two weeks with rostered ministers and laity alike from around the synod who are seeking direction about what to do regarding returning to in person worship, staying online through the end of the year, etc. Some have wanted a clear message from me as Bishop. Others felt like a clear message from me could complicate what they were already doing and put them in a further quandary.

Then, one rostered leader put me on the spot and asked me, "Well, what is your preference?" I do have a clear preference in all of this. I prefer that our congregations refrain from in person worship. It is the safest thing to do to protect one another. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Right now, we can love one another best by staying away from each other. We can love another by giving up things for the sake of the other. These past 8 months have been long. Many of us have not been in our church buildings at all. We miss each other and the community that we share. Some of us do not have the ability and/or the desire to hook up to virtual worship. Anxiety, grief, and loss are very prevalent, and we grow weary when we don't know when this will end. However, right now we are being called to love our neighbors, stay the path and stay home. In Galatians chapter 5 Paul writes:

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It's that simple ... and it's that complicated. My prayers are with you as we are church together in these difficult days,

*Bishop Joy Mortensen-Wiebe*  
South-Central Synod of Wisconsin