

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God, our life-giver, Christ, our life-savior, and the Spirit, our life-connector.

Now that Covid19 has officially reached Montana, you may be wondering about the “what next’s?” for your congregation. Especially those of you in counties where people have been diagnosed, at least presumptively, with the disease may be engaged in anxious conversations like: Do we have worship tomorrow or do we suspend it for the time being? Do we close our offices? How can we stay connected to each other if we all stay away from each other?

For those of you who are pastors, SAM’s, LPA’s worship leaders, and congregational leaders (particularly council members), I encourage you to communicate with one another and make your decisions together. Follow the Golden Rule and Christ’s call to love one another as you love yourselves. Make the healthiest decisions for the sake of your community – your congregation, city, and state.

While I as your bishop cannot dictate what you should do, I can offer guidance and support in several ways.

First, I can offer permission: if you and your congregation sincerely believe that suspending worship is the best choice for your community but are not sure if you are allowed to do so, you have my permission to cancel. God remains with you as individuals AND as a congregation even if you are not gathered for worship.

Second, I can offer recommendations. In the following situations, I would strongly recommend you not hold worship:

- Your pastor or worship leader is sick, feeling symptoms, or think they may be sick. Pastors, this is not the time to be Montana/Wyoming strong, and show up to tough it out for the sake of your people. You will do more harm than good if you spread the virus to others.
- You have a large number of people from high-risk groups in your congregation.
- You have a large number of people who are ill in your congregation. Even if it’s not covid19, it’s better to be safe than sorry.

If you do decide to hold worship in your congregation, I strongly recommend you follow these guidelines:

- No skin-to-skin contact such as shaking hands, hugs, or kisses of peace. Elbow bump or use the peace-sign instead. Even the Vulcan “live long and prosper” sign works if your hands can manage it.
- When doing communion,
  - do not serve the wine/grape juice using intinction or common cup. Fingers too easily dip into the wine which does not have enough alcohol content to kill the virus and drinking from the same cup (even with a sterile wipe) is not safe. Instead pour from a common cup or use individual glasses that the server with well-washed hands gives to each person. It is also permissible to serve the wine in Spirit only, speaking and hearing the words “The blood of Christ shed for you” without actually drinking. Jesus is present.
  - Make sure all communion preparers and communion servers wash their hands thoroughly (twice) and use hand sanitizers.
  - Have only one, very healthy, properly hand-washed person serve the bread and avoid skin-to-skin contact. Do not let people take their own bread since they can spread things to other pieces/wafers.
  - Don’t lay on hands to bless those who do not wish to receive communion. Just say the words.
  - Avoid communion at the rail if that is your practice. You’ll share less space and thus less air.
- Empty your baptismal font if you can and, if you can’t, discourage people from dipping their fingers in to remember their baptism. Instead, encourage folks to remember their baptism during the many, many times they are washing their hands throughout the day. Offer words such as these for them to say: “I am

a beloved baptized child of God. In my baptism I know that Jesus loves me and that the Spirit keeps me joined with the body of Christ even in these times of physical distancing and illness.”

Finally, I can offer spiritual guidance. Whether you hold worship or not: stay connected with one another using as many non-physical means as possible. Even if we must stay apart physically, we can be together spiritually and technologically. Staying connected with one another and with God will be crucial for our mental, emotional and spiritual well-being during this time. Things to consider:

- Pastors and worship leaders, offer what you can for worship using the technological tools at your disposal. Provide a shortened worship (with confession, prayer, scripture, sermon, more prayer and blessing) online with Facebook live or other live internet options. Or record it and put it up on your website for later watching. Just follow the copyright rules regarding music.
- **If you are able to share a live or recorded worship service on-line to the wider public beyond your congregation, please let the synod office know so that we can share links with those congregations who are not able to provide such services.**
- Congregational leaders, offer the bulletins, sermon manuscripts, prayer lists, newsletters and other printed items online through emails and/or your webpage.
- Set a common prayer time, like noon every day, when everyone can stop to pray knowing that others are praying too. Provide a prayer for folks to pray together if you wish.
- Pastors, visitation pastors, Stephen’s Ministers, LPA’s and others responsible for visitation to the homebound or hospitalized: use the phone, preferably by calling rather than texting. A prayer over the phone reaches God’s ears just as readily as prayers in person.
- Avoid visiting facilities with high-risk groups, especially as the facilities and state agencies recommend.
- Stay informed of the facts, and avoid the latest misinformation to come along.
- Take some time to turn off the TV, avoid your Facebook, Twitter, PinInterest feeds, stay away from the news, or find other ways to escape the relentless Covid19 talk that is coming at you from all sides. It’s okay and healthy to take a break from it all.
- Spend time with Jesus. Pray (lots), meditate, do devotions, sit or move around with God. Consider reading a whole book (or two) from the Bible beginning to end. Start with the gospel of Matthew since that’s what many are using from the Revised Common Lectionary. Or if your congregation is using the narrative lectionary, read the whole narrative on your own.

In these days, I remind us all that God is with us, loving us, guiding us, and supporting us. Not even Covid19 can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rm 8:38-39) So remember “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, you will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust’... You will not fear the pestilence that stalks in darkness...” (Psalm 91; note the number reverse from 19 to 91)

God’s Peace that passes our understanding be with you all,

Rev. Laurie Jungling  
Bishop, Montana Synod