

# Pastoral Guidance for Re-opening Congregations and Ministries

Bishop Laurie Jungling, April 22, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Christ's grace and peace be with you all in these time of on-going change and decision-making.

As you have probably heard, this afternoon Governor Bullock laid out his "Re-opening the Big Sky" plan, describing in detail Phase 1. In that plan, he announced that places of worship can open as soon as this Sunday, April 26. Here is his guidance as found on KRTV News:

**"PLACES OF WORSHIP can become operational on or after **Sunday, April 26**, with *reduced capacity and where strict physical distancing protocols can be maintained between non-household members. Avoid GATHERING in groups of more than 10 people in circumstances that do not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing.*"**

For some of you this may be good news; for others, you may not be ready for such a move yet. While I understand the desire to get up and running and back to normal again, I am not convinced that we are ready yet to gather for worship as early as this Sunday. This concern is in part due to the fact that many of us have yet to plan and educate ourselves and our congregations for what such a reentry ought to look like to protect the lives and welfare of our neighbors.

The governor has given churches a great responsibility to step up to manage and care for our congregations wisely and with reasoned common sense during this time. As you do this I remind you yet again that our greatest commandments are to Love God and Love our Neighbors. These go hand-in-hand: when you love God you love your neighbor; when you love and take care of and protect your neighbors, you are loving God. For Christians, all the law, including the state's laws, fall under these commandments.

In these commandments, we know that our primary responsibility and calling from God is first and foremost to care for our neighbor, including and especially our most vulnerable populations such as those over 60 or with health issues. This means going slowly and carefully as we make decisions.

**Therefore, I am strongly recommending that ELCA Congregations in the MT Synod extend the "stay at home" directive at least until Sunday, May 3, and use this extra week to prepare yourselves to reopen if that is what your pastor and council together decide is the right option for your congregation.**

For May 3 and following, I recommend that churches remain closed as long as you, in your context, think it is necessary to stay closed to care for your neighbors in your congregation and community (even if the church down the street is open).

I am also recommending that should you decide to go forward and begin in-person worship and other congregational activities, please move gradually and with extreme caution under clear guidelines you've created and that everyone agrees to follow. Check with your local (city and county) officials before you make any decisions. According to the governor, local areas are allowed and expected to have more restrictive guidelines as they think necessary. Follow those first before making your own decision.

As you plan your reentry, please consider your context, particularly the number of vulnerable and high-risk members who are bound to show up. I am strongly discouraging our vulnerable high-risk populations from gathering for anything at our churches. Think about them as you make your decisions.

And as time goes forward, practice intentional and on-going monitoring of the congregation and the community and make decisions accordingly.

Below you will find some guidance from me (with some help from my bishop colleagues). Also, tomorrow morning, you can see the MT Synod website for some more in-depth guidance for religious gathering from the CDC as of April 16. You can continue to check the CDC website, as well our state's, local and synod directives as we go through the various phases.

A couple of cautions before I offer my guidance. First, **be prepared for a 2-step forward, 1-step back approach** -- at the state-wide level, local governance level and for your congregation. You may end up having in-person worship for 2 weeks and then have to close again because of new virus outbreaks in your area or you find out someone in your congregation has it. Little step by little step is the safest way to go.

Second, if you do choose to go back to in-person worship and church life, **do not expect or lead others to expect that things will go back to normal or be the way things were before Covid.** Your worship and church experience will and SHOULD be very different than what you were used to. In some ways, it may not feel like worship or church at all because of the physical distancing guidelines that you should be practicing as you begin to re-gather. (See below.)

So be prepared for changes and take them in stride the best you can, working with your pastor and leaders rather than against them to create a safe space in which to worship.

### Some Guidance

Below are some questions and suggestions pastors, leaders, councils and congregations need to ask and consider before and as you reopen:

- Why are you reopening? What is your goal in reopening?
  - Be sure that you have clear reasons for why you are opening (or staying closed) that you can articulate clearly if you're asked by people, including the press.
  - Share those reasons with everyone in the congregation so they can answer.
  - "Fellowship" is not a helpful reason right now since that level of gathering is still being discouraged both by me and the state.
  - Pleasing loud voices in your congregation or community is also not a helpful reason.
- What are the essential services your congregation can offer to your community at this time?
  - Keep in mind that for now it may NOT BE WORSHIP but rather caring for people in need in your communities through varieties of service
  - "The risk you assume should be commensurate with the good you can offer."
- Who will make the decisions about going forward?
  - I recommend the pastor/SAM and councils work together to make all necessary decisions.
  - Who will set up your congregation's guidelines?
  - How will you inform and educate members and others of the guidelines?
    - Do some good, serious, rich education BEFORE people come back rather than that day. By then it's too late, though it will bear repeating.
  - Who will monitor and ensure compliance?
    - Example: if you're only allowing 10 in worship, who is going to tell #11 they can't come? How?
- What will you do with your virtual/online services?

- I highly recommend you do not end your online worship or faith formation offerings. Not everyone will want to come back right away. Continue to provide “hybrid” opportunities for those not willing to take the risks yet, particularly our most vulnerable populations
- What is your plan for cleaning gathering spaces, including entry ways, bathrooms, worship space? Do you have a sanitizing protocol in place?
  - What supplies do you need to have available for cleaning and hygiene?
    - Soap and water, disposable hand towels, sanitizer, disinfectant, cleansers, etc.
  - Who will do the cleaning after each activity?
  - What will be cleaned? (Don’t forget door handles, railings, bathrooms, kitchens, hymnals)
  - This should be done after every gathering and in a deep cleaning way, not just a simple rub-down with a wet rag.
  - Run the water and flush your system before you open.
- What limits will you put on the number of people who can gather in the space?
  - Recommended is still seating of non-family units at least six feet apart.
  - Block off areas with tape
  - Think about entryways, hallways, bathrooms and how you will keep people separate in the places that tend to clog up.
  - Manage entrances and exits. Ex. dismiss folks by rows or person-by-person
- Will you require or ask people to wear masks at worship and other activities?
  - If so, will you provide them?
- Will there be singing?
  - If so, encourage people to wear masks and/or open windows. As a choir is WA discovered the hard way and some health officials are at least hinting, droplets from our mouths travel much further when we’re singing in unventilated spaces.  
<https://www.infectioncontroltoday.com/covid-19/churches-could-be-deadliest-places-covid-19-pandemic>
  - Or consider an all spoken and instrumental service.
- Will you have communion?
  - This will be hard if folks wear masks.
  - If communion is celebrated, I recommend against any method that requires individuals to come within six feet of each other (especially intinction, common cup, placing the bread into a hand, kneeling at the rail, lining up, individual cups)
- How will you share the peace?
  - I recommend avoiding anything that would require touch or sharing airspace. A wave or the peace hand sign is enough.
- How will you collect the offering?
- What other activities will you allow or restrict?
  - I recommend having NO potlucks, soup suppers or shared meals of any kind. (Yes that includes coffee and brownies).
  - If you must, have only very small groups for Bible studies and clean the space after.
  - Postpone big events like Confirmation or Mother’s Day celebrations.
  - Wait on the big Easter Sunday gathering...Jesus is risen but we’re still on the road to Emmaus!

- How will you respond to visitors that you don't know?
  - We are called to be radically hospitable during this time but perhaps that takes on a different form than shaking hands. Consider opening a food pantry or sewing masks or other ways to love your neighbor.
- What will you do if a member contracts the virus?
  - How will you notify if someone in the congregation becomes infected while respecting privacy and other concerns?
- Will you allow others to use congregation facilities? What rules will they need to follow? Who will monitor, manage and make sure things remain clean?
- When will you resume visitation to shut-ins? What will this look like and what precautions will you take?
- Pastors and leaders, how will you care for yourselves during this time?
  - Don't try to do everything or too much or overcompensate. Recognize the complexity of the problem we face, but keep your responses simple.
  - Manage your own anxiety; that will help others manage theirs.
  - Practice physical, mental, spiritual and emotional self-care.
  - Don't try to make decisions too quickly and do so with others.

There probably many things I've missed but for now, I hope that this guidance will be helpful as you meet and make wise, thoughtful and loving decisions for your congregations and the wider community. Keep in mind that all it takes is one infected person to spread this virus not only in your congregation but throughout your area. How liable are you and your congregation willing to be for such an outbreak if it begins with you?

I close with these commands from Scripture and Martin Luther reminding us of our calling as Christ's Church in the world during these times.

- ❖ Remember that while all things may be lawful for you, not all things are beneficial. Nor do all things build up the body of Christ. (1 Cor 6:12, 10:23 – Paul says this twice so it must be important!)
- ❖ Remember that the neighbor always comes first and that what we do to the least of these who are members of our family [in Christ], we do to Christ. (Mt 25:40)
- ❖ Remember that “you are called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as opportunities for self-indulgence, but become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal 5:13-14)
- ❖ Remember Luther's explanation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment: “We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.”

Finally, take heart and “do not worry, siblings in Christ, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘When will we worship?’ or ‘When will we gather again?’...For indeed your heavenly Father knows you need these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and right relationship with God, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Mt 6:31-33 paraphrase)

Your fellow follower of Christ,  
Bishop Laurie Jungling