

Dear Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus whose journey to the cross is our life and salvation.

Every day we are receiving new information about COVID-19, the short-hand name for the disease coming from coronavirus 2019. There are many types of coronaviruses, one of which is related to the common cold. The one causing COVID-19, however, is a new or novel one previously not seen in humans. While scientists and health professionals are still learning about COVID-19, the disease appears to be more serious and life-threatening than the flu, especially to older adults and the more vulnerable among us.

We are thus living in a time of great uncertainty and fear. Daily we are hearing of tumultuous reactions on the stock market, restrictions on travel and size of gatherings, the suspension and cancellation of major sports, and the threat COVID-19 poses. The President of the United States has addressed the nation. The Governor of Wisconsin has declared a state of emergency limiting gatherings to no more than 250 and serving notice that guidelines for smaller groups will be forthcoming. Each day brings new developments and we are not certain how the events of the coming weeks and months will unfold.

I write to urge calm no matter what may be happening. God's love for us in Jesus Christ is steadfast and sure. God is with us, even in these times of great uncertainty and anxiety. We need not be afraid.

In truth for these very days we have been baptized. We are called to live out our baptism in Christ faithfully. That means living in hope not fear, continuing to witness and serve, and doing those things that demonstrate both our love of God and love for our neighbors.

We are hearing much these days about social or physical distancing so the spread of the novel coronavirus is slowed, limited and even contained in places. We are urged to increase our attention to good hygiene, especially to wash our hands regularly. We are asked to limit travel and avoid gathering in large groups.

All this is being done so the spread of COVID-19 is slowed and the impact upon the health care system is limited. Because a vaccine to combat the disease is probably 12-18 months away, we must rely upon public health initiatives to combat the spread of this virus. Not doing so could very easily result in the health care system being overrun, something that is happening at this very time in places in Italy. So the washing of hands with soap and water, avoiding large gatherings of people, limiting travel and creating more physical distance in our human interactions will aid in slowing the transmission of the virus.

How shall we be Church together at a time when we are being asked to work at social distancing? Shall we fast from worship and the reception of Holy Communion for a period this Lenten season out of love for the neighbor and care for the more vulnerable among us? How shall we encourage one another to dwell in the comfort and peace of Christ when forces of fear and uncertainty surround us?

These are important questions with which all of us must struggle and seek to make good and right decisions. No decision will fit for every context. What may be appropriate in one setting may not be right for another. Thankfully in Christ we are free from the judgement of God, free from fear, death and the devil, and free to give ourselves in service and witness to the Gospel.

I urge everyone to listen to medical professionals and scientists and think deeply about these matters together. Some may choose to cancel worship for a period of time; others may choose to gather as smaller groups for worship. We can explore ways of using technology to livestream, broadcast and reach out to one another with prayer and proclamation, and the care and love of God.

I invite you to visit the synod website (www.ecsw.org) regularly for worship and pastoral resources related to COVID-19. We will seek to provide accurate and updated information as well as guidance and counsel.

We have already postponed a trip to the Holy Land for a year and cancelled EPIC (Equipping People in Congregations) originally scheduled for March 14. Following conversation about the global pandemic Bishop Ubane and I together decided to postpone for at least a year the planned visit of our South African guests in June. We are in conversations with the Secretary of the ELCA and other churchwide staff about the implications for the synod assembly.

Our Presiding Bishop, the Reverend Elizabeth Eaton, has offered words of encouragement and counsel in recent messages. She has recalled the counsel of Martin Luther in 1527 when the plague swept across Europe and killed up to 40% of the population. She noted that in his letter “Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague” that Luther emphasized the duty to care for the neighbor, the responsibility of the government to protect and provide services, a caution about recklessness, and the importance of science, medicine and common sense. Bishop Eaton also reminds us to remain calm, stay connected, and trust God who promises to be with us always.

The young woman cutting my hair this week said, “it sounds like it’s time for all of us to step up our game.” Indeed it is. We are all in this together. We in the Church have been baptized for these days. I encourage pastors and deacons to steadfastly tend to the work to which you have been called, proclaiming the Good News and caring for the people of God. I encourage all the baptized in our daily lives to live as good citizens of this land and let the light and love of God shine forth as we live our lives. We are people of hope in the midst of adversity, people of abundant love in a climate of scarcity and fear.

I close with this brief prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, as you traveled through towns and villages healing people of every disease and illness, we pray you will accompany us in this time of a global pandemic. Heal those are ill and help us all to trust in your loving presence and help. Amen.”

In Christ’s love and peace,

Gerald L Mansholt, Bishop