



March 11, 2020

To the congregations of the Ohio District – LCMS,

Greetings in the name of Jesus during this holy season of Lent.

At the time of this writing, there have been 26 deaths in the United States related to the Corona Virus, also called COVID-19. As the concern over COVID-19 increases in the United States, it is wise for our congregations to pay greater attention to preparedness for the impact of COVID-19.

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has a resource that is potentially helpful for your congregation to consider what you might do if, God forbid, COVID-19 impacts your community and congregation. The document [Congregational Planning for Pandemics](#) from LCMS World Relief and Human Care suggests several strategies to be prepared for communication, worship, pastoral care, and community outreach in a time of community illness.

Pray – Prayer shifts our focus from fears and concerns to God. This is right and fitting, since we seek both comfort and guidance from the Lord in times of stress and anxiety. At the same time, we serve our neighbor in prayer. Such prayers touch our congregational members and community.

Get Good Information – The media coverage of COVID-19 is not designed to calm people, nor is it always accurate. Gillian Solem, RN MSN, a retired public health nurse, points to four sources that she finds reliable. They are your local county's health department, the [Ohio Department of Health](#), the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), and the [World Health Organization](#). Be aware that there are malicious groups who are taking advantage of the fear related to COVID-19 that are sending computer viruses and malware claiming to be important information related to the disease.

Basic Sanitation Saves Lives – It sounds overly simple but, *hand washing* is one of the most effective things we can do to protect ourselves and our parishioners from illness. However, hand washing is often skipped or done too quickly. A good 20 second wash with soap and water is advisable. Pastors should be extra vigilant on this front as we shake many hands, deliver the elements of the Lord's Supper to our congregants, and come into contact with ill people regularly.

It might be helpful to encourage people to use hand sanitizer before and after passing the peace if that is part of your practice. You might consider skipping the hand shaking and replacing it with a fist or elbow bump. Solem, who is also a member of Gloria Dei – Hudson, says that hugging can be safe, as long as the huggers turn their faces away from one another.

Wiping down surfaces with sanitizing wipes could be helpful as well. Areas to wipe down include door knobs, crash-bars, and handles, the bathroom water faucet handles, the drinking fountain, and, perhaps, the communion rail. It might be helpful to do your offering differently, for instance, place the plates on tables at the front of the church and allowing people to come forward to drop their offering in the place. Electronic giving might be encouraged as well.

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The Lord’s Supper – We don’t know of any breakout of illness traced to people receiving the Lord’s Supper. There is nothing wrong, however, addressing the fears of your congregants on this point. Some participants might prefer to use the individual cups instead of the common cup. That is a matter of conscience and pastoral care. In addition, you might think about using some strong grain-alcohol, like Everclear, on your purificator as you wipe the rim of the common cup. (It takes off lipstick, too!)

Give Permission to Stay Home – The best way to contain and slow the spread of illnesses like COVID-19 is to put space between people. Sometimes this is done through social distancing, such as people keeping about six feet between them. However, isolation and quarantine are also used in cases of actual illness. If a person is ill, it is probably best if they stay away from others. This, however, raises questions about how we will minister to them during their illness, and that must not be forgotten.

Communication – How will you communicate with your members? Do you have a phone tree? Email blasts? Text messaging? Now is a good time to strategize these items.

Here are some other items you might want to think about.

- What groups or ministries of your congregation might be affected by an outbreak?
- What about food handling at our Lenten Suppers, funeral dinners, etc.?
- What should we do about gatherings for funerals or weddings in case of an outbreak?
- Can your staff work from home?
- Do you have electronic means of sharing devotional and worship materials?
- How might we provide meals or other assistance for families in need during such a time?
- What are the unique risk factors in your congregation and community?

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Kevin Wilson,

President

(I am grateful to the staff at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, OH and Gillian Solem for providing the initial draft for this letter – President Wilson.)

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