

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMING WEEKS

Dear Pastors, Deacons, and Congregation Members,

Thank you for the creative and courageous ministry that all of you are doing during this very challenging time! I am thankful for you each day as I hear how you are caring for one another and bringing God's gracious love to your communities.

As you know, the name first given to Jesus' followers was People of the Way (see Acts 9:2). Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus set us free to follow a new and life-giving Way in which we entrust ourselves totally to our gracious and loving God and then express that same love to our neighbors in everything we do and say.

You and I continue this holy journey as People of the Way, walking through a complicated and changing world. Each day we have to discern what is the best path that Christ calls us to, as we do ministry in the midst of COVID 19 and the many hardships that accompany it. In particular, right now many congregations are asking **when** and **how** and **whether** to return to in-person worship and gatherings at church?

I am providing links to two documents that will help you think through this question and arrive at the best plan for your context. First, click [HERE](#) for "A COVID RESPONSE: Guidelines and Important Questions." This will help you to consider all the different components that need to be addressed if you open your church doors for face-to-face gatherings. I thank Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee of the Northwest Washington Synod for providing the majority of this document.

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and the ELCA Churchwide Office have also just issued a very helpful document on re-opening church buildings. Click [HERE](#) for "Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship." What is common to both sets of guidelines is the strong necessity for congregations to follow the directives of their state and local authorities and the updated advice of public health agencies. With these directives in mind, you can best make your decisions in the coming weeks and months.

I would like to add some additional thoughts as you make your decisions:

1. As you think about re-opening your churches, ask yourselves what you are most wanting. Worship? Fellowship and connection? Supportive conversation? I suggest that you start with what your congregation most wants and needs, rather than trying to do it all at once.
2. Indoor worship is the most complicated. Will worship feel adequately nurturing to people if, for safety reasons, there is no singing, no Communion, and everybody is at least six feet away? You may wish to continue with online worship and focus your at-church gatherings on fellowship, Bible study, or supportive conversations, including a brief time of prayer. Safety precautions can be built into these conversational kinds of gatherings and still provide a meaningful experience.

3. Particularly during the coming summer months, outdoor worship is a possibility to consider, even if it's just one Sunday. Join with some neighboring congregations to rent a tent and then pass it around each week.

4. In Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, we learned to think ahead and be prepared. As I listen to many top epidemiologists, I repeatedly hear that the virus may continue to be present for 12-18 months. Therefore, I encourage us to pray for the best and prepare for the worst. For example, at the same time that you may experiment this summer with some face-to-face gatherings, use these summer months to also develop even better online worship, Bible study, and pastoral care strategies and techniques in the event that they may be even more necessary in the Fall, if the virus makes a sudden return. I am looking for a source of funding that will enable congregations to take a step forward in their recording or live streaming technology. Even if we can safely return to at-church worship, many members will continue to feel most safe at home for many months.

What are your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions? We need each other for support and wisdom. Most of all, we need Christ's presence and that life-giving presence has been promised to us, no matter what. As People of the Way, our wandering becomes a holy journey where new life is continually being raised up from the old. God bless you in these important times and God give you strength, wisdom, and deep joy each day!

In Christ,

Bishop Rick Jaech