



# Northwestern Minnesota Synod

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders..., And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him..., so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” – Hebrews 12:1-3*

Dear Partners in God's Mission,

My hope with this letter is that we might come to shared expectations for the broadest outline of how returning to in-person worship will unfold along with the values that will guide it. We are developing more detailed guidance for that time when we can begin to work our way back to in-person worship in phases, and I expect this guidance will be ready later this week. In the meantime, let's come together on the basic understandings that will underpin this process.

The writer of Hebrews encouraged a community of beleaguered and persecuted Christians to persevere in the difficult race set before them: continuing to live as followers of Jesus in extraordinary times. The difficulty of their race was not just keeping faith, it was keeping it in a time and place that felt alien to their values and hopes. The world was not as they wanted it to be, and that made faithfulness even harder. Can you relate?

I am reminded of a scene happening every day at U.S. military installations. Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines take an annual fitness test which concludes with a 1.5 or 2-mile run to be accomplished within an age-adjusted time (a benefit to us old-timers!). When the fast runners cross the finish-line they circle back to run with struggling comrades offering encouragements like, “You're doing great! You're almost there! Great work! Keep running!”

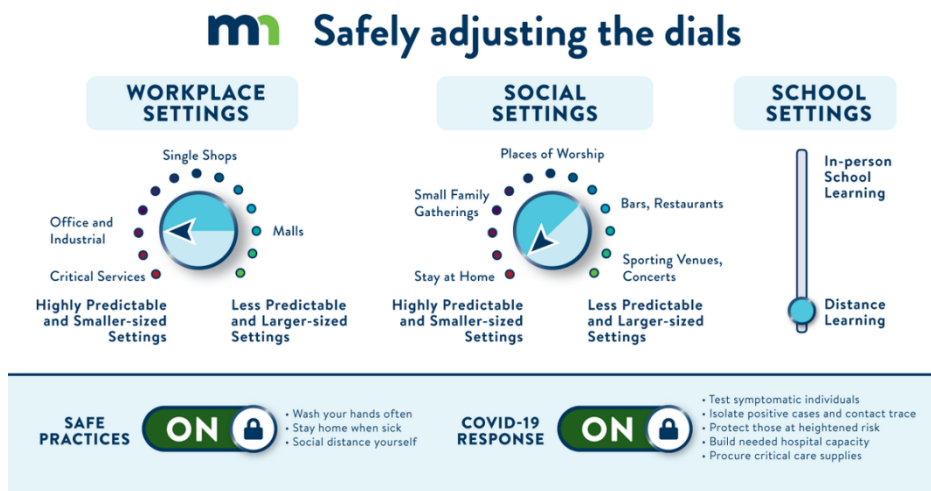
Dear Siblings – may you hear the voices of the great cloud of witnesses, led by none other than our risen Lord Jesus, that swift one who ran before us, that “pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” all of them running beside you saying, “You're doing great! Great work! Keep running!”

It's true. You *are* doing great! You are adapting to find ways to share the good news and serve your neighbors amidst great challenges. You are utilizing time and space at home to seek God in new ways through scripture and prayer. Some of you are risking your life to care for the sick or to ensure basic services. You are being generous even amidst financial challenges. You are finding ways to share your faith with the click of a button! Great work! Keep running!

And while there is a finish line in this race, it's still a ways off. You may have noticed that in the list of encouragements from Jesus and the cloud of witnesses I left one out: “You're almost there!” ***The truth is that here in Minnesota we are NOT almost ready to return to gathering in worship again the way we did before March 14<sup>th</sup>*** when public health restrictions began in Minnesota.

So, on the next page are the affirmations that I believe we should share as we begin to consider the long process of returning to in-person worship.

- Our motivation to do this slowly, correctly and safely is our faith and our values:
  - o We trust that God is at work in God’s word - creating faith, forgiving sins, bringing life and salvation – whether that word is being heard by someone sitting in one of our churches or by someone sitting at home watching YouTube or Facebook Live. We are confident that God will be God and that God cares about the church even more than we do, so our decisions need not be driven by fear or reckless anxiety.
  - o Our values of faithfulness in relationship, authenticity in our welcome and love that makes a difference are guiding our decision to stay home and will guide our decisions around re-gathering, too. We are staying home now, not out of fear, but out of love for our neighbor and out of our desire to keep faith with the people God has given us to care for. Those will be the values that guide our return as well.
  
- The risks are real.
  - o We passed a deadly milestone: [65,000 deaths in the U.S. from CoVID19](#). That’s more deaths from this novel virus than ever recorded from influenza since the great pandemic of 1919 - and we have not yet reached the half-way point. This is not just a bad flu season.
  - o The low numbers of positive tests in some of our counties does not mean that the risk of transmission is low. [The high percent of asymptomatic infections](#) (at least 25%, probably higher), coupled with the high threshold of symptoms required before one can be tested, combine to suggest that the true number of cases is much higher.
  - o The disease is deadly for all ages, but especially for people over 60 and/or with underlying health conditions.
  
- What we are doing is working!
  - o We stay home NOT to stop the pandemic – we can’t. We do it to limit the pace of infections so that our health care system does not become overwhelmed. This is working! You are modeling this behavior in your communities and doing it out of love for your neighbor, because that’s what followers of Jesus do! Thank you.
  
- Faith communities will not be the first or even the second ones to go back.



As you can see from the Governor’s illustration, faith communities are somewhere in the middle of this process, and will go back, in phases, only when certain benchmarks have been achieved related to testing and numbers of new cases. We are not there yet and will not be for a while.

- We went into this quickly and together, but we will come out of it differently.
  - o We went from no restrictions to 250 in worship to 50 to 10 to only those needed to create digital services in just two weeks. According the CDC and the White House's guidance, the path back will be much slower.
  - o Size and demographics will determine when congregations can start re-gathering. Smaller, younger communities will start earlier than larger and/or older ones. While we are regathering, all the social distancing, sanitizing, mask wearing and other safe practices will apply, and will for some time.
  - o At-risk populations will be the last to return to public, face-to-face activities.

***Here is what I ask of you at this moment...***

- Breathe in, breathe out. This will be a slow process. For most of us, in-person gatherings are likely months, rather than weeks away.
- Work together. Please do not leave the decisions around how your community will re-gather to the rostered minister alone, but please do include your rostered minister in your decision-making process. Take into consideration the risks posed to staff who are required to be present and modify your plans accordingly. Make this a collaborative process.
- Form a smart team to advise you on your plan for returning. Include people from your community who work in public health or safety. Use the same adaptive creativity you have been using these weeks and months to move ahead safely and responsibly.
- Keep praying!

Know that you continue to be daily in my prayers. It is a joy and a privilege to serve with you. Thank you for your good and faithful leadership at this time.

In Christ our Brother,



Pastor Bill Tesch

Bishop of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA