



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
NEW JERSEY SYNOD
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.
1930 Highway 33, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

September 22, 2020

Dear Friends,

Over this past weekend I participated in two different outdoor worship experiences. On Saturday, I presided at the wedding of Pastor Julie Haspel and Bill Santianna. The service was held on a sunny, breezy, cool morning in the backyard of the parsonage where Pastor Haspel lives. There were about 25 people present, all wearing masks and keeping physically distant from those not in their own households. I did not stay beyond the worship service for the luncheon as I am limiting my in-person interactions. It was a beautiful wedding and an affirmation of love.

On Sunday, I joined with the people of Emanuel Lutheran Church, New Brunswick for a celebration of new ministry with the installation of their pastor, The Rev. Linnea Clark. The service was in a public park with attendees bringing their own lawn chairs, wearing masks, and keeping physically distant from one another. There was no singing, no communion, and no post-worship meal at this service in a desire to keep the worship service short and as safe as possible. There was a spirit of joy as pastor and people officially began a new relationship.

I share these two experiences with you because I know that some of our congregations are beginning to get back together for worship or other group activities and are wondering what safeguards should be in place. While these decisions are local, I want to reiterate what I believe to be important considerations in making decisions about when and how to come back together in-person. You can find a helpful resource on our [website](#) which contains a checklist for worship planners.

First, conversations about how to gather in person should follow conversation and prayer about why to gather. Are the ministries being offered online meeting the needs of the congregation? What does it mean to be church when reservations for worship are necessary, or the gathering is no longer able to be “public”? How does gathering in person enhance what it means to be a community of faith? What gatherings are most necessary for the health of the community?

Once you've determined why you will gather in person, then questions about how to gather can be answered more easily. Keep in mind:

- outside is safer than inside
- shorter time together is safer than longer
- physical distance must be kept from those not in the same household
- if inside, opening doors and windows for outside airflow is important
- group singing is considered an unsafe activity
- percussion and stringed instruments are safer than horns and wind instruments
- masks and physical distancing are non-negotiable for those participating
- keeping record of who is in attendance for each activity aids in contact tracing should it be needed

Some of you have asked for help in determining whether gathering is safe. Let me be clear – there is no 100% risk free way to gather in person. That will be true even when there is a vaccine available. What we hope is to put measures in place that will allow us to live with this virus while taking precautions that will make gathering as safe as possible. Some of your insurance companies will encourage you to have participants sign waivers stating they understand there is risk involved – you will need to decide whether or not to have such waivers.

Here are metrics I have seen a number of immunologists and infectious disease experts use in assessing the risks of gathering in-person:

- < 4 new cases per 100,000 people indicates a lower disease burden
- >150 tests per 100,000 people means sufficient numbers of people are being tested
- < 5% test positivity rate is necessary before coming together in-person

Again, meeting these measures does not mean there is no risk of transmitting COVID19, it just means a lower risk than if the metrics are not met. Experts are still learning more about this virus and these metrics may change, as they have several times since March.

Finally, a word about celebrating Holy Communion. You know I have encouraged congregations not to celebrate this sacrament when the only means of worship is online. I stand by that encouragement, especially as it becomes safer to worship outside and celebrate communion in person. I believe a Service of the Word to be a full worship experience through which Christ comes to us and we can offer our praise. I also know that I, along with you, am hungry for the meal and am glad when it can be offered during an in-person worship service.

Receiving a wafer from the pastor who says the words, “the body of Christ given for you”, is important. It takes just a minute of face-to-face interaction to say and hear these words. When both the pastor and congregant are masked, can stand at a distance with arms outstretched, and are outside or have good fresh air flow, I believe the risk for COVID19 transmission is lessened. Providing

pre-packaged or asking people to bring their own elements may make people feel better but I’m not sure what it says about our understanding of a communal meal.

Thank you for the ways you have remained steadfast in your leadership during this time of pandemic. Our pastors and deacons were not trained for this, and yet are finding creative and faithful ways to proclaim the gospel. We are church for the sake of the world and now, more than ever, this world needs our witness.

Serving Christ with you,



Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew