



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

November 12, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace to you and peace in this time of uncertainty and anxiety.

I am writing today as we see increasing numbers of positive coronavirus cases. In addition, the country remains divided as results of the presidential election are yet to be certified. The fallout from these two realities increases our personal and communal stress in ways that push some to a breaking point. I hope this letter will provide a word that will help address this current situation.

First, we are seeing rising numbers of positive coronavirus cases. In some parts of our state, the daily percent positivity rate is at 20% (the Ironbound section of Newark, for example). Overall, today's daily percent positivity rate in NJ is 6.9%. There are very few parts of our state that are not affected by these increases.

While medical treatments for those infected with COVID19 have improved, these numbers are alarming. I am encouraging you to remain vigilant in your protocols for gathering. Please remember the safest way to gather for worship is online, followed by outside gatherings. Moving inside is not advised at this time, especially for those location with elevated numbers of COVID19.

I am encouraging our congregations to plan now for online Advent and Christmas worship. Be creative in gathering for virtual hymn sings, video greetings from your members, providing worship kits for each household that include candles and crafts, and even joining with a congregation or two across the synod. Continue to ask the questions: What is at the center of our celebrations? How can we help each other have meaningful experiences of worship? Why are we making the decisions we are making? Who is being served by our decisions? Who is being harmed or left out? Where is God leading us in this time?

Perhaps this is the year when we actually put a halt to the commercialization and over-consumption of our holidays. Re-setting our expectations so that we are centered in celebrating the gifts of God for the Advent and Christmas seasons is life-giving. A recorded worship service led by synod staff for Christ the King Sunday (November 22) will be available next week and sermons for the first three Sundays in December will be provided on our website as well. If we hear a need for the synod staff to provide a recorded Christmas Eve worship, we will do that as well.

Second, the divisiveness and uncertainty around our presidential election seems insurmountable at the moment. Once votes are certified by the states (NJ's certification is November 20), I hope we can focus on the issues that will not go away when a new president is in place. Whether excited or disappointed with the results of the election, our role as Christians in society remains the same -- we are called to love God and love our neighbors. In the Affirmation of Baptism service, we commit to loving all people and working for justice and peace.

We may disagree how to do that, but it is central to who we are that we stand with the most vulnerable working for policies that will affirm the dignity of all people, eradicate racial inequities, lift people out of poverty, and provide pathways to prosperity for all who call this country home. No matter the administration in local, state, or federal government, our role continues.

Finally, I urge you to be gentle with one another as we navigate the way forward. I trust you are doing your best to make faithful decisions regarding personal and communal life. We are all in a place we've never been before and facing situations that are new to us. Knowing that God holds us and our future secure, we can and must work together.

Peace to you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tracie L. Bartholomew". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Peace to you,".

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew