



*"Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."
Isaiah 41:10 NRSV*

May 14, 2020

Dear Saint Andrew members and friends,

Recently the roadside sign for Saint Andrew displayed the message, *"Sometimes love looks like an empty church."* Your Church Council is writing you today to briefly explain our current understanding of the following questions related to the message on the sign and our current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are asking:

1. When can we gather again to worship "in person"? (How long will our church be empty?)
2. Are we going to follow along in the re-opening of businesses, restaurants, and other services?
3. When will we be able to receive Communion?
4. How are we continuing to be Saint Andrew Lutheran Church in these times?

This global health and economic crisis is unprecedented in how quickly and broadly it has impacted the world. Many of us are working from home. We take part in virtual meetings, wear masks on the rare occasions we leave home, and make sure we are staying at least six feet apart from our fellow citizens. Society has been affected individually and collectively. *Everyone* is adapting in some way.

Saint Andrew has one uncompromising objective: **we will prioritize love and care for members and our neighbors as part of the human community.** With information from the Wisconsin Council of Churches, input from religious leaders, local church pastors, our insurance company, public health and emergency management offices, our pastors and Church Council are discussing options, using a thoughtful and responsible approach. Morally, ethically, and as people of faith we will use caution and safe measures to reduce the risks that physical gatherings may cause, specifically to the exposure of COVID-19 and the capacity churches have to be pro-active partners in public health.

Three phases have been outlined by many health and government organizations with these general definitions for religious gatherings:

Phase 1 – Less than 10 may gather with social distancing with mask wearing required.

Phase 2 – Less than 50 may gather with social distancing with mask wearing required.

Phase 3 – No minimum for gathering with social distancing and mask wearing required. Note that singing in worship will not yet occur during Phase 3.

What phase are we in now? Phase 1 has not yet begun. There are many different criteria before each phase can be entered and these phases are assessed and initiated by state and county health officials. It is unknown when phase 1 will begin. Church Council is committed to communicating with you throughout this process at each phase.

1. When can we gather again to worship "in person"? (How long will our church be empty?)

Saint Andrew's mission to be "open to all," challenges us to reasonable and safe gathering before *phase 3*. Because of our size, demographics, and our mission, the challenge to gather with less than 50 people would exclude visitors and members, especially the more vulnerable members of our community. We therefore are looking to use Phase 3 as the milestone for us to consider the return to community worship "in person" in the sanctuary.

2. Are we going to follow along in the re-opening of businesses, restaurants, and other services?

As our answer to the first question suggests, we will be “open to all” again for “in person” worship at phase 3. Our desire to worship and gather as a whole community is strong but is not contingent on economic factors. We can assist society as a whole by refraining from being together “in person” as we care for those who must work during this time.

3. When will we be able to receive Communion again?

At Saint Andrew and in the ELCA denomination, Holy Communion is contingent on being received in a gathering, during “in person” worship as a congregation. When we can assemble again is still unknown; however, with these extraordinary circumstances the greater ELCA, teaching theologians across the church, our Synod, and our local ELCA Church Conference are looking at other faithful options for how to commune. As soon as we can, we will provide members the opportunity to commune.

4. How are we continuing to worship, learn, witness and serve as the people of Saint Andrew Lutheran Church in these times?

COVID-19 has impacted all of us. For some, it has been deeply personal with fear and anxiety over a loved one fighting the virus – or worse, losing that battle. To anyone dealing with these most serious, life-altering implications, you are in our thoughts and prayers.

In the meantime, we continue to thrive, separately but together:

- Streaming and recording Thursday reflections and Sunday worship
- Small groups and ministries meeting online
- Having daily devotionals available to be emailed to you
- Sunday school materials available for family use at home
- Online fellowship hours with our pastors
- Weekly communication via e-mail (mailed bi-weekly, by request)
- Continued pastoral support

We are also looking at ways to connect our members who do not have the ability or means to use technology so that they too remain connected.

We are always looking for ideas to connect with you. Please submit suggestions to info@salc-wausau.org so that they can be considered. Your Church Council along with our pastors continue to meet and discuss the next steps moving forward. We will keep you informed of updates and any changes to our plan. In the meantime, let us join together in praying for the health of the world.

Peace, through Jesus Christ,

The Council of Saint Andrew Lutheran Church

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