



# East Central Synod of Wisconsin

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

To the people of the East-Central Synod of Wisconsin,

God's peace be with you! You have been church in the midst of pandemic for about 10 months, now. Even those of us who are most energized by change and the challenge of problem-solving are weary and counting losses, including the terrible and mounting cost of lives lost and harmed because of the virus. The leaders of congregations and other ministry contexts in our synod have had to make countless decisions, trying to keep people meaningfully connected, but also trying to prevent church gatherings from being a place where the virus spreads. While pandemic pastoring at Luther College, I found myself wishing for just one thing to not be totally new and strange.

Isaiah 43 describes God who sustains life and accompanies creation through the new and the strange as well as through all kinds of suffering. God makes a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. God is present and gives protection through flood and fire. At the Rev. Dr. Terrence Fretheim's funeral, I was reminded that this is also the only place in scripture where God says, speaking to the people directly through the prophet, "I love you" (43:4.)

Beloved people of God and leaders of God's church, with gratitude and affirmation for your ongoing creative work and decision-making in your contexts and conferences, Synod Council VP Kerry Fehrman and I offer these guidelines for worship and gathering. Our hope is that this will help relieve some of the burden of decision-fatigue facing leaders in our synod; we recognize that the constantly changing nature of pandemic makes that difficult to avoid.

These recommendations are based on the work of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, available along with many resources for worship during the pandemic at [wchurches.org](http://wchurches.org).

· **Avoid in-person gatherings.** While there are steps that can be taken to make in-person gathering safer—consistent and correct use of face coverings, staying home when sick, maintaining physical distance, limiting the number of people who gather, limiting the amount of time in the gathering space, no singing or woodwind or brass instruments, gathering outdoors or in a well-ventilated space—there is no way to eliminate the risk of gathering in-person during the pandemic. The Body of Christ gathers online, via radio or TV broadcast, through services where members can dial in to worship by phone or on recordings delivered to members who don't have internet access. The phone calls and online meetings you have been making to check in on people and keep them connected to the church and to each other: this is the church, working to keep people healthy on many levels.

- **Commit to your safest gathering plan through Feb. 14 (at least.)** We've seen that we are capable of adapting quickly when needed, and we thank God for that and for the difficult and life-saving work of each congregation and leader in this synod. Keeping this level of emergency response alertness going over the course of months, though, is exhausting. Rather continually reassessing and adapting plans based on public health data, assume that we will be in an active pandemic through cold and flu season, and make plans for the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany accordingly.
- **Make low/no-contact plans for Ash Wednesday.** Lent comes early this year (Feb. 17) and Ash Wednesday is typically a high-touch day. It is hard to imagine this day without the pastoral act of imposing ashes in the context of worship, but quick outdoor home visits or drive up imposition of ashes (safer) or distributing ashes in to-go kits and then gathering over Zoom (safest) are possibilities.

Advent preparation has taken on new layers of meaning; planning and preparing for Christmas gatherings has not looked at all the same this year. Thank you for the care you have taken in that planning and preparation, and know that in the newness, the strangeness, the suffering and the loss of this season, God is with you. Jesus who is the way, Jesus who is unfailing living water, Jesus, Immanuel, is right in the midst with you and with all creation. God bless and keep you as you bear witness to this Good News.

Gratefully,

Bishop Anne Edison-Albright  
Synod Vice President Kerry Fehrman