



## East Central Synod of Wisconsin

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Dear people of the East-Central Synod of Wisconsin,  
My last Covid-19 update came as we were preparing for Christmas and starting to imagine what Lent would look like; we'd made the decision to postpone the new bishop installation (and many other installations in the synod, too) because of increased risk and full ICUs. Today, we are in Lent and beginning to mark many one-year anniversaries of the pandemic. We are getting close to Holy Week, which will be different than last year, and different from other years, too. We passed the terrible milestone of 500,000 deaths due to Covid, and while infection rates have gone down, serious illness and death continues in this country and around the world. In the midst of the reality and impact of that loss, the reality and positive impact of the vaccine is another marked difference between now and my last update in December.

The combination of anxiety, grief and genuine—but hard, at first, to recognize—hope of this time feels like Easter. It feels like Jesus meeting us like he met the disciples on the road to Emmaus, hearing our mourning and our “but we had hoped” testimonies from the past year, and revealing embodied possibilities we had not been able to fully imagine a few weeks or months ago.

Again, I commend more comprehensive sources of guidelines and recommendations to you and your Covid-planning teams, especially the Wisconsin Council of Churches. At the Conference of Bishops, we were given this resource from Ecumenical Protocols for Worship, Fellowship and Sacramental Practice as CDC-vetted benchmarks and guidelines for in-person worship: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IPNroq4of1LGqOo1gY2kexqMfNx4sYHM/view>

Here is what I am learning on this road with you:

**Make decisions based on Christian ethics and values: put the needs of the most vulnerable, first.** From the beginning, one of the burdens of this pandemic has been relentless high-stakes decision making. As if the decisions we needed to make for ourselves and our families weren't enough, many of us—pastors, deacons, and other church leaders—found ourselves wading through public health data to make informed decisions on behalf of congregations and other contexts. Guiding our analysis of that data and our decisions as Christian leaders is the Gospel truth that Jesus turns the world upside down and makes the needs of the most vulnerable among us the most important of all. Jesus also insists that our family is larger than we think—we are deeply interconnected and interdependent, and our decisions must reflect care not only for me and my household but for the greater good. These values guide us firmly toward decisions that safeguard the health and wellbeing of others, particularly others who are at high risk.

**Constant high-stakes decision making takes a toll. Your leader needs a break.** Your pastor, deacon or vicar is likely showing signs of being under extreme stress. Leaders who adapted with creativity and enthusiasm at the beginning of the pandemic are exhausted

and worn down. This is not a reflection of your leader's skill, suitability for ministry, or call from God; it is a normal response to being in ministry—a caregiving, leadership position—in a crisis and, in this case, a year-long crisis. Congregations: reach out to your rostered leaders to find out what kind of sabbath renewal would be most meaningful. For some, it will be the gift of additional time off. Work together to ensure the necessary support for your leader to be away and focused on renewal: this rest time is good for the health of your leader and the health of the congregation. For some, what's most needed might be to direct continuing education or additional funds this year for coaching, counseling, spiritual direction or classes focused on health and wellbeing. Pastors who are renewed and equipped in their leadership and caregiving work will be better able to bring resources and hope to hurting people: caregivers, leaders and front-line workers in many different fields and people who fall into many different high-risk groups who are also worn down and exhausted, in need of pastoral care and healthy congregational community.

We know that after natural disasters, many clergy leave the congregations they helped lead through the disaster, and some leave the ministry, due to the trauma and burnout they have experienced. Clergy need renewal after a year of pandemic; some will be renewed by rest, sabbath and support from their congregations. Others will be renewed by change.

**There is hope.** There always was hope, of course, because we are resurrection people, and we know that death is not the end of the story, even in a pandemic, even with so much loss. The best metaphor I've heard recently is that we're very close to the end of the pandemic tunnel, but if we try to exit the tunnel early we will still crash into the walls. That may be what's making this time feel so hard—seeing that light, that better time ahead, and not being quite there yet. What gets us out of the tunnel? Getting vaccinated and encouraging others; all clergy are eligible to be vaccinated in Wisconsin, now, and a new group of high-risk people become eligible March 22. I am pretty excited that my husband, parents and I will likely all be vaccinated by sometime in April. There is joy in the hope of those small family gatherings. When it comes to public gatherings and spaces, continued and consistent use of masks and physical distancing also help us get out of the tunnel, whether we're vaccinated or not, indoors or outdoors. Continuing those mitigation methods now gets us to the end of the tunnel, sooner.

In a recent letter to rostered leaders, I shared that I believe communion can be celebrated in online worship, but that the question about online worship and communion is very different than it was in March 2020. Our focus now is not how to get online in a crisis (quickly, creatively, and well for the short term) but how to fully explore the implications and possibilities of online worship in a sustainable way. As many congregations are now gathering or preparing to gather in person, many are also thinking about how to stay connected with people who have joined online, as well as how to best keep people safe in their contexts at this stage of the pandemic. For these conversations, being church together helps tremendously. Sharing ideas, questions, worries and dreams with each other in your conference makes all of our ministry stronger.

The disciples didn't know it was Easter; they thought they knew that Jesus was dead, and that dead people stay dead. We know different, but I think this year we have some greater insight into how grim things were for the followers of Jesus in those three days. We have been walking together through this pandemic, sometimes stumbling in our grief, often holding each other up. Jesus has been walking with us and with all creation. I am grateful to walk with you in these days as your bishop.

Gratefully,

Bishop Anne Edison-Albright