



East Central Synod of Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

December 6, 2021

Dear people of the East Central Synod of Wisconsin,

In Advent, we hear texts that tell us to “stay alert” and “keep awake.” Growing up, I found this unnerving. Being constantly vigilant sounded exhausting, especially when I wasn’t entirely clear on what I was watching and waiting for. Jesus, yes. But how? Was this “stay awake” stuff a figure of speech, or something God really wants us to do?

As we begin the second Advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, seasonal exhortations to stay alert have new and more tangible meaning. When we watch out, stay alert, and care for each other, we watch and are alert for Jesus. We are vigilant to notice and take part in how God continues to show up in the world. God does want us to wake up and care for each other and all creation, and that does feel exhausting sometimes. As the pandemic continues to bring home our interconnectedness and the impact we have on each other, the realness of this Advent watching, waiting and caring for Christ in each other is not just unnerving, but also a powerful experience: a wake-up call for living out our faith.

In preparation to write this update, the synod staff and I checked in with and listened to the experiences of rostered and lay leaders in our synod who have been making decisions about Covid precautions and how we watch out for the Body of Christ. We’ve been listening since the beginning, and one of the notable changes recently is how many more of us now have direct experience with Covid, either ourselves or an immediate family member. Our listening helps us associate real people with the numbers and stories we’ve heard and seen: high and critically high burden rates; full hospitals; Covid exposures (or close calls) happening at schools, church events, and family gatherings; Covid-related serious illness and death; exhausted and burned out pastors, staff and volunteers.

There is a wide diversity of mitigation practices in our synod, from fully online to fully in-person with very little mitigation, with a lot of variations and combinations of practices in-between. Some of the diversity in our practice reflects the different realities of our contexts: high speed, reliable internet access is not a resource we all have equitable access to. Also, many congregations feel fragile, unsure of how many members we now have, and who might never come back. In areas where Covid safety has been politicized it feels risky to take a stand, even when that stand is for public health and the common good. We don’t all have the same trusted sources, and our distrust, anger and frustration with institutions and each other doesn’t stop at the church door.

This update was prompted by a large jump in numbers, as well as in the number of counties in the “critically high” category we’ve been tracking from the Wisconsin DHS. As a synod staff, we’ve revisited our Covid safety guidelines and practices, and have also had important and honest conversations about when we need to meet in person (and what we need to be safe when we do,) and how to best incorporate online and hybrid meetings more into our schedule. We know that getting to the “moderate” or “low” zone depends on us—all of us—and the choices we continue to make to care for and love our neighbors.

Because the synod staff does meet in person across the synod, where infection rates and Covid safety practices vary, we will continue to ask that the people we meet and worship with are masked—for your safety and the safety of others we’ll be meeting with, next. When possible, we’ll meet online or schedule events farther out, in hopes that rates improve.

We urge you to have, and to continue having, similar honest and important conversations in your congregations and contexts about continuing and improving Covid safety practices. Keep your care for the wider community and your most vulnerable members and neighbors at the forefront of the conversation, and take a layered approach: masks, handwashing, distance, airflow, contact tracing, encouraging people to stay home when sick, testing before especially large gatherings, keeping in-person gatherings small, gathering online when possible. Our ecumenical partners at the Wisconsin Council of Churches have also put out an urgent request for congregations, especially in rural areas, to host vaccination clinics. We'll share the contact information to get you connected to that ministry opportunity below this message.

Here's what we've learned from our conversations with you: You are living out your faith; you are living Advent in a tangible and visceral way. Watching the numbers, watching out for each other through Covid mitigations and safe gathering practices, waiting and praying by bedsides and from your homes, gathering for worship in person and online, listening deeply to each other's stories and meeting Christ in the people you interact with through church and your wider community. Thank you. As you continue this Advent work, we've gathered some resources for you—because that is part of how we watch out and show love, synod-office style! You'll find these listed at the end of this message. We are also praying constantly for you, as a whole and individually, by your congregation names and also by your names and concerns as we learn them, too.

My favorite prayer for Compline continues to give me a sense of hope and comfort this season: "Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch or weep this night..." (ELW p. 326). In Advent, God calls us into the Christian practice of watching and waiting; a ministry of presence and bearing witness to the preciousness of another person's life, of the belovedness of the whole body of Christ. I think of all the times I've kept watch, especially with people close to death and their families. I think of late nights watching and waiting with my kids when they are sick. Watching is hard, often exhausting work. It is also holy work, and God watches with us. *Gracious God, give rest to the weary, sooth the suffering, comfort the afflicted, and shield the joyous, for your love's sake, Amen.*

Watching with you,



Bishop Anne

[Covid-19 Plan and Procedure for the East Central Synod of Wisconsin](#)

[Wisconsin Council of Church - Host a Vaccine Clinic](#)

[Wisconsin Council of Churches - Returning to Church 3.0](#)

[Wisconsin Council of Churches Video for Returning to Church 3.0](#)

[CIDRAP \(Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy\)](#)

[Weekly Podcast. Osterholm Update.](#)

[Episode for the week of Dec. 2](#)

[Archive of Synod Covid-19 Resources](#)

["Blessing for Waking" by Jan Richardson](#)

(If this is a paper copy or PDF, please visit www.ecsw.org/covid19 for links to these resources.)