

People of God,

As representatives of various confessional Lutheran Church bodies in MN, we have been working with the government since the beginning of the pandemic to love our neighbors and protect people from the spread of illness. That is why we were dismayed when we heard Governor Walz's May 13 announcement that he would end the Stay-at-Home order to allow for more commerce, but continue to leave religious entities without a timeline for opening, limiting them to gatherings of up to ten people. In anticipation of reopening, we have prepared safety protocols based on the guidance of the Department of Public Safety. Along with Catholic bishops, we submitted a plan to the Governor on May 8 for his review that detailed the public health measures we would take. Those measures included an attendance cap of 33% of the occupancy limit of the worship space, robust cleaning protocols, and modifications to our services that would limit health risks. In providing our protocols to the governor and his staff, we expressed an openness to adjusting them as necessary. These protocols are consistent with practices that are already in use in many churches throughout the United States.

We were thus surprised and disappointed when the Governor rebuffed our efforts at coordination and refused to move toward the reopening of churches. That decision is a violation of our fundamental religious freedom, and indicates that churches are seen as a less than essential part of society. Our congregations are full of people who are committed to serving one another and the outside communities, and who are also in need of the spiritual value of meeting together. At this time, we believe that we can allow our communities to open in accordance with our religious beliefs and within accepted public health guidelines. Thus, we are announcing that our churches may reinstate public gatherings as of May 26, 2020, with the first Sunday services occurring on Pentecost Sunday, May 31. We strongly encourage congregations to follow our strict protocols for sanitation and social distancing and the limits on the number in attendance. This is subject to local conditions and is not binding on any of our congregations.

Throughout this crisis, we have attempted to model Christ's love among our communities, which is why Lutheran churches made the very difficult decision to suspend public worship services, school, childcare operations, and congregational activities independent of any executive orders issued by the Governor. We hoped that our efforts would be seen as supportive of Governor Walz's leadership and allow our beloved state to prepare the necessary infrastructure to save lives and limit the spread of COVID-19. We believe that the efforts of all Minnesotans were instrumental in flattening the curve and protecting those groups who are particularly vulnerable to the ill-effects of the virus. We expect that none of that will change as Minnesota "turns the dial" to the next phase of disease prevention.

In our decision-making, we have also sought to respect the rightful authority of the civil magistrate—another important biblical principle. In doing so, we have sought to be good stewards of our gifts by serving our communities in numerous ways. Members of our communities have pulled together and given sacrificially of their time, their finances, and their skills to be a light, all finding creative ways to exercise our faith without the balm of gathering together for worship.

We believe that we are capable of sharing the gospel within our communities and maintaining safe practices, making it unnecessary to further delay the scriptural exhortation to "meet together." (Hebrews 10:25), That belief is confirmed by the Governor's decision to end the Stay-at-Home order and allow more commerce. It is now permissible, for example, for an

unspecified number of people to go to shopping malls and enter stores, as long as no more than 50 percent of the occupancy capacity is reached. Big-box stores have hundreds of people inside at any one time, and the number of goods that are being handled and distributed in one store by many people—stock staff, customers, cashiers—is astounding. There is no state mandate that anyone wear masks in those malls or stores, wash their hands consistently, or follow any specific cleaning protocol. Given these circumstances, and the well-researched protocols that we plan to follow, protocols which have been successfully implemented elsewhere, how can reason require us any longer to keep our faithful from coming together and being fed by the Word preached and the Word carried by water, bread and wine?

We are very grateful for the constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of religion that we have. We believe that the executive orders forbidding 11 people from gathering together in a church regardless of its size, but allowing malls and other “non-critical” businesses to open, fails to uphold that guarantee. We have accordingly chosen to move forward in the absence of a timeline from Governor Walz. We cannot allow an indefinite suspension of in-person worship.

We share the governor’s concern about the importance of taking all reasonable precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and therefore have charged our congregations with the task of preparing for a limited return to public worship, though we are by no means requiring them to do so. Each congregation needs to be comfortable in its ability to meet the standards set forth in the accompanying public health protocols. They will need to carefully plan for how they will limit admittance to one-third of the seating capacity of their church, how they will seat those who arrive, and how they will clean the space in accordance with the protocol. We trust local leadership will determine when they are able to satisfy these requirements. We also recognize that some congregations may choose, for now, to continue to adhere to the existing ten-person limit.

We are also aware that congregations will have to stay alert to changes in local circumstances and be prepared to re-impose more stringent limits in the event of an outbreak in the community. We expect that they will continue to urge those at greater risk to stay and home and that they will continue to provide various technological means (live-streaming, YouTube, etc.) to serve the needs of those unable to physically attend services.

As local congregational leadership make these important decisions about when to safely re-open, we ask them to be in communication with the District office about their plans. Our goal is to provide for both the spiritual feeding of those entrusted to our care as well as the physical well-being of our neighbors, and with the excellent leadership in our churches and the help of our congregations, we trust that we will be able to do both.

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