To the people of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod

As you are most likely aware, there have now been confirmed cases of COVID-19, commonly known as the Coronavirus, in the United States.

The presence of this virus has some of us asking questions about what the church can and should do to prepare and, if necessary, respond to this new reality.

We, in the Office of the Bishop, are not trained health professionals and encourage you to seek health related information from credible sources. The MN Department of Health has a list of excellent resources here: [https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/index.html](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/index.html). This website contains situation updates, travel information, and guidelines for schools which could be adapted for use in the congregation.

At this time the MN Department of Health is not recommending the suspension of school events or extracurricular activities. Should this recommendation change it would be wise to consider the implications for your local congregation.

It is also prudent for congregational leaders to work collaboratively with community health professionals to begin thinking now about best practices for your congregation and ministry staff.

There are portions of the liturgy it may be good and appropriate to temporarily amend in the midst of this cold and flu season. The passing of the peace can occur without the shaking of hands. Care should be taken in administering the sacraments to reduce the risk of sharing germs. Those who are ill should be encouraged to stay home: this includes pastors and deacons. Open conversation between staff and congregational leaders should occur regarding care of the congregation when a pastor or deacon is ill. Rostered ministers should work in consultation with their congregation’s leaders in addressing the needs of visiting the ill and homebound.

As you make decisions for the sake of your congregation and ministry remember that nothing decided need be set in stone. Changing practices around greetings, communion, and visitation now does not mean we will never shake hands again. It is helpful to work toward maintaining a balanced perspective.

It would also be wise to consider the advantages of digital spaces. Posting sermons, reflections and prayers online can serve those who cannot otherwise attend worship. Making use of online giving platforms can ease the financial burdens congregations face in times of fluctuating worship attendance. The ministry and life of our congregations continue.

It is of utmost importance to pay attention to the sources of the information we consume (in addition to the MN Department of Health the Center for Disease Control has information here: [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html)).
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html). It is also important to use common sense, to wash our hands and cover our coughs.

We have always lived in a world of shifting realities. Some of those shifts are more surprising than others. Remember, in this time and every time, who you are: the people of God called and sent for the sake of the world.

As new information or resources become available, we will work to share them with you.

In Christ,

Rev. Regina Hassanally
Bishop of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA