



Southeastern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



December 8, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you! This letter is intended to help equip you as a leader in your congregation in planning for the possibility that your pastor or deacon needs to quarantine, isolate, or is incapacitated because of COVID-19. An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure, so the best thing to do is have a safety plan, stay updated on the latest public health guidance, and keep them from becoming infected in the first place.

In all of our thinking and planning, we need to be realistic about risk. Risk cannot be completely eliminated; it can only be managed and reduced to the best of our abilities. People we know and love—including our rostered ministers—will potentially be exposed, and in some cases infected.

Should this happen in your context, the first thing you should do is be in touch with your county public health officers. They will already be alerted to test results by systems apart from any action on your part, but it would be wise to alert them in order to assist in contact tracing and the like. If that exposure was part of an in-person service in your building, it would be best to plan on ceasing all in-person activities in the building immediately and to plan on at least two weeks of no in-person contact. Please also let the Office of the Bishop know so that we can provide pastoral care to the RM (that is, Rostered Minister) affected, and help provide support and resources to your congregation. Please note that anything you pass along to us will be treated with all care for confidentiality. Contact information for Assistants to the Bishop is included below.

The Southeastern Minnesota Synod does not have a stable of pastors ready to deploy and fill in, but there is much we can do to help you make wise, faithful, and safe decisions about what to do. There are several routes you can explore to see that the worship needs of your congregation are met. That's a determination you'll need to make on a case-by-case basis in conversation with your RM and Council leadership. It may very well be that your RM will need to step away from their regular duties to focus on healing and recuperating.

If your RM cannot provide any service pieces, you have several good options:

- Perhaps the best option would be to make use of the online worship resources from neighboring congregations. A list of virtual worship services from around the synod (including services provided by SEMN Synod staff) can be found at semnsynod.org/worship-streaming. There has been a tremendous upwelling of cooperation and generosity between congregations. Be good neighbors, and let your good neighbors help you when you have need.
- If you'd like to offer at-home worship resources, the ELCA maintains a blog with weekly offerings

at <https://blogs.elca.org/Worship/?fbclid=IwAR2b5kAd7p5NEYW0xWCNSUdSuOZgVJV NOan1OHJVxTDI6FHZE5xvyVDzGmw>.

- Lay-led services are always a good option. Sermons are not required, and most liturgies can be easily adapted to lay leadership. Many of you may have experience with lay leaders filling in for RMs on vacation or out sick in pre-COVID “normal” time. The same option is open in our current situation.

Given the realities of our current situation, congregations planning on meeting indoors and in-person will need to be open to the possibility of needing to pause again. Given the current numbers, it may prove necessary to once again move to meeting only through digital platforms for a time.

Perhaps the most important factors in all of these decisions are patience, compassion, flexibility, and creativity. These are not normal times, so we ought not to expect (or insist) that things will look like they normally do. If we manage that expectation, then patience, compassion, flexibility, and creativity can open us up to all sorts of faithful and meaningful ways to worship and to be church. These are not normal times, to be sure, but they are temporary. Changes and adaptations you make now are not necessarily long-term, and almost none of them will be forever. Psalms 39:7 reads, “And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you” (NRSV). That hope is ours in Christ, and it will carry us through.

Dear friends, thank you for your leadership during this time. Thank you for all of the ways that you’ve faithfully adapted. Thank you for all of the extra energy you’ve had to pour into the holy work of leading your congregation. Thank you for your partnership.

Peace to you in Christ,

PR. MATTHEW LEE LARSON

Rev. Matt Larson

On behalf of the Office of the Bishop of the SEMN Synod

Assistants to the Bishop contact information:

Rev. Matt Larson, mlarson@semnsynod.org

Rev. Barb Streed, streed@semnsynod.org

Kathy Chatelaine, chatelaine@semnsynod.org

Rev. Emily Carson, carson@semnsynod.org

You can also reach Bishop Hassanally or any of the staff by phone at 507-280-9457.