



Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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Rev. Dr. William O. Gafken, Bishop

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Dear People of God across the Indiana-Kentucky Mission Territory,

Last week, Indiana Governor Holcomb declared the state to be in Phase 5, the final phase, of “Back on Track Indiana.” At the same time, he left the requirement to wear face coverings in public in place at least through October 17. The latest Executive Order, which every resident of Indiana, especially congregational leaders should read carefully, can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/3kNkAkV>. All of the governor’s executive orders can be found here: <https://www.in.gov/gov/2384.htm>.

Earlier in the month, Kentucky Governor Beshear acknowledged, as Governor Holcomb has in Indiana, that while the virus has reached every county in the commonwealth and there continue to be significant numbers of new cases of COVID-19, including deaths related to it, the numbers have slowed and begun to plateau and the rates of positivity (percentage of positive cases per number of tests) in most places has dropped below 5%. Nevertheless, Governor Beshear continues to counsel caution, limits on in-person gatherings remain in place, and Kentucky’s face covering requirement will remain at least through October 7. Governor Beshear’s communications, which every resident of Kentucky, especially congregational leaders should read carefully, can be found here: <https://governor.ky.gov/covid19>.

Both governors strongly encourage us to make decisions about how we conduct ourselves as individuals and as communities of faith based on fact, science, and medical expertise, not partisan perspectives or personal desire or demand. This is wise counsel. I would add to it that as followers of Jesus we also include trust in God and the primary commitment to love and serve our neighbors in our discernment about how we will live into what so many people refer to as the new normal.

What’s a congregation to do in light of all this?

Begin by noting the word “new” in the phrase “new normal.” As much as we might wish it were otherwise, there is no going back to the “normal” that characterized our lives and our life together as the body of Christ just seven months ago. This virus has changed us and our world forever. For those of us who have died with Christ and been raised with him in Holy Baptism, for those who bear Good Friday’s cross on our brows and are sealed with the Spirit of Easter morning, the groaning and grumbling, lament and discord that so many of us experience now can actually turn us toward new life, the new world God is crafting, a world of justice, mercy, compassion, peace, and security for all.

Before rushing into decisions about changes in worship or other aspects of life together as a congregation, it’s crucial to create space for both lament and learning, trusting that God is working new

life in the midst of this wilderness. Consider spending some time with each other asking and exploring answers to questions like these: How might you share with one another (and with God) the loss and grief, yearnings and nostalgia that folks are experiencing? What are you learning from these last six months – about your congregation, about your neighbors, about yourselves, about how to engage mission and ministry together – that can shape how you will be church in the new world emerging?

Then, please be patient, cautious, and intentional about in-person gatherings, including worship. Medical experts remind us that following appropriate protocols, such as wearing face coverings, maintaining physical distance, and hand washing have played a significant role in slowing the spread of the coronavirus. They also remind us that as flu season approaches, temperatures are dropping, and people will be spending more time indoors, the likelihood of a spike in COVID-19 cases is high. And, of course, by all accounts a vaccine for COVID-19 will not be widely available for all people for at least a few more months.

Consequently, this is not a time to throw off all health protocols and act like the virus has gone away or was never among us. I recommend that congregations who have not yet begun to gather in-person for worship, continue to worship in the ways that you have for the next few weeks and to be patient and intentional in planning for the resumption of some form of in-person worship. For those congregations who have already begun some form of in-person worship that follows appropriate protocols previously suggested (physical distancing, face coverings, etc.) I recommend continued adherence to these protocols and practices at least for the next few weeks. It's also important to note that some congregations across the synod as well as worshipping communities of other traditions have had to cease in-person worship after starting it because some worshippers were diagnosed with COVID-19. Give attention in your planning to a response plan should something like this happen in your congregation. Guidance regarding protocols and practices can be found through the synod web site at <https://iksynod.org/covid-19-resources/>.

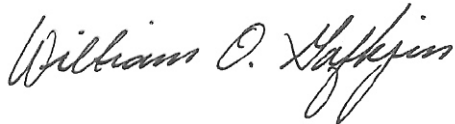
Pay close attention to local and county statistics. Both Kentucky (<https://govstatus.egov.com/kycovid19>) and Indiana (<https://www.coronavirus.in.gov>) have very helpful websites that highlight both statistics and risk related to COVID-19 by county. While the county statistics and color codes are intended primarily to assist schools in making decisions about in-person attendance, they will also be helpful for congregations to make decisions about the level of risk related to in-person gatherings in their locality. A number of congregations across the territory have also received helpful guidance for decisions about gathering in-person by contacting their local or county health department directly.

Support deacons and pastors and other ministers in their decisions about participation in in-person gatherings, including worship. Your pastor, deacon, or other ministers may very well have health-related or other concerns that suggest that, for example, it will not be wise for them to gather with groups yet, especially if there will not be strict universal adherence to safety protocols and a vaccine is not readily available. When a pastor or deacon is ordained, the gathered assembly, speaking for the whole church, promises to regard the pastor or deacon as a servant of Christ and to pray for them, help and honor them for their work's sake, and in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ. Now is the time for all of us to live faithfully into those promises. I am confident that by working together with grace, mutual honesty and honoring, and commitment to each other's well-being, you can discover creative ways to accommodate one another's concerns while also moving forward together in mission and ministry.

With the support of the Synod Council Executive Committee, your synod staff will follow this careful, patient, and intentional approach as well. We will continue to suspend our travel in the month of October and, perhaps, longer. We will continue to be present to leaders and congregations across the synod via teleconferencing and phone. If we determine it to be necessary or urgent, we may travel for an ordination or funeral, for example. We will only do so if the local community agrees to strict adherence to safe, healthy, lower risk protocols and practices. In such cases of necessity, we will also travel to only one community in any 24-hour period. The synod office will continue to be open Monday through Thursday with only one administrative staff member in the office at a time. When more than one of us is in the office we observe lower risk behaviors, such as wearing face coverings and physically distancing and ask that everyone else who visits do the same.

I give thanks to God for you and your commitment to being church, being the body of Christ in and for the world, through the entire length of this wilderness journey. Many of us are fatigued, confused, or fearful...or perhaps all three and more. It's important for us to acknowledge this and to turn together into the refreshing breeze of the Holy Spirit who moves with us through this time offering comfort and accompaniment, healing and hope, and new, abundant life in the world that God is crafting already in the midst of this wilderness. We go together in good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that God's hand is leading us and God's love supporting us.

Peace be with you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William O. Gafkjen". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Peace be with you,".

The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop