



March 6, 2020

I-K Synod Bishop  
William Gafkjen



## A Pastoral Letter from Bishop William O. Gafkjen Regarding COVID-19

As various media fill our consciousness with concern about COVID-19 (coronavirus), this can be a confusing and frightening time as we try to figure out how to respond as individuals and families and as congregations. It is both wise and appropriate to be concerned about the spreading of this coronavirus and to take reasonable precautions as we gather for worship and other meetings. The healing ministry that Jesus modeled for us certainly includes basic care for one another as well as care for ourselves. As we engage this care, there are at least three things that I encourage you and other leaders and members of your local faith community to keep in mind.

**It is seldom helpful or productive to let fear form the foundation of our responses in time of concern or crisis.** Fear is normal, of course. It is important to acknowledge it to ourselves and to one another. Even a cursory reading of the psalms confirms this. But letting fear shape our decision making seldom results in good decisions. Making decisions about how your faith community will live together during this time should be done together and based on facts and the fullest information possible. Two excellent sources for this information are the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) and the [World Health Organization](#). It might also be helpful to invite local resource people from medical professions or public health departments to meet with congregational leaders and/or to lead forums for congregational members to assist in your mutual decision-making about implications of COVID-19 for your gatherings and ministry with one another.

**It is important to continue to gather for worship.** If you are sneezing, coughing, or running a fever, you should stay home and take care of yourself, contacting your doctor if symptoms persist. Gathering for worship, singing, receiving the Eucharist, and being with friends all support our wellness and can even help assuage our fears as we hear and experience the presence of the crucified and risen Christ among us. When gathered, we should all follow practices that reduce the spread of germs and help people to feel safer. Helpful guidance in this regard is provided in a document provided by ELCA worship staff and available on the ELCA website: "[Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns](#)." This might also be a good time to step up ways in which folks can be included in worship and other meetings at a distance by using

technological tools available, such as Facebook Live, Go To Meeting, Zoom, Skype, and the like.

The call of the Gospel and the long history of the church suggest that **during times of crisis Christians do not only think of or tend to their own health and well-being, but also to the health and well-being of others**, including and especially those who may be isolated or marginalized in some way. In other words, this is also a time to love our neighbor, including those who are fearful, sick, or confused by the situation. This will look different in each context, of course, but, as an example, this might be a good time to recruit congregation members who can check in by phone with other members and neighbors who may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 or any other seasonal illness. As another bishop has put it, "the love of God becomes incarnate in a congregation that actively cares for each other and for others, especially in a time of greater anxiety and risk."

Finally, **we pray, when we are apart and when we are together**. This prayer, written by The Rt. Rev. Diane Jardine Bruce, Episcopal Bishop Suffragan, Diocese of Los Angeles (the next to last sentence of which was added by another ELCA bishop and which I further edited) may be a helpful guide for our personal and public prayers during this challenging time:

*Holy and gracious God, give us the strength to meet the health crisis looming around us. Enlighten researchers that they may discover the right vaccine against this disease. Guide the doctors, nurses and all medical technicians working with those who are infected to take correct actions for their care. Protect all medical staff and family or friends caring for those who are ill. Bring together the governments and governmental agencies around the world to work together to eradicate this health threat. Guide our faith community as we care for one another, for ourselves, and for our neighbor. All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Peace be with you,

The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen  
Bishop

[Helpful Resources Available Online \(including those mentioned in the letter\)](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov>

World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int>

Indiana Department of Health: <https://www.in.gov/isdh/28470.htm>

Kentucky Department of Public Health: <https://chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dph/Pages/covid19.aspx>