

May 22, 2020

Dear People of God of the congregations of the Sierra Pacific Synod, the Southwest California Synod, and the Pacifica Synod:

Grace and peace to you, in the name of the risen and ascended Christ!

It is with concern that we reach out to you today, on the eve of Memorial Day weekend and the last Sunday of Easter, having just witnessed in a televised message by the President of the United States a statement declaring that the nation's churches should open for public worship this weekend. We understand the strong desire of our people to worship together, particularly on a meaningful weekend like this one. We wish to state for the sake of our church and its people that we believe the advice to re-open this weekend is at odds with the prevailing medical understanding of the course of this virus and the ways to prevent its spread.

We call on you to continue to listen to those state and local public health experts who, using the best medical and scientific information available, have already given us sensible guidelines to follow in our states and in the counties of our synods. Churches remain places of particularly high risk for contagion, and recent cases in many states have confirmed that opening prematurely can be catastrophic. We cannot ensure, in all our congregations, the sanitation and distancing requirements necessary to be together for worship. Nor has the risk of infection decreased in many parts of our synods—and both a reduction in infections and effective measures to block contagion will be needed before we will be able to gather in person again.

This is not a question of religious liberty. Nothing earthly—no government, indeed no virus—can come between us and the love of God. The decision to quarantine us for a time is a public health decision, and we are obligated, for our own good and the good of our neighbor, to do the right thing—which in this case is to refrain from non-essential gatherings. Our faith is not optional—indeed it is “essential” to us as Christians—but it does not override our higher duty to consider our neighbor's welfare in a time of medical emergency.

Though in normal times people of faith gather every week for praise and proclamation on the day of Christ's resurrection, we are not absolutely required to do so in spite of every obstacle. We have alternatives right now; we do not need to be able to gather together physically in order to worship God—for God hears our prayers wherever

we are and whenever we are. We may pray, we may hear the proclamation of the Word, and we may read and study the scriptures—we may even assemble in digital communities on Sundays—without endangering ourselves and others by gathering together in our church buildings.

Lutherans, in particular, know that there is nothing sacred about a church building except as our sentiment makes it so, and that God is as accessible to us in personal intercession as in corporate prayer. Again, we say, this time of separation is not a time of separation from God. You may cultivate and even expand and intensify your faith in this time of sheltering at home. God is with us in each of our homes right now as surely as God is with us anywhere. And at the appropriate, safe time, we will gather again for the face-to-face worship we so miss and for which we ardently long. We share a hope that will come soon.

Again, we do not think resuming in-person worship ahead of the public health advisories is a good choice. It would be neither wise nor faithful for us to endanger our elders and those communities of poverty and color who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Nor would it be faithful to expose ourselves and our friends to contagion, or to rush into gatherings that are more likely to harm us than to bring us the peace we desire.

We call on the pastors, deacons, and lay leadership of our synods to comply with the standing public health directives in their localities. We recognize that as these directives continue to change, we will stay in dialogue with you. Our faithfulness to God is shown by our love of our neighbors, and in this situation there is a clear witness to be made—the one that best shows care for others.

May God bless and protect us all.

Bishop Mark W. Holmerud
Bishop R. Guy Erwin
Bishop Andy Taylor