

Letter to LCVH Church Family

In Lutheran theology, we talk about three estates from God. These gifts are government, church, and family.

The calling of the government is to protect its citizens. The Jefferson County Health Department recommends suspending large gatherings.

Based on Romans 13 and the Fourth Commandment we are to honor God's representatives. We remember these servants at this time and we pray for their difficult work.

Therefore, we will be canceling Worship Services, Sunday School, and Bible Classes for this Sunday, March 15. We will notify the congregation about future worship services and activities as we move forward. Please be alert for future emails and notifications!

I want to take a few moments to share a few additional thoughts.

Suspending church is a difficult decision and should always be done reluctantly in every circumstance. Canceling church should never be a knee jerk reaction. It has been thought through very carefully.

Let me share with you that canceling services during a crisis like this is nothing new in Lutheran history. For example, I recall stories from my own home state of Wisconsin when the Spanish Flu hit in 1918. The flu closed LC-MS churches for significant periods of time. Historians say the closures helped save lives. In this dire situation, there were also humorous stories of how cities kept saloons open. What irony! I suppose we will once again witness similar inconsistencies of why one place will be open and another place will be closed. It will be frustrating when you can't come to church on Sunday yet you will see people out in public places. In one sense this should frustrate you because Satan's goal is to prevent us from gathering together through any means possible. But in the end, do not let this discourage you!

The Lord will guide and direct us! He is the Lord of all. Including the Church. Including time. I want to highlight this gift of time. God often uses time to sort things out. Our struggle is patience. We pray for patience and calm. Time will soon give us clarity. The Coronavirus is reportedly new. There is so much information out there about the virus right now that many feel overwhelmed. The news moves so fast. There are differing opinions. Mistrust of authorities. Doctors have told me conflicting stories. Statistics are confusing. This all leads to individual uncertainty for some. And while others may have a degree of confidence in their own personal understanding about the virus, they may not have the same degree of certainty to make decisions that will affect the health of others. For those who are completely confident about the Coronavirus, we should not be so quick to dismiss others concerns.

These are all good reasons to momentarily suspend and allow the Lord to work through not only the good gift of medicine, but also the gift of time. Time will allow us to make wise decisions moving forward.

In the days ahead we will see first hand how the virus reacts. If the virus is serious we will be thankful we closed church this Sunday! If the virus is mild, that is our hope, we will be thankful! And this will be a sign that we can once again gather taking necessary precautions.

It is true that some churches right now are having services by trying to eliminate any physical contact with people or surfaces (handshakes, offering plates, doors, communion, etc.) that might spread the virus. These are ideas we explored, planned on implementing, and actually put into practice. However, there still is confusion on how the virus is spreading. What if we implemented these ideas only to learn that the virus is also airborne, which is being reported. Or we learn additional information. Again, as pastor, I do not want to place your health at an undue risk until we know more information. Time will be our friend in this scenario. God works through time!

The third estate is family. In the future you and your family will return to worship! That will be a joyous day! When that day occurs there will possibly be some uneasiness about entering back into public worship. There will still be some questions about the timing to resume normal daily activities. This is where the gift of family comes into play. Each individual and family is gifted with God-given freedom to make their own choices. Not everyone will see it the same. That is not only ok, but good, or godly! Because everyone has their own unique set of circumstances, which is a reason why God blesses us with personal liberty! What is good for one family will not be good for another. We are here to support one another and not judge one another. Exercise that liberty and do what is best for you and your family. We support you! There will be no judgment from the church. (By the way, church families will be making different decisions on this as well and we should not be in the business of critiquing one another.) We all understand that this is such an unusual moment in time.

We also understand that nothing in life is risk free. But we do not want to rush into making a decision about opening or closing worship in the heat of the moment, that we later regret. In the future when we open again, there might be some risks. We all understand in this life there are always risks. We want to re-emphasize over and over again, that for those in the high risk category (seniors, compromised immune systems, etc) please only come to church on the guidance of your doctors!

So, we might have to be patient to resume worship, or church services might start again in a timely fashion. Maybe this will be too quick for some, but not soon enough for others. If it starts up too quick for you, remember a few thoughts. For some of our members they need to be in public worship! The risk of missing out on church is greater than the risk of a virus in their judgment. There is truth to that! That is not just some pious or superstitious sentiment. We do not want to take the promised presence of God and cut people off from that gift! So, leadership is protecting people from physical harm but also a delicate balance of not taking spiritual gifts away from people that are cherished and treasured. And by the way, these spiritual gifts have a physical effect on us as well!

There are tremendous opportunities presented to us in moments like this. Instead of arguing about things on social media or watching the same coverage on cable news repeat itself over and over again, check in on a neighbor, family member, or church family. Talk to your kids about death and life. Easter and the resurrection. Physical health vs. spiritual health. Perspective in life. Priorities. Personal liberty and freedom to make choices. Risks in a fallen creation and how we as Christians handle risk. Fear vs. Faith. How a crisis opens doors to love. Value of public worship. Courage. Talk to your kids about what you miss since you can't go to church on Sunday and how that impacts you.

In the end, if you have a few days off of school and work and you discuss these things based on Christ, you might be blessed with a great educational moment!

Maybe this is a door to start a new routine of a devotional life at home. In the end, the curse of missing church for a Sunday or so might help you grow in Christ! Think about that!

I encourage you to spend this time reading the Bible. Read one of the Gospels. Sometimes we read so many other religious materials we simply don't spend enough time just reading the Word of God. Devotional life doesn't have to be super complicated. Pull out the Catechism. It has worked for 500 years! Go online to Lutheran Hour Ministries. Wonderful resources for devotions on this site. Google search lcms.org. Hopefully your Portals of Prayer is handy!

I will be trying to record and post my sermon for this Sunday so that we can keep some normalcy in our Lenten journey. However, I'm not the most technological person in the world. If you have been in my office or my home you know I like books. I was apparently born in the wrong era. And with that thought, I'm really not that excited about posting videos of myself preaching either. Honestly, I feel a little inadequate doing that, but I'll give it a try. Again, a little patience might be needed until we get that up.

God is good. He will give us the strength to move forward.

So, again, nothing on Sunday. We will just see how things play out and make decisions as we move forward. I'm not sure looking too far ahead is a good idea.

Pray for good health, for doctors and nurses, research, safety, wisdom, mitigating hysteria, courage, our leaders and those who are entrusted to make some imperfect but hopefully wise decisions.

As time goes on, I think we will all feel more equipped to make decisions for ourselves and others. LCVH will be more equipped to serve our people. Churches are not structured to immediately react to pandemics, so pausing to prepare is reasonable. Right now, the unknown is raising anxiety. That is normal and natural. Our Lord understands. It is not a weakness of faith. At the same time, remember the old Bible verse, "God does not give us a spirit of fear or timidity, but power and love."

+Pastor Ahlemeyer