

A Message from Bishop Zeiser about Opening Church Buildings

As we go through this Memorial Day weekend and begin to experience how it feels for some of us to live under relaxed restrictions, along with the heightened spirits that go with the first holiday weekend in the pre-summer weeks, I hope you have a safe and settled Memorial Day observance. It is important for all of us to recognize the significance of this holiday, and to offer thanks to God for those who made supreme sacrifices for the sake our liberties.



As the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, even in the midst of this holiday (and surely beyond it), I also want to reiterate my counsel about when and how to open church buildings for worship and other purposes. We cannot allow illusory hope or misguided enthusiasm to push us to unwise decisions about opening, assembling for worship, or gathering for meetings.

The phased and deliberate process of relaxed restrictions in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and in states across the country, requires that we be patient for the sake of those most vulnerable to the corona virus. Some of the most vulnerable are likely among the members of our congregations, as well as among those who visit our churches or participate in the ministries carried out by our congregations. Love of neighbor, central to the understanding we hold of our discipleship role as followers of the Risen Jesus, draws to act in ways that are sacrificial of our own needs and desires.

I encourage all rostered ministers and congregations of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod to abide by the guidelines established by the governor and to employ the suggested approaches to opening buildings offered by the ELCA Churchwide Office and the Wisconsin Council of Churches. As these guidelines and suggestions have seemed well informed and demand a high level of rigor, I have provided copies of them in previous communications similar to this message. I know, too, that some of you have had access to other helpful and wise resources; I commend your attention to their direction.

The warm personal interaction; the inspired worship; the satisfying mission work in our communities and across the globe; the meaningful opportunities for faith development and spiritual growth; and the unexpected encounters of grace that occur because we step inside beloved church buildings: all of these occasions and more make being part of a congregation so life giving and faith motivating. They are important to me and they are at the heart of why I am committed to the life and mission of the church; and I know that the same is true for you, too.

I have been so impressed by the creative ways in which congregations and rostered

ministers of this synod have directed the faith and the energies of their zeal for compassionate ministries during this awful pandemic. In fact, I have observed a level of enthusiasm, surprise, and renewal in ministers and congregations as they have found new ways to witness to their love of God. The Holy Spirit has stirred in you during this challenging time and you have shown the resilience of your faith. God is at work, and God will continue to do new things for the sake of all people and for all creation no matter how long this pandemic is in effect.

Please, don't be drawn into making a premature decision about opening your building.

With gratitude for your partnership in ministry,

Bishop Samuel Zeiser