

## A pastoral letter from our National and Synod Bishops

**March 4, 2020**

### **A Pastoral Letter Concerning Coronavirus (COVID-19) And Communities Of The ELCIC**

In a pastoral letter to the church released today, ELCIC National and Synod Bishops invite prayers for all who are affected by the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), particularly for the people of China and other nations where the disease is spreading rapidly, and offer recommendations, based on best practices of health authorities, for worship and community life.

Dear friends in Christ,

God's grace and peace to you. Recent news about the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has raised concerns for many of us for the wellbeing of people across the world and potentially in our communities and neighbourhoods. This may be raising fears and questions.

In response, we first want to ask you to pray for all who are affected by this disease. God be with those who grieve, are ill, isolated and afraid, and the many people involved in medical and emergency care. We pray particularly for the people of China and other nations where the disease is spreading rapidly. And we ask that together we stand with and publicly express our support of Asian neighbours and communities in this country, that racism and prejudice be confronted among us and in our nation.

We also ask that we resist allowing our fear to overwhelm us. We trust in "God with us," and in the revelation of God in Christ Jesus who speaks often in the Gospels the words of promise, "Do not be afraid." We are called to reassure others in this same promise.

It is also important to inform ourselves of the risks and precautions, and our national, provincial and local government health authorities are our best source of information. Please consult the Health Canada website: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html> or your provincial or local health authority for up-to-date information.

We want to ensure best practises in our worship and community life together, especially for the sake of those most vulnerable to this and other diseases. The following are recommended in our communities, based on best practises of health authorities, for preventing the transmission of the disease.

People experiencing cold or flu-like symptoms, especially a fever, should stay home and avoid contact with others until symptoms cease. Thoroughly washing hands and avoiding contact between unwashed hands and mouth, nose and eyes, and sneezing or coughing into your sleeve or a tissue, are the most effective ways of preventing infection.

Concerning specific worship practises, the following are recommended in our communities that should ordinarily govern our public worship:

Greeting one another, including sharing the peace, should be expressed in ways that are comfortable for each person, that may or may not include shaking hands or embracing, but also, a bow, nod, or smile.

Hand sanitizer should be readily available in and around our worship and other gathering spaces for everyone's use.

Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces according to local health guidelines in our public spaces of worship and gathering, especially washrooms, door handles, handrails, is recommended.

Those preparing Holy Communion should thoroughly wash their hands with soap and hot water and all vessels and containers must be carefully washed before and after worship as well.

Presiders and Communion ministers should thoroughly wash their hands with soap and hot water just before serving Communion.

Medical advice tells us that the common cup, when properly administered, continues to be a hygienically sound means of receiving the wine in Holy Communion. A metal chalice wiped inside and outside and turned between each person communing is the best practise. Ceramic chalices are not as hygienically sound.

Parishes that use individual glasses for Communion should ensure that good hygienic practises are followed by all persons who handle the glasses both before and after worship.

The practise of intinction (dipping the bread in the wine) is not recommended. But if used, worshippers need to take care that hands are clean and touching the wine is avoided.

People who are uncomfortable or anxious about receiving the wine in Holy Communion, regardless of the means, should be reminded that it is entirely appropriate to commune by receiving the bread only.

As we continue to monitor the situation, an extreme risk of transmission in a local community may require the temporary practise of communing with bread only. Local health authorities should be consulted in making this decision.

In addition, appropriate food safe practises, including thorough hand washing, washing of dishes, careful preparing and serving of food and beverages should be followed for all gatherings for hospitality and community together. Consult local government health authorities for best information and training as appropriate.

Our hope and prayer is that our appropriate concern for public health and well-being in our communities does not diminish our full and enthusiastic participation in worship and community life together. We trust in God's continuing care for all in response to this health challenge before us.

God bless us all with a Holy Lent and a springtime of hope in Christ Jesus.

Yours in Christ,

The Rev. Susan Johnson, ELCIC National Bishop

The Rev. Dr. Greg Mohr, ELCIC British Columbia Synod

The Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer, Synod of Alberta and the Territories

The Rev. Dr. Sid Haugen, Saskatchewan Synod

The Rev. Jason Zinko, Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod

The Rev. Michael Pryse, Eastern Synod