

**SYNOD OF
ALBERTA
* AND THE *
TERRITORIES**

Incorporated as Alberta Synod

The Office of the Bishop

10014 - 81 Avenue NW

Edmonton, AB T6E 1W8

Ph: (780) 439-2636

Fax (780) 433-6623

Email: info@albertasynod.ca

www.albertasynod.ca

***Spirit -Led
Leadership***

***Hope-Filled
Discipleship***

***Innovative
Tradition***

***Collaborative
Partnerships***

May 11, 2020

Dear Beloved of God:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Philippians 1:8-11

Yesterday the Government of Alberta released the COVID-19 Information: *Guidance For Places Of Worship*. The Information includes an Overview and COVID-19 Risk Mitigation, including: Support Congregants' Safety, Supporting Staff and Religious Leaders, Facilities, Cultural and Religious Practices, Singing, Drive-In Services, and Support for Public Health, while referencing that places of worship should also follow the *Workplace Guidance for Business Owners*.

As conversation and planning continue regarding returning to in-person gatherings for worship, I strongly recommend that rostered and lay leaders carefully take into account the guidance offered by the Government of Alberta in the Overview of the *Guidance For Places of Worship*: "Worship leaders are encouraged to continue to hold services remotely and using other creative mechanisms such as drive-in services."

As much as we long to be together in person, for the sake of the well-being of others, especially those who are most at risk, it is crucial that we be patient, disciplined, and wise in gathering together. And certainly, that as we move toward in-person worship, intentional planning and significant preparation will be in place following public health guidance, including a review of programming and worship services.

I have been impressed and inspired by the creative ways in which you have proclaimed the Gospel, offered pastoral care, knit together the body of Christ, and served the neighbor in our current reality. Please continue these ministries at a distance until it is more clearly safe to gather in person.

I trust that together, rostered ministers and congregational leadership will proceed with conversation, planning and decision-making in a way that provides the best leadership to your communities, mindful of your own context and ministry. Synod staff, myself and Pastor Prema Samuel – Assistant to the Bishop, are available to you for conversation, accompaniment, and support.

When we resume in-person worship, it will not be the worship experience we had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Significant measures to mitigate and reduce the spread of COVID-19 are required and expected by public health authorities, as shared via the *Guidance For Places of Worship*. Implementing such measures is the only responsible route to take toward in-person worship. The measures are significant and demanding and will require profound reimagining of almost every aspect of in-person gatherings, including, but not limited to, questions about who should and should not be in attendance, limited numbers of people, physical distancing, congregational song, sanitation measures, sacramental practices, offerings processed, and so on. Whatever decisions you make regarding in-person worship, know that you have my support.

In some ways, this tragic time has accelerated the movement of the church into the profoundly adaptive changes and challenges that we have needed to address in order to be vital communities of witness to Jesus in the 21st century.

As we plan for in-person gatherings, we are not just focused on initial gatherings, we are laying foundations for the new ways in which we will be the body of Christ and declare God's praise in the unfolding future.

There are new opportunities and possibilities before us, including recommitting to the missional process action learning model of listening, discerning, experimenting, reflecting and learning. And, all-the-while asking the questions: where is God in our neighborhood/community/world? And, how might we join God in God's mission?

Perhaps these initial questions for consideration may guide your conversation as lay and rostered leaders and congregational members. In considering these questions, keep in mind not just worship, but spiritual life, faith formation, service to the neighbor, and relationships in general as the body of Christ along the continuum that includes both physical and digitally mediated presence to one another.

- What is God calling us to be and do in the time ahead? What is God's purpose for us as a congregation/synod – what is God's mission through us – moving forward?
- What have we learned during the last few months about what is most important in our life together as the body of Christ that can shape how we live, work, and serve together from here forward? What might we bring forward into the future from this experience?
- What new skills have we picked up? What other skills and gifts do we need to embrace a new future?
- How might our theological, denominational, and biblical perspectives and traditions inform how we move forward?
- What among the things that seemed so important before the coronavirus crisis might we give less attention or let go of altogether?

Along the way, remember too, that not everyone will be pleased with the outcomes of your planning or find them immediately meaningful or inspiring. Many people, including you, will likely feel a sense of loss of what once was or might have been. Study and reflection of Ezra 3 might be helpful in this regard.

There we glimpse the big celebration of the laying of the foundation for the new temple after God's people returned from exile in Babylon. Note, by the way, that this was in the second year after their return.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priest in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

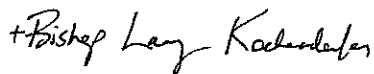
Ezra 3:10-13

We will not be able to simply flip a switch and return to what was before. Our life together as the body of Christ and in service to our neighbors is going to be very different moving forward. Be humble and gentle with one another in your conversations, preparation, planning and decision-making. Honor each other's emotional responses to changes in your life as a community of faith. Make space for lament. Welcome moments of joy. Help each other live into hope. Learn from this journey through the coronavirus wilderness and let the learning lead you forward. Trust that God is at work in this time and look for the new things God is doing even now.

Thank you for your partnership. Thank you for your witness to patient trust in God and to sacrificial, cruciform love for our neighbors, love that may yet even include refraining from gathered in-person worship for a time, for the sake of others.

Know that you are held in prayer. Synod staff will continue to do what we can to walk with you. Most importantly, know that God is with you and even now is planning and nourishing seeds of resurrection life.

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom



The Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer, Bishop
Synod of Alberta and the Territories - Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada