



March 14, 2020

Dear rostered ministers and leaders of the MNO Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Christ our Saviour.

On March 13, 2020 the Bishops of the ELCIC issued a letter as an updated response to COVID-19:

<http://mnosynod.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/20200313BishopsUpdateCOVID19.pdf>

In the same timeline, many of you are aware that Bishop Geoff Woodcroft of the Diocese of Rupert's Land directed Anglican congregations to suspend all worship and large gatherings after Monday March 16, 2020.

There have been several inquiries wondering if there will be a similar directive from MNO, and I feel the need to respond to all leaders together.

I continue to uphold the letter from the ELCIC Bishops and the advice it contains. Each of our settings are different, and it is difficult to provide a one-size-fits-all response. I am not an expert in virus containment or public health and I feel extremely uncomfortable making a determination about what constitutes an unreasonable risk, and more importantly, when that risk has passed. I continue to rely on the wisdom and determination of you, our local leaders, to make informed decisions for your communities and contexts.

**** An exception to the above statement is for those congregations who are in shared ministry with the Diocese of Rupert's Land. **** In these cases, we defer to the directive of Bishop Geoff and expect that these congregations will suspend their gatherings as directed.

Should your community decide to suspend worship services, there has been some discussion among our leaders to possibly live-stream worship services so that they are accessible to others. **I would like to offer synod support in making this possible.** We are able to provide video and streaming equipment, and will gladly host the stream on our social media channels. I am happy to assist in worship as required.

I will reach out to our colleagues in and around Winnipeg to see if a schedule can be developed, with different churches possibly hosting each week. I would appreciate if you let me know if your congregation would like to be involved as a host.

Especially in this season of Lent as we prepare for the new life that God gives us through Christ, we are reminded that God is ever-present for us in our challenges and worries.

Isaiah 41:10 reminds us:

do not fear, for I am with you,

do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Your role as leaders is to be a 'non-anxious presence' for our communities, pointing them toward the faithfulness of God. While we should all be diligent and avoid unnecessary risks, we also have opportunities to build up and support our communities whether face-to-face or through alternative means. I encourage you to make faithful decisions that focus on the needs of the community, not to respond in fear to this pandemic.

In all of this, please remember that you are called and gifted by God to lead your communities at this time. I am praying for you, and will continue to do so. Please continue to pray for each other as we try our best to navigate this situation, always pointing to Christ as our hope, our strength, and our life.

Blessings to you on your continued ministry.

Yours in Christ's Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a cross symbol followed by stylized initials and a surname.

Rev. Jason Zinko
Bishop
Manitoba Northwestern Ontario Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada