



September 29, 2020

Dear rostered leaders of the MNO Synod,

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

I have said many times how incredibly grateful I am for your faithful and dedicated service during this time of pandemic. You have been shepherding and guiding our congregations through uncharted territory. You have helped others to focus on faith and grow in their discipleship when face-to-face meetings have been difficult to arrange. You have taken precautions and made plans that will protect vulnerable populations. I give thanks for your leadership, and I pray that God will continue to bless your work.

The remainder of this letter is intended for our congregations and leaders in the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region (City of Winnipeg, City of Selkirk, Town of Stonewall, Town of Teulon, RM of Rockwood, RM of Rosser, RM of Springfield, RM of St. Andrews, RM of St. Clements (including Birds Hill Provincial Park), RM of West St. Paul, RM of East St. Paul, the Village of Dunnottar, RM of Cartier, RM of Headingley, RM of Macdonald, RM of Ritchot, RM of St. François Xavier, RM of Taché and the Town of Niverville).

You are facing a new challenge. With the Pandemic Response System Level (PRSL) raised to Restricted (orange), our hopes of getting back to regular in-person worship are affected. I understand the loss, and I share your grief that the prospect of gathering is again uncertain. We know that further caution is needed to help protect our members and communities. However, the announcement last Friday was not clear on how the changing regulations will affect our congregations.

We have been able to confirm that many of the protocols currently in place for worship, including attendance, will remain as they are now:

- Attendance at worship is permitted up to 30% capacity, provided physical distancing of 2 meters is maintained.
- Congregational singing, chanting, etc. is strongly discouraged.

However, there are additional protocols that must now be followed:

- Masks are mandatory indoors for all participants while attending all Church related events.
- A maximum of ten (10) participants are allowed for non-worship gatherings: weddings, funerals, meetings, etc.

In addition to these protocols, I want to offer some guidelines or suggestions for additional considerations that you may want to put in place for the safety of our members, visitors, and communities. These would remain while the PRSL is at 'Orange'.

- You may continue to celebrate Holy Communion. However, I strongly encourage you to consider suspending that practice while the PRSL is at 'Orange'. Removal of a mask to take communion does in fact increase the risk of spreading disease. If your congregation decides to continue celebrating Holy Communion, please review practices to reduce risk of contact or infection.
- Suspend or modify all rites and practices that require physical contact, even when wearing masks (E.g. baptism, confirmation, laying on of hands, etc.).
- Renew your efforts to have all congregation members be in regular contact with each other. Continue to build and foster community through phone calls, video call, text, email, etc.
- Ensure that decisions around gathering to worship are made cooperatively with clergy and elected lay leaders. Before proceeding with your gathering plans, assess whether or not your members would be comfortable returning to in-person worship.

It appears our ability to gather as a faith community is facing another difficulty. However, I want to encourage each of you to focus on, and pray about, how we can **be** the church in the midst of these circumstances. God calls each of us to proclaim the Good News, to reach out to our neighbours, and to be disciples in all we do. Those things are possible now--even when we cannot gather in person, and even when our gatherings do not look the same as they have in the past.

You continue to be in my prayers as you listen for God's voice and follow God's leading. Blessings to you and to the communities you serve in Jesus' name.

Yours in Christ's Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Zinko', with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

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