



EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA
MANITOBA/NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO SYNOD
Empowered by God, shepherding the church, serving the world.

October 31, 2020

Dear rostered leaders and congregations of the MNO Synod,

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

Like many of you, I have been watching and following the increased case numbers and impact of Covid-19 on our population in Manitoba and Ontario. Specifically within Winnipeg and surrounding areas, infection rates are increasing at an alarming rate.

With the announcement from the Government of Manitoba on Oct. 30, 2020, we have been given notice that further restrictions will be in place after the weekend. Time and time again, our government officials have said that this virus is spread through prolonged contact with multiple people. We are being told to significantly limit our social circles for the sake of stopping (or slowing) the spread of Covid-19.

The latest restrictions will still allow for faith-based gatherings. We are, according to the latest bulletin, allowed to gather in person for worship with certain restrictions and processes in place. However, I feel that what is “allowed” is not always what is in the best interest of our members and our communities. For this reason, I am **strongly recommending that all congregations suspend all in-person worship and meetings until the pandemic response level is lowered**, when they are in a health region that is subject to Critical (red) on the #RestartMB Pandemic Response System or equivalent restrictions in Ontario.

I do not make this recommendation lightly. However, there have been infections directly attributed to faith-based gatherings, including an outbreak at a long-term care facility from someone visiting after attending a faith-based gathering. Our baptismal call to care for our communities must take precedent over our personal desire to see each other or to practice our faith in ways that are convenient for us. God calls us to care for our neighbor and right now that means limiting how many people we come in contact with, even if it is for worship.

I urge you to make use of the many alternative ways that our pastors and leaders have been providing worship and devotional materials while we cannot gather. Many of our leaders are providing online worship services. Many of our pastors provide devotional materials and recordings. Several of our pastors are providing print materials where internet is not reliable. These resources are listed on the MNO Synod website at <http://mnosynod.org/resources/covid-19/>. If your congregation is not providing your own

resources, then I encourage you to connect with other congregations as way of sharing these resources.

The last months have been difficult. I know how much many of you were looking forward to returning to in-person worship and how diligently you have been preparing and planning for a safe return to your buildings. This latest news will certainly be disappointing, and will add to your anxiety. As people of faith, we rely on our regular connection with God and with our faith communities to feed us and strengthen us for life's challenges. Living in our current situation while also restricting our ability to connect with faith communities leaves us feeling cut off.

For these reasons, I urge you now more than ever to seek out as many opportunities as possible to connect with others in a safe way – video, text, phone, email, etc. I urge you to seek out several different ways to nurture and grow your faith – resources from local congregations, National Bishop Susan Johnson's bible book club (<https://elcic.ca/livingourfaith/biblebookclub.cfm>), daily prayer and scripture reading, etc.

In the midst of these challenges, I believe that God is providing an opportunity for us. I believe that God is allowing us the space to think and pray about what it means to **be** the church, not just to **go** to church. This is an opportunity for us to take a hands-on role in our growth as disciples. It is also an opportunity for us to engage more deeply in supporting the body of Christ rather than allowing a select few to do the work on our behalf.

I also believe that in all of this, God is eternally faithful to us. God will continue to lead us and support us in this journey. I continue to pray with you and for all of you during this uncertain time, trusting that God is able to do all things through Christ who brings us new life.

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 cross symbol to the left.

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