

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Erickson Regarding the “Safer at Home” Executive Order

Friends in Christ:

3/26/2020

While it may seem like a much longer period of time, it has now been two weeks since Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers declared a State Public Health Emergency in response to the spread of a novel coronavirus, now called COVID-19. Since that day, our congregations, our rostered ministers, our lay leaders, and our synod staff have had to make rapid and remarkable changes in how we connect, support, serve, and worship. I am deeply impressed and abundantly grateful for the innovation, compassion, and leadership I have witnessed. Thank you.

Now, Governor Evers has, along with many other governors, issued a “Safer at Home” executive order, which took effect on March 25 and is set to expire on April 24, and Mayor Barrett has issued a similar order for the City of Milwaukee. While these orders exempt certain “essential businesses and operations,” they generally instruct residents to remain at home and practice strict “social distancing” measures when out in public.

What may be confusing for our congregations and leaders is that churches are included in the list of essential operations:

h. Weddings, funerals, and religious entities. Religious facilities, entities, groups, and gatherings, and weddings and funerals, except that any gathering shall include fewer than 10 people in a room or confined space at a time and individuals shall adhere to Social Distancing Requirements as much as possible. (Gov. Evers’ order, page 12)

This means that, according to these orders, congregations that have engaged in the recent practice of assembling a small crew of worship leaders to either record or livestream their services of worship may continue to do so, as long as they stay at least six feet apart at all times. However, Gov. Evers has also suggested that everyone limit their circle of relationships to five people with whom we regularly have contact. These drastic and restrictive measures are all intended to slow the spread of the virus so that we do not overwhelm our medical system. In short, we do this out of love for our neighbor, a calling that often goes above and beyond the strict requirements of the law.

In other words, I implore all our congregations and leaders to seriously examine their practices and only engage in those that truly are essential. Certainly, providing worship opportunities are an essential component of maintaining and deepening our faith lives in these challenging times, but I would urge us to find a way to do so that follows not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of love for our neighbor.

I also encourage the following actions:

- Rostered ministers are invited to join the bi-weekly zoom meetings, led by the synod staff, as an opportunity to share ideas, resources, and support. If you're a rostered minister and haven't been receiving emails about these meetings, please let us know at gmsoffice@gmselca.org.
- Keep track of the synod web-page at www.milwaukeeesynd.org/covid19 for resources that address many different aspects of ministry.
- Remember to continue your financial support of your congregations, even in the midst of financial uncertainty. Many of our congregations entered this crisis with limited reserves and may need to take drastic measures soon.
- Keep in touch. Please reach out to us as your synod staff with any questions, suggestions, or concerns. Much of our work related to the ongoing life of the church will continue, though at a quieter and perhaps less urgent pace, recognizing that this crisis will eventually pass, and God will need a church on the other side. Reach out as well to those who may be the most vulnerable to the stresses and challenges of this crisis.
- Be kind. We are all being stretched and challenged in ways that we could not imagine just a few weeks ago, and we need to be gracious with each other. We're not all going to have the same gifts and responses, and when we disagree with or don't understand the actions of another, I pray we will try to respond with curiosity and compassion.
- Stay hopeful. I firmly believe that God is busily working to fashion a new creation, not because we're so smart and innovative and resilient, but because that's what God does. Whenever we exit this crisis, the calendar may not say it's Easter, but we will know better, and we will celebrate the power of life over death, hope over fear, and love over all.

God is with us; we are not alone; thanks be to God.

- Bishop Paul D. Erickson

