

Facing COVID-19 Together A Message From Our Synod President From WELS Together--March 16, 2020

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. *But take heart! I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33).

Events of the recent weeks and days surely remind us that Jesus' words describing the trouble that we will experience in this world are all too true. But especially in times of trouble like these, we will want always to remember the rest of what he told us: He has overcome the world. Our times are still in his hands. He will never leave us or forsake us. No matter how dark the days, he remains our light and salvation; whom (or what) shall we fear?

Throughout our synod, various areas of ministry, congregations, and schools have already been affected by the current health crisis and have been taking steps to respond. And, as the situation continues to change, many more decisions will likely need to be made in the days and weeks to come.

The synod has taken various actions in response to government recommendations and mandates, and, after much prayer, other decisions have been made based on common sense and an abundance of caution. To do our part in helping to limit the spread of COVID-19, the synod has placed a moratorium on all non-essential foreign and domestic air travel for synod personnel. Meetings at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry have been postponed or canceled. Martin Luther College, Luther Preparatory School, and Michigan Lutheran Seminary have canceled in-person classes through the Easter break.

As the situation changes, WELS congregations will be faced with making difficult decisions about how gospel ministry and congregational worship will be carried out in the coming weeks and months. Here are some important points to consider:

- The Fourth Commandment and other words of Scripture remind us not only to show respect and obedience to governmental authorities, but also to remember them in our prayers as they make decisions to safeguard our nation.
- According to the Fifth Commandment, we have the responsibility not to do anything to hurt or harm our neighbor (or ourselves, for that matter), but to help our neighbor in times of need.
- God's Word reminds us of the importance and blessing of worship and encourages us to make faithful use of the means of grace.

How do we apply these biblical principles at a time like this? The Centers for Disease Control has recently recommended that for the next eight weeks, public gatherings should be limited to no more than 50 people. Some local governmental bodies have already gone further, issuing an outright ban on public gatherings of 50 people or more.

Restrictions could become even tighter than that in the coming days and weeks. What does this mean?

- While we can make recommendations, the synod does not have the authority to mandate uniform actions by all of our congregations. Rather, congregations will need to make their own responsible decisions about worship gatherings, depending on local circumstances and governmental restrictions.
- Respect for our government, Christian love for our fellow citizens, and proper concern for our own health may require congregations to alter their worship plans. In some places, services may need to be canceled to comply with government mandates. In other places, congregations may decide to offer more service times to keep gatherings below the recommended or mandated limit. Congregations that cancel services are encouraged to find alternate means, such as live streaming worship, sermons, and Bible classes. Congregations that do not have the ability to do this may want to make their members aware of other congregations that do. In some cases, emailed sermons and devotional materials might be considered. Congregations can also equip parents with resources that can be used in family devotions. Our trust in the efficacy of God's Word reassures us that his Word works even when public worship gatherings are not possible.
- Recognize that this is an extraordinary opportunity to let our light shine in the ways that our congregations and their members serve the people in their communities in Christian love.
- In times such as these, as your local ministry strives to meet these challenges, your continuing and regular offerings are as vital as ever. God's work must go on.

We ask you to be patient with us. We are doing the best we can to provide information and guidance in this difficult time. And we ask for your prayers that God will guide us with wisdom and faith as we make what will likely be difficult decisions.

So it is with God's church in these last days. We know that Satan is doing all he can to silence the proclamation of God's saving gospel. We know that our enemy from hell tries to use events like this to drive a wedge between God and his people. But we also know that God can and will cause even this crisis to work together for the good of those who love him. He will use this to drive us to the cross of our Savior, where he gave himself to make us his own. And he will lead us to the open door of the empty tomb, where he demonstrated his complete victory over Satan, sin, and death.

May our gracious God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Preserver, keep you strong in your faith and confident in his promises.

Serving with you in Christ,
WELS President Mark Schroeder