



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

# Minnesota South District

... cultivating leaders intentionally engaged in the mission of God

March 26, 2020

## Dear Brothers,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who stills storms, heals diseases, and calms anxious hearts!

Yesterday, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz issued *Emergency Executive Order 20-20 Directing Minnesotans to Stay at Home*, which included the following exhortations:

“This Executive Order is consistent with a growing nationwide effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. On March 16, 2020, President Donald Trump issued guidelines to limit gatherings of more than 10 people. As of March 24, 2020, twenty-four states representing almost 200 million Americans have issued orders or public health directives closing non-essential businesses or limiting residents from participating in non-essential activities. Limiting activities to only those which are most essential and practicing social distancing at all times are vital tools required to mitigate the community spread of COVID-19 in Minnesota and nationwide...

1. Beginning on Friday, March 27, 2020 at 11:59 pm through Friday, April 10, 2020 at 5:00 pm, all persons currently living within the State of Minnesota are ordered to stay at home or in their place of residence except to engage in the Activities and Critical Sector work set forth below in Paragraphs 5 and 6.

**6. Exemptions – Critical Sectors. All workers who can work from home must do so.** Workers in the following Critical Sectors, who are performing work that cannot be done at their home or residence through telework or virtual work and can be done only at a place of work outside of their home or residence, are exempted from the prohibition in paragraph 1 as set forth below...

**v. Faith leaders and workers.** This category includes officials, workers, and leaders in houses of worship and other places of religious expression or fellowship, wherever their services may be needed. This category also includes workers necessary to plan, record, and distribute online or broadcast content to community members.”

## What does this mean?

It seems pastors are exempt from the mandate to work from home for the two-week duration of this order. Though it is encouraging that the governor counts “faith leaders” among our state’s essential workers, I would suggest that does not mean we pastors should merely carry on as usual. We’re all called upon in this national emergency to do everything we can to contain the spread of the virus. The mandate limiting public gatherings to 10 or fewer is still in place, as is the governor’s appeal to exercise good social distancing practices and meticulous hygiene while in your work environment.

Thus, I would again commend to you the careful balance of holding to our two-kingdom theology as you seek to honor and obey governing authorities, while at the same time boldly giving care to the souls entrusted to you by our Lord Jesus Christ.

As it stands, Governor Walz's order takes us at least through Good Friday, with the possibility of it being extended. In any case, we know this year Holy Week will be unlike any in living memory. Being a pastor at heart, I cannot imagine marking that week without gathering together for our beloved Holy Week services. Yet the theology of the cross—which is the very heart of our confession—equips us well to guide our people through this experience of loss with hope and confidence, looking to the sure and certain promise of the resurrection ahead. Jesus Christ remains the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome! We dare not hide the light of Christ, then or now.

## Shining the light of Christ

In fact, I know you are not doing any such thing. My executive staff and I are endeavoring to call as many of you as we can over the next weeks. Already in our conversations with you, we are hearing wonderful stories of your resilience and perseverance, your constant care of your flock. Though it looks rather different than normal, we are hearing numerous stories of how you are taking things head on, being bold in your pastoral vocation, flexible in your approaches, faithful in your calling, and joyful in your labors. You are letting the light of Christ shine!

You have been called to the kingdom for such a time as this. Be assured I will continue to walk with you and encourage you along the way as we navigate this extremely fluid situation. I ask that you do the same with your brother pastors. Our own confessions speak of how, “God is superabundantly generous in His grace through... the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren” (Smalcald Articles, Article IV, The Gospel). In other words, we need each other, brothers. Collectively, we are the body of Christ, and it is both your duty and your joyful privilege to care for one another even as you care for your flock.

## The mutual conversation and consolation of the Brethren

Therefore, I urge you to stand alongside each other and love one another, even as our Lord dearly loves you as His very own. You are not alone, you know. Accordingly, see each other as resources; seek counsel from each other as you determine how best to serve your people in this unprecedented situation.

Being flexible and nimble to meet this unique and changing context will be important. At the same time, be mindful that emergency conditions do not tempt you to introduce novel practices inconsistent with our theology. Rather, talk through your options with your brothers. Get their feedback, challenge and fraternally stretch each other, then sweat it out together. As you do, always remember to honor each other's pastoral integrity and discretion. (I'm also happy to talk things through with you if you desire, as I've done with a number of you already.)

Remember, each of your circumstances will vary, which may cause one brother to make one decision, and some other brother another decision. In these unprecedented times, the same

faithful pastoral discretion applies differently in one context than it does in another. I'm going to trust your pastoral discretion. Therefore, I also request that as a courtesy and demonstration of good churchmanship, brothers refrain from publicly commenting on the practice of others. This is a time for humility, gentleness, and patience as we all seek to bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2). I trust that each of you will deal with issues faithfully and thoughtfully, in light of the Scriptures and our Confessions, while being open and fraternal with one another. That is simply keeping in line with my ongoing vision for our District to love the Lord, love people, and love our Lutheran theology—all three—yet in that order.

## Take courage

We don't know how ferociously the contagion will attack us here in Minnesota in the weeks and months ahead. Statistically, it appears there will be many who fall ill and some who will die. Some of those casualties may indeed be members of your flock. In that case, you will of course need to exercise good pastoral judgment and proper hygiene precautions as you tend the sick and bury the dead. Yet the same glorious realities you proclaim every Lord's Day will be your sustenance and confidence: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting in Jesus' name.

Be assured that Satan will look to sift your souls in all of this mess. As a servant of Christ and steward of God's mysteries, you are especially targeted for his attack. He is crafty, sinister, and relentless. Fear and panic will come upon you in many forms. Financial concerns and safety concerns in particular will tempt you, your family, and your congregation into false belief, despair, and all kinds of other great shame and vice. Yet Luther reminds us that the devil is God's devil. That is, his attacks only serve to lead us to cling more firmly to God through His Word. A pandemic such as we are experiencing has a way of driving us to repentance and into the arms of our Lord Jesus Christ all the more. As Luther teaches in his hymn "A Mighty Fortress," no matter how fiercely the devil scowls, "He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done."

Therefore, dear brother, take courage. Our Lord has placed you into office as a pastor for just such a time as this. You can be sure that He will "equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:21).

Continue to [check the District website](#) for an ever-growing list of COVID-19 resources and tools to assist you in your ministry. In the coming days, I hope to send out a framework for proactive strategic thinking and faithful planning in this constantly changing environment and the aftermath of the pandemic. Stay tuned!

**The Grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

Your Pastor and Brother in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford, President  
Minnesota South District, LCMS