



May 23, 2020

**Dear Brothers,**

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all Lords and the King of all Kings!

As you are aware, Governor Walz has now issued new executive orders regarding communities of faith and places of worship being able to open in limited capacities. Our coalition efforts and willingness to work collaboratively with Governor Walz and his team has led to what we feel is a positive outcome, where legal action now appears no longer necessary. But before I address that, hear the Word of the Lord.

**Psalm 46:1-3 declares: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.**

During these troubling times, it is essential to have a place of refuge and a source of strength. Our Lord gives that to us in abundance through His Word and Sacraments. The declarative nature of Psalm 46 is wonderfully comforting. God “is” our refuge and strength, says the Psalmist.

As Lutherans, we know the importance of the word “is.” As we often say: “is” means “is.” This passage is no different. By faith, we trust our Lord God is indeed that which we need during our desperate times and moments of trouble. This trust, bolstered by the abiding presence of Christ’s Holy Spirit, gives us the ability to look chaos and fear square in the face and meet it head on with divine confidence. Even if it feels like the earth itself is giving way, the Lord steadies our trembling knees and quivering lips by the promise of “is”—He “is” our refuge and strength; He “is” the Good Shepherd; He “is” the resurrection and the life; and most assuredly, the sacramental bread and wine “is” the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given and shed for you!

With all the anxiety of our pandemic context, the madness of a continually fluid situation, the unrest of our political environment, the coalition’s potential legal action against the state (which is no longer necessary), and the uncertainty of what is coming next, there are immense pressures on you and your congregation leaders. It gets incredibly exhausting emotionally and spiritually. All of us are in desperate need of refuge and strength.

Please understand I know the utter burdens that you all are facing in the care of your flocks. It’s only natural that people get fearful and upset under these circumstances, and I know that sometimes they take out their frustrations on you. With the added chaos and unrest of these last few days of headlines and negative press, it has likely only created additional stress for you. But thanks be to God that Christ Jesus “is” our refuge and strength through it all.

To be sure, this last week has been incredibly intense and likely a heavy burden for all of us. I know some of you were quite satisfied by our coalition’s decision to press the Governor. Others I know were saddened, and still a few others were severely disappointed. I welcome feedback and rejoice that the promises of Christ are always stronger than any of our weaknesses. I also rejoice that our Lord Jesus is the Lord of the Church and will carry us forward despite our inadequacies. Yet, know that our coalition’s decision to move forward with potential legal action was difficult and painful, but one that, like the Apostle Paul’s appeal to Caesar, was the conscience-bound action that seemed required given the circumstances.

In the end, we are thankful that we were finally taken seriously by the Governor. Even more, we are extremely grateful for the graciousness of Governor Walz in taking ownership of the communication breakdowns. He is to be commended for his willingness to lead in such an accountable fashion. I am particularly thankful for his approach to genuinely hearing our concerns, acknowledging them as legitimate, and now acting upon them with a new executive order, even as our nation's president encouraged governors to do so.

As such, it is important to note that the new executive order frees congregations to publicly gather in a limited way without threat of penalty. To be clear, as I noted in my [May 20](#) communication to you, I cannot dictate how or when you would open up, but that you would be free to do so according to your conscience and corresponding readiness despite the governor's then standing executive order. With the new executive order, our congregations can in good conscience open up for limited corporate worship according to the provided guidelines should you so choose. Starting May 27, Governor Walz's executive order assures congregations who feel ready and prepared to open up for corporate worship that they can do so in accordance with 25% of building capacity (and a 250-person maximum on larger facilities).

Again, please note, this does not mean you must open up. Simply that you can do so if you are prepared and desire to hold limited public worship services in the afforded responsible manner.

**NOTE!** Part of the reopening plan will require following safety protocols and a guidance document that will also soon be issued by the state. These protocols are quite similar to the protocols we had previously proposed to the Governor, but are not identical. We will forward that guidance once it is published. We here at the District office will be here to help all of our congregations work through those protocols for each congregation's individual situation. Phil Johnson, [phillip.johnson@mnsdistrict.org](mailto:phillip.johnson@mnsdistrict.org), at the District office will be the point person on this issue for MN South.

During these unquestionably challenging times, it is especially important that our intercessions and thanksgiving for our public officials continue, just as Paul urged the young Pastor Timothy: "**I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions**" (1 Tim. 2:1-2a). Likewise, we cherish the Church's stewardship of the Gospel and Sacraments that enable Christians to live out their daily vocations as citizens contributing to the public good and serving their neighbors in love. Know these truths were at the core of our coalition's decisions and actions. We are shepherds who earnestly pray for our leaders and simply desire the freedom to responsibly care for our sheep publicly, sacramentally, and compassionately.

Thank you, brothers, for continuing to bear with me and with one another throughout this difficult time. Know that I love you in the Lord. You are a blessing to me and our precious congregations of the MN South District. In my own frailty and weakness, I give thanks that God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble, just as He is for you. Together, we will continue to pray fervently for an end to this pandemic and for an increase of faith toward Christ, love toward one another, and compassion toward our neighbor.

Your Brother and Pastor in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford, President  
Minnesota South District, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod