



New England Synod FYI - Pandemic Letter from Bishop Hazelwood

February 1, 2021

Congregations of the New England Synod,

Our pandemic winter continues. I, like you, feel the fatigue that is circling about our lives. The good news of vaccine distribution beginning is offset by concerns about variants of Covid19. While I remain hopeful for the longer term (next six to nine months), I remain vigilant and cautious in the near term.

We may be getting close to gathering in-person, but we are not there yet. Some of our states are beginning to relax their rules around some in-person gatherings, and this may, in some places such as Connecticut, include relaxation around gatherings for worship.

I would exercise extreme caution in moving too soon toward this practice!

Much of the reasoning behind state governments taking more relaxed positions in relation to houses of worship, versus other public spaces, is related to concerns around first amendment considerations. Earlier last year, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a synagogue that believed it had the legal standing to hold worship services, even when the Governor stated, out of health and safety concerns, that they should not meet. Since that ruling, most states have adopted a "request approach" toward houses of worship. For instance, in Rhode Island, the governor asked churches to not hold in-person worship during a recent outbreak.

My point in this letter is this:

Just because a state government may grant permission or shift its language around holding in-person worship does not mean your congregation should. As my grandmother used to say, "*just because you can....doesn't mean you should.*"

This letter serves as encouragement to be thoughtful, careful and mindful of our role as servants.

The ELCA has released "Considerations for Returning to In-Person Worship." You may view the full document [here](#). Last year, I provided you with a letter offering suggestions on how to approach re-opening, which is copied below.

"As I review those documents, along with several news stories of churches that attempted to meet for worship and then had spread of this disease, I want to offer my own personal reflections. If I were serving as a pastor in a congregation, I would say the following to my church council:

"I see no upside to gathering in person for worship for the foreseeable future, and I think we should begin now to plan for many months without it. Let's put together teams of people that will work together on four areas.

Spiritual Life including Worship & Devotions - *This group will plan worship and devotional opportunities for the congregation in ways that maximize engagement from as many in the congregation as possible.*

Caregiving/Shepherding Ministry - *Let's focus our energy on how we can connect our community via a shepherding group model.*

Social Justice/Community Advocacy - *Let's find ways to both serve our community and act on matters involving the most vulnerable in our communities and beyond.*

Generosity Team – *This team will work on ways to engage people on matters of Stewardship and Generosity. What can we do to help people see the value of increasing their giving during this time when our church is so important to so many people?*

Let these four teams be the center of our energy. I as pastor will work with each of these teams, but I can't do it alone. I need you to step up and be involved. In many ways, by doing this, we are also setting the stage for a new way of being church that will be determined when we come through this time of change."

I still believe that is the best path forward.

It seems likely (though who can predict the future these days?) that we will be able to gather for in-person worship in 2021, certainly outdoors in warmer months. Therefore, let's be mindful of that coming opportunity and not rush too hastily into indoor worship.

I have great confidence in the patience and wise leadership so many of you are exercising. We are moving forward into a new day. I know it is hard, and I know the loss many have experienced during this pandemic is painful. Let us continue to exercise patience and wisdom!

Sincerely,

Bishop James Hazelwood