



**SOUTHWESTERN
PENNSYLVANIA
SYNOD** EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH IN AMERICA

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Office of the Bishop

Epiphany, 2021

Dear Synod,

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus be with you all.

Today we celebrate the revealing of Christ to the world through the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12). The story of their visit includes their great joy in seeing the star stop over the house where the Christ child was and their exercise of caution to return home by another road. I am writing to invite you into joy and into caution as we consider again in this new year how best to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Joy is to be found in the very recent decline in the state-wide numbers of reported new COVID cases. Over the last four weeks the number of reported new cases has declined from a daily high of more than 12,700 to a recent low of just over 3,600¹. This is joyful news! And yet when compared with the rate of new cases that held steady through the summer (about 700 a day), even this lower number is five times higher than when our congregations began to open again, carefully, to in-person worship.

Joy may also be found in the first vaccinations of our population. How we have waited for a vaccine to be developed, tested, approved, and distributed! To date about 130,000 residents of Pennsylvania have received the first of two injections that we are told will be 90% to 95% effective. This is more joyful news! And yet that number represents only 1% of our state's population of 12.8 million. So there is still a long way to go before the people of our synod's ten counties will be sufficiently inoculated against the virus.

What, then, shall we do? I believe we can harbor joy and exercise caution with continued hopeful waiting. Our congregations and other ministry sites have already done the difficult work of creating local plans for how to provide in-person gatherings safely. So when the time is right, we are already prepared to act. There is joy in that; we are ready. *But while the governor's guidance has relaxed some restrictions on indoor gatherings beginning January 4, I continue to believe that our best response of care for the neighbor is to voluntarily restrict in-person gatherings until we see the number of new cases fall to the sustainable levels we experienced through the summer.*

As has always been the case in our church, local leadership has both the freedom and the responsibility to determine how their communities of faith will care for their own

¹ The PA Dept. of Health reported 12,788 new cases on December 10, 2020, and 3,641 new cases on January 3, 2021. The summer saw a low of 337 new cases on June 13 and a high of 1,207 new cases on July 23.

<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx>

members and for their neighbors. As an example of a local decision your synod staff has made, we continue to hold all our meetings remotely and to open the building to visitors only by appointment. We have not determined a target time when this pattern will change, but we are living these days with patience and with hope, knowing that before long the time will come when we can open the building and meet in person again.

The story of Epiphany that St. Matthew relates indicates that the journey of the Magi took as long as two years. We do not know how much of that time was spent in discernment and preparation and how much in actual travel, but we do come away with the strong sense that when they saw the child their joy was far greater than any tribulation that their journey had caused. It is in anticipation of such a joy that I ask you yet for a little more patience, a little more restraint, a little more caution on the journey, all for the sake of our community's well being.

The day will come, I am certain, when our need for restraint will have passed. And when it does, I am confident that the suffering we have experienced along the way will be displaced by the joy of being together in person. We are still on the journey. But we know that the journey leads to joy.

With you in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kurt".

+ Kurt