



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

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Office of the Bishop

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Dear Synod Leaders,

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

It was love that caused “the Lord of bliss” to “lay aside his crown for my soul,” the familiar hymn (*What Wondrous Love Is This?*) reminds us. It is love for one other that our Lord Jesus says distinguishes his followers (John 13:35). **In this same spirit of love, I am writing to strongly encourage you to suspend all in-person gatherings in your congregation or ministry site, including worship, for the next four weeks.** I am aware that our full-communion partner churches are also providing similar guidance this week for their communities of faith. I know that being together in person is precious to us all, but right now the exercise of Christian love calls us to lay it aside for a while.

Since March I have been checking the website of the Pennsylvania Department of Health every two days to see where the reported numbers of new COVID infections stand. Generally speaking, from the middle of May to the beginning of October, the two-day increase was between 1,000 and 2,000 cases. (That is, between 500 and 1,000 new cases a day.) This four or five month run became a kind of “new normal” for many of us. Many of our congregations began to hold in-person gatherings again, and it seemed we had figured out how to live with the virus pretty well. Schools began to open; we began to let down our guard.

But then, as October advanced into November, the average two-day increase in cases across the state moved steadily upwards, from 2,000 to 3,000 to 4,000. This caught my attention and caused some alarm. I wondered if we would have to step back from the “new normal” patterns of life we had begun to embrace.

Now, as November grows old, the two-day new cases have spiked: 5,000, 7,000, 9,000, 11,000. The most recent one-day increases are now around 5,000. We are between five and ten times the average new infection rate we experienced through the summer! On top of this alarming state-wide data, I am aware of an increasing number of people in our synod who have had to quarantine because of the risk of exposure, or who have tested positive for the virus. Out of love for them and their families, and out of love for the members of our congregations and our communities who may be at risk if we continue our pattern of meeting in person, I strongly encourage you to suspend in-person meetings, including worship, through December 15. I will continue to monitor the situation and write to you during that time with my discernment about whether or not we ought to extend that period of time.

In the coming days, you will find information on our website about congregations offering online worship opportunities during Thanksgiving and Advent. If your congregation or ministry site does not currently have the ability to host online worship, I encourage you, with your pastor or interim pastor or council leadership, to review this list. Recorded online synod worship

services that are being prepared for December 27 and January 3 will also be found there shortly. Please check the website over the next several days to access these resources:

<https://www.swpasynod.org>.

“Love,” St. Paul teaches us, “bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things” (I Cor. 13:7). I am confident that our love for each other can carry us well through this present time as we look toward the distribution of vaccines before too long and the hope of moving past the pandemic. Together we look forward to those days when we will be able to gather in person again, when, as the hymn says, “we’ll sing on, we’ll sing on.”

With you in Christ,

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

+ Kurt