



May 15, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

God's peace be with you in the name of Jesus!

The big question – When are you going back for your first worship service? I'm hearing two opposite emotions as churches make decisions about re-opening their doors for worship. Some are excited while others are anxious.

The weight of making this decision – It's one thing to make a decision to not have gatherings in our building when the Governor has issued an Executive Order. The weight of a decision to re-open is very different when it falls on our shoulders, especially when respected health professionals still raise concerns about the spread of the virus. In a time when we may be hearing mixed messages, we need to ensure that the decisions we make are well-thought out and are able to be fulfilled with excellence. That decision has even more gravity when the pastor or the pastors' family are the ones with compromised immune systems. Many of our workers or family members are in this situation.

Decision-making requires balance – When learning to ski down a steep mountain, the skier has to learn how to center his weight over his heels. If the skier's shoulders are not centered directly over his heels while moving this way and that on a double-diamond run, he will lose his balance and crash. Good decision-making during a global pandemic reminds me of downhill skiing.

How do we find balance in our decision-making?

- Prayer-based decisions: Watch Jesus! He was always talking to His Father. The more we read God's Word and get tuned into the Father's ways, the more we will be tuned to see the many ways He opens and shuts doors for us (Matthew 7:7-8). Learning to make prayer-based decisions will provide peace with God and one another – and some great stories!
- Value-based decisions: We learn from God's word that loving God and loving neighbor are at the root of our decision-making (Romans 13:10). In what specific ways does my decision show my love to God? In what specific ways does my decision show my love for each of my neighbors? If we can honestly answer those questions our decisions are balanced.
- Education-based decisions – What does the world of experts say to us about making this decision? In this particular situation more information continues to be discovered about the spread of the coronavirus. Please join us on Monday morning for the webcast with Colonel Nancy Boriack, a pandemic biologist who will share thoughts about entering our buildings safely. In addition, the following link is one of the latest articles being shared from church to church within our district about how the coronavirus spreads:
<https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>. When our decisions continue to be shaped with the best information around, it provides balance.



- Body of Christ decisions – Imagine the confidence we would have if Jesus was weighing in on a decision. We have the opportunity through the Body of Christ. When called workers and lay leaders work together to make the best decisions, we have the affirmation of the body of Christ. In this situation, I'm seeing some circuit pastors talking to one another about their potential plans and calibrating decisions on the basis of the wider group around them. He gives His wisdom to all of us, as we work together. The body of Christ is very wise.
- Accountability for our decisions – If the church leadership makes a decision to re-open their building for worship, they need to do an audit of their gifts, talents, time, and energy to ensure they have the capacity to make good on their decision continually. Then they are in the place to confidently assure each person that comes into the building (including the pastor, staff, and lay leaders) that the space is a safe and healthy place for them.

Looking Forward – Depending on their location, some of our congregations will make decisions to gather for worship in the next few weeks. Others will need to wait for a later time. Through the leadership's transparency in decision-making and careful instructions about how to re-enter, congregants will be in the best place to make informed decisions for their participation. Many will be excited to walk back into the sanctuary for worship. Others will be thankful to have the opportunity to worship from a distance until more time has passed. Each person needs to know that they are supported, loved, and respected as they make their own decisions for themselves and their families.

The Biggest Question – *How do we love one another and the people around us through this time?* Actually, while a big question for us right now revolves around the timing of our sanctuary worship, the biggest question is: how do we love one another and the people around us during the coronavirus? Often during a crisis, due to the anxiety people are feeling for their own safety, there is a shortage in love. May it not be so among us.

And A Commendation: I'm hearing that there is no shortage of love among you. Your love for the Lord and all His children is the heartbeat of mission. I see it in the way that you are respecting and caring for one another as you make decisions about how to handle worship, ministry, Holy Communion and a myriad of other things. I pray we will hear:

- many stories told about the way you loved your neighbor
- deep expressions of love that ordained and commissioned workers received from their congregations
- stories community leaders tell of the LCMS congregations serving the most-neediest of the community during the coronavirus

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

In the royal service of the King,

John R. Denninger, President
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