



THE  
LUTHERAN CHURCH  
Missouri Synod

Office of the President  
The Reverend Doctor Matthew C. Harrison  
President of the Synod

March 13, 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

*“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).*

The entities of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), including her seminaries and universities, have been taking various actions in response to government recommendations and mandates to try to stem the spread of COVID-19. At this time, our global missionaries and their families are all well. Some are quarantined in their respective countries by local governments, and we have put in place a temporary travel ban for their safety and that of others.

We do not want to add to what at times seems like a circus of media hype and political nonsense. Therefore, I would like to address you, the people of the LCMS, directly.

1. **We owe our local and national government authorities respect according to the Fourth Commandment.** We owe them our constant prayers according to specific directives of St. Paul (1 Tim. 2:2). Within the last 24 hours, Dr. Anthony Fauci of President Trump’s White House Task Force stated that we are in a crucial period during which it is possible to significantly limit the spread of the virus by smart action on the part of the public.
2. **We have a duty of love to our neighbors according to the Fifth Commandment.** “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need” (Luther’s Small Catechism). The LCMS is not hierarchical. I have no authority to mandate anything in this regard to the 6,000 congregations of the Synod. Nor would we want it any other way. But I do have the freedom and responsibility to urge all of us to make a concerted effort to act in ways that limit exposure for ourselves and advance the well-being of our neighbors, at church and beyond.
3. **This is a very fluid and changing situation. Responses will not be uniform across the church.** As Luther noted in his document on the plague in Wittenberg, different people will make different decisions based upon circumstance and vocation.
  - a. We trust our well-trained clergy, as they consult with each other, circuit visitors and district leadership to take appropriate action in their context.
  - b. We trust the great lay leaders of our congregations to discern appropriate action.
  - c. Given the seriousness of this virus, as well as the fluidity of this situation and potential for much greater infection, actions may include, in some places, forgoing church services (and offering online substitutes). We trust the sanitary practices of our parishes with respect to the Sacrament of the Altar. But in these few weeks, individuals, pastors and congregations will be making decisions in light of the crisis, on various customary practices. We must, in love, be patient with one another as we strive to be both faithful and responsible. Also, remember

*Over, please.*

to be generous with your offerings in these weeks when attendance may be affected. We will soon provide the opportunity to ask all manner of questions, including those on the Lord's Supper.

4. In Luke 21, Jesus foretold the kinds of things that would mark the time just before His coming. Wars, rumors of wars, earthquake, famine, persecution and much more. He also included pestilence. Many great Christians, including Martin Luther 500 years ago, beheld the mess of the world around them and thought the end must be coming soon. But Jesus said at the end of his speech, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

You all know Luther's great Reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It's his hymn version of Psalm 46. But you may not know that it was written during the plague in Wittenberg in 1527. "A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon; He helps us free from ev'ry need That hath us now o'ertaken" (*Lutheran Service Book* 656:1). Your times are in the hands of the Lord (Ps. 31:15). Your days are numbered by Him (Ps. 139). In fact, the very hairs of your head are numbered (Luke 12:7). You have only the resurrection to look forward to (John 11:25). And you have the glorious apostolic promise: "All things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

I plead your patience as we all struggle through this, along with our nation and the world. I do know this: that crosses always drive people — including us — to Jesus. Count on it.

We'll update you soon.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you His peace. Amen.

**Pastor Matthew C. Harrison**

*President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*