

A pastoral letter from Pastor Brones regarding cancellation of public worship

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today my heart breaks as I inform you that Bethlehem will be cancelling all public worship services through January. This decision was not made lightly. In fact, I feel the heavy load of making a decision that I believed would never have to be made. However, in consultation with our resident physician (Dr. David Pietrasiuk), our Dean of Elders (Gordon Gruhn), and the President of the Congregation (Bruce Dellinger), the decision has been made in order to protect the sheep of our beloved Bethlehem congregation. Both staff and volunteers have been infected with Covid-19. So, too, have over a dozen family members of BLC. Diane and I continue to suffer the ongoing results of the infection. None of the cases seem to have occurred as a result of public worship at Bethlehem. However, with the growing spread of the virus within our BLC family, it seems prudent to act out of an abundance of caution. Additionally, many LCMS pastors have been infected and hospitalized. Some have died! Just a few days ago, on January 10th, the FL/GA district lost a dear pastor, Rev. David Brighton, to Covid-19. He was the senior pastor at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Warner Robins, GA. Pastor Brighton was the first vice president of the FL/GA district. He and I entered seminary together in 1978 and have been close friends ever since. Forty-two years of friendship is a long time, and I am grief stricken by this loss of a faithful friend and servant of the Word. I know we can't live in fear but if we can mitigate our exposure to this deadly virus by ceasing our public gatherings for a brief season, we will all be safer. I am willing to put my life on the line for the sheep I am called to serve, just as Pastor Brighton did, but I don't want to risk losing you because of my actions or lack thereof. I want to ask all of you, even if you disagree, to please support this decision. With so much disunity in the world today, one of the church's greatest witnesses will be our unity in Christ. Remember, this time of refrain is only for a season. Soon we will all be together again. In the meantime, **please watch our live-stream worship on Sundays at 11 o'clock via the BLC website** and let us *"encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near"* (Heb. 10:25).

Joy is in short supply at the moment. People's hearts quake in fear of what is coming on the world. But let's remember that joy isn't the same as happiness. Happiness is a fleeting thing; it comes and goes at will. True joy that's deeply rooted in Christ goes steadily on despite sorrow and adversity. In fact, joy is at full throttle when fueled by faith. *"Abide in Me and I in you"*, says Jesus (John 15:14). That arrangement keeps us going through the tight spots in life long after mere happiness has come and gone. The net result is a joy that can coexist with suffering, pain, and even death itself. Evidence of this is the joy Diane and I have felt through your calls, texts, emails, cards and an abundance of chicken noodle soup! Indeed, chicken soup is good for the soul and healing for the body. Thank you for sharing joyfully with us in this way.

So count it all joy, brothers and sisters, even in these dark days of hardship and uncertainty. It is your high privilege to be a part of the body of Christ. So, stick close to Jesus, won't you? Spend extra time with Him during these difficult days. Let Christ's love have its way with you. As you are able – given the restraints imposed on you – He wants to love others through you, bringing hope and life to burdened, sorrowing, fearful hearts by His sure Word. As part of that joy, I am asking you to continue supporting our ministry through your tithes and offerings. Our giving has to be modified to accommodate the new reality of not gathering in person for a few weeks, but I am asking you to **please give via electronic transmission, by mail or by dropping off your offerings at the church personally**. The ongoing ministry of our church is dependent on the tithes and offerings of our people.

As you go about your lives, remember you are not alone. The Savior who loved you all the way to death and back to life again still lives for you. He prayed for you that awful night of His betrayal, asking His

Father that you would be a channel of His love for His beloved church: “*...that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them*” (John 17:26).

That love maintains your joy through each long day of this present exile. As Jesus endured the cross for the sheer joy of loving you, so He loves His people through you now. Despite the burdens of these days, Christ’s abiding love remains forever sure.

“I will see you again . . . and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22).

Your servant in Jesus,

Pastor Dana Allen Brones
Jude 24-25