



Central / Southern Illinois Synod

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

God's rich grace be yours as we experience as never before these last weeks of Lent!

As time goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that it will be weeks (or months) before we return to gathering for worship as we have known it. As I write this, pandemic-related uncertainties continue stacking up upon one another. This is all the more reason to remind ourselves that "God is our refuge and strength, a present help in trouble; therefore we will not fear." (Ps. 46)

Governor Pritzker has now extended his "Stay at Home" order through the end of April. It may well go further. I am moved by how many of you have developed wonderfully caring and creative ways to connect for worship and pastoral care via internet, and how you are adapting to be in touch (figuratively) with our people who are not plugged into the web. Yes, as one of our pastors mentioned online before beginning a livestreamed worship service, "it's just not the same" as being gathered together. And we all have a strong urge to get back to "normal." Nevertheless, we cannot let this desire to gather take precedence over our obligation to our fellow members and to our communities not to endanger them by risking contact. "Love your neighbor," said our Lord said. To continue, now indefinitely, to refrain from gathering, is an act of self-giving for the sake of our communities.

It will feel very odd not to be gathered for Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter Sunday. But the Spirit still gives life. I know that many of you are creating adaptive ways to lift up this upcoming most sacred time in the Church Year. Let me suggest, also, that when your congregation can return to gathering, you make that first Sunday back a rip-roaring, festive "Easter" celebration.

Let me carry this message further with a paragraph borrowed from Bishop Kurt Kusserow, of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod. This was in a letter sent out to SWPS and I reproduce it with his permission.

The urgency of the moment presses each of us to pay attention only to those things that are different. Our deep inclination is to bend and press and hammer "the different" until it starts to look more familiar. Faithfulness to our mission, however, keeps our focus on who we are and what we are about as Church whenever we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. I think we will find this discipline most helpful in the days that lie ahead of us. In fact, as we learn how to be Church in this new place we may find ourselves retrieving something of our identity and inheritance in the process.

“Faithfulness to our mission ... keeps our focus on who we are and what we are as Church whenever we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory.” So, then, what is our mission?

My shorthand, “elevator speech” answer is that our mission is “to glorify God, to build up the body of Christ, and to proclaim Christ crucified and risen.” A more elegant description in our ELCA constitutions says this:

The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.

In the past two weeks, I have witnessed in our pastors and deacons a paradoxical mix of exhaustion and new energy; they are tired, and they are deeply engaged – both at the same time. No doubt our synodically authorized ministers, congregational leaders, and others of you live in this same curious, paradoxical mix. I see in this a mystery of the Spirit of God at work, pulling us to our limits, to arouse and focus our ministries. Maybe this is because the COVID-19 pandemic has created a need for us to draw more deeply on our faith, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

God continues to sustain and empower us for our mission during “Stay at Home” orders through the Word of God, read, preached, sung, and conveyed in caring phone calls. Let the prophet Isaiah’s grateful acclamation in our Old Testament reading for this coming Sunday be your acclamation: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning the Lord awakens – awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught” (Isaiah 50:4-9a).

God bless you richly as you go into Holy Week. Our tendency may be to lament that we cannot enjoy the familiar festivities of Jesus’ journey to the cross and into resurrection that properly take place in gathered congregations. Imagine, though, what God might be doing among us this year in a different setting, such as our homes.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. John Roth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

S. John Roth
Bishop, Central/Southern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America