



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
NEW JERSEY SYNOD
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Returning to In-Person Gatherings

As people whose lives are formed and re-formed by Scripture, we find ourselves turning again and again to the stories of our faith ancestors found therein. During this time of the COVID19 pandemic, I have looked at the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers wondering how God is using our current situation for good. I have wandered with the Israelites in the wilderness thinking perhaps this time is our wilderness school. I have re-read the stories of the early church in Acts thinking perhaps our future as a church will look a lot more like the house-churches of the first century. I have waited with the apostles for the Risen Christ to come among us. In all of these accounts, one thing becomes clear – God pursues us, claims us, and is with us, no matter our circumstance! Even at times of rebellion and sinfulness, especially in times of despair and hopelessness, God makes a way out of no way and showers us with grace and love.

Today I was again in the wilderness with the Israelites, in Chapter 32 of Exodus – not a very happy chapter! Here, the Israelites are tired of waiting as Moses has been gone too long up the mountain. They grow impatient and want to do something! In their restlessness, they convince Aaron to make for them a god they can see and worship. And he does – he fashions a calf made from the gold of their jewelry. The results are disastrous, as we know. Moses is furious, God is displeased, and destruction results. Thankfully, that is not the end of the story.

We know this restlessness! We want to do something that feels familiar. We are tired of waiting for the governor or the CDC or the WHO to say it's ok to return to in-person gatherings. My fear is that we will begin to fashion for ourselves something that resembles "church" but instead becomes something that actually harms us. So I urge you, dear church: stay the course, love your neighbor by staying home, check on each other remotely, and continue worshipping online.

While we don't have a date yet as to when we might return to our buildings, when we are able to return to in-person gatherings, there are many things to consider. Linked to this letter is [guidance from the ELCA](#). It is comprehensive but not exhaustive (though looking at this list can be exhausting). It does not tell you everything you need to do or not do but helps you think through how and when you might carry out ministry in your setting. Gather a group of leaders from your congregation and work through this guidance together to make the best decisions possible.

Here's what I would add to this checklist – pray for wisdom, dwell in God's word, and ask repeatedly, "what is our mission as a congregation in this community and are we serving it?". Think through what your decisions communicate about a God of abundant life. Perhaps congregations in a particular mission cluster will want to make joint decisions about how and when to re-gather. Decisions made one day do not need to be binding as conditions change – councils and worship teams need to be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to current circumstances.

I have a concern for our pastors and deacons with underlying health conditions whose doctors have said they shouldn't return to in-person worship until there is a vaccine for COVID19. How will congregations honor that word? If this is your situation, let's talk to come up with a plan to care for both the rostered minister and the congregation moving forward.

Finally, I know we are in this together doing the best we can to care for the church we love. We will make mistakes and disagree about next steps. And that is okay. When it happens, let's look back and see what we have learned and then move forward with the risk of again making new mistakes and having new disagreements. But through it all, we trust in the God of grace and mercy whose Spirit surrounds and upholds us. It's what we've got, and it is enough.

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew