

PUBLIC WORSHIP AND THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

A Statement from the President of Lutheran Church-Canada

The coronavirus (COVID-19) that is sweeping around the world has, at the time I write these words, resulted in the deaths of more than 3,000 people and infected more than 90,000 others in 75 countries. As we all know, it is causing much fear and apprehension to millions more – travel bans and disruptions, a sharp decline in the stock market, the closing of schools, cancellations of public events, and the like. This, by the way, is rather personal for my wife and myself as we have a daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren currently living in South Korea which has the most reported cases of the virus outside of China.

Since this is such a fluid and changing situation, I would, in the first place, simply remind all the pastors and members of the congregations of Lutheran Church-Canada of the practical suggestions from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC):

“Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available; avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands; avoid close contact with people who are sick; cough or sneeze into your sleeve and not your hands; stay home if you are sick to avoid spreading illness to others; and regularly clean and disinfect surfaces that people touch frequently such as toilets, bedside tables, door-knobs, phones and television remotes with regular household cleaners or diluted bleach.”

When the black plague broke out in Wittenberg, Martin Luther wrote an open letter entitled “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43, pp. 115-138). It is a biblical, practical, and timely reflection on the proper response of Christians to death and suffering. In his letter, Luther speaks about: being fervent in prayer; the duties we have toward our neighbour while at the same time preserving our own life as a gift of God; doing everything possible to counteract death and the plague by using medicines, avoiding places and persons infected, and the like; and the responsibilities that those in certain offices or vocations such as pastors, government officials, and health care providers have toward the sick and suffering and toward the well-being of society as a whole.

Luther also adds some instructions on how we should care for our own souls in times when the shadow of death looms over us: namely, by attending church and listening to the sermon so that we might “learn through God’s word how to live and how to die,” and that “everyone should prepare in time and get ready for death by going to confession and taking the sacrament once every week or fortnight.” The Large Catechism reminds us of the benefits of partaking of the Lord’s Supper in these words: “We must never think of the Sacrament as something harmful from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy that grants salvation and comfort. It will cure you and give you life both in soul and body. For where the soul has recovered, the body also is relieved. Why, then, do we act as if the Sacrament were a poison, the eating of which would bring death?” (V. 68).

Luther concludes his letter in this way: “We admonish and plead with you in Christ’s name to help us with your prayers to God so that we may do battle with word and precept against the real and spiritual pestilence of Satan in his wickedness with which he now poisons and defiles the world.” In light of last Sunday’s appointed Gospel Reading on the temptation of our Lord, the following words from the Large Catechism of the seventh petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“*But deliver us from evil*”) are most timely: “There is also included in this petition whatever evil may happen to us under the devil’s kingdom: poverty, shame, death, and, in short, all the agonizing misery and heartache of which there is such an unnum-

bered multitude on the earth. Since the devil is not only a liar, but also a murderer, he constantly seeks our life. He wreaks his vengeance whenever he can afflict our bodies with misfortune and harm. Therefore, it happens that he often breaks men's necks or drives them to insanity, drowns some, and moves many to commit suicide and to many other terrible disasters. So there is nothing for us to do upon earth but to pray against this archenemy without stopping. For unless God preserved us, we would not be safe from this enemy even for an hour" (III. 115-116).

I would, as such, share with you the following prayer that may be used in our congregations:

"Almighty God, heavenly Father, give us grace to trust You during this time of great distress. In mercy put an end to the coronavirus epidemic that is afflicting many people around the world. Grant relief to those who are suffering, and comfort to those who mourn the death of loved ones. Sustain all medical personnel who are attending to the sick, and bless the efforts of those who are working tirelessly to discover a treatment for this disease. In these times of affliction and distress, strengthen us by Your Word and Spirit to continue steadfast in the one, true, saving faith; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our suffering Lord and Saviour, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

Rev. Timothy Teuscher, President
Lutheran Church—Canada

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS:

It is important that congregations use common sense in addressing the concern of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). We offer these suggested practices for your consideration:

- Offer hand sanitizer throughout the church for members to use.
- Encourage adequate space between people/families. Also consider wider spacing at the communion rail.
- Forgo handshakes during the Sharing of Peace or make it an option for people. Tell members that it is okay not to come close or into contact with other members.
- Pastors and those distributing Holy Communion should wash hands and use sanitizer before distributing communion.
- All are encouraged to practice good hygiene, including ushers and church greeters.
- Following the celebration of Holy Communion, after proper care of the elements, the altar guild should wash the vessels with hot, soapy water, then towel dry them, and put them away.
- Encourage congregation members to learn the symptoms of COVID-19 and to seek medical attention if they suspect they may be infected.

Regarding Holy Communion and the common cup, we are reminded that this is a sacramental meal and that the Lord comes to us in His crucified and risen flesh for the forgiveness of sins. We eat and drink in a supernatural way the body and blood of Christ, hidden under the forms of bread and wine. Here is where our Lord Incarnate comes to us and enters our flesh in His flesh. Pastors are encouraged to teach and remind members of the sacramental nature of Holy Communion and the blessings bestowed through it, while following appropriate hygienic practices in the distribution of the Sacrament.

An additional resource to help congregations plan for wide-spread illnesses is available from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at: <https://blogs.lcms.org/2020/resource-helps-congregations-plan-for-wide-spread-illnesses/>.