

North Carolina Synod Re-Gathering Task Force

RECOMMENDATIONS

Seeing this pandemic through the eyes of the NC Synod Vision

Vital Congregations *Vital congregations are communities of Jesus with life-giving relationships with God, each other, and the community/world. Congregations need to make it through this crisis. Your community needs you. A COVID-19 outbreak in your congregation would be devastating.*

Whole and Healthy Leaders *The emotional toll of a pandemic is real. Many rostered ministers are considered vulnerable populations or are caring for someone who falls within those parameters. This is a time like no other and leaders need care themselves as they care for the congregations they serve.*

Collaboration *We are better together and yet we know that our contexts are widely different. Where are the places we are stronger together? How might we be in partnership with our ecumenical colleagues as well as those within our synod during this pandemic?*

Prophetic Voice *Anchored in hope, even in the midst of this crisis, God is always doing a new thing. We commit to advocating for all those impacted by this pandemic and being a voice of love and hope in a hurting world.*

Seeing this pandemic through the eyes of the NC Synod Core Values

Jesus Centered *Jesus, the Christ, is the very center of all we do. Loving thy neighbor may mean not gathering when your population is vulnerable.*

Generosity *We live and give generously even as economic realities are hard. We recognize that congregations and communities will be financially impacted by our time apart. We will trust God's provision for tomorrow.*

Relationships *Cries to gather center around a yearning for relationship. We are made for being in relationship and we belong to each other in Christ. This is the difficulty of a virus that spreads when we are close together. Being in relationship with one another is important but doing so safely is crucial.*

Reconciliation *Viruses have no political leaning. Vulnerable populations were at risk prior to this pandemic and this crisis magnifies that reality. How can we strive for justice, compassion, peacemaking, advocacy, and healing in the midst of this crisis?*

Grounded in our vision and core values, the North Carolina Synod Council makes the following recommendations for the congregations of the NC Synod:

- 1. Standing in solidarity with our North Carolina ecumenical partners in the Episcopal, United Methodist, AME Zion, and other traditions, we will refrain from in-person gatherings of more than 10 people indoors and 25 outdoors until the NC governor moves us into Phase 3.**

What does this mean? We recognize that there are many in the vulnerable population who will gather when the doors open regardless of the risk to their health. By waiting until we move into Phase 3, we hope to care for the health of all.

Why do we recommend this? It is our recommendation to be a phase behind what is allowed by the state of NC for the safety of our population. The majority of our congregations have large populations of vulnerable people. As St. Paul says, “Not all that is permissible is beneficial.” There have been multiple instances of churches being the source of outbreaks since the beginning of this pandemic. The health of all is our primary concern.

How can we worship?

- Continue gathering online until high-risk individuals are able to resume their normal activities. Continuing online worship means that high-risk individuals do not have to make a difficult choice. Consider how online worship may be a part of your worship community going forward. Online worship has been a gift to many of our shut-ins and will continue to be the only avenue of worship for many of those in vulnerable populations. Vulnerable populations may be unable to gather for many months to come as we move from phase to phase and possibly go back to previous phases. This may be the perfect opportunity to collaborate with other congregations in sharing online responsibilities. Online gives us the ability to reach into communities unserved prior to this crisis.
- If you are determined to gather before we recommend, congregations might consider drive-up worship. Drive-up worship may help us acclimate to a different type of worship during a pandemic. This would mean not entering the church building for any reason but allows for a gathering of more than 25 people if family units remain in their cars with their windows up.

2. We will postpone any in-person gathering with children or youth until September 1 when additional recommendations will be available from our school systems.

What does this mean? Our children and youth are hope. They are our present and our future. Our call to care for the least of these deems it necessary to limit their gathering for their safety.

Why do we recommend this? Children and youth were initially thought to be at low risk for this virus. That information has changed in recent weeks. Children and youth are also very bad at physical distancing. Some are too young to understand, others are unable to fathom the risk. Allowing kids to be taught the appropriate physical distancing, hygiene, and cleaning requirements in their school settings first, will make the transition to church activities easier. Schools will have additional resources to help teach these behaviors to children that many of our congregations don't have.

What about child care facilities in our congregations?

- Congregations with licensed child-care facilities should follow the policies set in place by the [NC Division of Child Development and Early Education](#).
- Non-licensed child care in our congregations that do not provide full-time child care for working parents is considered non-essential. Re-opening these types of child care should be weighed by your congregation council against the risk of infection.

3. We will develop in-person gathering protocols and an implementation plan in writing prior to gathering.

What does this mean? For the safety of all, it is important to have protocols and an implementation plan before we gather again. Communication is vital to setting a standard for how worship will take place. Lutherans are not great at change. This virus requires that we change how we do things to avoid a public health crisis.

Why do we recommend this? Coming back together will not be as it was in March. Worship will look different and be different. It will require a change in mindset and behavior for the safety of everyone. It is good to know the level of risk for gathering in person again and to have that discussion as a congregation council. Having clear protocols and a team to implement those protocols will be important.

What can we do now as we wait?

- Read the ELCA Document, [“Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship: Being Church Together during the COVID-19 Pandemic”](https://tinyurl.com/ya3jzbdm) (<https://tinyurl.com/ya3jzbdm>)
- Contact your insurance carrier and/or attorney to ask questions. How are we liable if someone gets COVID-19 from our gathering? What are your recommendations before we gather in person again as a worshipping community?
- There are risks associated with all matters of things. Congregations need to make careful and informed decisions even when the urge to gather in person is strong.
- Determine if you have the necessary resources to procure and provide for safe worship, i.e. masks, hand sanitizer, and the appropriate cleaning supplies. Buildings have been vacant and will need certain systems checked prior to re-entry. Currently, many of the resources needed for in-person gatherings are unavailable.
- Consider these recommendations for in-person gatherings—when that is allowed:
 - No singing or wind instruments supplied by human breath.
 - Outdoor worship would be safer than indoor worship, but outdoor worship still involves a level of risk.
 - Determine your maximum capacity under physical distancing guidelines, both indoors and outdoors, in your sanctuary and also in another larger space in your

facility. Your fire marshal will have your maximum capacity number as a starting place.

- Use the Service of the Word for the first 4-6 weeks until the newness of restrictions around gathering in person has passed.
- Postpone coffee hours or fellowship times until such time as state or federal officials deem it safe to do so.
- Determine who will enforce protocols as part of your implementation plan.