

To the People of the New England Synod,

Way back in January we had church life. That model of church life consisted of a building with a paid staff, in-person gatherings, people shaking hands, sharing food, singing, hugging, and programs for various age groups. Some of us have only known that model of church life, and we've been lamenting as we've witnessed the struggle to maintain it. I now call that model of church life the January Church, because it was last in January when we experienced it fully.

Much has changed since then, and every day brings more transition.

The purpose of this letter is to set the stage for what's next in two areas, Reopening and Worship.

This letter is longer than usual. Be forewarned.

Reopening

It is clear that re-opening is going to be a slow and gradual process involving some careful planning. This will require congregations to be flexible and adaptive because change will be the consistent theme going forward. In some ways, I believe reopening will be more challenging than the decision to close.

Considerations for planning your re-opening

1. Recognize that re-opening is not going back to normal. The church we all remember, what I call the January Church, is something we will not be returning to any time soon. If you view re-opening as an attempt to get back to the model of church as usual, I believe you will be continually frustrated. We must understand the need for grace and patience with one another as we all attempt to discover Christ in new ways.
2. Follow the guidance of your state's governor and health officials. New England Synod congregations are located in seven different states. While some states are acting in coordination with one another, this will not be the case throughout our region. In addition, I would not anticipate a great deal of specificity in the guidance for houses of worship. There are multiple reasons for that, including concerns about first amendment matters. While there may not be specific recommendations regarding houses of worship, look carefully at plans for schools (elementary through high school), since they are most similar to churches in their dynamics, for instance, people traveling from a regional proximity, sitting in rows, gathering for food, interacting socially, etc. My advice is to watch the guidance for schools and translate that application to church life.
3. Recognize that a phased re-opening is probably your best scenario. As an example, [Rhode Island](#) has a current limit of 5 persons gathering, and anticipates a process that will increase to 10, then to 15, then to 50. How will your congregation adapt to this type of model? I think a phased re-opening might look like this:

Phase 1 – When your state indicates a likely date for relaxing the quarantine, ask yourselves, “What’s most in need of attention?” One way to answer this question is to consider the most vulnerable and those who are grieving. Maybe it’s best to look at some social ministry that has been curtailed, such as a food pantry, before considering worship. In addition, if your congregation has had multiple deaths, perhaps attending to grief via memorial services is an appropriate first priority. The larger point is, don’t try to do everything all at once.

Phase 2 – As the next level of quarantine is relaxed in your state, begin conversations about how your congregation might be able to come together in smaller configurations. Not everyone will want to nor should they want to gather publicly, but some people are eager to have some in-person contact. One congregation might consider a gathering of its shepherding groups where six or so people meet. If you have the capability, perhaps that first meeting could be outside. In other words, think of Phase 2 as an intermediary step, think small. Also think of those not able or desirous of an in-person gathering, how will you continue to attend to them?

Phase 3 – If your state officials relax restrictions to larger group gatherings, ask yourself how this might be done. A favorite question of mine these days is: What’s doable? Following the Rhode Island guidance, this means groups of 50 could gather together. If you have a smaller congregation this might work. But if you are in a larger congregation, does that mean you need to have multiple worship services or staggered attendance plans? In this phase, you’ll also need to consider ways you will attend to expectations of sanitizing your building. Additionally, are you continuing an online presence as well? How will you do this simultaneously? One church is considering plans for an in-person gathering on Sundays, but then an online gathering on Wednesdays. Are you now asking your pastor, administrator, musicians and others to do twice as much work? Have you considered partnering with another church to share these responsibilities and more evenly distribute the workload?

Whether you use this concept or another, I urge you to recognize that this will be a gradual re-opening. You should also plan for the inevitable “two-steps forward, one-step back” scenario. Several health officials have indicated we may have times when the virus spreads quickly and we may need to restrict our activities again. How will you plan for this possible return to Phase 1?

The reality is: this is hard. We are trying to balance a concern for health and safety with a desire to connect again. Take it slow; go one step at a time and recognize not everyone is ready to make the same step at the same time, so allow for flexibility.

Resources

There have been many resources published elsewhere that may help in your planning for re-opening, and I’ve listed some below. This is not an exhaustive list, but some comprehensive ones.

[A Plan for Returning to Church by the Wisconsin Council of Churches](#) – This resource also makes use of a phased approach, as well as raising important considerations around actual worship practices. Again, remember to always be aware of your own state’s health officials’ recommendations.

[Coming Back Together by the Three ELCA Synods in Texas](#) – The three ELCA synods in Texas and Louisiana have produced this guide. Since that part of the country has chosen to re-open sooner than New England, we can look to their experience. I’ll be in touch with my colleagues there to learn from them as they go through this process.

[Opening Up Again](#) – This is a document produced by the Federal Government that contains helpful information. It also uses the phased opening approach. This document contains important reminders about health and safety protocols.

Throughout this time of pandemic, I ask your patience with one another. Do not rush decisions. Be mindful of decisions that you make for all your constituents, as well as for longer term implications.

Worship for the Long Haul

I have been impressed with how rapidly you have adapted to the new reality of worship and congregational life in these times. The widespread use of online worship, Bible Studies, fellowship hours, and meetings using a variety of technologies is admirable. We are all still beginners in this work, learning as we go. Like toddlers learning to walk, we spend a fair amount of time falling down. But that’s how we learn. That’s ok.

As I’ve learned more and more about this disease and the likely trajectories of its impact on society, I’m realizing the need to begin making plans for the long haul. The commonly articulated time frame of 12-18 months before we achieve some semblance of broad public safety via a vaccine, credible treatments, and levels of herd immunity is a sobering timeline. Some have noted that timeline might be a best-case scenario. In light of this, I think we need to look at questions around the future both near term and long term of the church. For now, let’s discuss our worship life together.

There is clearly a need for us to think and plan for ongoing changes in worship life, chiefly around questions of online worship and some practices which have always been in-person such as Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Ordination, weddings and funerals. How do we navigate the terrain of a three-legged stool of theological understandings, pastoral needs and technological innovation? While some have chosen a quick fix approach, I’ve not wanted to go that route for multiple reasons, which I have [previously described](#). I’m grateful to the pastors, deacons and congregations of this synod for their patience in honoring my request that we refrain from an impulsive decision to engage in various practices around Holy Communion.

However, I do think the time has come for us to dive more deeply into this subject. I am choosing a harder path in the hopes that the outcome will yield a more thoughtful decision. That

path is to engage as widely as possible in a series of discussions on our practices of worship in these times.

We will begin with a series of discussions at the conference level with pastors and deacons. Then, we will introduce an opportunity for congregations to engage in similar discussions. There will be resources made available in both written, audio and video formats. These will be small digestible pieces that address the topic at hand. The full details of this approach are in development and will be available next week.

My goal in all this is two-fold: 1. to deepen our understanding of the sacraments, and 2. to help provide for informed decisions as we move into a new way of being church.

I could choose to simply write you all a letter, tell you what I think, and be done with it. That seems easier and briefer, but does not honor your gifts, intelligence and faithfulness. I'm choosing the harder way, but I believe the end result will be more broadly embraced. I will have more information and details next week, and you'll actually have tools to put in people's hands next Wednesday.

Finally, a brief word on the "big picture." I think we are in a time of transition. I don't fully understand it, but I sense that these are times of significant cultural and spiritual transformation. If you are interested in exploring this with me, I'm having a series of Wednesday evening Zoom discussions starting next week. More information on that is [here](#).

Once again, thank you for all you are doing. I'm witnessing so many examples of congregations, places of ministry, and individuals rising to the challenges. We are demonstrating to those around us that Christ is alive in the people of our synod. My confidence in the present and the future of this church continues to rise as each day I hear about Lutherans being the hands and feet of Jesus.

Sincerely in Christ,

Bishop Jim Hazelwood