



Central States Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness: when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you and you shall be built. Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

Jeremiah 31:2-4

During these past several weeks when there has been so much suffering, loss and fear, we have not been able to come together in our churches to worship and comfort one another. But in amazing and creative ways, you have continued to proclaim the gospel, remain connected, and care for the needs in your communities. You have indeed experienced and shared *grace in the wilderness*. But being socially isolated, abiding by stay at home orders to slow the spread of the coronavirus, has been hard and even exhausting, not to mention the sacrifices that so many essential workers have made to keep all of us safe. Thank you for all you have and continue to do as God's loved and loving people.

Now as we begin to look to a time when stay at home restrictions will be lifted, many are asking, "When can we begin to gather together for in-person worship and return to our church buildings?" Because we are a synod that covers not only two states but a diverse context in terms of location, size of congregations, local resources, etc., it is not possible to give a specific date that can apply to all of our congregations. The decision to begin worshipping in person again will be made by the council and pastor working together with careful consideration to the following:

- Legally binding orders
- Safety of the community and congregation
- Recommendations from health officials
- Federal guidelines for three-phased re-opening
- Recommendations from the synod office

In-person worship will likely resume at different times in different places and will happen in phases. It is important that congregational leadership begin developing a plan based upon the above considerations. We in the synod office are available to help you evaluate the situation, answer questions, and develop a plan.

Just as the federal document on re-opening emphasizes the process taking place in phases (the 18-page document can be found on the synod website), plans to re-open our churches should also take place in phases. Before proceeding to these phases, the document says the following

gating criteria should be met in order to mitigate against resurgence and protect the most vulnerable.

- 14 days of declining cases
- Hospitals able to treat all patients without crisis care
- Robust testing program in place

Phase one requires 14 days of declining cases. Phase two requires 28 days without resurgence. Phase 3 requires 42 days of declining cases without resurgence. At this time, neither Kansas nor Missouri have seen 14 days of declining cases. Once the above criteria have been met in your community, legally binding orders are lifted, **and a plan has been developed to slowly and carefully** gather for worship again, churches can begin to meet in person.

We know that it will not be a matter of opening the doors on a specific date, everyone flocking back into the building, and resuming worship in the same way that we did prior to the pandemic. We will need to practice “social distancing” to some extent well into the coming months. What will that mean in terms of greeting people at the door, sharing the peace, collecting the offering, celebrating communion? How do we need to design our worship services during phase one of returning? What will change as move into phase two? What if we have to go back to phase one?

During the coming weeks, I urge you to begin developing plans (see the document on the synod website) that will address the following:

- **Worship** - Find guidelines and suggestions on the synod website. What about those who are in vulnerable populations and not able to gather safely?
- **Communication** – How will the plan be communicated so that the necessary changes to worship services are understood and practiced?
- **Meetings, small groups, youth activities, etc.** – When will these activities resume in person and how will social distancing be practiced?
- **Facility** – How will the facility be cleaned after each use?
- **Stewardship** – How will you continue to care for your resources and use them for ministry, including staff and volunteers?
- **Addressing loss and grief** – Not only have there been deaths in our congregations without the ability to gather for funerals, but the whole community has experienced a profound loss during this time. How will we help people deal with their grief?

I cannot emphasize enough we will not be coming back to our churches in the same way that we left them. This pandemic has profoundly changed every fabric of our society, including our churches. We will have to do things differently, constantly adjusting as things continue to evolve. In some ways coming back together will be more challenging than closing our doors for the past several weeks.

But as we heard in Jeremiah, God loves us with *an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again, I will build you and you shall be built.* We shall be built **anew**, for

in Christ God makes all things new. That is the promise of Easter, of resurrection. Our call is to trust that God is constantly creating, redeeming and inspiring us to be the church. I truly believe that this is a defining moment for the church to listen to God's call and step boldly into a new way of being for Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

In the name of the Risen Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Susan Candea". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "In the name of the Risen Christ,".

The Rev. Susan Candea, Bishop