



SYNOD OF ALBERTA AND THE TERRITORIES

Incorporated as Alberta Synod

The Office of the Bishop

10014 - 81 Avenue NW
Edmonton, AB T6E 1W8

Ph: (780) 439-2636

Fax (780) 433-6623

Email: info@albertasynod.ca

www.albertasynod.ca

***Spirit-Led
Leadership***

***Hope-Filled
Discipleship***

***Innovative
Tradition***

***Collaborative
Partnerships***

July 5, 2021

Dear Beloved of God –

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Acts 2 describes the worship experiences and practices of the early church. *"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."* (Acts 2:42) These days we long to see and greet one another face to face, and to reach out for the bread, the wine, and for one another. We long to gather in person to worship, to eat, drink, and sing together.

Over the past 15 months, physical distancing and other protective public health measures have interrupted many of our regular worship practices and congregational activities. While we yearn to put this time of separation behind us and return to the familiar practice of gathering in person as a congregation, it is vital that each congregation carefully develop and implement re-opening plans that are appropriately tailored to the unique context of their own community, their congregation, and its ministries.

Acts 2 reminds us of the great care that members of the early church had for the needs of one another within the context of their worship and praise of God. The planning that congregations do in preparation for a safe return to gathering is an important act of ministry. Lay and rostered leaders will want to engage in theological reflection and think through pastoral care concerns carefully in their reopening planning. Taking time to consider the needs of the congregation is, in itself, a means of honouring God's creation and love of all people. We belong to God and are made in the divine image of God. It is not only right, but our duty to carefully discern what is best for the community before acting.

Though the lifting of provincial restrictions on July 1st seems to signal an end to the pandemic, the advice of public health officials continues to change in tandem with the virus itself, as well as with our increasing knowledge and experience with COVID-19 and its variants.

At this time, with respect to in-person worship, I strongly encourage continued use of masks, physical distancing, hand and facility sanitizing, offerings received at a stationary place or forwarded through e-transfer, automated withdrawal, or by mail, and careful consideration regarding communion preparation and distribution.

As we seek to make responsible, faithful, thoughtful and lawful decisions about public worship and gatherings, let us consider:

- Are there members in our midst who are unable to be vaccinated due to health concerns?

- Does our community include numerous children under 12 who are not yet vaccinated?
- Are there many active local cases of COVID in our community?
- How comfortable is the congregation with returning to in-person worship?
- How will we accommodate those who are not comfortable with or who are unable to attend in-person worship?
- Are there health and sanitation practices which are beneficial to continue?
- Should worship practices be limited for a time as a precaution? How might they be modified for safe practice? (communion, passing the peace, singing, gathering offering)
- How might those new to the congregation who have participated in online worship be remembered and included in the life of the community?

Keep in mind that there may yet be times of reimposed restrictions if new waves of infections emerge, and gradual reopening as infections again decrease. In all situations, err on the side of love for your neighbour and know that change will be inevitable. Patience, grace, and flexibility will be necessary as we strive to make the most appropriate decisions for the people of God in our communities at this time. In addition to worship planning, it will be helpful to spend time reflecting upon what has been done online during this past year, as this will likely lead to new insights and discoveries for our worshipping communities. Other decisions, including in-person meetings, and other small-group gatherings, as well as children's ministry (as children under 12 are not yet eligible to be vaccinated) must be carefully managed.

I continue to give thanks for the many ways in which individuals, congregations, and specialized ministries offer faithful ministry and leadership in their communities. Once again I remind you to be humble and gentle with one another. Honour each other. Welcome moments of joy; make space for lament. Help each other live into hope. Learn from this journey in the wilderness and let the learning lead us forward. Trust that God is at work in this time and look for the new things God is doing even now.

Despite the longing to return to "the way things were", continue to be faithful in seeking to protect those among us who remain vulnerable. As we seek the safest way to return to in-person worship and programming, may we continue to trust our lives and to place our hope in our God of healing and grace for all people.

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

In Christ Jesus—
Shalom,



The Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer, Bishop
Synod of Alberta and the Territories – Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada