



December 10, 2020

Beloved in Christ in the Rocky Mountain Synod,

In August of 2020 the Synod Council joined me in offering the following recommendation with respect to the worship life of our congregations and ministries in the Rocky Mountain Synod:

RECOMMENDATION ONE (August 2020)

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to prioritize worship opportunities that are safe, accessible, invitational, meaningful, and sustainable. The use of an online/digital platform remains the highest recommended format for corporate worship through at least the end of the calendar year.

Any in-person worship experience should prioritize an outdoor venue, small groups, physical distancing, and the use of face coverings. There is a strong likelihood that corporate in-person worship that is able to include all parishioners inside of a church building will not be advisable well into 2021.

December has now arrived with both hope and hard truth. While the prospect of vaccine distribution offers great promise for a future day, the grim reality of the current moment is that the pandemic continues unabated. Infections, hospitalizations, and deaths from COVID-19 are at an all-time high in most of our nation and in every corner of our synod. According to community health experts, our situation will continue to get worse before it gets better. Any significant in-person contact between people who do not share the same household is deemed to be unsafe. Now is the time to exercise maximum caution, not ease up. For our worship life, this leads to the **strong recommendation to discontinue any in-person worship gatherings—particularly indoors—and rely extensively on digital worship platforms through at least the end of March.**

Depending upon the progression of the virus and the extent of vaccine distribution, the landscape beyond March will become increasingly complicated. Keeping in mind that outdoor venues in which participants observe pandemic protocols (limited numbers, physical distancing, use of face coverings) are much safer than indoor options, it might be possible to consider some forms of in-person worship options in the spring. However, it is important to note that health experts indicate that until the vaccine has reached a significant percentage of the population, there will be continued risk for anyone who is not vaccinated or who does not have immunity. This reality of a partially vaccinated populous will create incredible complexity for decision making about who should be included in any in-person gatherings. It will take our collective wisdom to learn how to navigate this new landscape.

For the immediate moment, we implore you as rostered ministers, congregations and ministries of our church to choose the path of honoring our most vulnerable neighbors and showing maximum care for those serving in our overwhelmed health care systems by refraining from in-person church gatherings—for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yours in Faith,

Bishop Jim Gonia

Approved by Synod Council on December 10, 2020