

Dear Partners in Ministry,

To say that these are challenging times with ever changing information regarding the coronavirus and how to respond to it is an understatement. I have never encountered anything like this in my over 36 years as a pastor. We are in uncharted waters and you as pastoral leaders are in challenging positions. Not only do you need to be voices of hope and calm in the midst of the anxiety people are experiencing, but you also need to help your communities make decisions about the best way to care for one, including whether or not to cancel worship services and other church activities. I recognize and respect that each individual congregation has the responsibility to make decisions that are right for them and that you know your individual congregations better than I.

Recognizing all of that, I am at this time respectfully and strongly recommending that all of our congregations throughout the synod **PAUSE (not panic but pause!)** That means I am recommending that we suspend all worship and fellowship activities in our buildings through the end of the month.

There is much we do not know about the coronavirus in terms of having an effective vaccine, but we do know that the only effective to slow the spread of the virus, to “flatten the curve,” and not overwhelm the health care system, but give medical experts time to develop testing and treatments is to practice social distancing. By **pausing** (cancelling) group activities, which includes worship, in our churches we are working together to care for our neighbors.

This does not mean I am asking you to **pause** from being the church. Rather I am asking you to be the church in new ways during this time. And I am asking us to do this together. Below are some ways in which we can do this:

- Please make the decision to cancel worship and other activities in conversation and consultation with your council leadership. These are tough decisions. You have my support but you also need the support of your own leadership. We are in this together.
- Formulate a plan on how you are going to continue to care for one another and provide worship for your congregation. Many congregations have already done this. If you do not have the ability to livestream (and we have many resources on the synod website to help you do this), we will be providing worship services, including sermons on our synod website. We will provide ways in which we can continue to worship, to hear the gospel and hold on another in prayer. (More information will be coming about this in the next few days.)
- All synod staff travel will be suspended through the end of the month. But please know that we are available for you by phone and will be expanding out capacity to use Zoom and have conversations via the internet. At this time the synod office will remain open, but some staff will be working from home.
- All in person synod events and meetings will be postponed or held on-line. (Again, more information will be coming out in the e-newsletter on Wednesday and will be posted on the synod website.)

Please know that I do not make this recommendation lightly. I recognize that when congregations do not meet in person for worship, giving goes down and that affects the ability of the congregation and the synod to do its ministry. I also recognize that there will be push back and this could raise the anxiety in your congregations. Please communicate to your congregations that this is not a call to panic but to **pause**. And pausing during the season of Lent is not such a bad thing!

I also want to assure you that we are here for you. We will be reaching out and touching base with you, but please know you can call or e-mail anytime. At our Tuesday morning staff meeting, we will be working out the details of a synod plan to assist and support you as leaders as well as your congregations. Watch for more information to come to you through your deans.

Finally, please know that I deeply appreciate your leadership during this time. Let's remember we are the church; we are the church together; we are the church for the sake of the world. So, for the sake of the world, for our neighbors, let us be examples and leaders of care. Let us not panic. But let us pause to do what we can in slowing the spread of this virus, and in our pausing discover new ways that the Spirit is indeed at work among us.

Bishop Susan Candea