**PASTORAL MESSAGE REGARDING COVID-19**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

 As you know, with the spread of the coronavirus – specifically “COVID-19,” there have been many government “guidelines,” “mandates,” etc. to help stop the spread of this disease; as well as much guidance from the Missouri Synod and the Michigan District, and the counsel of many of our pastors in our own Thumb East & West Circuits. There is also much misinformation circulating. Please be confident that I and our congregational leadership are keeping up-to-date on these developments, which seem to change daily and even hourly.

 Regarding the decision to continue worshiping through Sun., March 22 – with added precautions (including no Holy Communion; See below), several factors were taken into consideration (not in any particular order):

* Government directives: Although the President put forth not meeting in groups of more than ten people, this was a “*guideline*,” *not* a mandate. The only governmental *mandate* that was in effect at that time for Michigan – and that would affect churches – was the 50 people limit. And, on Sat., March 21, the Governor exempted churches from the penalties of going over 50 (partly due to the “separation of church and state”). Any suppers we host were, and are, cancelled due to State Health Department directives to all licensed food providers (which we are). In short, at that time **we were *not* in violation of any government mandate.**

 Obviously this changed beginning Tues., March 24, with the Governor’s new “stay-at-home” Executive Order banning the gathering of any size group and the closing of all non-“essential” businesses. Although the worship penalty exemption still exists, we would be violation of the general Order if we held worship services and Bible studies. Therefore, **as of Tues., March 24, all services, Bible study, and meetings are cancelled** until further notice.

* Synod/District counsel: Although both Synod President Harrison and District President Maier have provided video comment and suggestions on this issue, they continue to acknowledge that this is a local congregation decision, and that **no congregation/pastor should be judged** on the decisions they make regarding their local situation. The Synod/District has no authority to *mandate* action to any congregation (on this or any other issue); from the beginning, the Synod has been, and is, an *advisory* entity. One of the suggestions is to live-stream and/or video-record services for people to watch at home. Although we do not have live-stream capability, beginning with the Wed., March 25 Lenten service **we are now video-recording mini-services and posting them on our web-site** (under “SERMONS”) **and Facebook page.**
* Circuits’ input: Congregations within our two Thumb Circuits are doing different things: Some are not worshiping in-person, but are live-streaming and/or video-recording; however, **at least eight (about half) held regular worship services on Sun., March 22** (most including Holy Communion), and some of those are continuing to do so. It’s been stressed **that no one should judge** another congregation/pastor regarding the decisions each make.
* Huron County: As of yet (March 26), there are still **no cases of a positive COVID-19** test in our County.
* Theological considerations: Confessional Lutherans have a different understanding of worship than most others: We’re not simply a gathering of Christians present for the *primary* purpose of praising, singing, and praying *to* God, with a message *about* Him. This is all *Law* (what *we* do), all of which could be done from home. This understanding of worship makes it easier to simply cancel worship (let alone some unchurched leaders or leaders with this concept of worship “suggesting” what should be done).

 Rather, we believe what the Bible and our historic understanding of worship is: That in God’s “*Divine* Service” (*i.e.*, *His* Service to us – which is *Gospel*), the *primary* purpose of gathering in public worship is to be in the ***actual* Presence of the Triune God**, and **to *receive* His Gifts of His Word and Sacraments**, from which we actually receive Forgiveness, Life, and Salvation – not just read, hear, and sing *about* them. That is, **when we gather, Jesus is *actually* (not just Spiritually somehow) in our midst**, as real as the person sitting next to you in the pew (or six feet away!). Another way to put this is that “Heaven is where Jesus is, and Jesus is in our Sanctuary when we gather around His Word and Sacraments (along with all those who are in Heaven!), thus we are in a piece of Heaven” when we worship. The *secondary* purpose of our gathering is then for us to *respond* in thanksgiving through praise, prayer, and song. This is yet another consideration when it comes to deciding whether to cancel worship or not. As one pastor has said, “Hospitals remain open to tend to the *physical* needs of people, churches can do the same for *spiritual* health.”

* Precautions: We have taken additional health precautions in the Sanctuary: The Chancel rail and pew tops are being thoroughly cleaned (as they were already); we have **suspended Holy Communion** (to avoid touching of the rail and vessels); **bulletins and offering plates are not being passed** around; hand-sanitizer is available as you enter the Sanctuary (as it was already); **no hand-shaking**; and a general encouragement to consider **“social-distancing”** as much as possible when choosing where to sit. Maybe the most important factor is the **encouragement to all those in high-risk/vulnerable situations, and those simply uncomfortable with attending, to stay home.**

 Given all of the above, please realize that there are **no concerns/input that you may have regarding whether or not to have worship that haven’t already been, and are continually being, considered**. For every person who has an opinion on this issue, be assured that there are others who have the opposite opinion. It was, and will continue to be when public worship resumes, an **individual decision** on whether to attend or not, and **no one should be judged** either way. Obviously, as factors change – as they are daily and even hourly – future decisions regarding resumption of regular activities will be posted on our **Facebook page** and on **local radio stations**. We ask for your **prayers** in all of this; and to that end:

“Almighty God, Merciful Father, Your Thoughts are not our thoughts, Your Ways are not our ways. In Your Wisdom You have permitted this COVID-19 pandemic to befall us. We implore You, let not the hearts of You people despair, nor our faith fail us, but Sustain and Comfort us. Direct all efforts to attend to the sick, console the bereaved, and protect the helpless. Bring Hope and Healing that we may find Relief and Restoration; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”