

A Resource for the Time of Reopening

We are hearing about what's next, and when it might unfold, as weeks under restrictions accumulate during the coronavirus pandemic. Because of the continued risk for infection by a virus that can kill its victims, it is important for congregation leaders to be cautious for the sake of members and visitors who will gather in time in our buildings.

I continue to count on the counsel of medical experts, health officials, and the office of the governor for direction. On that basis, I have found the attached guidelines for Returning to Church to be consistent with wise practice. The guidelines, developed by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, are comprehensive, clear, and insightful. I recommend them to you for the time when plans get underway in your setting. <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>.

There are two things to keep in mind going forward.

First, this synod's territory covers different regions of northeastern Pennsylvania. Our northernmost area is less populated and has, in some places, not been impacted by the coronavirus as seriously. At the same time, some of the more populated southern areas have been among the most adversely impacted in the state. At the same time, my visits to congregations across the synod have taught me that many members cross mission district and county lines to attend weekly worship – sometimes for close to a half-hour drive.

We need to be mindful of various circumstances that must influence decision making about returning to church. What prevails in one place may not prevail in another. It is important not to make assumptions about what congregations ought to do.

Second, I know that there are rostered ministers whose personal health circumstances would be jeopardized by a premature opening, or by returning to full pastoral responsibility without the benefit of a vaccine. Consideration needs to be given to those who share this ministry with us and who face this dilemma. In this matter, I encourage mission district ZOOM meetings by rostered ministers now to gauge what special situations might exist and how those situations might be addressed collegially.

Finally, and yet foremost: thank you for your faithful ministry in these days of stress, uncertainty, and frustration. In support of your ministry, I want to lift up words in the ordination rite that move me every time I say them to the newly ordained: *And be of good courage, for God has called you, and your labor in the Lord is not in vain.* May these words echo from your moment of ordination and sustain you in the days ahead.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Sam Zeiser