



The LCMS Kansas District

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A Pastoral Statement on "Coming Back to Church"

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" (Psalm 122:1)

Dear Friends,

The word "church" literally means "gathering." We come together to fellowship with God and with one another. We come together to participate in the liturgy of the church as God speaks to us and we speak back to Him the very words He has given us to speak in Holy Scriptures. We receive His true body and blood in the unleavened bread and wine of Holy Communion for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith.

Your pastors have done extraordinary things during this time to make sure that you are spiritually fed. Whether it be through small group services, phone calls, mailings, radio broadcasts, live-streaming or church in the parking lot, God's Word has continued to go out.

Now, some of us haven't been able to attend church in person due to a variety of reasons, including health concerns. Still, we must be a people who love the Scriptures. We read, mark, learn and inwardly digest what our Lord gives to us through His Word. Having taken in that Word, we must live it out in our words and deeds. This hurting and suffering and dying world needs the Good News that you and I possess in Jesus Christ.

As COVID comes to an end and as more vaccines are administered, God help us, Amen, how will your life be formed? What decisions will you have to make when it comes to in-person worship? Look, I know that it's much more convenient to watch church from my couch in my pajamas. I can watch a sermon at any time of any day of the week now. But is this church? Is this what God intended for His baptized to be doing? Yes, the challenging work remains of getting people back to church—getting people from spectatorship to participating and gathering once again.

We know that with the advent of livestreaming services, many churches are struggling to have their members come back to in person worship. Here a tension emerges: We may receive the **full** Gospel, yet still long for the **fullness** of the Gospel.

What does this mean? Rev. Trevor Sutton, St. Luke Lutheran, Haslett, MI writes, *"In the midst of a pandemic, when many people must remain home and listen to a live-streamed message, the **full** Gospel is proclaimed. The Holy Spirit can and does work through the Word proclaimed – even when that Word comes to us through invisible waves, speakers, and screens. Yet, this does not negate the **fullness** of the Gospel that can only be experienced in the physical gathering of the local congregation as they go about baptizing, partaking of the Sacrament of the Altar, administering the Office of the Keys, and through the mutual consolation of the brethren. We are able to say that there is a fullness of the Gospel that can only be experienced in the assembling of the Christian Church."* (Virtual Christianity: The Full Gospel and Its Fullness)

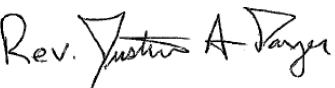
To put it simply, the church must be the church. Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann, professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis writes, *"We must gather to worship. We must find ways to faithfully celebrate together God's gifts to us in Word and Sacrament as our Lord intended. We must provide the structure to guide Christian living*

not only on Sunday morning, but throughout the week. We must create and schedule and keep the events and opportunities that will help to reestablish the pious habits of God's people. The church must act like the church: the gathered saints of God celebrating the gifts of God, living out the story of God in all of life, and actively encouraging one another along God's way." (The Post-Pandemic Pew: A Reflection for Pastors)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I certainly can't force you back to church, nor plan what your daily life looks like. It's going to take you saying, "Yes" to your pastor when he invites you to a small group service to receive Holy Communion if you're still not comfortable being in larger crowds. It's going to take you encouraging your family, your neighbor, your fellow member to come back to the place where God desires His people to gather.

To close, each of your congregations have received information about a District wide "Day of Repentance" on Ash Wednesday. I encourage all of our congregations to commit to doing this as we "walk together" as the Synod in this place. But most of all, I encourage you to participate—in whatever way you can, in whatever way your health allows. We need one another now more than ever!

In the service of Christ,

Rev.  Justin A. Panzer

President Panzer