



Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Dear Synod,

Christmas is coming. COVID-19 is not going away.

Patti, Christopher, and I have in the past spent Christmas Day together and then traveled to see our families in central Pennsylvania. This year, my brother who I have not seen for two years, my sister-in-law and nieces for even longer, announced he and his family are coming home for the holidays. Patti and I and our families have practiced physical distancing and all the other precautions to prevent the spread or contracting the virus. But my brother and family are coming in from out of state, for Christmas, to be with family. Do we risk exposing them or they us to the virus? Will this be the gift of Christmas this year? Do we gather in celebration that can lead to illness or death? I am sure many of you wrestle with the same dilemma.

I know plans are underway in many of our congregations for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship. Many decisions are being negotiated and made between pastor, musicians, worship leaders and committees based on local viral trends and concerns. We have become good, some might even say experts, at taking precautions to not offer opportunities to spread the virus when we gather for worship. I know congregations and pastors are wrestling with what worshiping together during the Christmas season will look like. How many liturgies should be offered? Can it be Christmas without singing *Silent Night*? And are there enough resources and people to prepare, lead, clean up and reset for the next liturgy. Is Christmas worship becoming more stressful and anxious than usual? We know physical, mental, and even spiritual exhaustion leads to increased susceptibility to disease and chronic illness.

I would encourage simplicity as you think about, plan and evaluate Christmas this year. Keep in mind always the focus of Christmas is not you or me. Christmas is God coming to us in flesh and blood. God is the actor, and we are the receiver. This year simplify the liturgy, the message, the gathering of God's people so the focus is not on our wants, needs and desires, but on God with us and God for us. The manger bed leads to a cross for the salvation of the world, not a hospital bed because we wanted to get things our way and now suffer the consequences of our actions.

Perhaps this is the year we truly live into the season of Christmas, those twelve days leading up to the Epiphany of Our Lord. Perhaps we celebrate the season, and the feast days within it, to mark our Christmas this year. Perhaps this is the year when we do not point just to ourselves and what we do as the community of believers in our building, but to what other communities of believers in other Lutheran and ecumenical partners are doing in their places of worship.

Or perhaps this is the year of the digital or virtual church gathering. Who knows what the weather will be like, it has snowed in parts of our synod already!

COVID-19 will pass. And our Christmas cycle will come again next year. We are called to be faithful witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord until he comes again. This year we are called to be safe in our witness. We are called to model a less stressful, less anxious celebration. We are called to care for one another and our families.

Called to Serve,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Lozano". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Lozano