



Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
FROM THE OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

December 15, 2021

*Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for
The interests of others. – Philippians 2:4*

Dear Beloved in Christ,

I bring you greetings for a blessed Christmas and a safe New Year. As we approach our second pandemic holiday, you are in my prayers.

Sadly, a week before Christmas, we are seeing a COVID surge that rivals the one we saw last December and January. Case counts are approach last winter's peak, *even though many more people are vaccinated*. Positive test rates are where they were during the April surge. And the trends are moving sharply upwards. We are seeing the effects of the *airborne transmission* of the virus in our communities.

In most of our area, the rate of positive tests and/or the percentage of ICU capacity filled is near or at the levels that the ecumenical consultation on worship (in which the ELCA participates) recommends **considering alternatives to indoor gatherings**. I wholeheartedly second that recommendation.

I encourage you to do everything that you can to ensure the safety of your people if they gather in person.

The most basic precaution is **that anyone who feels sick should stay home** – even if you are a rostered minister or a worship leader. This is also true if anyone is **exposed to an infected person**. I pray that you are continuing to **share your service in sacred cyberspace** for those who cannot attend in person.

If you are gathering indoors, everyone attending should **wear a mask**. The same is true if you gather outdoors if you are singing. Please **maintain physical distancing** between groups that are not of the same household.

God's work. Our hands.

If it's possible, in-person attendees should **be fully vaccinated, including with a third dose** if eligible. Research shows that people, especially the elderly, who have only one or two doses are more vulnerable to breakthrough infections, in addition to the risks to those who are not vaccinated.

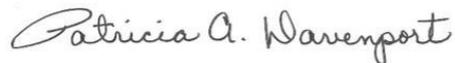
Beyond vaccines and masks, it is very important to **have as much fresh air exchange as possible** in your gathering space. You can improve ventilation by *opening windows or gathering outdoors*. Yes, I know it is cold, but without proper ventilation the virus can be suspended in the air for a long time.

It is also advised to **limit occupancy of your indoor spaces to 25-50%** of capacity set by your fire marshal. I know some churches have scheduled multiple Christmas services to reduce attendance at each one. Leave time between services. The virus spreads because people breathe the same air.

I know you are tired of this ongoing need to monitor the virus and maintain safety. I know I am. Yet we are called to work for the safety of our worshippers as well as our communities.

I join you in prayer that this pandemic draws to a close across the globe. For now, I remind you to stay vigilant and keep safety paramount in your concerns.

In the name of Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia A. Davenport".

Rev. Patricia A. Davenport
Bishop
Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod