

Continuing our Life as Church Becoming: Updated recommendations for navigating the next chapter in our pandemic landscape.

Approved by the Rocky Mountain Synod Council, August 4, 2020

RECOMMENDATION ONE:

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to prioritize worship opportunities that are safe, accessible, invitational, meaningful, and sustainable. The use of an online/digital platform remains the highest recommended format for corporate worship through at least the end of the calendar year.

Any in-person worship experience should prioritize an outdoor venue, small groups, physical distancing, and the use of face coverings. There is a strong likelihood that corporate in-person worship that is able to include all parishioners inside of a church building will not be advisable well into 2021.

RECOMMENDATION TWO:

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to offer low-risk, in-person gatherings tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of the various people within your setting for the sake of the emotional, physical, communal, and missional health and well-being of the congregation/ministry.

RECOMMENDATION THREE:

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith use this time to pay particular attention as people of faith to those in your community, in our nation, and in this world who are most vulnerable during the pandemic and let that inform your ministry efforts.

Priority should be given to anti-racism work that addresses individual and corporate contributions to systemic racism and a culture of white supremacy/privilege for the sake of understanding and dismantling such injustice and fostering authentic diversity in our church and nation.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR:

It is recommended that every congregation/ministry of our synod take advantage of this disorienting time of pandemic to intentionally ask “*church becoming*” questions. What does it look like to more fully become the church the Spirit needs us to be for the life of God’s beloved world? What conversations, partners, and resources will help you explore the future we are being called to embrace as the Body of Christ in our time and place?

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From Bishop Gonia

Beloved in Christ in the Rocky Mountain Synod:

Note: The recommendations offered here are updated from [those presented on May 23, 2020](#). Please consult the originals when reviewing these updates in order to access important background, context and resources.

Introductory comments

We have been living in pandemic mode since the middle of March. By now we imagined that conditions would be improving or that our concerns would be more focused on a possible second wave of coronavirus in the fall. Instead, we find ourselves more deeply in the midst of what [Dr. Michael Osterholm](#) has described as a “forest fire,” spreading wherever there is “wood to burn.”

At the time of this writing, infection rates and the related death toll from COVID-19 continue to rise both in our country and region. There is no clear end in sight to when and how this pandemic will ease its grip on our life. The idea of 14 days of successive decreases of cases in any location, including in much of our synod, seems a long way off. Situations elsewhere in the world show that even when cases subside for a time, new outbreaks can occur when preventative measures are relaxed.

Our ability to control what the virus will do is limited. Wishing it away will not change our reality. We are learning the hard way that our only option for helping mitigate the spread of this virus is to adapt our behavior. Behaviors that help prevent the spread of COVID are familiar by now:

- avoid large gatherings
- maintain physical distance when with others
- use face coverings when in public spaces
- regularly wash and sanitize hands and surfaces

Given that the end of this pandemic is not in sight, we must continue to adapt our life not only as individuals, but as the church. Dr. Osterholm suggests that we anticipate the next twelve months as being a “COVID year”—and plan accordingly. While this is not what any of us desires, it IS possible for us to make the necessary adaptations in our individual lives as well as in our practices and ministry as the church. Like generations before us that have faced significant challenges, determination and resiliency are required.

Our struggles with COVID-19 are only part of the story. In the months since the earlier recommendations were shared, we’ve also been confronted anew by the ongoing pandemic of

racism in our country. Sparked by the murder of George Floyd, a Spirit-driven movement has arisen, sweeping many white Americans—[myself included as I shared in my blog](#)—into the deep and personal work of confronting our own complicity in systemic racism and the role we play in maintaining white supremacy. To engage actively and sustainably in anti-racism is urgent, sacred work for our nation and our church.

Amid it all, we are caught between weariness and hope, resignation and new possibility. We fear not seeing an easy end to this tumultuous chapter even as we find ourselves cautiously open to actually doing life differently. As anxiety grows about the endless divisiveness all around us, we are reminded of our calling as people of faith to be peace-makers, bridge builders, and pursuers of justice. With the Psalmist we cry out, “How long, O Lord,” even as we learn to sing a new song to the God of our salvation!

The members of the Synod Council and I want to **recognize and affirm the hard work of our rostered ministers, church professionals, congregations, and ministries** during this time. You have risen to the occasion, adapted your practices and routines, and worked diligently to safeguard the health and well-being of our neighbors while still living out our calling as Christ’s Church. We are grateful for every one of you and for the amazing efforts you have made.

At the same time, we’ve witnessed that in some places, fissures are developing between pastoral leadership and lay leadership over matters like gathering in person for worship or the use of face coverings. “Digital fatigue” has grown for many as our desire to be physically together deepens. What was initially considered a temporary, novel experience of online worship and ministry now feels more burdensome.

While many of us address the direct impact of COVID-19 on our families and local communities, the global impact of this pandemic has also hit home as we learn of the death of leaders in our companion church in Madagascar. For everyone, the once familiar rhythms of life have been replaced by new patterns that don’t feel nearly as satisfying and which often seem to narrow our world and perspective.

Given all those realities, how do we move forward as a **church becoming** in navigating this next chapter of our pandemic landscape? That is what these updated recommendations are intended to address. It’s important to understand that a key value behind these recommendations, like those offered in May, is NOT returning as quickly as possible to what we knew before.

Rather the value at work here asks how we might use this pandemic to learn what it means to be a **church becoming**. What does it mean to navigate this next chapter in this pandemic landscape, not merely trying to survive, but living and acting as a church that is open to becoming all the Spirit needs us to be for the life of the world?

Updated recommendations

There are four updated recommendations. Each recommendation includes some areas for consideration as well as initial resources to support your efforts.

RECOMMENDATION ONE:

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to prioritize worship opportunities that are safe, accessible, invitational, meaningful, and sustainable. The use of an online/digital platform remains the highest recommended format for corporate worship through at least the end of the calendar year.

Any in-person worship experience should prioritize an outdoor venue, small groups, physical distancing, and the use of face coverings. There is a strong likelihood that corporate in-person worship that is able to include all parishioners inside of a church building will not be advisable well into 2021.

This recommendation about corporate worship choices asks each context to actively evaluate the following:

- Is our worship choice **safe**? Do people risk contracting COVID if they participate?
- Is our worship choice **accessible**? Who is left out if we make this choice and why? How are we addressing the lack of access on the part of those left out?
- Is our worship choice **invitational**? Does our worship choice encourage and welcome the participation of new people? How is worship experienced by someone showing up for the first time?
- Is our worship choice **meaningful**? Are we focused on what matters for the spiritual life and active faith of those participating?
- Is our worship choice **sustainable**? Can we maintain what we're doing for the foreseeable future? Can we make adaptations as needed?

Pay attention to the **values and priorities** that are informing your decisions about worship, as well as to the **pressures** that may be at work to influence an outcome not aligned with your values. For those sharing building space with other communities or organizations, it's important to be clear about your own values and priorities and to determine whether they will take precedence when determining the use of your building by others. Be sure to check with your insurance company, and consult any written building use agreements to determine where liability resides.

For those whose primary worship opportunity is offered through a digital/online platform, it's more important than ever to give consideration to some of the following:

- **Equipment** – Are we equipped for the long haul with the best tools possible? Are members equipped to participate?
- **Content** – Are we recreating exactly what we would do for in-person worship online or are we adapting/tailoring worship for this platform? Are we focused on what is spiritually nurturing given the opportunities and limitations of our chosen platform?
- **Presentation** – Is our worship presented in a way that is accessible and user-friendly for all? Are we intentional about reaching out to new people and welcoming visitors?

- **Variation** – Do we repeat the same thing each week or do we vary the way we engage worshippers (embedded videos, music, etc) or use a variety of platforms?
- **Participation** – Are there places for lay leadership? How do we facilitate a worship that is still “the work of the people,” remembering that liturgy is intended to engage participants, not spectators?
- **Holy Communion** – Are we reviewing how this dimension of worship is celebrated? Is the pastor serving as the presider at the table or inviter to a private meal? Is the “for you” clearly offered? Is the invitation to all clear? How is this experienced by those visiting?
- **Collaboration** – Are we sharing worship opportunities and leadership with other congregations, near and far? Are we experimenting with opportunities to be *church better together* through worship in this time of pandemic, knowing we can collaborate with folks who are geographically far from our location?
- **Evaluation** – Are we evaluating our worship and receiving feedback in order to learn and grow? Are we visiting other worship services and learning best practices?

As we think about our **worship life**, this time of pandemic invites us to consider **why** we do what we do and whether the **way** we tend our lives of faith might take different shape. What if the key components of our typical worship—**Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending**— were not simply parts of a once-a-week experience engaged via ZOOM, livestream or a physically distanced space, but rather served as a framework for how we did life together?

Imagine if **Gather** meant how we intentionally committed ourselves to deepening our relationship with one another at this time when personal connection is so hard. What if our engagement with the **Word** wasn't just a sermon, but led us to concrete strategies for making choices that reflect what God is saying to us through Jesus? Imagine a life of worship in which the **Meal** included all the ways we pause to let the deep places of our souls be nurtured. What if **Sending** was about the specific ways we agreed to unleash our collective gifts now for the sake of serving our most vulnerable neighbors? What if everything about our *worship life* became a focus on *life as worship*? We might just discover why the early Christian community flourished in the midst of adversity.

Resources to get started:

The best way to be resourced for worship during this pandemic is to be in active conversation with others and to share ideas. [Some general worship resources](#), including [materials on Holy Communion](#), can be found on our RMS website.

RECOMMENDATION TWO:

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith continue to offer low-risk, in-person gatherings tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of the various people within your setting for the sake of the emotional, physical, communal, and missional health and well-being of the congregation/ministry.

Our ability to thrive as children of God depends on our engagement in meaningful relationships. While authentic relationship can develop and be nurtured using digital platforms to connect, nothing is quite as satisfying as being together in-person. The pandemic has made frequent in-person gatherings inadvisable. Practicing COVID-19 safety protocols has made in-person

gatherings awkward and less fulfilling. In order to sustainably weather this next chapter in the pandemic landscape, we must rely on a both/and approach. We must both maintain our commitment to preventing the spread of the virus in every way possible and we must find lower risk opportunities to be together in-person, even when it's not the same as it used to be.

When considering any in-person contact or gatherings, it is recommended that outdoor venues be prioritized, and all proper pandemic protocols be observed, including limiting the number of participants. In planning any in-person gathering, it helps to ask clarifying questions. Why is this gathering needed? What are we hoping to accomplish? Who should be included/invited to attend?

Given the complications of connecting in-person during these days, it's recommended that the particular needs seeking to be met help shape the type of gathering or connection.

- What kind of in-person contact or gathering offered by the church might best address someone's **emotional well-being**?
 - Example: Small group gatherings for fellowship or Bible Study.
 - Example: One-on-one pastoral care conversations.
- What kind of in-person gathering offered by the church might best address someone's **physical well-being**?
 - Example: Giving someone a ride to a doctor's appointment.
 - Example: Bringing a meal to a homebound person.
- What kind of in-person gathering offered by the church might best address the **communal needs of the congregation and our ministry needs**?
 - Example: A small group recording a worship service
 - Example: A call committee meeting a ministry candidate.
- What kind of in-person gathering offered by the church might best address the way we **live out our sense of mission and carry out our ministry to the community and world**?
 - Example: Hosting or participating in a food drive for the local community.
 - Example: Participating in an anti-racism rally.

As we head into the fall season, it's important to give thought to how in-person gatherings will be impacted when the **weather is not conducive to being outside**.

Resources to get started:

Most published resources about in-person church gatherings focus on the protocols needed specifically for *worship* gatherings (see the May 23 recommendations). This recommendation encourages *other* types of in-person connections and gatherings. It will be up to all of us to develop shared resources that imagine how to offer safe, life-giving occasions for in-person connections.

RECOMMENDATION THREE:

It is recommended that congregations and communities of faith use this time to pay particular attention as people of faith to those in your community, in our nation, and in this world who are most vulnerable during the pandemic and let that inform your ministry efforts.

Priority should be given to anti-racism work that addresses individual and corporate contributions to systemic racism and a culture of white supremacy/privilege for the sake of understanding and dismantling such injustice and fostering authentic diversity in our church and nation.

Someone recently noted that this pandemic has created space/opportunity for us to face the realities of racism in a way not seen in this nation since the Civil Rights movement. I am grateful to see so many congregations and ministries already engaging intentionally in anti-racism learning and action. My hope is that we will all heed the call of the Spirit to participate in this *kairotic* moment and movement. For many of us, this work means *unlearning* many assumptions, patterns, and narratives that have shaped our vision of “truth” and “reality” with regards to racism.

As the ELCA, we have made an explicit commitment across all expressions of our church to act together to end racism and to foster healing for all. The commitment to work for justice and peace is named in our baptismal covenant even as it is embedded in the ordination vows of every rostered minister. The Synod Council and I encourage every pastor and deacon to participate in our upcoming RMS Theological Conference, designed to equip us for sustainable engagement in anti-racism work individually and communally.

In our life as a synod, I have begun intentional conversations with leaders of key ministry initiatives as well as Office of the Bishop staff. I’m offering four questions to begin a generative conversation in each area of ministry:

Within the context of our mission and ministry as the Rocky Mountain Synod:

- *How does your particular ministry/program contribute—consciously or unconsciously— to perpetuating systemic racism and white privilege/supremacy in the church?*
- *How does your particular ministry/program help dismantle systemic racism and white privilege/supremacy in the church?*
- *How does your particular ministry/program help foster authentic diversity in the church?*
- *What changes could help your ministry/program more effectively dismantle systemic racism and white privilege/supremacy and foster authentic diversity in the church?*

There are many excellent resources to facilitate consciousness raising and anti-racism engagement. I call upon everyone who is part of our life as the Rocky Mountain Synod to take part in this urgent and sacred work.

Resources to get started:

[ELCA Racial Justice Ministries](#)
[Rocky Mountain Synod ACT4RMS Anti-Racism Resources](#)
[Doctrine of Discovery Resources](#)
[RMS Sanctuary Resources](#)

RECOMMENDATION FOUR:

It is recommended that every congregation/ministry of our synod take advantage of this disorienting time of pandemic to intentionally ask “*church becoming*” questions. What does it look like to more fully become the church the Spirit needs us to be for the life of God’s beloved world? What conversations, partners, and resources will help you explore the future we are being called to embrace as the Body of Christ in our time and place?

The current pandemic has provided a “kick-start” to those who are convinced that change in the church is neither necessary nor desirable. It’s clear by now that the church we were before March of 2020 is not the church that will emerge when this crisis ends. The question is not IF we are being changed but HOW we are stewarding this change for the sake of God’s mission. Every congregation and ministry context will need to determine how best to engage in journey of ***church becoming***.

Our Churchwide Offices just announced a model for ***Future Church*** that will seek to broaden collaboration and shared leadership across all expressions of the church. In the Rocky Mountain Synod we have developed several initiatives intended to foster a culture of adaptive change and to facilitate conversation on how ***church becoming*** finds expression in your particular context:

Excellence in Leadership (EIL) is a curriculum whose vision is to explore adaptive change through the framework of emotional intelligence in order to help form *courageous, resilient, and faithful leaders who are better equipped to build courageous, resilient, and faithful communities of faith, for the sake of the world*. I’ve used any number of the tools of EIL to navigate my own ministry in these changing times and have found it personally helpful, including in my work on anti-racism.

The **Vital Right-Shaped Ministry (VRSM)** initiative is being developed as a component of 3E (Educate, Equip, Enact) in order to offer a deep dive into your community of faith’s ***becoming*** by looking at things like:

- ◆ Sense of identity and mission
- ◆ Vision for ministry
- ◆ Structures for leadership
- ◆ Use of space
- ◆ Commitment to partnerships
- ◆ Self-perception as community
- ◆ Grounding in generosity
- ◆ Commitment to intentional diversity

Even as these resources are offered for the sake of *church becoming*, they themselves are still *becoming*. As a predominantly white church, we're recognizing that too often our default is to design resources from within our dominant white cultural perspective. Learning to do things differently takes effort, intentionality, and the willingness to make mistakes, learn and grow. **EIL**, for example, is currently evaluating its material and methodology in light of our shared commitment to anti-racism so that it can better understand the values and limitations for how it fosters leadership development. If we're going to take *church becoming* seriously, we have to be willing to practice it in every aspect of our life. Questioning our assumptions and inviting the perspective of others is a good place to begin.

Resources to get started:

[Bishop Jim: Classic Church and Church Becoming Video](#) (2013)

[Handout: Classic Church and Church Becoming](#)

[Excellence in Leadership](#)

[Vital Right-Shaped Ministry](#)

Additional Reflections

As we move into this next chapter of pandemic life, it's important to keep in mind some of the following:

- **Contexts across our synod vary widely.** Although no location in our synod is immune from this pandemic, rates of COVID-19 rise and fall depending on the particular location and time, allowing for differences in response at any particular moment. Access to the internet and computer competence is not uniform across our synod, meaning that the use of digital technology cannot be considered a given without mitigation. The size of congregations or ministries also varies which means that capacity for engagement in adaptive practices will not be equal. As we move forward, it will be helpful for congregations or ministries of similar size or type to network together for an exchange of ideas and support. **Collaboration will be key.** Congregations with greater capacity in terms of resources or staff might be able to offer support and accompaniment to smaller congregations and ministries. Several communities of faith working together can avoid duplication of work. This is the time to let our commitment to being church together be the rule of the day!
- **Pastors, deacons and church professionals who are also parents of school-aged children** will be caught in the same dilemma as their peers: navigating work life and the need to provide for children's education. Many students may be unable to return to in-class learning at the start of the schoolyear or may be required to engage in a hybrid program of education that includes time in the classroom and time at home. Congregations and ministries served by pastors and deacons with children in school will need to exercise maximum grace and flexibility in their expectations. It is recommended that congregations/ministries have intentional conversation with rostered ministers/church professionals about what will need to be changed or adapted if they are also caring for children's educational needs.

- Despite the fact that we have been living with COVID-19 since March, the idea of living with this pandemic for the foreseeable future is difficult to accept. **Navigating the next chapter of this pandemic landscape will often feel overwhelming.** As a *church becoming*, it's important that we pace ourselves for the long journey, that we take ample time to rest and renew, that we treat one another with grace and kindness, that we adjust our expectations and seek hybrid options for being church that both protect our collective health and well-being while also tending to our human need for relationship and activity.

We can do this. We can do this because we are not alone. We are promised time and time again that the crucified and risen Jesus walks with us. We are assured that God's abundant love, grace, and presence are unfailing. We are met in each moment by a Spirit who casts out fear and whose power energizes our mission.

Let us go forth into this next chapter of pandemic landscape with faith and good courage. Let us go forth as ***Christ's Church, Better Together ... Christ's Church, Always Becoming.***

Yours in Faith,
Bishop Jim Gonia
The Rocky Mountain Synod Council

August 4, 2020