



Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

Grace and peace to you in these glorious Autumn days!

Last week, Governor Whitmer announced that because of rising COVID-19 cases, the Upper Peninsula was being returned to Phase 4. Hardly moments later, the Supreme Court of Michigan declared that the Governor's ongoing emergency orders were unconstitutional. Together, as the church, we ask the good Lutheran question, "What does this mean?"

Both our Northern Wisconsin and our Upper Peninsula congregations now find themselves in the same confusing space where the Governor has issued orders without the legal capacity to enforce them. In our Lutheran polity, the enforcement of any behaviors rests with each congregation's council. It is the work of each congregation's leadership together to discern and decide what their guidelines will be for when in person worship will happen and how it will happen given the realities of an ongoing pandemic. Resources for all that needs to be considered are on our [synod website](#).

That being said, those in Michigan have only to look at their Wisconsin neighbors to see what happened when the orders of the Governor were ignored. Wisconsin hospitals are filling up, case numbers are rising exponentially, and many congregations have wisely pulled back from, or refrained from engaging in, in-person inside worship.

I write to encourage you to raise the bar from what is legal to what is advisable. Do not plan on in-person, inside worship unless the numbers in your county are flat or decreasing. If worship is held in person, please continue to require masks, especially in indoor spaces, and practice physical distancing from each other, which is only possible if numbers are limited in your indoor spaces. The [guidelines](#) that have been put forth by the Wisconsin Council of Churches still hold true regardless of any executive order or constitutional challenges.

And these best practices also continue to be advisable for your movement in and through your community. Masks and physical distancing, while not fool proof, are the best weapons we currently have to slow the spread of the virus.

I know that our situation feels like it's getting worse. We are weary and feeling the strain. But there is good news!

Those who study the emotional impact of disasters have noticed patterns in how populations respond during times of trial. At about six months into a disaster, there is a period called the “Disillusionment Phase.” I believe this is where many people are currently. But that’s not the good news. The good news is this phase has an end point. A day will come when we will move from the Disillusionment Phase, marked by weariness and anxiety, to the Reconstruction Phase, which is marked by new creativity, energy, and a coming to terms with the changes that we have witnessed. (Check out [this article](#) for more.)



So, please be encouraged. Even as we are in the thick of it, know that this too shall pass. As we are all feeling stretched thin, please be gentle with each other. Be even more patient, even when you don’t feel like it. And let your pastoral leader and your councils know that their efforts to lead and decide and consider so many things are deeply appreciated. They are doing the best they can to keep you safe and still embrace you with the presence of Christ through the community of faith. If you feel yourself being pushy, relax. If you are tempted to cast judgement, reconsider. A day is coming soon when we will feel creative and energized, ready to begin again as we move into a new future of being church together.

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Katherine Finegan
Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod