



# Allegheny Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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Bishop Michael L. Rhyne

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## **Allegheny Synod - Suspension of In-Person Services until Further Notice**

Friends,

Recently we announced the suspension of in-person services and in-person meetings in the Allegheny Synod through April 6, 2020. This week members of our Synod team and several pastors took part in a conference call with the Pennsylvania Secretary of Health, Dr. Rachel Levine. Dr. Levine was very candid in her discussion of the current situation. Dr. Levine shared that infection rates are doubling every few days. Her estimation is that the shutdown will extend into May. As more people begin to be infected with the coronavirus, we may see stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders extended to our area. The stay-at-home orders are, at the time of this writing, in effect for five Pennsylvania counties.

With this new information, we must suspend our in-person worship services and in-person meetings indefinitely. To gather at this time, while the infection rate of Covid-19 is exponentially growing and doubling every few days, would be dangerous and would expose the most vulnerable among us to serious illness and could lead to the death of our beloved members. We do not have a date for resumption of in-person services. I strongly encourage your Council to make this decision.

I learned this week from Bishop Bartholomew in New Jersey that one of their congregations has had three people die from Covid-19 and, at this time, four people are ill in the hospital with the virus. This is a small congregation where everyone knows and loves each other—not unlike many of the congregations in the Allegheny Synod. They mourn the death of three beloved sisters and brothers in Christ and are praying that they will not mourn the death of seven.

This is why we can't meet together. We don't want our congregations to be a health hazard to our members. We don't want to lose people we love. I don't want any of you to get sick, die, or to accidentally pass what could be a lethal virus to people you love.

I do not like that we find ourselves in this situation. I want our churches to be open. I want us to be able to gather together, to embrace each other, and to share the love of Christ in person. But, to gather together in-person at this time would be unsafe and life-threatening. Not gathering together in person as the church breaks my heart, but we need to protect each other. It is out of concern for the health of our members that I give you this directive.

Additionally, this is the policy that most church bodies in our area are following. The Altoona-Johnstown Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church has suspended services indefinitely. The Orthodox Churches have closed public worship at the order of the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Episcopal Church has suspended in-person worship until the shutdown is over. The Presbyterian and Methodist churches have suspended services. We are all doing the best we can to care for our people.

Your pastors and deacons are hard at work figuring out how to faithfully lead worship and care for you in this time. Many of our leaders are offering recorded services on the internet. We are using Zoom technology and conference calling to bring our communities together as best we can.

We also know that some of our congregations do not have a pastor at this time and rely on our lay worship leaders to provide services. For these congregations, I would first encourage you to see what your local sister congregations are offering. Please feel free to take part in the prayer and worship offerings that any of our congregations are making available. The Synod staff also is posting a weekly Sunday worship service which is posted on the Allegheny Synod 8C Facebook page.

In Christ,

+Bishop Michael L. Rhyne