Greetings Trinity Lutheran Church members,

I am confident when I say that our hearts are with one another as we go forward into these weeks ahead.  While those among us may find ourselves in different situations regarding our risk, our vulnerability, our health and our security, we are all united in being a worshipping community - Trinity Lutheran Church.  To borrow the sentiment of the Apostle Paul, when one member of the body suffers or rejoices or weeps or succeeds, we all share in the experience together.  And we are stronger together than we are on our own.  And certainly, churches in rural communities have a well-practiced talent for being there supporting one another in times of need or crisis.

I wanted to write a sober word of encouragement after having the chance to sit for a moment.  Certainly, we in our communities are beginning to grasp the circumstances.  Things will be different in many and various ways... for a time.  Our gathering habits will change.  Our traveling habits.  Our shopping habits.  Our work habits.  Most everything will be experienced differently... for a time.  And there will undoubtedly be work to do when the fog clears, and we seek to resume normal operations.  Only time will tell.

We took time today during worship announcements to review together what the circumstances are.  Much of the calendar is clearing itself before our eyes.  Activities on the calendar such as the WELCA Spring Gathering at Trinity and the VBS Potato Feed have been cancelled along with other routine activities such as the 8:30 Wednesday morning Bible Study.  I haven't had a chance to discuss the LMM Bible study at 6:30.  Efforts to limit any gatherings so as to limit the spread of coronavirus are appropriate for the sake of those most at risk which seems to be the elderly and those with compromised health.

The decision regarding how we handle our worship schedule will be made by us.  The Synod has no authority to dictate such matters for us, but as usual they have provided precious guidance and resources as best, they can.  In fact, all of us are doing the best we can, and we are seeing some shining moments happening as a result.  We are dealing with a unique situation, and we are figuring this out together as we go.  The medical experts do the best they can, but even they are not of one mind and heart.  So, we need to trust ourselves to make the best decisions that we can for our own communities in our own locations based on the best available information.

For now, our Sunday worship services will continue as normal.

We are taking appropriate precautions on Sunday mornings to prevent the spread of the virus providing hand-sanitizer and using cleaning wipes liberally.  The offering plate is waiting at the entrance of the sanctuary instead of being passed around.  Communion practices will include the pastor wearing plastic gloves.  We are refraining from shaking hands as we greet each other.

Pastoral visits will be understandably restricted for the safety of both pastor and parishioner.  Phone calls will have to do in many cases.  But visits are not eliminated completely.  In case of emergency, a pastoral visit is still available of course.

Events such as baptisms can still happen as long as all precautions are taken.  This year just by chance, there is no confirmation class to consider, and classes for the existing students will be adjusted as needed to accomplish the curriculum.

If the time comes when we have to advise people to stay home, a plan is in place to provide internet streaming of our worship service, and we can gather virtually for those who have the technology.  That opportunity can be complimented with in-person worship in the church building for those who do not have the technology, or we can find other creative solutions. More information to come when that decision has been made.

But of important note, the doors of the church will never be "locked," and the government cannot command churches to do anything, so if you have need, you will always be able to come to church.

And in the meantime, please remember that our worship gathering is an important element of our spiritual health, but it is only one element.  A well-rounded spiritual wellness approach is always important, and there are things that you can do on your own.  Please consider or continue practicing prayer and daily devotionals in private.  Please consider or continue practicing personal stewardship of time, talents and finances.  Please give of yourselves as you are able, as God has blessed you.  Make phone calls to those who may be isolated or connect via email or other means of connection.

A word about supporting your congregation during this unique situation:

We strive as a congregation to be honoring our God-given responsibilities in providing spiritual health for our community, and we hope that we earn your support.  We never want to convey an entitlement to your financial support.  You have many options when it comes to your choice for charitable giving, at a touch or a click, but please know that this local congregation is a direct influence on the spiritual health of our community - through you and your development of your spiritual presence in your own life and in the lives of others.  We are on the ground here together, the first line of defense.  And together we can do amazing things.

One more word - about stewardship as a spiritual practice:

While the church building has expenses that need support, it more important to consider our own needs to practice stewardship as a regular generous sacrifice.  We love because God first loved us, and we give because God first gave us his son, and God gives us all that we need to support this body and life.  Regular stewardship is a tactile reminder of this.

A final word - about the e-giving options.  If you are ready to look at the e-giving options, there are several options available.  You can go to the church website <http://trinitylutherandewitt.com/> and click on OFFERING.

You can also use an app right on your smartphone.  Go to  <https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/church-app> for further information.

Trinity Lutheran Church uses a popular tool Vanco Payments, widely used by churches to handle these kinds of electronic transactions.  Please use with confidence!

And I forgot who said this, but I heard once that our spiritual health has no better thermometer than seeing how we manage our wallet or our purse.  I would professionally agree with that opinion.

If you feel sick, stay home.  If you require treatment, please call your medical practitioner.

If you have any questions of a spiritual matter or a church matter, please let me know!

Please know that I am praying for you.  We are in God's hands, and sometimes God's hands guide us towards helping others in important ways.

Peace,

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Rev. Travis Panning

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