

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. Matthew 4:23

Dear Pastors, Deacons, SAMs, and Council Presidents,

This is difficult. I'll cut to the chase. Research indicates that three of the most dangerous places to be during a pandemic are inside a building filled with people who don't live in your house like:
1. Bars and restaurants
2. Gyms and work out facilities
3. CHURCHES!

This is a crisis. The hospitals are filling up. Medical workers are overworked and getting sick themselves. University of Wisconsin in Eau Claire, River Falls, and Stout will be entirely online after Thanksgiving. Elementary and High schools are making tough decision to go online after so many teachers and students have tested positive. Pastors have started to report to me that members of their churches have died from COVID-19. At least three pastors in our synod have tested positive for COVID. My 27 year old daughter who works in health care tested positive last week. This is real.

Here is the strongly worded recommendation from the Wisconsin Council of Churches.

November 11, 2020 Update¹: Given the current state of COVID spread in Wisconsin and Governor Evers' Executive Order 94², we recommend that churches abstain from gathering in physical spaces, indoors OR outdoors, at this time. We know this will impact community celebrations and holiday services in the weeks to come, and offer this recommendation in the firm belief that it will help protect the life and health of congregants and community.

I will echo this recommendation. I recommend that you plan all online virtual worship services for the season of Advent and Christmas. I know this will be difficult. Many will grieve not being able to gather on Christmas Eve for candlelight worship. As spiritual leaders you need to do everything you can to keep people safe and keep yourself safe. You do not want your church to be known as a super spreader site. You do not want to do funerals for your vulnerable members who got sick because they came to worship. I do not want you to get sick. Encourage your members to stay home, wear a mask, sanitize, and be careful.

The pressure to hold in person worship during Christmas is immense. I read about a church that is planning to do all online virtual worship for Christmas, but it will decorate the sanctuary, and from 1-4 p.m. for a few days before and after Christmas they plan to open the sanctuary for one household at a time. Families or individuals may come into the building (wearing masks, of

¹ <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

² <https://evers.wi.gov/Documents/COVID19/EO094-COVIDRecommendations.pdf>

course) to listen to recorded music and pray. They will provide printed prayers and Bible readings. There are important logistics with this plan, like scheduling and instructing families to wipe down everything they touch before they leave, but it sounded like it might be a safe way to meet the spiritual needs of some of your members. My point is simply this: You can do this. You can adapt and change and discover new ways for your community to worship and celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus without being crowded in the same building at the same time. You can do this. You can keep the members of your church and community safe.

Dear friends, this Christmas will be celebrated in the middle of a crisis. We need Immanuel, God with us, to get through this. *Remember, Jesus is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome!* I am hopeful that soon there will be a vaccine and we will all be able to gather again safely. I know you are tired, even exhausted. Let us know how we can support you.

The synod ministers are recording a complete worship service for you to use the Sunday after Christmas. I hope it will be helpful and give you the break you need. I am grateful for all you are doing! I pray for you all every day.

Together in Christ,

Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson