



March 16, 2020

Grace Family,

Today we are facing one of the most unique challenges in modern public health, and all of us must work together to slow the spread of the coronavirus, COVID-19. As noted in the [previous letter](#), now is not the time for fear; it is, however, the time for action. Grace's Congregation Council met yesterday afternoon and discerned how best to respond to the rapid spread of COVID-19. Council has made the following decision:

**All events and meetings held at the church building are suspended until further notice.**

Council will continue to monitor the situation and will decide as a group when it is reasonably safe to lift the suspension of in-person activities.

The situation continues to evolve at a rapid pace as the spread of COVID-19 continues. Yesterday evening, the CDC recommended that events with more than 50 people be cancelled until May. This kind of recommendation underscores the importance of doing everything we can to slow the spread of this pandemic, and Grace will play its part for the sake of the public health. For the time being, we are going to be church together in a very different way.

Much of what defines the Lutheran Church is found in the *Augsburg Confession*. There the church is described as "the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." (Article 7) Notice how the church is described as a group of *people*, not a place, nor a building. For us to be church together, we need two things: gospel and sacrament.

With respect to the gospel, we are going to continue to provide worship opportunities on our website and Facebook page – you can be sure that you will hear gospel in the coming weeks. As for the sacraments, part of administering them rightly is knowing when to *not* administer them.

The sacraments are intended to *strengthen* our faith (Article 12). With that in mind, perhaps *abstaining* from Holy Communion – for the purpose of caring for ourselves and others amidst a pandemic – can strengthen our faith in this strange time. We are not abstaining selfishly, but in love for one another and love for the sick and suffering throughout this country. In sacrificing our weekly celebration of the meal God gives to us, I suspect we may find ourselves a little closer to the very heart of Christ, and a little fuller in faith as a result.

While we grieve the current absence of worship in-person, we know that once we can be together once more, it will be a rich celebration. Our face-to-face reunification, whenever it may be, will be a way to experience a type of resurrection, and we can always find hope in that.

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Now, let us turn our attention to what being church will look like during this time.

Many of the practices we have already begun will form the foundation of the way forward. We will continue to produce worship videos in the coming weeks, posting them on the church website and Facebook page. We plan to add music to these worship services, too. This will be the way we worship together, even across many miles. And we will also be attempting to produce midweek Lenten worship videos, so that you can worship with *Holden Evening Prayer* from home.

As for the rest of our Lenten journey, we hope to continue to produce digital versions of the material. We may not be able to facilitate table discussions as we did in the first two weeks, but we hope to persist in our telephone conversations between members – a great opportunity to see not only how others are doing, but what they are thinking, too. For those of you who lament the delicious soups of those Wednesday nights, perhaps the phone calls are a good opportunity to swap recipes!

If it seems like I am beginning to reach for reasons to make phone calls, I cannot deny it. I simply cannot stress enough the importance of making phone calls to one another during this time of ‘social distancing’ – people need contact with others, especially those who share their faith, so please be the church in this way. Please be especially intentional about calling those who might not have access to our online gathering opportunities. When we were baptized, we were brought into a family of faith that relies on one another – we need to let others know they are not alone in this time, even if they must remain mostly in their homes.

There are many details which we will be addressing in the days to come – ongoing projects that will need to be rescheduled or adapted, for example. Our Grace Happenings email, which will go out tomorrow as usual, will address many of these items. If that mailing does not address a concern you have, please be in touch with the pastors. We are almost certain to miss something, since everything is going to be a bit different – we welcome your collaboration as we seek to find new ways forward in this time.

Finally, I want to repeat what I said before about our mental health in these unusual days. Global pandemics are scary things - I am only a handful of days into my first one, but I still feel confident this is true. With that in mind, please be kind to yourself - do not allow hour after hour to be consumed by 24/7 news programs. Just because there are 24 hours of news programming does not mean there is 24 hours of news. Use this time to read something new, watch a movie, wash your hands, pet a dog, wash your hands, call somebody from church - *be church together*, even if we cannot be under the same physical roof.

If you have any questions or concerns, please give one of your pastors a call. If you need help, call us. If you're worried, call us. If you talk to somebody and you think *they* need our assistance, call us. If you are just bored...well, we now have several new worship services to produce, so maybe call somebody else. But *really*, please feel free to reach out; we are here for you. My cell phone number is 740-312-5774. Pr. Rachel's cell phone number is 864-230-3816. If both of those numbers are busy, leave a message; we'll call you back.

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Let us close with a prayer together:

**God of Creation, all that you have made is good and your love endures forever. We praise your name for the wonder of modern medicine, and we are grateful for all those whom you have called to serve in that field. Protect those who labor for the health of their neighbors. Give your guidance and strength to all doctors, nurses, and technicians whose skill is saving lives. We remember how you preserved your people through wildernesses of many kinds, and we ask you today to preserve your people once again through the wilderness of this pandemic. Give hope to those who are battling this virus and courage to those who fear that they will face it. In the midst of uncertainty, we are thankful that you do not change – you neither slumber nor sleep and in your hands we are all safely numbered. In the days ahead, we ask that you draw us closer together as your people, so that our physical separation would not keep us separate from one another, nor from you. Keep us always focused on your will and make us ready to respond with the gifts you have first given us in order that your will be accomplished. We lift these things to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our physician, friend, and savior. Amen.**

Peace in Christ,

Pastor Gregg Hoffman  
Senior Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church