
Office of the President
Rev. Timothy Teuscher

May 21, 2020
The Ascension of Our Lord

Dear Brothers and Fellow Workers in the Gospel,

‘When and how should our churches reopen?’ That is the question that I have been asked in one form or another from many of you in light of Covid-19 restrictions on group gatherings slowly being lifted in various parts of our nation. It is not, however, possible for me to answer that question with any specifics since each province, as well as various regional municipalities and cities, have different orders and protocols in place. Moreover, each congregation of our Synod is unique in terms of number of members, demographics, and the physical layout of its church building. In some congregations such a ‘reopening’ might necessitate multiple services of smaller groups; while for others one service might suffice. In addition, I would recommend that each congregation put in place their own protocols concerning social distancing and the sanitizing and cleaning of their church building . . . being guided and informed in this matter by local and provincial government regulations.

That such questions about reopening our churches are on the minds of many of you is indeed good and right and proper; after all, as the Augsburg Confession states: “The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (AC VII.1). I want to focus at this time on these words – “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught”; that is, the Service of the Word as it is called in the Divine Services of the *Lutheran Service Book*. The Service of the Sacrament or “the assembly of saints in which the sacraments are administered” I will address in a future letter as particulars concerning the administration of the Lord’s Supper when it is possible to gather together continue to be the subject of much discussion and debate across our Synod. In this regard, I commend those of you are engaged in such mutual conversation on this issue and are not acting unilaterally and separately.

The “church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely.” Now, to be sure, on the Day of Pentecost the apostles proclaimed the Word of Christ publicly to the world, so to speak, much like what is being done through The Lutheran Hour broadcasts or by many of you via online video services. Such is indeed necessary for as St. Paul says: “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). This mission work, as we commonly call it, is not, however, an end in and of itself; but it leads, or hopefully leads, to the establishment of congregations. So we read at the end of the Pentecost account concerning those who repented and were baptized into the name of Christ as a result of Peter’s mission sermon: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, the breaking

of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). We see the same thing during Paul’s missionary journeys. For example: after he and Barnabas preached the Gospel and people came to faith in Christ, we are told that “they appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, (and) commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

Notice – ‘the fellowship’ (*koinonia*) . . . ‘the church’ (*ecclesia*); that is, the assembly or physical gathering of believers in various places, the body of Christ together and not disjointed or amputated individual members, the priesthood of the baptized and not a bunch of individual priests. Moreover, it is in this physical gathering or corporate assembly, no matter where or how large or small it might be, that you have been called to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13) and to lead the people in prayer (1 Timothy 2:1, 8). The Small Catechism explains, as it were, the reason and necessity for this in these familiar words: “The Holy Spirit . . . calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.”

The apostle Paul speaks of this gathering or assembly of God’s people in these words: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). So, too, the writer of Hebrews says: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). And all of this is framed by and grounded in that amazing and comforting word and promise of our Lord Jesus Himself: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20).

To be sure, there is nothing new or profound in what I have written. So why do I bother to mention it? Well, in spite of the claims by some that virtual gatherings are the future of the church, or that digital technology can replace the need to physically gather together for worship; such is really a modern version of that ancient heresy – Gnosticism. Not only did the eternal Son of the Father become flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary, not only did He suffer in the flesh, not only was He raised to life bodily, not only did He ascend into heaven bodily; but He uses real . . . not virtual . . . creaturely things to accomplish His work of saving and restoring His sinful, fallen creation – water, bread and wine, words on a page in a book proclaimed from the lips of real flesh and blood pastors like you into the ears of real flesh and blood sinners who are physically gathered together. And while the church can make use of virtual communication, just as it has in the past through the radio airwaves or with the printing press, and just as it is being used at the present time by many of us during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, such cannot and does not replace “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (AC VII). An LCMS pastor put it this way in his recent blog: “The church is both an *ecclesia visibilis*, a visible gathering around the preached Word and administered Sacrament, and an *ecclesia abscondita*, the hidden union of all believers of every time and place through faith in Christ. But it is never an *ecclesia virtuale*, a virtual church, just as there is no virtual Christ, virtual Cross, or virtual death and resurrection.”

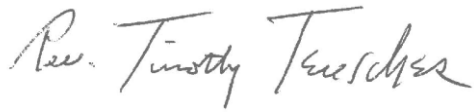
Some closing thoughts and words of wisdom on this Ascension Day from Herman Sasse: "The mystery of the church is the real and essential presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Whether the church is present or not does not depend on the good or evil will of people, but only on his will. If he in his limitless mercy wills that his Gospel be preached also in the future among our people, and that generations of our people yet unborn should hear the saving message of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ, then it will most certainly happen. No one knows how it happens. It may be that it will happen without the methods of modern 'publicity' and without the technical means of the modern transmission of information. But there can be no doubt that the mandate shall be carried out. . . . He who believes in the mighty power of the divine Word with the strong, unshakable faith of Martin Luther knows that this Word does its punishing and saving, building and destroying work without respect to human help or earthly impediments. . . . Therefore the church will remain among us in the future so long as Christ remains with us. 'For thus he speaks, and so it happens; he commands and so it stands' (Ps. 148:5). The church exists in our century as a miracle of God. To people it is an inconceivable riddle, to many a terrible offense. Its future is not determined by people, just as it cannot be foreseen by people. For the future of the church is the future of Christ" (*The Lonely Way*, Vol I, p. 463).

And further: "A world which wrestles with death, a humanity that threatens to be drowned in the night of insanity cries out for deliverance. And we stand powerless over against it. We do not know what we should do. There is no program to solve this problem. Evangelization of the world, mission work among the masses – will we bring all this about? No, we must recognize that we can do none of it. Only if we first recognize our complete powerlessness and helplessness, only if we first acknowledge before the face of him who is holy and true that we in our sins can indeed no way encounter the world with the claim that it should hear us, only if we first acknowledge that our lips are impure and our hands are stained, only if we first can say nothing other than 'Lord, have mercy' – only then can we learn to grasp the mystery of the church of Christ. If our mouths are dumb, then he speaks. If we with our wisdom and our power are at an end, then he speaks his great Word to us: 'Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age!' With these words he once sent his apostles into the world, to tasks which humanly speaking were impossible, to destinations which they knew not. And they joyously went the unknown way. They knew that his forgiveness, his peace, his power were with them. 'Behold, I am with you always' – this is the mystery of the church. For upon what does the church rest? No, not our faith, not on the holiness of our lives – then it would have long since dwindled out of history – but solely on Christ the Lord for 'where Christ is, there is the church' (Ignatius). Have we not all too often forgotten this? That there is one living Christ, that God raised the Crucified One and made him Lord, and that this Lord really and personally is with us always. . . . Where his Gospel is plainly and purely preached, where his Sacraments are rightly administered, there he is really and personally present. . . . In humble repentance let us all turn ourselves to him. If we with empty hands and with contrite hearts come to him, then he will place us before our tasks, just as he once sent his first disciples into the world, with the great promise which we hear today in faith: 'Lo, I am with you always; even to the end of the age'" (*The Lonely Way*, Vol. I, pp. 71-72).

"The Father of glory . . . raised (Christ) from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every

name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:17, 20-23). May these words from the appointed Epistle Reading for this day of The Ascension of Our Lord comfort and sustain you during these unusual and difficult days as you seek to proclaim His Word of life and peace to those entrusted to your care.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rev. Timothy Teuscher". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Rev. Timothy Teuscher, President
Lutheran Church—Canada