

ELCE COVID-19 Update

From the Executive Council – 20 March 2020

Hello!

I hope you are having a good week – finding good news in the world (how pollution levels have reduced and the sound of birds and insects have returned in places), among your family and friends, and of course with Jesus himself. There are lots of good news around! Nevertheless COVID-19 is still around and it is not good news. Actually it is a virus doing its own virus-thing because we are spreading it. Globally we are susceptible to it which is why it is called a pandemic and it is changing a lot of things at the moment.

What is it changing?

Because we are not immune to this virus and it has an unknown contagious phase it can spread to others well before people know they are ill. This means that all the changes centre around people minimising contact with each other because this is an airborne virus (eg. found in droplets of breath, saliva, and surfaces where the droplets land). So we are keeping our distance from each other and not gathering where we do not need to come close to each other. Hence all the working from home directives, the public transport changes, the school closures, all the hand washing reminders, all the catch-it / bin-it / kill-it posters, and you can think of lots more – all designed to delay the spread of this virus and not overwhelm our society's health system, food chains, law and order, and our safety.

Because COVID-19 seems to target certain groups in society they are more vulnerable and need to be protected from the virus even more. The Government's link on social distancing is very good for the information on how we minimise contact and who is particularly vulnerable. Please read it!

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>

In summary people in the following groups are vulnerable to COVID-19:

- Aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)

- Under 70 with underlying health issues (eg. long term respiratory diseases, many chronic diseases, a weakened immune system, and being seriously overweight (BMI >40))
- Those who are pregnant

And this means that how we are church also is changing. The ELCE is not alone here! All church bodies are changing their practices because we all are by nature social groups who meet together (the very thing that is problematic at this time). God is not deficient! We are the ones who are problematic (always!) and, at the moment, the issue is an airborne virus.

So what is the ELCE doing?

Already ELCE congregations have responded to the situation by:

- encouraging the vulnerable to self isolate
- practising scrupulous and additional hygiene regimes in the church building and at Holy Communion
- keeping in contact with everyone and supporting each other
- investigating how to engage online (for worship services and bible studies)

But this is a changing situation, what else is happening?

Yes, the situation continues to change quickly. Unfortunately the number of infections and deaths are increasing. People are concerned about things getting far worse before they get better. The British Government has talked about 12 weeks but no one precisely knows what the time frame means or its accuracy. The consistent message remains – deny the virus the opportunity to spread – restrict social contact.

This challenges us because when we worship we join together to receive God's gifts together, to experience the ups and downs of our lives together, to be blessed together, to be sent out together back into the world where we are individuals and families following Jesus. COVID-19 is challenging our being together. This hurts, frustrates, and concerns us. But it should never make us anxious or afraid because Jesus is with us in any

circumstance – even should we be isolated in some way.

And so in this situation, the ELCE's Executive Council makes the following recommendations to the congregations of the ELCE and their members and pastors. The Executive Council does so with reluctance but with the clear goal that we are being good neighbours to our fellow citizens in this land. The recommendations also acknowledge that the ELCE is Church and called to serve those around them. We commend these recommendations to everyone in the ELCE.

So in light of the current COVID-19 situation and commencing immediately the Executive Council recommends that:

- ELCE members stay home as much as possible and delay the spread of the virus (by minimising travel and minimising 'social contact').
- ELCE members not attend public services and church activities.
- ELCE congregations not hold public services and church events in their church buildings.
- ELCE pastors and congregations be proactive in care for all members – and particularly those listed as vulnerable to this virus – and, at all times, be conscious and active in matters of hygiene and 'social distancing'.
- any ELCE pastor in a vulnerable group or living with someone in a vulnerable group should limit his ministry and travels and help delay the virus.
- all members immediately communicate with the pastor and congregational leaders when any symptoms are discovered or when self-isolation is happening – and should a pastor or his family be thus affected, that the ELCE Chairman also be contacted immediately.

The Executive Council is also aware that church life is more than a Sunday worship service. There is pastoral care, visiting, mutual care between members, engaging with the community, chaplaincies, and much more. Sunday services might not happen but congregational living and care doesn't then cease. Thus the Executive Council also recommends that:

- pastoral visits or visits by Elders or pastoral carers be exercised with extreme care so as not to spread the virus.

This means that where people are self isolating because of symptoms or because they have been in contact with someone with symptoms that no visits should be happening so that the visitor does not have to then self isolate. The only exception to this might be if the pastoral visitor was wearing the same attire as the health workers attending those with COVID-19. Otherwise support and ministry needs to happen via remote means – phone, Skype, Facetime, Facebook, WhatsApp.

This also means that where people are self isolating because they are in a vulnerable group and show no signs of symptoms that visits might occur provided rigorous health and hygiene practices can be followed and social distancing can occur. Otherwise support and ministry needs to happen via remote means – phone, Skype, Facetime, Facebook, WhatsApp.

So what now?

All ELCE congregations are providing resources and alternative options – something online – so that people can stay connected and worship and not feel so alone.

At home we can take the initiative and not be socially or spiritually isolated. (Isolated but not isolated!) Perhaps at set times all members of a congregation in their own homes could have times for reading and prayer bonded by the thought that others are doing the same at that time?

Perhaps the members of congregations could join a Facebook or WhatsApp congregational group to stay in touch?

In all of the online communications a wonderful resource is Lutheran Radio UK.



Lutheran Radio UK broadcasts the Daily Offices each day and from Sunday 22nd March onwards – at least for this COVID-19 time – LRUUK will now include a sermon and prayer for that Sunday. (I recorded them on Thursday.) You can hear these services at 7:00am, 9:00am, 5:00pm, 7:00pm and 11:00pm.

Go to www.lutheranradio.co.uk and click on Listen Live. You can download the app and listen on your phone.

The Lutheran Service Book at page 299 lists a Daily Lectionary which is a good reading resource.

Some ELCE congregations are having online services. As details are known we will share them.

Congregations with extensive libraries of audio files for you to 'dip into' are ...

<http://www.oslc.org.uk/>

<http://www.christlutheranchurch.org.uk/site/>

<http://www.ascensionlutherans.co.uk/>

If you are interested in recording material to go online then perhaps this link may help ...

[https://www.ctsfw.edu/wp-](https://www.ctsfw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Streaming-Guide-for-Churches.pdf)

[content/uploads/2016/02/Streaming-Guide-for-Churches.pdf](https://www.ctsfw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Streaming-Guide-for-Churches.pdf)

Some pastors may be at church on Sunday or at designated times in the week for prayer and counsel and absolution and consolation – or just so people can come in and sit by themselves. This is not meant to be a de facto worship service but more akin to going to the doctor's surgery for care and help. Again it needs to be stated that the goal of delaying the virus is paramount these days and so rigorous health and hygiene measures and social distancing are the orders of the day.

Last week the ELCE's Commission on Theology and Social Concerns was asked to advise about the distribution of Holy Communion. It met on Tuesday 17th March.

The Commission on Theology and Social Concern's Advice Regarding the Distribution of Holy Communion in this time of COVID-19

1. We affirm the importance and centrality of the common cup in Holy Communion and that its use is found in the institution of Holy Communion by Jesus (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19,20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) and in the teaching of unity with Christ and with those who commune (1 Corinthians 10:16,17). The common cup is the historic practice of the Church.
2. We recognise that the common cup is an obstacle for some communicants in this time of COVID-19 and we acknowledge the use of individual cups to meet this pastoral situation.
3. We advise that the best practice for the use of individual cups is when the consecrated wine is

distributed by a pouring chalice or other item into the individual cup which is then consumed and then followed by another worship assistant who pours a little water into the individual cup for the communicant to consume.

4. We urge all best hygiene practices for the Divine Service.

Thinking of others – praying for them

It is quickly obvious that we are very interconnected and I don't just mean via our social media. There are many people whose role – vocation in our Lutheran understanding – simply means that they cannot work from home. Our society – we – need them to continue working. These people are in our congregations and in our streets.

First to mind, I imagine, are all those involved in the NHS. But then the neurons make links to teachers, emergency service workers, social workers, people involved in the justice system, the prison system, communications and media, public service, religious workers and chaplains. Did you get postage through your letterbox, a milk bottle at your door, your rubbish bin emptied? Are the shelves empty all the time? No! Because our food production and retail continues. I am sure you can think of more people and professions whose contribution helps us stay home and be safe.

Let's make lists of these occupations – and if we know names, let's add names as well – and find regular time to pray for them and for their families.

It is very strange!

Yes, we live in strange times when to be good neighbours we stay indoors! That's what virology teaches us!

God's Word also teaches us to care for our neighbour as the chief expression of following Jesus. Because God loves us, we love those around us – family, friends, strangers, enemies. We do not live isolated because Jesus – hidden from our senses – the Word made flesh – is active through his Word to us, engages us, comfort us, supports us, and reminds us of our identity – we are God's children living in a strange land. Yet we live with a confidence and a hope that the world regards as strange. We are not foolhardy or terrified by events but we use our sanctified common sense to follow Jesus and rejoice in his gracious presence.

God bless us all.

- Pastor George Samiec