



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

... cultivating leaders intentionally engaged in the mission of God

July 23, 2020

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd of the sheep!

Yesterday, MN Governor Tim Walz issued an indoor / outdoor statewide mask-wearing mandate for all public buildings and spaces. And as you might expect, opinions are strong and vary widely. Below are some examples of what I am hearing from you and others.

From those who are okay with the mandate:

- Why can't Christians just comply and have church services with a mask as ordered?
- How hard is it to wear a mask to protect those who are at-risk?
- Why can't you just keep doing online services for the safety of others?
- Why can't churches simply obey the law and be a good witness to the rest of the community?
- If everyone would just wear a mask, we could control the disease and keep it from spreading.

From those with objections to the mandate:

- It is difficult to embrace the governor's orders as democratically reasonable.
- These orders are not constitutional and infringe on our civil and religious liberties.
- Rural is not the same as the metro; a one-size-fits-all approach is not reasonable.
- "The government has no business telling me what my children and I have to put on our bodies. It is my body, it's my choice, and it's my life."
- Masks provide a false sense of security and cannot guarantee you won't get sick. Yet, they are being portrayed to our people as just that, while also being used as a political weapon to divide people and demonize objectors.
- Why should our sick and dying have to suffer alone? Why do they have to die alone? Have we completely lost our humanity? We cannot allow the state to dictate how we will care for our people.
- Why can people gather, protest, and chant for social justice, breaking both social distance and mask rules without legal consequence, while those who gather peaceably to receive the forgiveness of sins, sing hymns, and even hear about the importance of racial reconciliation and the power of forgiveness are being threatened with fines and shamed as evil and wicked if we object to those mask requirements?

- Neighbors are being pitted against neighbors with the government now giving phone numbers for people to call and report on your neighbor or place of business if they're not following mask rules. This is draconian, tyrannical government overreach and is right out of a dystopian novel.
- Why should we trust the governor and his so-called scientific facts when there are other scientific facts that have a different perspective?

Something for both sides to consider:

- Here is what the [Star Tribune said yesterday](#) when announcing the governor's mask mandate: "Many studies have only provided weak or inconclusive findings on the benefits of mask-wearing in public, but the evidence is building that the practice at least provides 'source control,' meaning that wearers protect others from germs they spread in the air through coughing, talking or breathing."

Brothers, here is what I know for sure:

- **Remember your vocation.** You are not Caesar's man. You are the Lord's man. You were not called to your office to serve as an extension of the government. You are called there to care for blood-bought souls by administering the means of grace. That is your first priority. Right now, more than ever, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting through Jesus Christ are the consolation and the hope our people and communities need in the face of a pandemic and parallel civil unrest.
- **The Holy Christian Church has a long history of caring for people and thriving in hope amid pandemic situations.** The church has always assessed the evidence of a situation and gauged the needs of her people according to different criteria than the state. We dare not let the cacophony of anxieties and fears speak louder than the hope of our Lord Jesus Christ. We dare not let fears or demands for physical safety speak louder than the faith we have in the Creator of heaven and earth, whom we trust to give us our daily bread.
- **The Church is our family.** That is more than a sentimental platitude. To be brothers and sisters in Christ is much higher and stronger than ordinary blood ties. That bond is created by the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whenever any family gathers together, there is always risk of passing on germs, no matter the situation, time in history, or place of gathering. To gather in person for the Lord's Supper, as the Church has done across the ages and during pandemics, is not the same as restaurants serving strangers but is always a family meal. This practice of corporate worship is difficult for the state and secular world to understand.
- **The nature of humanity is to see faces, to read faces, to love all faces**—black, white, red, and yellow faces—they are the faces that are on us and all around us. Faces tell a story, they reveal our innermost feelings and disposition, they smile and welcome, they show comprehension in learning, they cry for help when in danger but are unable to speak, they show sorrow and gladness, and they show optimism

and hope. Faces are to be seen. Look at the faces around you and love those faces in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- *****I cannot mandate what you do in your congregation.** (That is not our congregational polity.) You—not I— are the called servant of the Word in your location. You, in consultation with your elders, need to be making decisions and determining how you will respond to this new mandate. Up this point, some churches have made no rules or policies but simply allowed every family or member to follow the dictates of their conscience in the question of mask wearing. There is no lack of information to inform your decision. In addition to what we have already put out, there is a mountain of guidance from the state—some of it helpful, some of it overreaching. Ultimately, you need to assess what you and your congregational leaders think is best and act according to your conscience for the good of your people and the care of your neighbor in service to the Lord. Use reason and wisdom, soaked in prayer, wrapped in the Word. I will support you in your decisions.
- **Not every congregation and every community are going to do things exactly the same.** Likewise, there are bound to be divisions within your congregation membership. Foster understanding and a forgiving heart within your congregation membership; opinions are bound to be strong and wide-ranging. Please be patient with one another and charitable with one another as we continue navigating these challenging times in the confidence of our Lord Jesus Christ. His promise is never to leave us nor forsake us!
- **To quiet fears and encourage faith in these uncertain times,** I commend to your use and encouragement to your members the book [Christ and Calamity: Grace and Gratitude in the Darkest Valley](#) by Harold Senkbeil. It is a free digital download or available for purchase as a hard copy. Though it is occasioned by our pandemic environment, it really addresses a wide variety of uncertainties and distresses with the promises of Christ and His consoling presence in His Word.

Invariably, there will be more to come. I continue to take it all in and consult with other church leaders, as well as express our voice to the governor's office. But through it all, the Lord Jesus Christ has sent us His Holy Spirit to comfort us and lead us through His Holy Word.

The Lord bless you and protect you in both body and soul unto life everlasting.



Your Brother and Pastor in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford

Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford, President
Minnesota South District, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod