



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
NEW JERSEY SYNOD
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.
1930 Highway 33, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

May 22, 2020

Dear Friends,

Just this afternoon, President Trump declared houses of worship to be essential and to open this weekend. I would agree that houses of worship are essential. Throughout this pandemic and stay-at-home order, our congregations have continued to provide essential ministry by proclaiming the gospel, feeding the hungry, advocating for the most vulnerable, carrying out Christian education, and being the church for the sake of the world. While we have not gathered in person, we have continued to be open.

The declaration about opening this weekend should not lead you to rush to have in person indoor worship services. I am eager to gather again in person but not at the expense of the most vulnerable among us. Many of our members and most active churchgoers are older which puts them in a high-risk category. Some of our rostered leaders have underlying health conditions, which also puts them in a high-risk category. A number of our buildings do not allow for the physical distancing required (6 feet between non-family groups) to have more than a handful of people present. In NJ, the stay-at-home orders remain in place.

Please follow the guidance we put out last week ([found here](#)) and utilize a congregational planning team to make decisions about how to gather again in person in your building when it is safe to do so. It is better to plan a methodical phased return than to risk causing an outbreak of COVID19.

My prayers are with you as you make these decisions,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew