



Dear people of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,

Grace and peace to you in these glorious summer days! I hope you are finding renewal and refreshment and making time to get outside.

In the last 24 hours, three significant announcements have come from Governor Whitmer of Michigan, Governor Evers of Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Today, I will try to offer some clarity as to what these announcements mean for inside in-person worship in our Northern Great Lakes Synod congregations, both in Michigan and Wisconsin.

Firstly, Governor Whitmer's Executive order is linked [here](#).

At first view, the "only 10 people or less" for inside gatherings is the most striking highlight. However, a closer read shows that Region 8, the Upper Peninsula, is not included in this order. Under Section 8c on page 6 of the document, gatherings are allowed inside for up to 25% capacity, with face masks and social distancing. However, if the numbers of Covid-19 cases are rising in your county, I recommend NO inside in-person worship until reported cases are flat or declining for at least two weeks, preferably three.

Secondly, Governor Evers' Executive order is linked [here](#).

With cases spiking in Wisconsin, Governor Evers is doing what he can to keep people safe. What has become routine in Michigan may feel burdensome in Wisconsin. Please remember that masks and social distancing have been shown to reduce the spread of the virus. This is all about keeping your neighbor safe. While some may see it as a political issue, for us as Lutheran Christians, it is, at its core, about love of neighbor and protecting the most vulnerable among us. Again, if cases are spiking in your county, I recommend a pull back from inside in-person worship until cases are flat or declining for at least two weeks. Inside in-person worship can then resume, but only with face masks and social distancing.

Thirdly, the Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) issued an updated [Returning to Worship Recommendations](#).

I have appreciated WCC and their dissemination of solid, science based advice. In this document, the WCC advocates for a complete pull back from in-person worship in all

Wisconsin congregations until September when plans for in-person worship can be evaluated and considered. There are several reasons for this - the spiking cases and the exhaustion and decision-fatigue of pastors and leaders being two of those reasons. Again, if your county is experiencing an abundance of cases, do not meet for inside in-person worship. But if cases in your county are flat or declining for at least two weeks, then a plan for in-person worship and a timeline can be considered. If you are unsure, please err on the side of caution. The challenge, of course, is that things can change very rapidly. Councils and pastors would do well to have a plan for communicating last minute adjustments.

Other things that both Michigan and Wisconsin congregations can glean from this WCC Updated Recommendations is to be thinking ahead to Advent and Christmas. Prepare yourselves now, emotionally as well as practically, that our traditional observances and celebrations will have to look and feel differently. We continue to find new ways of doing things: staying connected, prayer and worship habits, devotional resources, Bible study and conversation, crafts and fellowship, Sunday school and youth group.

Understandably, we are sad not to be able to do what we enjoy so much. We can feel bereaved, disconnected, and our spirits heavy with loss. Our grief over not being able to gather, worship, fellowship, and observe our high holy days and traditions in the way we want is real.

But so is the virus. This is our [Wilderness time](#). We are being forged into a new people of faith even as God is close. The Spirit of Christ is with you and will not leave you to walk in the wilderness alone.

Together, we will do our best to meet the challenges ahead.

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Katherine Finegan
Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod