



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Office of the
General Secretary

lutheranworld.org

To: LWF Member churches

Geneva, 19 March 2020

Re: Church in times of Coronavirus. A Pastoral letter

Dear sisters and brothers,

In light of the pandemic spread of the COVID-19, many governments are instituting measures to enforce “social distancing”, that is, physical distance one from another. These measures increasingly entail restrictions also for the way the church gathers, especially for worship.

We acknowledge that these restrictions are difficult for churches whose identity is expressed in a gathering of people in one space around the Word and sacraments. When the body of Christ cannot meet together in one place, what then are we to do?

We would like to offer a few theological and pastoral reflections.

The church in the public space

Churches are in the public space and consequently subject to laws and regulations issued by their own governments. Churches will support the efforts of governments that promote and protect life. Accordingly, churches will support public health regulations and just efforts to stop the spread of this virus that affects all humans without discrimination. Churches are also called to set an example of responsible adherence to public policies. At times, they will even push local and national governments to heighten restrictions on movement and gatherings in order to protect the most vulnerable and the elderly.

We call upon LWF member churches to support and to follow the regulations that governments are putting in place to promote and protect life.

Worship and sacraments in times of exception

Under normal circumstances, compassion moves the church to create community with the sick or isolated. However, when medical protocols dictate, the wellbeing of vulnerable neighbours is best served by not assembling.

We experience such pastoral exceptions every day with the millions of children and adults in our churches who have immune systems compromised by long-term diseases or associated treatments. While this is pastorally difficult, respecting isolation protocols decreases the risk of infection and best serves their wellbeing.

As Lutherans, we profess that we are liberated by God’s grace through faith. We are free from religious compulsion. Our freedom constrains us to love and care for the neighbor. Our decisions are guided by love, which expresses itself in a spirit of self-discipline.

In times of a global pandemic like COVID 19, therefore, not to gather in one place for worship is an expression of compassion and solidarity. It does not diminish our worship but embodies worship in a new way. It doesn't make us to be less the church, but fully the church. This is the paradox of compassion that comes with the current pandemic of COVID-19.

We call upon LWF member churches to live into these times of exception with the ongoing trust in the means of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit who continually creates and renews the church.

Remaining together while physically distanced

Some churches with the technical means are gathering online, via television or radio.

In communities without these possibilities, parishes are distributing print materials for households to continue Christian education and worship at home.

In several of the LWF's regions the use of social media is prevalent. It is used to share prayers, readings, hymns, and recorded sermons. Groups are being created to remain in contact and pray together, even if not meeting physically.

In times of pandemic, when sharing the bread and wine is not available, we take comfort in remembering that the Word is a means of grace, that can be received through prayer, singing, reading and meditating on the Word, calling on God, remembering our community and our neighbours. The Holy Spirit is present when we profess God's name even if we are alone.

In *A Simple Way to Pray* Luther wrote,

"Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of the Church...are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain...There we can find God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Holy Spirit, that is, God who daily sanctifies us."

Worship is then a proactive sign of hopeful solidarity.

In these exceptional times, we call upon you to live out the Reformation principle of "ecclesia semper reformanda" (the church in ongoing process of reforming) as you find new ways of gathering in Jesus' name and worshipping the Triune God.

Support from the LWF Communion Office

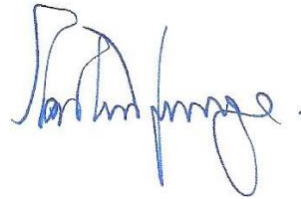
As a communion of churches, united in worship, we know well what it is to be geographically distant from each other, yet closely bound to each other. That experience is a resource for all of us. Today, though physically separated, we are united by God who makes us one.

The LWF Communion Office will continue supporting with weekly prayers to be used on Sundays, both in printing and in social media. We want to invite you to use them as a source of encouragement and as a reminder of how God's call makes us one despite the distances separating us. We take courage from the words of the Apostle Paul who knew that physical distance is no obstacle, "for nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Romans 8:39)

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Pantil Filibus', with a horizontal line above the first few letters.

Archbishop Dr Musa Pantil Filibus
LWF President

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Martin Junge', with a horizontal line above the first few letters.

Rev. Dr Martin Junge
LWF General Secretary