



# Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

August 2020

Dear Congregational Presidents and Church Councils,

I have to be honest with you. This pandemic has gone on too long and I'm really struggling with it. Covid 19 has changed everything and I don't like it. I feel like I'm stuck in an endless snow storm, spinning my tires, can't get out, and the more I spin the deeper into the rut I get. I'm sad I can't go to visit my aging parents. I'm disappointed about cancelling the trip I had planned to Holden Village. I'm frustrated because I can't plan synod events for next year, because who knows what next year will bring. I'm missing in person worship and visiting congregations in our synod on Sunday mornings. Ask my husband, he'll tell you that I've been complaining and grumbling about this for a while now.

To be honest I can tell you that many of the pastors, deacons and SAMs in our synod are struggling too. Many of them feel stuck, sad, disappointed about the things they had to cancel, and frustrated that they can't plan. Some of our younger ministers are really worried about keeping their kids safe when school starts. Some older ministers are at high risk and have underlying health issues and are afraid of getting Covid 19 themselves. Many are tired from recording or livestreaming worship every Sunday, a skill none of them learned in seminary. Some are "ZOOMed out" from online meetings. And many are missing in-person, in-the-building worship even more than their members.

If we are all honest, we would agree that to one degree or another, we are all struggling and stressed by the uncertainty about when will this be over; the grief over the cancellations and losses, the fear - *what if my loved one gets sick?* - and, the anger caused by our leader's response to this pandemic. And so we grumble and complain and struggle like the Israelites did when they were wandering in the wilderness.

The Exodus story tells how Moses led the Israelite's escape from slavery under the Egyptian Pharaoh, through the Red Sea, and their wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. They were not happy wandering in the wilderness without a map. The Israelites grumbled and complained. They were hungry, thirsty and their feet hurt. There were also the snakes. (Numbers 21:4-9) They were cranky and hard on their leaders, Moses and Aaron. (See Exodus 14-16) Moses realized that the people where not really complaining about their leadership, they were complaining against God. (Ex 16:8)

This pandemic is our wilderness experience. There is some evidence that the level of complaining and grumbling has increased significantly in the last six months. It's not surprising. We don't know what to do about all the feelings that I mentioned above and so they leak out sideways on the wrong people and in unhelpful and hurtful ways. Some of our pastors, deacons and SAMs are the ones who feel the brunt of the complaining and grumbling.

It might be helpful, like the Psalmists, to direct our anger and laments, grumbling and complaining to God. We need to cry out to God and ask God to give us what we need to cope. We pour out our hearts and in prayer ask God for a cure and to heal the sick, to change our hearts, to give us peace. *How long O Lord, have you forgotten me? How long must I bear this pain in my soul? Answer me. Give me some light and hope. Still I will trust in your steadfast love. (See Psalm 13)*

**I'm writing to church councils and especially to the council presidents today to encourage you to be understanding, and strive to work cooperatively with your pastors, deacon, or SAMs. Please take care of your leaders so they can take care of you.** They are people, they have feelings, they wear out, they need encouragement, and support too. This is an especially challenging time for pastors with young children at home, as it is for all young families.

Things aren't right. Everyone wants to go back to worship inside the church building, sit in their favorite pew, hear the organ play their favorite hymns, and visit with friends at coffee hour. As lay leaders in your church it is difficult for you to hear your members grumble and complain. As leaders when you hear complaining encourage everyone to just take a breath and try to see the long view. God was with the Israelites. God was with us before the pandemic. God is here now. We are in the midst of a crisis. This pandemic is inconvenient for some BUT it is life threatening for many. When possible help those who are grumbling to see things from the pastor, deacon or SAM's point of view.

1. **Please be gracious** to your pastors, deacons and SAMs. They are learning and adjusting to this just like you are. They are trying to keep everyone safe. No one wants to return to in person worship more than they do. This is not a normal time. Things cannot be normal. We can't pretend they are. Your minister and our synod are following the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Wisconsin Department of Health and Wisconsin Council of Churches recommendations. **Try not to grumble about not being able to worship in the building.** Please don't pressure them into in person worship.
2. **Please, clarify expectations and ask for what you need rather than complain.** Imagine walking in your minister's shoes for a few days (especially if your minister has young children). Put yourself in their position. Do you have realistic expectations of your minister or are you hoping they can perform miracles?
3. **Communicate clearly and directly with your pastor, deacon, or SAM. Don't talk about them, talk to them.** Listen and care. Ask what THEY need. Ask how you can

help. Be supportive rather than judgmental. Please. Say something positive to your minister.

4. **Take the long view.** Everything will NOT be better if you just got rid of your pastor. The middle of a pandemic<sup>1</sup> is NOT the time to seek a new pastor nor is it the time to detach from a parish arrangement. This is a time to cooperate and patiently, prayerfully follow Jesus. When this is over your pastor will be grateful for your support. Please build up rather than tear apart.
5. **Ask God questions.** Where do we see God in all of this? How can we join in what God is doing now? Where are the new opportunities to share the good news of Jesus? How can this crisis be an opportunity to share the good news so that the next generation will come to know and love Jesus? In a crisis, remember to Stop/Drop/and Pray. Please be spiritual leaders.
6. **Remember we all are beloved Children of God.** We may not like everyone, we may not agree with everyone, but please remember to treat each other as beloved children of God. It does no good to nit-pick, gossip, complain, or sabotage a fellow member of the body of Christ. Please build each other up rather than tear down. Remember the Golden Rule? “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Matthew 7:12)

This is a challenging time. It is difficult being a leader when many are complaining and grumbling and misdirecting their feelings. I am praying for you. Please remember that **the synod ministers are all here to help you.** If you need to talk, don't hesitate to call us. Our contact information is on the synod website. [NWSWI.org](http://NWSWI.org).

Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson

PS Luther Seminary has three podcasts that I find extremely helpful and I commend them to you. As a leader, these podcasts will be very helpful to you as you continue to wrap your head around the question of what does it mean to be a faithful follower of Jesus in these days.

<https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/resources/podcasts/wilderness-time-podcast/>

1. Faithful Adaptations,
2. Pivot-leading through chaos,
3. Wilderness Time

Other resources for your consideration can be found at

<http://nswwi.org/worship-faith-formation-at-home>

<https://www.elca.org/publichealth>

<https://www.wichurches.org>

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The clergy shortage has gotten worse. More pastors are retiring and fewer are graduating from seminary. Pastors do not want to leave their congregation and start a new ministry in the midst of a pandemic. Interim and part time pastors are more difficult to find. Supply pastors are usually retired and older in the high risk for coronavirus category and unfamiliar with technology for livestreaming.

