

Dear friends in Christ,

Here at the Office of the Bishop, we received news that President Trump has deemed churches and other houses of worship “essential” and has called on governors across the country to allow these places of worship to reopen this weekend. Meanwhile, New York Governor, Andrew Cuomo, has announced that beginning May 21st, religious gatherings of no more than 10 people will be allowed statewide. Social distancing measures must be enforced, and all participants must wear masks. Additionally, drive-in and parking lot services will be permitted. The Governor also informed us that New York is convening an Interfaith Advisory Council to discuss proposals to safely bring back religious services.

We realize that the information coming from our governing forces appear contradictory. However, **OUR PRIORITY IS YOU** and your well-being. **Protecting the health and safety of ALL members of our community is both our truth and our precedence as the Office of the Bishop.** Being at the epicenter of this pandemic and in order to protect our flock, **we advise that congregations remain closed until more accurate and uniform information is provided.** As Indiana-Kentucky Synod Bishop, The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, wrote in his recent response to President Trump’s statement, *“The church does not need to re-open. The church – the body of Christ – has been open and working all along.”* **We know we are essential, but it is not essential to gather in person at this time.** One of our congregations lost over [44 members to the coronavirus crisis](#). We would like to protect our ministers, lay leaders, members and communities from also experiencing such abundant devastation, loss, and grief. This virus is a silent assassin that cannot be seen; we must protect each other and proceed with caution. We are monitoring this situation so that we may continue to make educated decisions and provide you with accurate information.

Thank you all for taking care of each other during these troubling times, for we are ALL God’s children and are **united in love and in prayer**. Let us continue to pray for the families and friends of those we have lost, and for the good health and welfare of all members of our communities.

Thanks be to God.

Have a blessed and safe Memorial Day Weekend.

**In Christ,
from the epicenter of the pandemic,**

**+ The Rev. Paul Egensteiner
Bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod**