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Pastoral Letter Concerning the COVID-19 Outbreak

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is my duty as your pastor to write to you in the light of the current health crisis. This is a long letter, but I urge you to read it in full.

By now none of you will be under any illusion about the seriousness of the COVID-19 (corona virus) global pandemic. Only two days ago, the World Health Organisation declared Europe to be the epicentre of the pandemic. While the UK has so far not been affected as seriously as some other countries, it seems that we are still on the foothills of the outbreak in this country. The number of confirmed cases, and of deaths, is rising fast.

In summary, this is what seems to be known about the outbreak:

- COVID-19 is much more infectious than normal seasonal flu, meaning that the rate of infection is much faster.
- This means that it is likely that up to 80% of people will at some point be infected.
- Most people will experience only mild symptoms or none at all.
- However, certain vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected: the elderly, those with underlying health conditions (especially respiratory conditions such as asthma and COPD, and diabetes).
- Everyone who catches the virus will likely pass the infection to others, regardless of whether they experience any symptoms.
- The contagion will continue to spread until the population reaches 'herd immunity': when enough people have had the infection and are therefore immune, so that most carriers will have no one left to infect. How long this will take is not known.
- The government's current strategy is based on controlling the spread of the infection, to slow it down so that the NHS doesn't become overwhelmed. At the same time, the emphasis is on protecting the vulnerable population that is most likely to experience severe symptoms and risk of death.

This current situation has some important temporal and spiritual implications for us as individual Christians and as a church. I want to outline the most significant ones here.

As far as matters temporal are concerned, we are called to be wise and dutiful members of society. That means taking every precaution, in order to help control the spread of infection, both at home and at church. Above all, as far as current advice stands, it means taking particular care to observe good hygiene, and isolating ourselves from others if we think we may be infected.

In particular if any of the following applies to you, you should stay at home for seven days:

- You have been in close contact in the last two weeks who has reason to believe that they are infected
- You are experiencing any flu-like symptoms, have a raised temperature (above 37.8°C/100°F), a new continuous cough

You should contact 111 for further advice if

- Your symptoms worsen
- You feel unable to cope with your symptoms at home
- You don't get better after 7 days

Please also look out for each other. If you haven't seen a fellow-member for a while and are concerned, do give them a phone call to check everything is in order. For anyone having to self-isolate, life can quickly become lonely, so human contact becomes increasingly important.

If you do have to isolate yourself, please let me know straight away so that I know to pray for you and to play my part in looking out for you.

Also, if you are in isolation, remember that you can listen to the services live via the church website on a computer, tablet or smartphone, and also participate in Bible studies. If you don't have use of such devices, I will ensure that you are able to hear the Word of God by another means.

For the time being, we have no reason to cancel our scheduled gatherings, whether on Sunday morning or at other times. Therefore, everything will continue as normal. However, we do need to be especially vigilant about hygiene. The following changes will, therefore, apply with immediate effect:

- We will not use hymn books, orders of service or propers cards for the time being. Instead, everyone will receive an individual order of service, including the hymns. These will be laid out at the entrance; please collect your own on entrance (the person greeting at the door will remind you to do so).
- Please do not shake hands or hug people at church.
- Please wash your hands as you enter the building, after the service, and as you leave. I have ordered hand sanitisers for the church; however, they have failed to arrive on time, and the shelves are empty in the local shops I checked.
- No biscuits or cake will be served after the service. If you would like to have biscuits, please bring your own, but do not share them.
- Coffee and tea will be served. However, the person serving the drinks will only pour the drinks into the mugs. Every person should pick up their own mug off the tray. If you take sugar, keep your spoon with you until you have finished your drink. After you have finished your drink, please take it to the kitchen sink yourself. Do not pass your mug to others, or collect other people's mugs for them, however unfriendly this may seem!
- If you need to cough or sneeze, cover your mouth, but not with your hand. Use a paper tissue, and put it in a bin afterwards and wash your hands before touching anyone or anything. There will be paper tissues at church. If you can't get to one in time, cover your mouth with the elbow of your sleeve.
CATCH IT — BIN IT — KILL IT
- After the service, take your order of service home with you, rather than leaving it on a table or chair.
- Keep your distance from others. We will have more seats than usual laid out; it's a good idea to spread out as much as possible.

Remember that we have a responsibility above all for the well-being of others. Whether or not you are likely to be personally affected by the viral infection, if you catch the virus, you are likely to spread it to others, who may experience dangerous symptoms.

In all this, we are dealing with the matter as good, prudent members of society.

As Christians and, therefore, citizens of the kingdom of God, we have the privilege of approaching this health crisis also from a different perspective. In Holy Baptism, we received the gift of eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, whatever happens to us on earth cannot shake our confidence that “if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” (Romans 14:8). We may catch a virus and get ill and even die; or we may avoid this particular pestilence. Yet, since we pray for God’s will to be done, for daily bread, and for deliverance from evil, we can be confident that He will never leave us or forsake us.

We know better than the world around us that death is inevitable. Whether we die of COVID-19 or survive it, all flesh must die. The wages of sin is death, and since we all sin, we all must die. But we also know, unlike the world, that death is not to be feared. Christ has overcome death, so the sting of death has been removed. Living in Him, our earthly life is but the beginning of the joys of life eternal by the gracious gift of God.

Therefore, while we must take every care to act prudently, our hope is not in avoiding illness and death, but in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, who has better plans for us than the mere postponement of earthly demise at this or any other time.

For this reason, we can remain confident and cheerful in our confession of the good news of Jesus Christ, especially when other sources of confidence are taken away from us. We pray in the litany that the good Lord deliver us from ‘pestilence and famine’. That He will do, since He has delivered us from the power of every evil. St. Paul writes,

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39)

And so, dear saints of God, take comfort in His promises, and make diligent use of the means of His comfort. Whether you remain free to roam, or are isolated at home, be diligent in prayer; read, hear and meditate on His word; and as far as possible, continue to receive the gifts of His Spirit. Comfort one another with the promises of God.

In particular, if you are not in isolation, keep coming to church, to hear God’s word, to receive the forgiveness of your sins, and to partake of the life-giving body and blood of Jesus Christ, which will continue to be distributed so long as it is possible.

Some of you may have questions or concerns about the distribution of the Lord’s Supper at this time. There are both spiritual and practical considerations, which I want to share with you. The pastors of the ELCE have been in conversation about these matters in the past week, and the Commission on Theological and Social Concerns will hold an emergency meeting in the near future to formulate a common response.

First, I want to remind you of the spiritual reality of the Lord’s Supper. When we receive Holy Communion, we are receiving the true, crucified and risen body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in, with and under the bread and the wine. That is to say, we are not dealing with merely earthly food and drink, but with heavenly gifts that surpass the realities and powers of this passing world.

The Bible tells us that this heavenly meal has health consequences: in 1 Corinthians 11:30, St. Paul tells us that unworthy reception of the Sacrament can have dangerous bodily ill-effects. We have every reason to believe, therefore, that the opposite can also be true: that this ‘medicine of immortality’ in fact benefits our mortal bodies. Jesus said of His flesh, “This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die” (John 6:50).

Therefore, as long as I remain in good health, I will continue to preach the word and to administer the sacrament to you. If I am taken ill, or have to self-isolate, I will make arrangements that the Word will continue to be proclaimed to you one way or another.

The following practical measures will be in place:

- I will wash my hands very thoroughly immediately before the Service of the Sacrament, and again immediately afterwards. As a result, mine will be the cleanest hands in church during the distribution.
- The blood of Christ will continue to be distributed using the chalice. The rim will be wiped clean after each communicant, using a purificator infused in strong alcohol. *Please do not touch the chalice with your own hands.* I will do my best to administer it to you carefully.
- I will place the body of Christ in your hand, so as not to pick up any germs that may be transmitted in your breath or saliva. Please place your right palm over your left in front of you. It is better not to pick the host in your fingers, which are the least clean part of your hands. Rather, raise your hand to your mouth.
Intinction (dipping the host into the cup) is prohibited.
- If you do not feel comfortable receiving the Sacrament with others, it is perfectly acceptable to stay in your seat and to forego receiving for a while. It was given to strengthen our faith, not to make us fearful.

Also, if you are nervous about coming to church, not because you are unwell but because you worry about becoming ill—especially if you think you may at high risk—you should not feel bad about staying at home. In such a case, tune in to the online service if you can, and contact me to arrange for me to bring the Lord's Supper to you at home. As soon as you are able to do so with confidence, return to the fellowship of the body of Christ.

Finally: you will have heard many commentators referring to the corona virus pandemic 'unprecedented'. I am not sure that it is, and Christians living through the plague and other pestilences will no doubt have experienced things as bad, but without the aid of modern health care and mass communication. And even if this were unprecedented, we have the promise that God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13).

Take heart, then, in the wisdom, goodness and promises of God, fulfilled for us in Jesus Christ, who has overcome every enemy. To Him be glory now and forever.

Your servant in Christ,

