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People of God,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, in his one precious Holy Spirit. Amen.

This letter comes to you from the pastors and the presidents of the two congregations of the Tomorrow River Lutheran Parish.

We are in a strange and odd time together. With its recent ruling, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court has made possible a full resumption of all our activities. And, as of this moment, Portage county has not chosen to issue its own public health restrictions as other counties and cities have. We could legally begin to gather again.

At the same time, your pastors, the other pastors in the Tomorrow River Conference, our synodical Bishop, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, our National Church, our denominational full communion partners, the National Council of Churches, the CDC, and the federal pandemic guidelines all indicate and instruct that resuming in-person worship today is premature.

For those of you who are bottom line people, here's the bottom line: it is not time for us to start gathering for public worship yet. In addition, when we do begin, there will be many necessary, scientifically-based changes to our worship format and other activities to limit contagion and to protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

Now, here are some of the details as we know them today:

We will live into the best parts of our faith tradition and to continue to build together a ministry characterized by *compassionate connections for a better tomorrow*. It is critically important that whatever we do is mindful of the members of our community who are elderly, vulnerable and/or at risk. They are not in some group off to the side, they are part of us and must not be forgotten or marginalized! We must be mindful of the unique nature of this pandemic as we plan.

- It's not always clear who is and who isn't vulnerable. There are people in our midst with underlying health concerns that are unknown to the community. We will remember such people!
- We are aware of stories about people with no underlying conditions, who would not be considered vulnerable, who become very sick indeed. We will need to continue to learn and to adapt. We will discover new categories of vulnerability. We will remember people who surprise us with their vulnerabilities!
- While children seem to handle the coronavirus better than adults, there is a small subset of children who become very sick indeed. We will remember!
- We will all need reminders to conduct ourselves in ways that minimize risk to others. This will be uncomfortable, but we will remember!
- Children especially will need help protecting vulnerable people in the community. We will remember!

- There may be intermediate phases or steps in which some group of us are able to gather while others must continue to stay away. Current guidelines state that people 60 years old or older and people with underlying health conditions should not gather in public worship until phase three or later. We will remember those who are missing and will work toward their full inclusion! We will remember!
- Until all can safely gather together again, we will continue to provide online and DVD content. We will make provision in the Pastors' and staff members' responsibilities and use of time. We will remember!

Peace and Nelsonville have shared staff and ministry since 1912. The leadership of both churches is absolutely committed to working and opening together going forward.

- The yoke between the two churches is very strong. Lay and Ordained leadership are fully committed to joint decision making. It may very well be that there are different offerings provided by each of the churches, but both will be accountable to the same standards and guidelines that all might be safe and that there might be peace and harmony in the Parish.

We belong to a denomination that asks and expects us to participate in a common witness. We will be responsive and attentive to our bishop and to the national church.

- At this moment, there is complete unanimity among our spiritual elders that reopening is premature and that our eventual reopening must necessarily include a great many changes in practice. We will receive their counsel with open hearts and with gratitude.
- Your congregations have been posting messages from our Bishop and from the national church on our website. There is a Coronavirus tab on the top of the home page that is being updated several times a week.
- You are invited to read with great care the Retuning to Worship guide from the ELCA and the Retuning to Church guide from the Wisconsin Council of Churches. You will find both on the parish website (trchurch.org) on the Coronavirus page. Both will let you know much of the work and many of the changes that are before us. Please, take the time to be informed!

We belong to a branch of the Christian church that historically has celebrated education and the pursuit of scientific truth. We will be responsive and attentive to the best available medical and scientific instruction.

- At this time, we don't know everything we need to know -- much less everything we want to know. There will be false starts and mistakes and new beginnings along this path as we learn more, as science advances, as treatments improve and, God willing, as vaccines come online.
- We know that in many places, the responses to the challenges of the pandemic have become political. We want no part of that! In our actions and decisions, we are neither affirming nor attacking any political party or politician. We want truth. We will settle for the best guesses of the best educated and most relevant authorities we can find. We will not waste a moment trying to figure out political costs or spin. We are Christians first, members of families second, neighbors third, and we disagree about politics -- but that isn't going to be decisive!
- Research on the virus continues in many places and the news is often difficult for lay people to grasp and assemble. Today, we seem fairly sure about the following:
 - The virus can live on surfaces for 3-ish days and in rare conditions as long as fourteen days.
 - Droplets from coughs, sneezes, talking and singing can hang in the air for a shockingly long time and spread quite far. Our vocal cords aerosolize the virus.
 - There is no certainty that people who have been infected develop immunity. There are stories of people being reinfected. Certainly, herd immunity, if even possible, is a long long way off.
 - A vaccine is probably a year or more away. It might never happen. It might offer seasonal protection. It might be of limited use. It might be golden! We don't know.
 - People are most infectious 2-5 days BEFORE they experience symptoms. That means that I can be spreading the disease BEFORE I have any indication that I am sick. This has enormous ramifications for reopening public worship.

- Products to properly clean our buildings and to keep members safe are currently in very short supply. Production will increase, but in the meantime.... We wait...
- There will be debates about which safety measures are effective and which are not. We will go with the best available information we can find. And we will probably go back and forth several times until certainty emerges. We will survive with good cheer!
- There will be additional outbreaks. We cannot anticipate the progression of the pandemic. Sometimes public health agencies will ask us to go back to safer practices and behaviors, sometimes governing authorities may order such retreats. We will comply.

Though we use many of the same words to define them, there is a difference between civil freedom and Christian freedom. Civil freedom means that I can pursue my own ends without undue interference as long as I stay within the law. Christian freedom means that there are no barriers keeping me from my Christian duty to God and neighbor. We will be exercising our Christian freedom in such a way that we both remember and protect the most vulnerable in our midst whatever any of us choose to do in other parts of our lives.

- Some lawful activities increase my risk for infection and increase the chances that I will spread the disease before I am aware that I am sick. It seems likely that those of us who take maximum advantage of our civil freedoms must then exercise our Christian freedom by staying away from public worship. What I do legally is my business until I injure or kill someone in the family of God...
- Many of our religious practices which are perfectly appropriate uses of our civil freedom will be constrained by the demands of our Christian freedom. For the time being, we will limit our religious practices and behaviors to protect our Brothers and Sisters in faith.
- We will rejoice that our Christian Freedom is not, and cannot be, taken from us as we respond to the pandemic. We can care for one another and protect one another whatever comes!

Where we are today:

- In-person worship services continue to be suspended. There are multiple online offerings each week so that we might continue to be a church of the Word. Those who have no online presence are offered DVDs of this programming free of charge.
- We are doing everything we can to prepare our buildings and our rituals for a safe reopening. We will find ways to worship, to hear the word, to share in the Lord's Supper.
- We are in conversation with our colleagues as they make similar plans and decisions. There is a robust debate occurring at all levels of the church regarding best practices and mutual support as pastors and churches each find their own ways forward.
- The Church office is open, and the Pastors are available for pastoral care and counseling in person and electronically
- We continue to keep a list of persons asking for prayer and to distribute that list electronically in such a way as to protect the privacy of these persons.
- Our social ministries continue unabated.
- Hospital visitation is limited to phone calls, texts and emails.
- Shut-in visitation is similarly limited, but cards and gifts are being dropped off so that our elders know that they are precious members of our communities.
- Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals are limited to 10 persons or less if held indoors. Families are welcome to stream such events for guests unable to attend.
- Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals may be held without any size limitations outdoors as long as social distancing standards are kept. The pastors currently recommend that all funeral services happen entirely at the cemetery so that families and friends may grieve together.
- Holy Communion is the sharing of one bread and one cup among the many. At the present time we are not imagining ways around this bedrock understanding of our faith. Pastors, Bishops and Theologians across the Worldwide Church are in disagreement about what might or might not be faithful adaptations. This disagreement signals to us that waiting is appropriate. Our practices are solidly Scriptural and studied. We will embrace the best that comes out of these current conversations and deliberations!
- We know that other churches are having remote communion or wondering about everyone bringing their own bread and wine... we are waiting and hungering for the real thing. We don't

like waiting. We don't like being hungry. In this moment, we learn something about our brothers and sisters who are often left to wait, who are often hungry. In the meantime, we have the word and our baptisms! Martin Luther was very clear that if we must choose between the Word and our baptisms on one hand and Holy Communion on the other, we should choose the Word and our baptisms. As we hear the word, we receive Christ. Remember too that until recently, both congregations celebrated Communion only 4 times a year. The belief of our founders was that "too frequent" Communion made it less special. We have an opportunity to experience the sensibilities of our elders!

Sometime in the future we will be able to gather again. It will be different...

- Almost certainly we will be limited to some small number of persons. 25? 50?
- Online resources will continue to be posted.
- We will be conducting multiple short services each Sunday. Perhaps as many as six or seven 30-minute services each week with disinfecting regimens between services and a prescribed traffic flow to keep order
- You will be asked to sign up for a service time so that we can regulate numbers. This will be like calling a restaurant for a reservation
- There will be services at both congregations
- We will keep lists of everyone who attends so that contact tracing can be easily done if someone comes down sick
- The leadership of each congregation is thinking through adjustments to the worship space that are necessary to disinfect the space between each service.
 - We might reconvene in a fellowship hall or outside
 - We might alter the seating
 - We will practice social distancing
- We will not shake hands, hug, have greeters, have ushers, or stand in a dense line to talk to the pastor before or after the service,
- If advised by scientists or institutes of public health, we will be wearing masks.
- We will not pass anything. No offering plates, no pew pads, no clipboards
- We will strip whatever sanctuary we use. No hymnals, offering envelopes, pencils, coloring books or crayons
- There will be no congregational singing or speaking in unison
- We won't have that glorious pile-up of kids at the front for a children's sermon
- Sunday School will continue to be online for a long time... Kids stink at social distancing...
- We will receive communion again, but in such a way as to minimize the opportunities for transmission of disease. We will honor our faith and our theological understandings. We will make new traditions!

When you read a list like this, you might be tempted to despair. "Church has been taken away from us!" But it isn't true! We are the Church and Jesus promises that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the Church! God has sheltered and protected us across the millennia and God will certainly protect us now in this season of pandemic. And then, when it is safe again, all will be restored! And the worship of God's house which had seemed so dull, so predictable, so ... optional ... for so many of us will again be seen for what it is: a gift of great value and a joy that anticipates the kingdom to come.

May God bless and protect you all. We will let you know when we have more certainty about all of this!

By the Grace of God, The leaders of the Tomorrow River Lutheran Parish:

Peggy Henke, President of Nelsonville Evangelical Lutheran Church
Greg Reichenbach, President of Peace Lutheran Church
Gretchen Anderson
Dwight Anderson