

Office of the President  
Rev. Timothy Teuscher

September 29, 2021  
St. Michael and All Angels

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Service of Our Lord and His Church,

We are now over a year and a half into the Covid-19 pandemic here in Canada. Wearing masks, physical distancing, sanitizing of hands and facilities, and the like have become ‘the new normal,’ as some have called it. Moreover, various government restrictions on in-person gatherings, Covid-19 testing requirements for travel purposes, vaccination passports, and the like have taken their toll – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. At a time like this where anxieties are extremely high and many people are not able to rationally engage in discussions without a strong emotional response, the results can be and often are damaging to family relationships, friendships, and, yes, even to the relationships of members and pastors in congregations and within our Synod itself.

Over the past year the President’s Ministry Council has sought to address various practical and theological issues related to this pandemic in our communications to the pastors, deacons and congregations of our Synod – whether it be letters from the Synod President and the PMC to the whole church or from Regional Pastors to pastors and congregations within their respective region. While the majority of responses have been quite positive; some, however, not so much – criticizing the PMC for either saying and recommending too much . . . or not enough . . . or not in the way that they personally think and feel.

While we admit that what has been sent to pastors and congregations over this past year in connection with the pandemic could probably have been expressed in better ways; it is also true that, as Philip Melancton put it, “nothing can be said so carefully that can avoid misrepresentation” (Ap VII & VIII. 2). For this reason the catechism explanation to the Eighth Commandment reminds all of us to “explain everything in the kindest way” (SC I.16).

Despite the assertions of some, many of the issues surrounding the pandemic are not entirely clear and straight forward. There are pastors and congregation members, for instance, who differ as to their assessment on the part of government officials curtailing the fundamental freedoms we have come to take for granted under the Charter of Rights – especially “freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; freedom of peaceful assembly; and freedom of association.” In addition, there are a variety of opinions concerning in-person worship services and the various protocols congregations have set in place. Some are still quite fearful in physically attending the Divine Service, while others are not. Some have strong convictions about the necessity and importance of getting the covid vaccine; while others, for various personal and equally legitimate reasons, are rather hesitant and have chosen not to do so.

While the context and situation is not the same, the principle enunciated by St. Paul should be in vogue among us in this matter as well. So he says: "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him" (Romans 14:3).

Our Lutheran Confessions put it this way: "Love is a bond and unbroken chain linking the many members of the church with one another. Similarly, in all families and communities harmony should be nurtured by mutual aid, for it is not possible to preserve tranquility unless men cover and forgive certain mistakes in their midst. In the same way Paul commands that there be love in the church to preserve harmony, to bear, if need be, with the crude behavior of the brethren, to cover up minor mistakes, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms and the hatreds, factions, and heresies that arise from such schisms. For harmony will inevitably disintegrate if bishops impose heavy burdens on the people or have no regard for their weakness. Dissensions also arise when the people judge their clergy's behavior too strictly or despises them because of some minor fault and then seek after some other kinds of doctrine and other clergy. On the other hand, perfection (that is, the integrity of the church) is preserved when the strong bear with the weak, when the people put the best construction on the faults of their clergy, when the bishops take into account the weariness of the people. All the books of the sages are full of these commands of fairness, that in every day life we should put up with many things for the sake of mutual peace" (Ap IV.232-233).

Now there is one specific matter that we do need to address at this time; that is, whether congregations should implement a vaccine passport policy? We strongly recommend and advise that this not be done. Such would not only be contrary to the principle that St. Paul sets forth in the above cited passage from Romans; but also to that which the Epistle of St. James warns us against in chapter 2, verses 1-4, that is, "showing partiality" and "making distinctions" as to who can "come into your assembly."

While at times over the past year and a half we have been in lockdown, the devil has not been. He continues to work overtime to divide the Church, to cause dissension and division among us, and to scatter and isolate Christ's sheep from the flock. At the same time, our Lord Jesus continues to rule and govern His Church by virtue of His ascension to the right hand of His heavenly Father (Ephesians 1:20-22). He is still present among us and with us even where just two or three are gathered together in His name (Matthew 18:20). One of the blessings of this pandemic is that it has served to reorient and direct all of us to this "one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42); that is, the Lord's people gathered together in the Lord's house on the Lord's Day to receive the Lord's gifts through the hearing of the Lord's Word and the partaking of the Lord's Supper and to respond by praying the Lord's Prayer and singing the Lord's praises.

In Christ's Service,

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