



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Office of the Bishop  
621 Bright Road  
Findlay, Ohio 45840-6987  
Phone: 419.423.3664  
[www.nwos-elca.org](http://www.nwos-elca.org)

Parish Plan of Return  
addendum  
June 1, 2020

**“... a lawyer asked him [Jesus] a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:35a-39).**

When you read through the Gospels, you cannot help but notice the number of questions that are asked. Jesus asks lots of questions, though rarely does He answer them. Most often Jesus uses questions to help His followers discern what it means to live faithfully. But on one occasion, Jesus provides a clear and concise answer. When Jesus is asked, which commandment in the Law is the greatest? He responds, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself”**. The answer Jesus gives is clear. We love God by loving God **and** by loving our neighbor. Love motivates everything we do as followers of Jesus, including how we worship and how we care for one another.

On April 28, 2020, the Northwestern Ohio Synod presented a *Parish Plan of Return*. That document (see below) is full of important questions to help pastors, deacons, and elected parish leaders make wise and faithful decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The June 1, 2020, *addendum* is an update of the original document to help you faithfully pray, observe, reflect, discuss, and act.

The intent behind the *Parish Plan of Return* and the *addendum* is to encourage you to prayerfully and faithfully consider the questions of “Why” and “How” before considering the question of “When”. It is important to understand “Why” we believe this is the right time to return to in-person worship in the sanctuary. Might there be an alternative space to slowly and carefully begin in-person worship (outdoors, parking lot, front lawn)? The question of “How” should also be carefully considered and a plan fully developed before the question of “when” we might return to in-person parish life.

Below please find some updated recommendations and guidelines on “how” to implement a prayerful and faithful *Parish Plan of Return*.

Bishop Daniel G. Beaudoin  
Northwestern Ohio Synod

For updates please see: IIB; IIC, IID; IIIA3; IIIA5; IIIB2e; IIID1; IIIG3

Parish Plan of Return  
April 28, 2020

**I. Resetting Our Hopes and Expectations**

*“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:13-14).*

In the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul reminds his readers that love is at the heart of God's commandments. Love for our God, but also love for our neighbors. We are called by Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit to ground ourselves in God's love and allow love of neighbor to guide our practices.

In the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, many of us had great expectations that our parishes would return to in-person worship after a short hiatus. We are beginning to understand that out of concern for ourselves, and the safety of our neighbors, our return to parish life will take place in incremental and extended phases. There will not be a straight march back to normalcy, but a series of fits and starts. We may experience two steps forward followed by one step back, so we should be ready to adjust and adapt quickly and safely.

On Monday, April 27, Governor Mike DeWine announced a plan for the Responsible Restart of Ohio. It involves a slow, measured reopening of the economy where safety risks and economic risks can be negotiated with the least danger to the people of Ohio. Governor Mike DeWine and Dr. Amy Acton's bold plan reminds us that we are running a marathon, and not a sprint, so we need to reset our hopes and expectations based upon our current understanding of this virus and the command by God to love our neighbors.

It is becoming more and more clear, that for the next several months, our lives will be shaped by the impact of the COVID-19 virus. As we consider a return to parish life, congregational leaders will be making a number of challenging decisions. This *Parish Plan of Return* is offered as a framework to guide pastors, deacons, and elected parish leaders to make wise pastoral decisions. It is not a series of directives that will account for each and every situation, for all ministry is contextual, and you know the needs of your particular parish. The *Parish Plan of Return* is a set of guidelines and questions to help you prayerfully observe, reflect, discuss, and then act. May the Holy Spirit guide and lead your deliberations and decisions.

*Let us pray, O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship pg. 317).*

Below please find some recommendations and guidelines on how to implement a *Parish Plan of Return* that aligns with Governor Mike DeWine's plan for the Responsible Restart of Ohio. As you finalize decisions, we encourage you to seek the guidance of state and local health officials, and work in collaboration with local parishes. The *Parish Plan of Return* Taskforce is also available to collaborate with you and to help you. Thank you for prayerfully considering this

document and continuing to offer strong and steady leadership to your parish. We are grateful for you.

Bishop Daniel G. Beaudoin  
Northwestern Ohio Synod

## **II. The newest guidelines from Governor DeWine and Dr. Amy Acton**

- A. On Monday, April 27, 2020 Governor DeWine introduced the *Responsible Restart of Ohio* plan.
- B. The plan set a beginning for reopening several economic sectors
  - 1. Sectors began reopening on May 1
  - 2. Daycare and banquet centers may reopen by June 1
- C. These re-openings come with a series of requirements
  - 1. Required face coverings for staff / employees and recommended face coverings for clients / customers
  - 2. Conduct daily health screenings
  - 3. All practicing good hygiene
  - 4. Regular cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces
  - 5. Limited capacity to meet social distancing guidelines
  - 6. Multi-step process if COVID-19 infection is detected
  - 7. Some sectors have additional requirements
- D. Several things remain
  - 1. The stay at home recommendation for those most at risk
  - 2. The requirement for groups no larger than 10 people with several exceptions through July 1 (see Health Director's May 29, 2020 Updated Order)
  - 3. Most public gathering/entertainment spaces remain closed

## **III. Some Questions to Consider**

- A. What have been your sources of guidance as you consider reopening the parish building and activities?
  - 1. How have you sought the guidance of God?
    - a. Individual and Corporate Prayer
    - b. Scripture
    - c. Faithful Conversation and Deliberation
    - d. Love of God and Love of Neighbor
  - 2. Are you following the directives of official Guidelines for Reopening from:
    - a. The State of Ohio by Governor Mike DeWine and Dr. Amy Acton
    - b. The Federal Government by President Donald Trump and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The federal government guidelines suggest that schools, daycare centers, restaurants etc. will open during phase two of the return to "normal" services plan, it seems reasonable that this is when corporate worship can resume, but probably giving more weight to local directives before national.
    - c. County, City, and Village directives from Local Elected Officials and Health Professionals

3. Have you followed the guidance of the Northwestern Ohio Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?
    - a. ELCA: *Considerations for Returning to In-Person Worship*
  4. Have you contacted your insurance agent and insurance company about any plans to reopen?
  5. How are you planning to enforce your plan recognizing that a written plan must be followed by the parish in order to mitigate legal liability?
    - a. Is there a team lined up to enforce your plan?
    - b. Is your plan actually doable? Sustainable?
- B. Have you developed a comprehensive plan to reopen your parish for in person worship and activities based on federal, state, and local directives?
1. How have you involved your parish leadership?
    - a. Pastors, Deacons, Church Council President, and Parish Council
  2. What factors go into such a decision?
    - a. Does this answer provide for the needs of the most vulnerable in ways that are inclusive and safe?
    - b. Is your reason for opening positive? (Is it based on more than silencing complaints or uncertainty about finances?)
    - c. What are the risks of opening for congregational worship?
    - d. Is opening with your parish's demographic wise? There are churches who worship ONLY or primarily a 60+ age bracket.
    - e. The reality of a phased-in return, **possibly a soft start, while maintaining the possibility of dialing back the level of openness if the virus re-surges.**
    - f. Required ongoing social distancing, and its impact on not only worship but every facet of congregational life including: Fellowship, Education, Ministry groups/Teams/Committees, Community Gatherings/Parties/Showers
    - g. The reality that this is a long haul, probably at least 18 months (new normal)
  3. How will you communicate this comprehensive plan and best practices to parishioners and the community?
    - a. Each parish should begin preparations for the return to worship services including establishing appropriate guidelines for distancing between congregants during services, acquiring what PPE you can access (hand sanitizers, masks etc.) and a proactive communications plan to send out to congregants prior to services so folks can be as prepared as possible.
    - b. We need to make every effort to let them know that God values their lives and safety far more than God values their attendance on Sunday mornings. The "Church" is us, not a building. I think our pastors need to let everyone know that staying home and staying safe is OK and doesn't mean that you aren't a faithful Christian
  4. How will you communicate this comprehensive plan to local health professionals, your insurance company, and the Northwestern Ohio Synod?
- C. How will you insure proper cleaning and sanitation in communal spaces?
1. How will you clean your facility after the services, as well as between services, if multiple services are offered?
  2. How will chemicals work on the surfaces in your spaces?
  3. Who will do the cleaning? Will you have the volunteers or staff available?

- D. How will you practice and enforce physical distancing?
1. Current Guidelines: 6 feet distancing, no physical contact, masked at all times, exclusion of all high-risk individuals, no fellowship/physical touch outside of immediate family units
  2. Will you: serve Holy Communion, Pass the Peace, Collect Offering, do Children's Messages, have Choir, Sunday School, etc? Can these activities be done in a manner that adheres to the guidelines outlined above?
  3. What is your plan for enforcing these guidelines? What team do you have in place to oversee this effort? Is this plan sustainable?
  4. Consider a change in communion distribution. Set your local practice aside and do a "new thing". See the educational opportunities that exist because of being "forced" to do something differently.
  5. Have you considered that your Pastor may be among those who are most vulnerable? This and other concerns may cause your Pastor to be concerned about returning to in-person worship.
- E. Based upon your context and the population of those who attend in-person worship, are you prepared to address the fact that high risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying health conditions) should continue to follow the *Stay at Home Order* and not participate in in-person worship or other activities? How will you monitor and enforce this?
1. What portion of your community is "most vulnerable" and how can you best protect them?
  2. There are no vulnerable vs. invulnerable populations as we are all vulnerable either by our own known health conditions, the conditions we have but are not yet aware of or, most importantly, by the risk we expose our loved ones to by unknowingly exposing them to the virus.
  3. How do we help our most at risk people (often also our most committed attenders) come to grips with the reality that they should not return to the building, even after we reopen, until we are well into phase three of the *Opening Up America Again* guidelines.
- F. What guidelines and parameters will you use to respond to changing conditions?
1. How will you sustain social distancing in worship over a long period of time?
  2. How will people's longing to return to normal impact their expectations and behaviors when we regather for in-person worship?
  3. How is your congregation assessing and addressing the needs of its community/neighborhood?
  4. How are you addressing issues like food insecurity, safety from violence, education for children, depression/hopelessness, etc.
- G. What will you do with on-line / virtual worship and faith formation?
1. At some point churches are going to be faced with resuming Sunday School and Christian Education. Plans need to be brainstormed now for how September might look. Will classes be held? What are your plans for VBS?
  2. To maintain social distancing, how will you handle Fellowship?
  3. As you look to continue online and streamed worship (strongly suggested), have you upgraded your copywrite usage licenses?

- H. Pastors, deacons, and lay leaders: how will you care for yourselves during this time of transition?
  - 1. What are congregations doing to care for and support their rostered and lay leaders?
  - 2. How are you collaborating with other area leaders, parishes, and the NWOS?
  - 3. Have you thought about plans for vacation coverage? Possible recorded sermons? Neighboring leader sharing a sermon?
  
- I. How will your congregation respond to confirmed (or suspected) COVID-19 cases?
  - 1. What system do you have in place to contact everyone who worshipped with you in the past 2-3 weeks?
  - 2. How will you support that group of people while they are self-isolating for 14 days?
  - 3. Perhaps it will be advisable for congregations to take literal attendance at worship, so that if a person is infected, the church can be referenced as to who was in attendance over a period of two weeks
  - 4. Has the leadership thought through possible required repeated two-Sunday breaks due to quarantining?

#### **IV. Looking forward in hope**

*Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid". John 14:27*

- A. We are the church! Ministry and mission doesn't stop because the building is closed.
  - 1. This would be a great time to lift up and expand small groups in your parish
  - 2. Look at how you are church apart from public in person worship
  
- B. Continue reaching out to your parish – congregation and community.
  
- C. Take this opportunity to see the blessing in being forced to consider new ways of connecting
  - 1. Digital forms of worship
  - 2. Alternate forms of meeting
  - 3. Expanded ways of giving beyond the offering plate
    - a. direct electronic giving
    - b. giving through bank bill paying apps
    - c. mailing in checks by mail
    - d. other digital forms of giving: Venmo, Pay pal, credit card
  
- D. Know that the Lord has been with us, is with us as we struggle through this pandemic, and will be with us into the new future that is still before us.
  
- E. This is difficult, new territory for all of us. But we are not alone... *"When you go through deep waters I will be with you". Isaiah 43:2*

## **Parish Plan of Return Task Force**

- Rev. Paul Reichert (Pastor at St. Martin's Lutheran, Archbold/Dean of Maumee Valley Conf.)
  - Cell – (419) 349-3375 Email – [pastorpaul@the-welcome-place.org](mailto:pastorpaul@the-welcome-place.org)
- Rev. Will Stenke (Pastor at Trinity Lutheran, Findlay)
  - Cell – (810) 347-8583 Email – [pastorwill@trinityfindlay.org](mailto:pastorwill@trinityfindlay.org)
- Deacon Steve Basselman (Deacon at St. Martin's, Archbold with specialization in worship/music)
  - Cell – (419) 572-6091 Email – [steveb@the-welcome-place.org](mailto:steveb@the-welcome-place.org)
- Laura Strietelmeier (M-Div & Nurse at ProMedica Tol. Hospital)
  - Cell – (419)309-9358 Email – [laura.striet@gmail.com](mailto:laura.striet@gmail.com)
- Kathy Barbee (ICU Nurse at St. Vincent Mercy Health System)
  - Cell – (419)276-0684 Email – [jksbarbee@aol.com](mailto:jksbarbee@aol.com)
- Dan Barbee (Pres. Of Rural Div. at Mercy Health System)
  - Cell – (419)307-0158 Email – [dlb81363@aol.com](mailto:dlb81363@aol.com)
- Rev. Sarah Schaaf (Director of Community Engagement)
  - Cell – (740)802-3530 Email – [sarah.schaaf@nwos-elca.org](mailto:sarah.schaaf@nwos-elca.org)
- Bishop Daniel Beaudoin (Bishop NWOS)
  - Cell – (419) 423-3664 Email – [daniel.beaudoin@nwos-elca.org](mailto:daniel.beaudoin@nwos-elca.org)

## **Links and Resources**

State of Ohio Coronavirus Site - [www.coronavirus.ohio.gov](http://www.coronavirus.ohio.gov)

- Public Health Directives
- Responsible Protocols for Reopening
- Site Specific Requirements

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html>

ELCA: *Considerations for Returning to In-Person Worship*  
<https://www.elca.org/publichealth#worship>

Federal Guidelines: Opening Up America Again -  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

Responsible Reopening of Ohio-  
<https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/responsible/Responsible-Protocols.pdf>