

April 7, 2020

Dear NALC Pastors,

I am writing to you to offer a confession and to share a request, both of which are related to the recent practice, in some of our churches, of offering “virtual communion,” during this time when we are unable to meet in person. Before sharing my confession and request, allow me to open my heart and offer a bit of perspective.

As bishop of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), having been elected last August and having officially taken office two months later, in October, I am still on the front end of understanding this new role and clarifying for myself the responsibility it carries. In these early months, I have learned a great deal and, I pray, I will continue to learn even more throughout my tenure.

What I never saw coming is the same thing none of us saw in advance. The onslaught we are now experiencing with COVID-19, the coronavirus, is, at least in our lifetimes, unprecedented. Not only is its scope more significant than any of us might have expected, but the speed at which it has traveled has caught our world, our countries and our leaders, as well as those of us in the Church by surprise.

As a result, as pastors, we have all worked hard in recent weeks to serve our people faithfully. We have adjusted our approach to worship. We have improvised in the ways we offer pastoral care. We have expanded our use of technology and we have been challenged by a life experience in which we have no previous life experience.

Through it all, our pastors have been faithful. There is no doubt in my mind that each of our pastors, in whatever changes they have made, have done so in ways they believe are faithful to our Lutheran Confessions and the witness of Holy Scripture. Their decisions, without exception, have been made for the sake of serving the proclamation of the Gospel and the building up of the Body of Christ. I am proud of our clergy. I am proud of each of you. I thank you for your faithfulness during such an unforeseen and challenging time.

As bishop, one of the responsibilities I carry is clearly outlined in Article 8.02 of our constitution. In the section dealing with the role and responsibilities of the bishop, it states the following:

*Article 8.02 – The Bishop shall carry out a pastoral ministry within the church, serving as pastor for the ordained ministers and congregations of the NALC. The Bishop shall preach the Gospel, forgive sins, administer the Sacraments, **and judge doctrine.** (Augsburg Confession XXVIII)*

And so, here is my confession. In “judging doctrine,” insofar as it relates to the practice of virtual communion, I have allowed our pastors to sort through the pros and cons of this practice and decide for themselves how to proceed, without taking the appropriate time for reflection and consultation necessary for the unity of the Church. While our people long for the Lord’s Supper and we long to provide them with opportunities to receive it, I believe it is best for now to refrain from this practice until we have spent the necessary time to discern, pray, and engage in theological reflection.

While I believe our pastors have faithfully struggled to make good and faithful decisions during this difficult time, I confess that I should have been more aware of and informed by the possibility that this new practice, rather than uniting us as a body of believers, could serve to divide the communion we share with our international and ecumenical partners, diminish our witness to the world, and disrupt our own unity within the NALC.

After having sought counsel from a number of our Lutheran theologians, some of our NALC staff, and our two previous bishops, Bishop Emeritus Paull Spring and Bishop Emeritus John Bradosky, and having also requested our Commission on Theology & Doctrine to convene for the sole purpose of addressing this very question, here is my request:

For the sake of the unity of the North American Lutheran Church and the greater Church catholic, for the purpose of allowing our own NALC Ministerium the time to think and pray through the implications, pro and con, of this significant change in practice, and for the greater purpose of ensuring that our witness to the world of the saving power of Jesus Christ, offered to us through His cross and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, is not divided, I request that we place a moratorium on the virtual sharing of the Lord’s Supper, until we have allowed ourselves sufficient time to come to a thoughtful and prayerful and collective understanding around such an important and significant question.

To that end, even though my request comes in the middle of Holy Week, if it is possible for you to adjust your plans and omit this practice, I encourage you to do so. If, however, you have already made plans, approved by your church council and communicated to your people, I request that you share this letter of concern with your congregational leadership. If you and your council agree that it is still best to implement this practice during this week, I will understand, but request that no such

practice continue beyond this week, until we have completed the necessary consultation, reflection and conversation.

Until we come to a more unified understanding in our approach, in place of the visible Word, I encourage you to emphasize the power of the spoken Word, and to proclaim it, even as you offer forgiveness and absolution to your people. In so doing, remind them there have been many times in Christian history when the sisters and brothers who have gone before us have not been able to share the Sacrament. To honor their witness, to ensure the unity of ours, and to allow time for us, as a church body, to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our discernment, this request is made for the sake of the greater good. Thank you for your understanding and grace.

Allow me to close with two verses from Luke's Gospel. These words of our Lord speak not only of His desire to share the Passover meal with His disciples, but of the desire we all feel for that day when we will share this same meal, our Lord's Supper, with each other, once again:

"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:15-16 NIV).

Thank you for your faithfulness and for the partnership we share in Jesus. I look forward to that day when we will share together around our Lord's Table once again. May God bless you in your ministries and may this most Holy Week be one that draws us all closer to Christ.

In His Name,



Rev. Daniel W. Selbo

Bishop

North American Lutheran Church