

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For over a year, we have experienced an interruption in gathering for Divine Service. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has raged across the globe and taken over 3.5 million lives, our congregational worship life was interrupted, changed, and then creatively continued. Since last March, Jehovah Lutheran has offered the Service of the Word online, and at different points we have offered several methods for the in-person Service of the Sacrament (Holy Communion). We have now been gathering together for the full Divine Service in person (minus congregational singing) since the first Sunday in Lent of 2021. We have also continued to offer the recorded Service of the Word.

Recently our Board of Lay Ministry and Church Council discussed moving forward with the further re-opening of in-person Divine Service at Jehovah Lutheran. After deliberating, these boards, Erica, and I, unanimously and wholeheartedly have decided to end the recorded service and restore congregational singing to our in-person gatherings. We made this decision on the basis of the current metrics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Minnesota and the extremely high rate of vaccination. At this point, nearly 100%! of eligible members (age 12 and older) have been fully vaccinated. At the same time, viewership online of the recorded service is extremely low. Our church staff and volunteers have put in countless hours and nearly limitless energy into the filming, production, and uploading of these services. At this time, however, few are watching them.

Beginning on Sunday, July 4, we will discontinue the recorded service in its current form. We will offer the Divine Service in-person at 9:30AM. We will record portions of this service for distribution to our members who are unable to come to services in-person. I will continue to bring Holy Communion to those unable to come.

We will begin reintroducing congregational singing on July 4. At first, we will sing the final hymn together at the conclusion of the service. If anyone is not comfortable with singing at this time, they may exit before we begin this hymn. In August, we plan to also begin singing the communion liturgy together. We will then add other singing parts back into the service from there. We are also very excited that we will have a fully vaccinated ensemble sing for us, in-person on Cantata Sunday! Ben Wegner is preparing a wonderful baroque treat for the ears to enhance our worship that day!

Many of you may be wondering if we will hold our services without masks. The CDC recommends that we continue to wear our masks if we are singing together as a congregation, since singing spreads the virus more than ordinary talking. We should also bear in mind that not every member of Jehovah has yet had the opportunity to be vaccinated. **Those under 12 years of age still have not been approved to receive vaccination against COVID-19.** We anticipate that they will begin to be vaccinated around September. Our children have endured many hardships for the sake of the most vulnerable during this pandemic, and in Christian love, we will now bear with them, until they too can be vaccinated. We will continue to wear our masks in services so that we can move forward with congregational singing and for the sake of our unvaccinated children.

While we will keep masks on for worship, the council has approved that we may hold meetings and other small groups (Bible study, volunteering, etc.) without masks. For this to take place, everyone in the group needs to be fully vaccinated, and all should agree that they are comfortable removing masks. Anyone who wishes to keep their mask on may always do so. If unvaccinated children (under 12) are present, we must all continue to wear our masks.

I know that this has been a very long road for all of us, and I thank you for your patience and longsuffering. The pandemic has not been able to dampen your faithfulness to the Lord or your love for His people. Erica and I would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to those who have worked very hard to continue our common life of worship during this time of pandemic. In particular we give thanks to:

Mark and Rhoda Schuler,

Elizabeth, Bruce, Ben, and Abby Wegner;

David and Susanna Mennicke,

Tim and Max Buendorf,

Spirit Freed,

Guest musicians and choirs,

All of our wonderful lectors and other assistants.

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. So much creative work was accomplished without prior warning. So many schedules were altered. So many wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ worked together for the common good. Your labor for our Lord and His people has not been in vain.

As we go forward together, we continue to devote ourselves, as did the first Christians, to gathering for worship, to hear God's Word, and to share together the bread of life and cup of salvation in our Lord's Supper. May our Lord bless you as you receive His gifts.

In Christ,

Your Pastor, Joshua Miller

Your Congregational President, Erica Dalager Reed