



## Where Is My Church?

### LIFE TOGETHER BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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#### INTRODUCTION.

Church life prior to March 2020 was considered by most in the church to be “normal.” “Normal” is a relative term — for many people, it can look very different. Even so, the idea that a consistent and clear pattern of behavior was in play for most churchgoers was an unrecognized comfort. Being able to attend church and maintain a weekly rhythm that included worship and fellowship was a way of life for all. Many took for granted the simple activity of gathering for worship, hearing the Word of God, receiving the Sacrament of the Altar, and enjoying the presence of fellow believers. It was unthinkable that a day would come when we would not be able to gather and hear God’s Word and receive His grace through forgiveness.

For all churches throughout our beloved Synod, life together and church rhythm has changed in ways that no one could have predicted. Overall, most churches and church workers have reported that their congregations and ministries have found ways to adapt and continue through this pandemic. That does not mean, however, that damage has not been done. People have sustained physical, emotional, psychological, financial and even spiritual trauma as a direct result of this situation. This study will seek to provide some context to life together before, during and after the pandemic of 2020. It will explore what life in the church should look like and what our Lord expects of us as citizens and members of His body.

- I. It is important to spend some time discussing where your church stood before, stands currently, and will stand in the future. This will help set the stage for what we will discuss later in the study about where we should go and how to get there.
  - a. Discuss what the church looked like before COVID-19. Give examples of how church life flowed and the normal rhythm of the church.
  - b. Discuss what the church has done to attempt to deal with the current circumstance.
  - c. Write the following down on a piece of paper and keep it to yourself until the end of this study: What will the church look like years after this pandemic? We can reflect on this at the end of the study to see if your thoughts have changed.

**II.** The Bible speaks about our love as citizens in this world and as members of society.

a. Please read the following passages and discuss what the Bible says about who we are in our lives as citizens. Pay careful attention to what our response to the authorities is and why we do this. Give examples of this in your life and your church.

- i. Romans 13:1–5 (Governmental authority)
- ii. 1 Peter 2:13–17 (Institution)
- iii. Matthew 22:37–40 (Our neighbors and those around us)
- iv. 1 Corinthians 15 (Motivation for our work)
- v. 1 Timothy 1:8–9 (The purpose of the law)

**III.** Luther wrote about living as citizens. He said that we must be a part of the world around us as citizens and members of communities and churches. The commands of Christ lead Christians to serve and care for their neighbors.

a. How has your church dealt with this aspect during COVID-19, considering the above Scripture passages? Remember to not pass judgement in this discussion, simply talk about what the church has done to deal with its role as citizens during this time.

Luther discusses in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (1520) how Christians in some cases must endure certain levels of suffering connected with their lives as citizens and servants.

b. Discuss this reality within the context of your church. Give examples of the way in which faithful people of God can unfortunately suffer during events like these.

c. How has the church been negatively impacted during this current crisis? Take time to also highlight the ways in which the church may have benefited or thrived during a time such as this.

**IV.** Throughout this current pandemic, issues have arisen around how to handle the situation at local churches, in regions, within districts and the Synod, and around the country. This has led to differences of opinions and in some cases conflicts in congregations and families. Within the context of the church, these types of differences should not divide us, as we are all members of the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, these issues will and often do divide members of the church, family members and good friends.

a. How do we juggle the difference of opinions within the church regarding topics like:

- i. What do we do about public worship?
- ii. Should we have services in person or worship online?
- iii. What about the way in which we deliver the Lord's Supper?
- iv. How do we come back to worship?
- v. Should we require masks, and what do we do if someone refuses to wear a mask?

These questions are just a few examples of what churches and leaders are wrestling with. These things can cause conflict and tension as we work to have life together as members of the Body of Christ in the church and in community. (It is very important to remember in this section that listening and not judging is crucial while you discuss this topic.)

Please read Romans 14:1–23 and discuss how it applies to the church and the life together as we navigate the issues of the church both now and into the future. Pay close attention to the application that this has for all conflict issues within the church.

- vi. List the issues that have arisen within your congregation that have led to some tension when dealing with pandemic-related responses.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  
- vii. Discuss the importance of being patient and bearing one another's opinions and feelings. (Keep in mind that there will likely be opposite opinions about the answers to these questions. The key here is to show respect and understand that no one opinion trumps the other in terms of right and wrong.)
  - 1. Discuss the role of repentance in our dealings with one another.
  - 2. Have we missed opportunities to speak peace to our neighbor?
  - 3. What benefits might private confession and absolution give to one whose conscience is troubled or burdened by conflict?
  
- viii. How can we work together to move forward with making decisions that are best for the church and that give a clear witness to life together within the church and society?
  - 1. Discuss ways to accomplish this, thinking how it may impact certain people within the church.
  - 2. How does this affect the witness of the Gospel?

**V.** In this section, we will discuss where our understanding comes from with the context of Scripture, considering the different lenses we may have.

a. From the perspective of the world:

- i. Please read and discuss Colossians 2:8.
- ii. What must we do when discussing matters of the church in light of the world and the Bible?

b. From ourselves:

- i. Discuss how we can come at this topic with selfish motives and an arrogant spirit of being right. What affect can/does that have on our ability to share the love of Christ with the world around us?

c. From God:

- i. Real wisdom is from God. What or why do society and people think that the creation can teach the Creator? Talk about how the world wants to dictate to God how He should act in situations like this.
- ii. Why do we think we can understand the mind of God?

Real wisdom is to know that God is just, merciful, loving, caring and forgiving. Please read Colossians 2:1-7 and discuss the implications regarding our submission to God's wisdom.

d. The Word of God is our only clear and true source of knowledge and wisdom. He provides us with all we need to know to fulfill His will in our lives and the life of the church.

**VI.** The church has endured these types of events and issues throughout its life. Our Lord has always delivered on His promises to neither leave nor forsake His people.

a. What do ministry, life together, witness and living our faith look like today and into the future?

We must trust in God that He will do what He promises He will do. Read Romans 8:28 and apply it to the current situation in your life and your church.

Please read the following passages and focus on how we are called to trust in God. Discuss how these apply today.

b. Deuteronomy 7:9–11

c. Psalm 25:2

d. Psalm 118:8–9

e. Hebrews 2:13

We must remain firm in faith and firm in our trust in what Christ has promised He will do. We rely on what He has already done. He laid down His life for the salvation of the world. This is the great act of love shown throughout the history of the world. We trust in what He has done, and we trust in what He will do.

Life together in the church today has many different aspects connected to how we handle these types of issues and how we work together.

f. First and foremost, we begin by understanding that Christ is at the center of all we do and say.

g. Discuss ways that you as members of His body, the church, can live together and work toward the common good of proclaiming Jesus to the world.

h. The work of Matthew 28 and the Great Commission does not stop because we are under siege. How can the members of the church band together to continue the work of evangelism?

## CONCLUSION

Together, we are uniquely equipped to endure the onslaught of the devil with the saving message of Jesus. Nothing is better than living in the Word of God together and proclaiming Jesus' love to all nations, creeds, colors and languages. We must be ready in and out of season to give an account of who Christ is in our lives and the lives of the world. As the effects of the most recent pandemic continue to unfold within society and the life of the church, we must remain united. We must not allow the devil to cause divisions among us, separating us and causing us to be pitted against one another. This is the work of Satan and a work that Jesus defeated long ago. Respecting the opinions and the positions of your fellow Christians, even at times when they are different than yours, is crucial. Understanding that everyone will be at different places along the spectrum and have many different opinions about how and what to do as we return to worship and beyond, is crucial. Life together begins with having Christ as the center of all things we do together. May the Lord of all grace and mercy continue to bless, guide and lead you now and always.