



Southern Illinois District—LCMS

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Rev. Timothy J. Scharr, President

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Mr. Jeffrey Fick, Schools and General Executive

14 May 2020

The Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
207 State House
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Governor Pritzker,

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, the crucified, who was dead and now is alive forever!

In our letter of 17 April 2020, we requested that you declare worship as an essential activity within the state of Illinois. Thank you for doing so. Our congregations continue to meet in groups under ten, online and through drive-in church. However, the Reopen Illinois plan raises concerns among us.

Phase Three allows up to ten people to gather. This unfortunately places a heavier burden on larger congregations and disregards their ability to safely accommodate more than ten worshippers at a time. Places of worship that can seat dozens—even if that involves a small, poorly ventilated building—are treated the same as those that can handle hundreds while still maintaining proper social distancing. Both are limited to ten people. It would be much better if this was changed to a percentage of the capacity for each building set by the fire marshal. For instance, one-third of capacity would be much better than a set number in this phase.

Under Phase Four, schools would be allowed to open. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has one hundred and one elementary and twelve high schools in Illinois. The majority of our schools are housed in a facility connected with a church. Chapel is a vital part of our curriculum and held in the church. A school with seventy students can open safely but they would not be able to use the church for worship since the church is limited to fifty people in this phase! This makes little sense to us, and we ask that this be addressed.

There is also uncertainty under the Phase Four guidelines as to whether churches will be treated worse than cinemas, theaters, and restaurants. The later facilities are subject to undefined “capacity limits,” which we presume will be based on the size of the building. A theater that can seat 1,000 would not be subject to the same numerical quota as small venue that can only seat 50. Yet religious gatherings, regardless of the size of their facilities, would presumably remain subject to the 50 person limitation. This unfavorable treatment of religious gatherings compared to other venues is deeply concerning.

Because of these concerns, we would ask that worship services be allowed to meet with at least two-thirds to one hundred percent of capacity during Phase Four. Currently it is only in Phase Five that congregations may worship freely. The requirements for Phase Five are distant, if not unattainable, in our estimation. It requires “a vaccine or highly effective treatment widely available or the elimination of any new cases over a sustained period, the economy fully reopens with safety precautions continuing.” This may be one to two years away, if ever.

We care about the health and welfare of our neighbors. We are eager to follow CDC guidelines for hygiene and social distancing. Our people are also practical in that they do not want to be conduits of this disease to the most vulnerable. We are simply asking that our churches would be free to practice our religion and assemble with the least restrictive means necessary.

Our prayers remain with you and your family, all magistrates and for the end of this epidemic. Thank you for considering our requests.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Allan Buss, President
Northern Illinois District – LCMS

Rev. Mark Miller, President
Central Illinois District – LCMS

Rev. Timothy Scharr, President
Southern Illinois District – LCMS