

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD



WYOMING DISTRICT
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Office of the President

May 20, 2020

Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon
State Capitol
200 West 24th Street
Cheyenne, WY 82002

Governor Gordon,

Let me introduce myself as the President (Bishop) of the Wyoming District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I provide oversight and support to 60 congregations and a mission-station in an area including all of Wyoming, the Nebraska Panhandle, and one congregation in Colorado. I write to provide you a word of counsel and advocacy on behalf of our congregations and pastors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn the interests of civil government and Christian churches into potential conflict. We think that these conflicts can be avoided to the benefit of both. Here is what our church teaches concerning these matters:

First, we teach and urge our people to honor and obey civil government. Our God commands us to do this, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1). For this reason our pastors and congregations have sought to honor your authority during the pandemic. It is because of this command from God that we seek to honor you by giving you this counsel and encouragement.

Second, God commands our congregations to pray for you and for all those in authority over us. "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Our intercession before God for our communities, government, and leaders is the greatest power we have in civil matters. This is the great service our congregations provide when they gather together as the church.

Third, our obedience to civil government is not absolute, but qualified by natural law and especially by the mandates God has given us in the Christian Scriptures. In particular, God alone instructs our churches how to worship him, what is to be taught and done, who serves as minister, who is admitted to worship and the rites of the church, and so on. In these matters, "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Thankfully, our nation's Constitution and the Bill of Rights agree with and defend these essential truths regarding the distinction between the authority of the civil government and that of the Christian religion. For all the reasons given here we now counsel you and appeal to you as follows:

First, we commend you for the discretion and restraint you demonstrated early in the COVID-19 pandemic in leaving churches and other faith assemblies out of your orders. Providing guidance and making an appeal to religious gatherings is an appropriate respect toward the distinction between civil government and religious gatherings.

Second, however, we urge you and appeal to you to restrain the actions of many of our counties through their county health officers, and now also in the Fourth Continuance of Statewide Order #2 issued under the signature of the Wyoming State Health Officer. The variances, and now the Fourth Continuance, attempt an egregious trespass upon the duties of our Christian religion, and they contradict the rights recognized and defended by our governing documents. "Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]." Both these reasons demonstrate that the orders contradict natural and moral law. We believe that they damage the cooperative relationship between civil government and our religious gatherings and set a precedent that endangers both.

We strongly urge you and our local officials to withdraw these orders in favor of non-binding guidance that accords with a healthy distinction between civil government and religious gatherings.

Respectfully,

Rev. John E. Hill, President