



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After 40 years of active pastoral ministry I thought that I had seen about everything. When I became the interim Pastor at St. Luke's, I expected ministry would be much the same as I had already experienced. As I came to know you at St. Luke's, I discovered I was doing ministry with wonderful, extraordinary people, but I still expected the ministry to be ordinary. Now, here we are! We are striving to be Christ's church in a time unlike any that I have ever experienced.

What makes this crisis so different than other crises the church has faced? I thought back to one of the last national crises that we lived through in my time as a pastor: the attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York. Our world changed in a few minutes. We watched the wanton disregard for human life as the airplanes slammed into the towers. Then we witnessed the unbelievable collapse of the towers. We watched as thousands died helplessly. It changed our national psyche.

But, we came together to meet this awful event. Hundreds of first responders and ordinary citizens ran—not away from the buildings but toward and in to them—to try to save any lives they could. People came together to pray and to provide what was needed. As soon as I heard the news, I set up a prayer service for that evening. I started getting the word out to our members and I put up large signs at the doors of the church announcing the service. I knew that there was little time to get out the word, but if even a few of us came together to pray it would be important. That evening I was amazed how many people showed up with so little advance notice. Church members, people from other congregations, people from the neighborhood, people just passing by and seeing the signs all came together to pray. As Christians and as Americans we come together when disaster strikes.

But this crisis is different, especially for Christian churches (or any other religious assembly). What we do best—coming together—is precisely the thing that we dare not do. It is not because some dictator tells us we cannot. If that were the case we would do it anyway. As St. Peter and the Apostles said to the authorities who ordered them not to gather and preach about Jesus: *"We must obey God rather than human beings!"* (Acts 5:29) But the law that keeps us separated is not human law, but the

law of love. Jesus told us: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13:34-35)

So, the first thing I want you to remember is that the inconvenience of this present moment is an opportunity to show love to one another. We are apart because we love each other. The care we show one another is itself an act of discipleship. Paul teaches us: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28). Paul doesn't say that all things are good. He says that God uses all things, even bad things, for His good purpose. First and foremost, we are called to be God's instruments of good in this bad circumstance.

With all this in mind, let me commend your willingness to do what must be done. Let me ask your continued patience as this drags on longer than we might like. We have had to make some tough decisions.

- Cancelling worship does not come easy to me. Before this, I only ever did it once in forty years. I wish that council or I could give you a specific date when we will gather for worship again, but that is just not possible at this time.
- We have had to postpone until the end of summer our celebrations of first communion and confirmation. We will have to wait until we can gather our youth together again to prepare for these things. We will have to find alternative ways to prepare. More information about catechism and first communion classes will be forthcoming.
- Our Sunday school program is essentially over for this school year. This breaks my heart because I know our Sunday school teachers are so very faithful and hardworking. Even though they can't do what they love to do, I want them to know how much we appreciate them at St. Luke's.
- We do not know when the church council will be able to meet face to face again. That which is essential will be done because the council can communicate in other ways, but it is much less effective than meeting. So some things may not happen as fast as we would like. I want to commend our council for their good work in these difficult circumstances.
- All our ministry groups, those who sing, or sew, or pray have been put on hold or had to find new ways to operate. Those who set up for worship and take care of the building have been idled despite their willingness.

What then shall we do? What actions can we take?

1. We can pray. This crisis shows us our helplessness, but there is one who is not helpless. God bids us talk to Him—open our hearts to Him. Pray for St. Luke's, your family, your neighbors, your community, your country and the world. And after praying, trust. God hears your prayer. A good resource in your prayers might be Psalm 46. You might use this psalm over and over in these days.

The St. Luke's Prayer Circle has committed to pray every day at 8:00 am and asks you to join them. Our prayer list will be maintained and accessible on the St. Luke's website.

2. We can worship on-line. Pastor Shawn Smith, St. Paul's Luther Church, Sarver, has graciously welcomed me to participate in a streaming of Sunday morning worship on St. Paul's website. We will do this together until we can worship in our own buildings again. This can be accessed on St. Paul's website at stpaulssarver.com. Live streaming of Sunday worship begins at 10:10 am, but the service will be available in its entirety any time. We will also be doing services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday at 7:00 pm. If you are unable to access St. Paul's on-line service, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Grove City, is worshipping by phone. Please call in five minutes before the start of the 10:30 am worship. The phone number is 425-436-6396 & the access code is 519336#.
3. We can communicate. Check on one another. Keep in touch with St. Luke's through our website. Thanks to Shannon, our office has been open all along and I hope will be open throughout this difficult time. Please don't come to the office—call, text or email. Some wonderful people doing some wonderful things have let us know about resources that are available to us. If you have a particular need, please call the office and see what resources might be available to address it.
4. My cell phone number is 412-916-0122. If I can be helpful in any way please call or text me. My email address is bfshirey@gmail.com. I will commit myself during this time to check my email daily, but the phone is faster.
5. Our main source of financial support is our weekly offering. With no services we have no offering. Let me encourage you to send your offering to St. Luke's (PO Box 187, Saxonburg PA 16056). God will see that our congregation will get through the challenges we face, but you could be part of God's sustenance by continuing to make offerings even when we can't gather together.

I will attempt to keep in communication through pastoral letters posted on our website every Wednesday and Saturday. I will bring you reflections on our situation and the bible readings for the week ahead, with my comments on the readings. I sincerely hope these things will be helpful to you.

Finally, let me remind you, what Jesus said in Matthew 24:35: "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*" The difficulties and dangers of this present age will pass away. We will get through this. We will get over this. We will learn from this. And we will grow from this. On Easter morning Jesus rose in victory and if we hold firm to Him (as He holds firm to us) the victory is ours!

United with you in Christ's love and service,
Pastor Brian Shirey