

On the Pandemic: A Renewed Call to Persevere and Prevail
From Bishop Christopher deForest, January 26, 2021

As the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, I have been asked by congregations and leaders across the synod to give my perspective as the new bishop and provide updated direction.

First, let us be clear: this crisis is not over. People are still suffering and dying at a devastating rate; and it looks increasingly likely that the worst may be yet to come over the next several weeks. Add to this, the fact that it is winter, so gathering and worshiping outside is very difficult. We are all exhausted and lonely from almost a year of this. And now, we have new threats coming from what appear to be more contagious, and perhaps more deadly, new mutant strains of the virus. Many businesses, large and especially small, are stretched to and beyond the breaking point. And political divisions are not only driving us apart; in our frustration and despair, they can lead us to give up on the very practices and attitudes we need to stay alive, and to love our neighbors by safeguarding their health and lives as well.

And yet, we know there is hope on the horizon. Vaccines exist, they really work, and they are getting out, however imperfectly. Wearing masks, washing hands, social distancing, avoiding groups and crowds – these simple behaviors still make a big difference. Some of our congregations have worked out detailed plans for limited, safe gathering. And many are still using technology as the best alternative. I applaud and give thanks for all who are working so hard and holding on so well, even now.

Considering all this, my direction is simple: **please stay the course**. As it is written in Hebrews 12:1-2: *¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us **run with perseverance the race that is set before us**, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

In our case, “running with perseverance the race” at this moment means:

- If you are still gathering online or by means of technology, continue to do so.
- If you have already implemented a process for safely meeting in-person, continue to be vigilant in following your own guidelines.
- If our state and local authorities give new directives, let’s do our best to comply.
- On a personal level, let us continue to love our neighbor by wearing our masks, washing our hands, keeping social distance, and avoiding mixed indoor gatherings.

For how long? This is always the hard question. But in God I trust. And God has put in our midst good authorities of science and government, for whom we are called to trust and follow (Romans 13:1-7). In the synod office, as we receive new information, we will pass that on to you. The current information on our website concerning the pandemic still contains valuable direction and links to other reliable sources.

As a sign of hope that we will be in a better place in four months, we are moving forward now with plans for an in-person Synod Assembly for June 3-5 – but we will also work on back-up

plans to meet online if that is ultimately the wisest course. Look for more information on this coming out in February and March.

For now, please know that I pray for you each day, and I invite prayers for all of us, as we endure these difficult days. I believe we will look back on all this, in a similar way that we recall the great national and global tribulations of our past, such as the World Wars. We admire how our ancestors endured shortages, sacrifices, were forced to be apart for long periods, and had to deal with the real threats of injury, despair, death, loss and horrible grief. May God give us strength to persevere as they did – and to bring us over to new days of renewed peace, health, strength, purpose, and “joy set before us”; along with a deeper appreciation of all the gifts we have been given, of life and love and mutual care in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher deForest". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher deForest, Bishop
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod