

Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I write to you this evening on behalf of the Disaster Response Network of the Northeastern Iowa Synod, ELCA. By now, I know that you are aware of the public health crisis that is quickly encroaching and entering into our communities. I trust that I am not the first to tell you the importance of proper hand hygiene, staying home if you are ill, and the paramount tactic to slow the spread of COVID-19, social distancing (might it be better to name it physical distancing?).

We trust that in times such as these, Christ is ever present with us, a light shining brightly in the darkness, a light that no darkness can overcome. For so many, we find comfort in worship together in our parish buildings on a regular basis. However, during this Lenten season, we have found ourselves not in a metaphorical but a physical wilderness as we engage in physical distancing. I commend you all for your tireless work navigating what worship life will look like in the coming weeks as we journey towards the cross of Good Friday and the blessed resurrection of life over death that will quickly follow.

Because our congregation cannot worship in person, I have encouraged the people I serve to pray at 8 p.m. every night for our neighbors, both near and far, as we face the COVID-19 pandemic. Last night, on a whim, I decided to go over to the church and rang the church bell at 8 p.m. as a call for our prayerful unity during our physical disunity. This morning, my colleagues at the Reformed and Congregational parishes in Allison spoke, and we are going to begin ringing all the bells in town every evening at 8 p.m. throughout the crisis. Additionally, my Reformed colleague suggested we broadcast a prayer service on our local cable channel after the dong of the bells calls us together in prayer.

Here is my challenge to you, good people of Northeastern Iowa (and beyond if you would like to share with your colleagues in other regions): encourage the parish you serve to come together every evening at 8 p.m. in prayer during these uncertain times, and let your church bells ring with gusto as a call to this prayer! I further encourage you to reach out to your colleagues of other denominations in the areas you serve and encourage them to do the same.

May the familiar sound of hope that has momentarily gone silent hold us together in unity until we can meet again in person.

In peace,

Rev. Kyle B. Barton
NEIA Synod Disaster Response Network Chair