

Lutheran Laymen’s Declaration and Petition

Sine Dominico Non Possumus

(Advent 2020 AD)

Context

On the 11th day of March, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a novel disease outbreak first detected in Wuhan, China, to be a global pandemic.¹ This disease, designated ‘Covid-19,’ was believed and later identified to be caused by the coronavirus ‘SARS-CoV-2.’ As the disease spread around the world, the governments of many countries implemented mass mitigation strategies in an effort to curtail its spread. The Province of Ontario, on March 17, 2020, called upon the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act* to limit gatherings to a maximum of 50 people.² Here in the Region of Waterloo (Ontario, Canada), on March 17 and again on March 27, 2020, health authorities recommended, but did not order, “the closure of all church and faith settings.”^{3,4} On March 24, the Province of Ontario ordered all businesses to close, except those itemized as “essential businesses;” religious services were not mentioned in this order.⁵ On March 28, the Province of Ontario further restricted public events and social gatherings (including “religious services, rites and ceremonies”) to a 5-person limit.⁶ Although churches were never officially ordered to close, some of our church leaders were led to believe otherwise by overzealous officials.

Coinciding with these events, all LC-C congregations in the Region of Waterloo ceased gathering for Divine Services (NB: for the sake of clarity, in this document we use the term ‘Divine Service’ to refer to the firmly established in-person, physical gathering of God’s people together as a congregation to receive God’s gifts of Word and Sacrament). A variety of different practices began to emerge; Divine Services were largely replaced by online offerings, with some pastors delivering Holy Communion to people’s homes provided all government-mandated restrictions were followed. An official statement⁷ from the President of LC-C supported the closure of churches and encouraged congregants to submit to all pandemic-related requests and orders issued by health authorities. In contrast, an opinion statement published by the faculty of the Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary^{8,9} opposed the

¹ World Health Organization. (2020, March). *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

² <https://www.ontario.ca/orders-in-council/oc-5202020>

³ <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/Modules/News/index.aspx?feedId=23db2aa9-679a-417e-871c-2913ebc5b78b&newsId=cd3ecf7e-45c6-4eb8-9a5f-166ff1b7787e>

⁴ <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/health-and-wellness/resources/Documents/COVID-19-Update-Dr.-Hsiu-Li-Wang-March-27-2020.pdf>

⁵ <https://files.ontario.ca/solgen-oic-closure-nonessential-business-2020-03-24.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/200052/v2>

⁷ Teuscher, T. (March 18, 2020). Concerning the Coronavirus (Covid-19): A statement from the President of Lutheran Church – Canada. https://www.canadianlutheran.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/03/COVID-19-Statement-LCC_March-18-2020.pdf

⁸ <https://steadfastlutherans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Facts-and-Truth-A-Faculty-Opinion-on-Worship-in-and-after-a-Pandemic.pdf>

⁹ Rev. Dr. Stephenson also separately published a private opinion piece addressing this issue.

<https://www.gottesdienst.org/gottesblog/2020/4/20/de-profundis-interdicti-magni-anno-mcmxx-from-the-depths-of-the-great-interdict-of-2020>

disruption of the Divine Service. Not all local pastors were in agreement with the statement from the faculty of the Seminary.¹⁰

To the delight of our adversary, the devil, the pandemic-related disruptions have led to considerable discord and conflict in our Synod and in our churches. While some members of our churches agreed with the church closures and/or recommended restrictions, others characterized the clergy and Synod's support for church closures as an abandonment; this latter group of people felt—to use the familiar biblical metaphor—like sheep deserted by their shepherds in the face of adversity (John 10:13). Sadly, trust between laypeople and pastors (and Synodical leaders) was eroded.

Here in Advent 2020, churches are once again celebrating Divine Services, but various restrictions persist.¹¹ There continues to be a lack of unity in the Church on theological issues related to the pandemic, and trust between laypeople and pastors continues to erode. At the same time, there is no concerted effort to address the lack of unity and the erosion of trust in our churches, nor has there been any strong leadership to guide the Church through this crisis. While the Synodical President has published several letters addressing these issues,¹² they have largely gone unnoticed and have had little impact, particularly in light of the earlier recommendation to close churches. The recently published Commission on Theology & Church Relations document¹³ also provided little guidance on these matters.

In the midst of the current discord and the accompanying leadership vacuum, and since another reported wave of infections threatens yet another round of possible church closures, we, the undersigned laymen of Lutheran Church-Canada, respectfully but emphatically submit this petition. Below we make requests based on a set of foundational declarations we outline, which we are eager to discuss in order to foster biblically-based unity (Ps 133:1; Eph 4:3; 1 Peter 3:8) in our Synod.

Requests

We earnestly request of the leadership of Lutheran Church-Canada, regional pastors and pastors of congregations, that they:

1. Publicly and unequivocally affirm the importance of the weekly celebrating of the Divine Service (as defined above), before their congregation, the community and earthly authorities, even during pandemics and other crises.
2. Ensure that the Divine Service is celebrated weekly in our churches, even if the governing authorities recommend or order churches to be closed or attendance to be severely restricted.

¹⁰ Astley, N. (2020, July 14). Personal Response to “Facts and Faith: What we Know to be true in the face of a pandemic”. (Rev. Nolan Astley is the Senior Pastor at Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kitchener, ON, Representative of the Synod President, CLTS Board of Regents, July 14, 2020).

¹¹ <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/200263>

¹² <https://www.lutheranchurchcanada.ca/covid-19/>

¹³ https://www.lutheranchurchcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2020/12/Contemporary-Issues_CTICR-2020.pdf

3. Communicate with governing authorities to advance the mission of the Church, to advocate for the continued and uninterrupted practice of the Divine Service, and to urge government officials to refrain from attempting to impose any impediments to the Divine Service.
4. Engage in extensive, meaningful discussions in our Synod and in our churches about the theological issues pertaining to pandemic-related church closures and restrictions, with the aim of arriving at theological unity and a clear scriptural understanding of the specific theological issues on which there is currently a lack of agreement or clarity.
5. Make a concerted effort to work with the laity to rebuild trust.

Steel Man Argument for Suspending the Divine Service During a Pandemic

As is clear from our requests, we disagree with the cessation of weekly Divine Services, especially during a pandemic or any other crisis. To focus our argument in support of our position, we first outline the ‘steel man’ argument in support of pandemic-related church closures (or modifications to church practices). The argument is based on two fundamental *theological* claims:

1. Scripture (e.g., Rom 13:1-7) states that, as Christians, we are required to “be subject to” our governing authorities, even if they recommend or order church closures or restrictions to the Divine Service.
2. Continuing to hold Divine Services during a pandemic violates the fifth commandment (“You shall not murder”). Assumedly, meeting together in a Divine Service could lead to disease spread, and this might result in harm to, or the death of, our neighbor.

Although the foregoing fundamental claims are theological, the second of these claims relies on several *scientific* assumptions, namely:

1. The pandemic disease (in this case Covid-19) is particularly contagious, harmful, and lethal (with initial reports claiming it was 10 times more deadly than the seasonal influenza^{14,15,16}).
2. The implementation of mitigation strategies, such as quarantining of the healthy population, social distancing, and mask wearing, will effectively curtail the spread of the disease.

These scientific claims originate from reputable government health authorities and have been reported in well-established media outlets, and as such, are based on a widely accepted *sociopolitical* foundation.

While the argument in favour of pandemic-related church closures (or modifications to church practices) is based primarily on a theological foundation (Rom 13 and the fifth commandment), it is also based to some extent on scientific and sociopolitical foundations.

¹⁴ Fifer J. House Oversight and Reform Committee Hearing on Coronavirus Response, Day 1. C-SPAN Web site. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4860450/user-clip-dr-anthony-fauci-addresses-covid-19-mortality-rate%20>.

¹⁵ <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/coronavirus-is-10-times-deadlier-than-seasonal-flu-fauci-says-1.1404001>.

¹⁶ <https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/487086-coronavirus-10-times-more-lethal-than-seasonal>

Fundamental Statements Against Suspending the Divine Service

We present here several series of statements that underpin our view that the Divine Service should be celebrated each Lord's Day, unimpeded. Importantly, we firmly believe that the arguments for or against church closures fall exclusively in the domain of theology. Therefore, we draw particular attention to our statements addressing theological issues; once those are dealt with scripturally, all other scientific and sociopolitical issues become irrelevant. Nevertheless, we do see some practical utility in addressing the related scientific and sociopolitical issues as well. Accordingly, below we make statements concerning all three foundations: theological, scientific and sociopolitical.

Our aim is to reason from Scripture (Acts 17:2), prayerfully discern, "what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2), help promote biblical practices in our churches (Ps 119:105),¹⁷ and foster biblically-based agreement and unity in the Church (Phil 2:2).

I. Theological Statements

The following is a series of theological statements pertaining to the pandemic-related disruption of the Divine Service. All of the following statements are supported by Scripture and by the Lutheran Confessions.

Series 1: Concerning the weekly celebrating of the Divine Service

1. God commanded his people to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy (the third commandment; Ex 20:8-11; Ex 31:13-17; Ezek 20:12). The Sabbath was given by God as a "sign forever" (Ex 31:17), "until He comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The third commandment has not been repealed by Jesus Christ¹⁸ (Matt 5:17; Luke 23:56; Acts 2:42; Heb 10:25). Instead, the Sabbath is a gift to man (Mark 2:27) and has taken on its full meaning with Christ as 'our rest'¹⁹ (Heb 4:1-13; Matt 12:8). As a participation in this reality, the observance of the Sabbath for the New Testament Church now chiefly involves the weekly gathering of God's people (Heb 10:25) to hear His Word²⁰ and physically participate in His Supper (Acts 20:7), which are the two fundamental components of the Divine Service. Historically, the Lutheran Church has confessed that the marks of the Church are the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.^{21,22}
2. Although the weekly observance of the Divine Service does not merit salvation, such weekly observance is derived from the Sabbath command and follows the timeline set as a pattern from the beginning of Creation (Gen 2:3). This affords the regular opportunity for God to bless His people with His faith-sustaining gifts of Word and Sacrament. In the New Testament, the Church regularly gathered on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7); while the specific day chosen is within the realm of Christian tradition, in Luther's judgment the day

¹⁷ See Epi I:1.

¹⁸ Hummel, H.D. (2005). Ezekiel 1-20. Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture. Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis. (2005) pp. 593-594.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See LC 1, 85

²¹ See CA VII:1 and IV along with SA III,xii:2.

²² <https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/marks-of-the-church/>

now chosen ought not to be changed.²³ The Divine Service is an important lifeline for the Church; as Ambrose says plainly, “Because I always sin, I always need the Sacrament.”²⁴ We should not allow our freedom in Christ to minimize the importance of weekly gathering around Word and Sacrament.²⁵ The Divine Service is needed all the more when people are afraid and concerned about illness or death. Luther has also advised that during a plague clergy must remain at their posts and continue to provide both Word and Sacrament.²⁶ For maximum clarity, the case we are putting forward is that regardless of the attendance level, the Divine Service should be celebrated on a weekly basis uninterrupted. Suspension of the regular weekly Divine Service creates an opportunity for the devil to weaken the Church’s moorings in Christ’s Word and Sacraments (Ps 2:3).²⁷

3. When the Church suspends the regular weekly Divine Service during a pandemic, it conveys a denial of the primacy of Christ and His supremacy over both His physical creation and the forces of the devil. Such a suspension reveals that we have placed our fear, love, and trust in earthly things above God. It testifies that the possible presence of a virus has more consequence among us than does the certain presence of Christ when His people gather to hear His Word and receive His Body and Blood. The ancient Christian maxim reads, “As we worship, we will believe.”²⁸ Do we believe that, “when we go to the Lord’s Supper... we commune with Christ and that wherever Christ is, there is heaven?”²⁹
4. Scripture explicitly teaches that God’s people ought to meet all the more as the end times approach (Heb 10:25), even as pestilence and crises are expected to increase (Luke 21:11; Rev 18:8). In addition, God is “our refuge” and he is able to deliver his people from illness and pestilence (Ps 91:3-10; Dan 3:17) if He chooses, particularly when they cling to Him (Mark 5:28; Luke 8:46) as we do when we participate in the Lord’s Supper. Even if one were to become ill as a result of attending the Divine Service, it is not a loss to suffer patiently and with endurance when following the Lord’s command (Rom 5:3-5; 1 Pet 3:17; 1 Pet 4:19). Nevertheless, because we ought to take care of the body God has given us (Eph 5:29; 1 Cor 6:20), and since Luther observes, “It is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot place the same burden upon everyone,”³⁰ individual Christians are at liberty to take precautions that do not interfere with or disrupt the Divine Service.

²³ See LC 1,85.

²⁴ See AC XXIV:33.

²⁵ Hummel, H.D. (2005) pp. 593-594.

²⁶ Martin Luther wrote a letter titled “Whether one may flee from a deadly plague” in which he wrote “Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees” (John 10:11). For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death.” <https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>.

²⁷ In an essay titled “Pandemic: A Time for Eucharistic Feast,” Rev. Mark C. Bestul dismantles the argument that pastors may impose by proclamation a so-called ‘Eucharistic fast’ on the people of God because secular authorities have done so.

²⁸ “Lex orandi, lex credendi.” – Prosper of Aquitaine

²⁹ Just Jr., Arthur A. Heaven on Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition. (p. 212)

³⁰ Luther, Martin. Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague. <https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>

5. In accord with the incarnational nature of the Gospel, virtual meetings and online videos cannot serve as acceptable substitutions³¹ for the physical gathering of the Church (Deut 12:8).³² While the communion of saints is truly a spiritual gathering, God calls His people to gather physically (Heb 10:25); it would therefore be wrong to impede upon Christian liberty by preventing this gathering from taking place (Matt 19:14). When the people of God gather around the Lord's Table, they testify to Christ's real presence (1 Cor 11:23-25). Let us not forget that God in His infinite wisdom has chosen to work His grace through physical means, undoubtedly because of his full understanding of our weaknesses, limitations and needs as physical beings, whom He created. When Christ says "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt 18:20), He is clearly speaking of a physical meeting in a particular location.³³ Innovative new definitions for terms like "gather" and "assembly" are unjustifiable, to which also testifies our Synod's long history of reaching out to delinquents absenting themselves from gathering for Divine Service. Various mediums have always been available to facilitate metaphorical gatherings and these have always been rejected by the Church as unviable alternatives to real gatherings;³⁴ our present day technology adds nothing new to this line of reasoning. While the Word of God is surely efficacious even outside of the Divine Service (Isa 55:11), the practice of gathering³⁵ should not be minimized.³⁶ Our Confessions teach, "God is pleased only with services instituted by his Word and done in faith,"³⁷ and Moses declared, we are to worship our God "as he tells us" (Ex 8:27). The paramount importance of assembly has been understood and upheld since ancient times (Ps 122:1, Luke 1:10, John 20:26, Acts 2:1, Acts 20:7, Rom 16:5, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, Philem 2, Acts 2:44-46, Heb 10:25),³⁸ and is indelibly embedded into the very vocabulary of the Church (e.g. *ecclesia*). Our own Synod has historically strongly emphasized this same view, stressing that God gathers His people together in the Divine Service to receive His gifts.³⁹ Although the Synod did not intend for online activity to permanently replace the Divine Service, its hasty recommendation to explore new online options during the lockdown has set a new precedent which will be difficult to walk back: pastors are now facing the substantial challenge of weaning their parishioners off of online options and bringing them back to the Divine Service.

³¹ <https://www.lutheranchurchcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2020/05/2020-05-21-Letter-to-Pastors-4.pdf>

³² See AC VII:1.

³³ In his commentary on Ezekiel 1-20, Rev. Dr. Horace D. Hummel writes "As long as we are in this world of time and space, worship will take place at some specific time and place where God's Word is proclaimed truly and his Sacraments administered rightly, and not merely in the privacy of the individual heart, apart from the body of Christ—the church. It has been said that he who does not worship at a specific time and place probably does not worship at all." (pp. 609-610)

³⁴ In Luther's day, the printing press was a relatively new technology that could have been—and indeed was—used to facilitate metaphorical gatherings. The telephone brought another way to gather metaphorically in the late 1800's. The television in the mid-1900's is another example. Holographic technology is developing rapidly and will offer yet another way to gather metaphorically in the future.

³⁵ Precht, Fred L. (1993). *Lutheran Worship History and Practice*. Concordia Publishing House, Missouri, p50.

³⁶ See LC 1,84.

³⁷ See AC XXVII:70.

³⁸ Precht, Fred L. (1993). *Lutheran Worship History and Practice*. Concordia Publishing House, Missouri, pp177-181.

³⁹ <https://www.lutheranchurchcanada.ca/what-we-do/worship-music/essence-of-worship/>

Series 2: Concerning the relation between Church and State

1. The State (i.e., any governmental body) does not have the authority to command the cessation of the Divine Service.⁴⁰ Christ is the Head of the Church (Eph 5:23; Matt 22:21), and there is no authority except from God (Rom 13: 1; John 19:11); there is no governmental authority that can supersede or override the commands God gives to His Church (Acts 5:29).
2. Similarly, the State does not have the authority to dictate or mandate alterations to the practices in the Divine Service (Ex 8:25-28). For example, the State does not have the authority to forbid the public preaching of the Word (Matt 28:20) or the use of the common cup during Holy Communion (“This cup . . .” 1 Cor 11:25). Since the pattern for outward worship has been given to us by God in his Word, the State’s intervention in these matters is a usurpation of God’s authority.
3. Scripture (even Rom 13:1-7) does not require Christians to have complete, unquestioning and unfettered obedience to the State (Acts 4: 18-20, Acts 5:28-29). While Christians are entreated to respect government offices and to obey just governmental laws and mandates (Rom 13:1-7), Christians are not required to submit to corrupt and unjust officers by obeying laws that contradict God’s commands (Dan 6:10; Dan 3:18). Indeed, the faithful Church described in the Book of Revelation is one of continued resistance⁴¹ to the Beast (e.g., Rev 10-20) and in fact, the power required to fight the Beast is derived from the continuous, pure preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the holy Sacraments.⁴²
4. When the State demands the shuttering of churches, or mandates changes to the ancient and Scriptural practices (Acts 2:42) of the Divine Service, the Church must oppose the State faithfully, confidently, and unyieldingly⁴³ (Acts 4:18-20, Acts 5:28-29, Matt 28:18-20).

Series 3: On the relation between the Third and the Fifth Commandments

1. The argument for the pandemic-related suspension of the Divine Service is understood by some in terms of a conflict between the third commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” Ex 20:8) and the fifth commandment (“You shall not murder” Ex 20:13), and therefore it is said that we are no longer to gather for Word and Sacrament. We maintain that the commandments are not in conflict and that they are not brought into conflict by a pandemic. This is just as the command to love God is not in conflict with the command to love one’s neighbor. These only appear to be in conflict when one misconstrues what it means to love (or murder) one’s neighbour, or when one confuses the order of the commandments and fails to qualify the commandments concerning man (commandments four to ten) by the commandments concerning God (commandments one to three) (see Matt 22:37-40).

⁴⁰ See AC XXVIII:12.

⁴¹ We also note that Christianity remained an illegal religion in the Roman Empire until 313 AD.

⁴² In his commentary on Revelation, Louis A. Brighton writes the following (p. 352) about the Beast from the sea: “*the beast represents and symbolizes every human authority and everything of the human nature that the dragon can corrupt and control and use in his warfare against the woman (the church) and her seed (individual Christians): political, governmental, social, economic, philosophical, and education systems, as well as individuals.*” (italics in original) Brighton, L. A. (1999). Revelation. Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture. Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis.

⁴³ <https://www.hausvater.org/articles/336-the-magdeburg-interpretation-of-romans-13-a-lutheran-justification-for-political-resistance.html>

2. The fifth commandment (“You shall not murder” Ex 20:13) does not forbid one from engaging in action that might result in the physical harm of one’s neighbor, because almost any action could have such a result. In other words, while the commandment forbids one to murder one’s neighbour, it does not imply that any action that risks harm to one’s neighbor is unacceptable and sinful. It is an error and an excessive burden on consciences when one makes the fifth commandment so capacious that it encapsulates almost any action and intention, including the possibility of unintentional transmission of a poorly understood pathogen (e.g. SARS-CoV-2).
3. Encouraging one’s neighbor to faithfully participate in the Divine Service is clearly beneficial for the neighbour’s soul and, Lord willing, also for the physical body (fulfilling the fifth commandment). We ought to “help and befriend” our neighbour “in every necessity of life,”⁴⁴ and what greater necessity does our neighbour have than his spiritual welfare? Depriving one’s neighbor of the means of grace and Christian fellowship, especially during a time of crisis, is certainly spiritually harmful and is physically and psychologically harmful also. Thus, any concerns about the wellbeing of one’s neighbour should consider not only the possible harm caused by a pandemic, but also, and primarily, the certain harm associated with depriving one’s neighbour of God’s life-giving treasures in the Divine Service and of the benefits of faithful Christian fellowship.

II. Scientific Statements

The argument in support of church closures during *this* pandemic is based partly on a consideration of the scientific information available about the pandemic—particularly on the alleged severity of the disease and on the effectiveness of various mitigation strategies. With regard to the cessation of the Divine Service, we believe that science does not have the privilege of informing such matters, and that the foregoing theological statements provide a sufficient foundation for our requests to pastors and Synod. We also believe that decisions about church closures ought not to depend on the severity of the pandemic, and that our foregoing theological statements and requests would be unchanged even if the current pandemic were much more harmful. However, to allay people’s concerns about church meetings during this Covid-19 pandemic, we make the following statements about scientific matters related to the pandemic using publicly available scientific evidence.

Series 1: Concerning the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic

1. Initially, the severity of the pandemic was considerably overstated. By any comparable metric, SARS-CoV-2 is nowhere near 10 times as deadly as the common flu, contrary to what was originally claimed and widely advertised by the WHO⁴⁵ and others.⁴⁶ The initial severity of Covid-19 was overestimated partly because of a confusion between (and an inability to

⁴⁴ See SC I:10

⁴⁵ <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--13-april-2020>

⁴⁶ Fifer J. House Oversight and Reform Committee Hearing on Coronavirus Response, Day 1. C-SPAN Web site. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4860450/user-clip-dr-anthony-fauci-addresses-covid-19-mortality-rate> Published March 11, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020.

effectively measure) ‘case fatality rates’ and ‘infection fatality rates.’⁴⁷ Importantly, the predictions from highly influential computer models—such as the one generated by epidemiologists at Imperial College London, which predicted 500,000 Covid-related deaths in the UK and 2.2 million deaths in the USA “if no action was taken”,⁴⁸ and which was used to justify lockdowns in some regions—turned out to be egregiously inaccurate, overestimating the number of deaths by a wide margin. Covid-19 is simply not the disease it was initially advertised to be.

2. There is reason to believe that the severity of the pandemic continues to be substantially overestimated. This is partly because commonly used tests for the disease (i.e., RT-PCR & antigen tests) have questionable validity and reliability and have high functional false positive rates,^{49,50,51} which would lead to an overestimation of the number of infections. We also note that the current ‘surge’ in infections and cases is difficult to interpret because of the high functional false positive rates of the tests and because of the massive increase in testing. Perhaps a better metric to consider is the number of Covid-related deaths. However, the number of deaths presented as Covid-related is substantially inflated because of false positives and because the criteria for classifying deaths as Covid-related have been liberal (e.g., deaths *with* Covid have been combined with deaths *from* Covid).⁵²
3. Despite the aforementioned measurement problems, even if the most liberal diagnostic criteria are applied, it is becoming apparent that the likelihood of dying from, or being severely affected by, SARS-CoV-2 is surprisingly low. The majority of deaths with Covid-19 occur among elderly individuals,⁵³ often with multiple pre-existing conditions.⁵⁴ As we care deeply for our senior brothers and sisters in Christ, we agree that individuals falling into this category should be encouraged to take appropriate precautions. Moreover, according to an article published in the preeminent journal *Nature*, “For every 1,000 people infected with the coronavirus who are under the age of 50, almost none will die.”⁵⁵ In fact, the infection fatality rate in some regions “remains close to zero for people under 50,”⁵⁶ and a substantial portion of individuals in this age group, if infected, are asymptomatic.⁵⁷ To illustrate the underwhelming number of deaths with Covid-19 consider the Region of Waterloo, which provides frequently updated statistics regarding Covid-19.⁵⁸ These numbers and curves show resolved cases (presently 3,976), active cases (presently 468) and Covid-related deaths (presently 137). It is perhaps worth noting that

⁴⁷ Brown, R. B. (2020). Public Health Lessons Learned From Biases in Coronavirus Mortality Overestimation. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2020.298>

⁴⁸ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01003-6>

⁴⁹ <https://academic.oup.com/cid/advance-article/doi/10.1093/cid/ciaa1491/5912603>

⁵⁰ Surkova, E., Nikolayevskyy, V., & Drobniewski, F. (2020). False-positive COVID-19 results: hidden problems and costs. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 8(12), 1167-1168.

⁵¹ <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/news/opinion/second-wave-faked-on-false-positives-pandemic-is-over-pharmaceutical-officer/ar-BB19vVBp>.

⁵² <https://theconversation.com/died-from-or-died-with-covid-19-we-need-a-transparent-approach-to-counting-coronavirus-deaths-145438>.

⁵³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>.

⁵⁴ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00087-eng.htm>.

⁵⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02483-2>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02483-2>.

⁵⁷ Oran, D. P., & Topol, E. J. (2020). Prevalence of Asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 Infection: A Narrative Review. *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

⁵⁸ <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/health-and-wellness/positive-cases-in-waterloo-region.aspx?mid=31127>.

the number of deaths has increased by 20 between July 2020 and December 2020. That is, in the 2nd half of 2020, twenty deaths were attributed to Covid-19 in the Region of Waterloo. It is important to keep in mind that on average 3,500 people in Canada die of the seasonal flu each year.⁵⁹

Series 2: Concerning pandemic-related interventions

1. When taken as a whole, the scientific evidence does not support the commonly held assumption that popular prevention policies, such as masking of the healthy population^{60,61} and mass lockdowns,⁶² meaningfully reduce the number of deaths caused by a respiratory virus like SARS-CoV-2.
2. There is growing concern that the pandemic mitigation strategies—particularly masking, social distancing and lockdowns—are in fact causing substantial harm.^{63,64,65,66,67} There is mounting concern and evidence that current pandemic interventions have increased the prevalence of mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression),^{68,69,70,71} increased drug use,^{72,73,74,75,76} reduced

⁵⁹ <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/health-and-wellness/flu.aspx#>

⁶⁰ <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-sag-mask-use-in-community-rapid-review.pdf>

⁶¹ For an extensive list of resources on masking, see the bonus show notes for Episodes 22 and 23 of the Not Conformed Show: <https://notconformed.show/episodes/episode-22-principled-pushback> and <https://notconformed.show/episodes/episode-23-model-covid-citizen>.

⁶² Berenson, Alex. *Unreported Truths about COVID-19 and Lockdowns: Part 2: Update and Examination of Lockdowns as a Strategy*. Blue Deep, Inc.

⁶³ Galea S, Merchant RM, Lurie N. The Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19 and Physical Distancing: The Need for Prevention and Early Intervention. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2020;180(6):817–818.

⁶⁴ Terry, P. C., Parsons-Smith, R. L., & Terry, V. R. (2020). Mood Responses Associated with COVID-19 Restrictions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 3090.

⁶⁵ Schippers, M., & Kompanje, E. (2020). For the Greater Good? The Devastating Ripple Effects of the Covid-19 Crisis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 577740.

⁶⁶ Brown, R. B. (2020). Public health lessons learned from biases in coronavirus mortality overestimation. *Disaster medicine and public health preparedness*, 1-8.

⁶⁷ <https://gbdeclaration.org/>.

⁶⁸ Terry, P. C., Parsons-Smith, R. L., & Terry, V. R. (2020). Mood Responses Associated with COVID-19 Restrictions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 3090.

⁶⁹ Czeisler, M. É., Lane, R. I., Petrosky, E., Wiley, J. F., Christensen, A., Njai, R., Weaver, M. D., Robbins, R., Facer-Childs, E. R., Barger, L. K., Czeisler, C. A., Howard, M. E., & Rajaratnam, S. (2020). Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic - United States, June 24-30, 2020. *MMWR. Morbidity and mortality weekly report, 69*(32), 1049–1057. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>

⁷⁰ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312605/parents-say-covid-harming-child-mental-health.aspx>

⁷¹ Dhami, M. K., Weiss-Cohen, L., & Ayton, P. (2020). Are People Experiencing the ‘Pains of Imprisonment’ During the COVID-19 Lockdown? *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 578430. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.578430>

⁷² Czeisler, M. É. et al., (2020).

⁷³ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/john-robson-opioid-deaths-show-the-true-cost-of-lockdowns>

⁷⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/public-health-annual-report-opioid-deaths-skyrocket-1.5780129>.

⁷⁵ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/marijuana/sns-tft-coronavirus-increases-global-marijuana-demand-20200701-oygaxryb7vhcjfeu44cgacicaa-story.html>.

⁷⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/03/style/am-i-drinking-too-much.html>

social cohesion in families,^{77,78} and increased poverty and hunger⁷⁹ (particularly in the third world, which is a travesty that cannot in good conscience be ignored).⁸⁰ Research also suggests that wearing the kind of masks in common usage today by the masses actually increases the risk of illness.⁸¹ Thus, abiding by the pandemic-related intervention rules evidently causes harm.

Series 3: Concerning the Covid-19 scientific consensus

1. Although “scientific consensus” on Covid-19 has been reported in the academic literature,^{82,83} it is important to recognize that ‘consensus’ is not an epistemological tool used in science; it is a sociopolitical tool used to guide policy. A reported scientific consensus on an issue does not mean that this view is accurate or true. In fact, assuming so is a fallacy known as the *argumentum ad populum* (appealing to the people)⁸⁴ (see also John 7:48). We hasten to add that there have been scientific consensus that have been later overturned (which is standard scientific practice), and that there is a myriad of scientific consensus that contradict central biblical teachings (1 Tim 6:20).
2. There are good reasons to be skeptical of any current scientific consensus on issues related to Covid-19. First, because of the demand for rapid publication of Covid-19-related scientific data, the scientific peer review process has been compromised, and decisions are increasingly being made based on ‘preprints,’^{85,86,87,88} which are manuscripts that have been made available before they have endured the quality control of peer review. Second, the paucity of the available data on Covid-19 at this time simply precludes any strong agreement on scientific issues relating to Covid-19. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the “scientific consensus” typically portrayed in the mass media excludes important and highly qualified dissenting voices. In this regard, we encourage readers to consider the signers of The Great Barrington Declaration⁸⁹ as just one example of the rapidly growing group of expert voices dissenting from the accepted “scientific consensus” on Covid-19.

⁷⁷ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid-19-panic-divorce-rates-1.5795625>

⁷⁸ Perez-Vincent, S. M., Carreras, E., Gibbons, M. A., Murphy, T. E., & Rossi, M. A. (2020). COVID-19 Lockdowns and Domestic Violence. Inter-American Development Bank: Washington, DC, USA. <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/COVID-19-Lockdowns-and-Domestic-Violence-Evidence-from-Two-Studies-in-Argentina.pdf>

⁷⁹ Pereira, M., & Oliveira, A. M. (2020). Poverty and food insecurity may increase as the threat of COVID-19 spreads. *Public health nutrition*, 23(17), 3236–3240. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980020003493>

⁸⁰ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7223940/coronavirus-world-hunger-rising/>

⁸¹ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/5/4/e006577.full.pdf>

⁸² Alwan, N. A., Burgess, R. A., Ashworth, S., Beale, R., Bhadelia, N., Bogaert, D., ... & Gurdasani, D. (2020). Scientific consensus on the COVID-19 pandemic: we need to act now. *The Lancet*, 396(10260), e71-e72.

⁸³ [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32153-X.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)32153-X.pdf)

⁸⁴ <https://www.logicalfallacies.org/argumentum-ad-populum.html>

⁸⁵ Majumder, M. S., & Mandl, K. D. (2020). Early in the epidemic: impact of preprints on global discourse about COVID-19 transmissibility. *The Lancet Global Health*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x\(20\)30113-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x(20)30113-3)

⁸⁶ Flanagan A, Fontanarosa PB, Bauchner H. Preprints Involving Medical Research—Do the Benefits Outweigh the Challenges? *JAMA*. 2020;324(18):1840–1843. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.20674

⁸⁷ <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1847/rr-6>.

⁸⁸ <https://cen.acs.org/policy/publishing/Pandemic-puts-preprints-first/98/i22>

⁸⁹ <https://gbdeclaration.org/>.

3. Despite claims of consensus on Covid-19, there is no shortage of conflicting messages, opinions, assessments, interpretations and data characterizations coming from various public and private institutions (e.g., academic, medical, governmental, and media). In the midst of this confusion we suggest that it would be ill-advised to make any important decisions based on the available information.

III. Sociopolitical Statements

As we have noted above, the argument in support of church closures during this pandemic also rests partly on a sociopolitical foundation. That is, people's attitudes towards the present pandemic depend on their worldviews and their knowledge about the pandemic, both of which are shaped by the information they receive from various sociopolitical institutions—academic, medical, governmental and media—that they deem trustworthy. In addition, people's responses to governmental bylaws, orders and rules depend on the structure of our (Canadian) legislative and legal systems and people's understanding of these systems. Accordingly, we thought it would be useful to consider several important sociopolitical elements at play.

Series 1: On Covid-19-related messaging

1. Scripture teaches that God's people should always be on guard against deception and the subversion of their biblical worldview (2 Tim 1:14); the current pandemic situation is not exempt from this warning. Indeed, our adversary the devil is the "father of lies" (John 8:44), the purveyor of "wicked deceptions" (2 Thess 2:10) and "the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9). His deceptive messages have brought sin into the world (Gen 3:1-5, 13), led to temptation (Matt 4:1-11), and caused people to hold false beliefs and worldviews (Matt 16:23). Furthermore, the forces of the evil one hinder the dissemination of the truth (1 Thess 2:18; Gal 5:7; Dan 10:12-14). Scripture also forewarns that many people will not listen to the truth but will instead "wander off into myths" (2 Tim 4:3-4). Against this scriptural backdrop, we should not be surprised to learn that governments, media and various other actors (corporations, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, etc.) have a long history of manipulating public opinion and people's perceptions of truth by using various refined and well-documented propaganda techniques.^{90,91,92,93,94,95,96} Importantly, the current pandemic-related messaging bears the hallmarks of an effective, coordinated and sustained propaganda

⁹⁰ Herman, D.S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books, New York (Original work published 1988)

⁹¹ Chomsky, N. (1991). *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. 2nd Ed. Seven Stories Press.

⁹² Ellul, J. (1965). *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Vintage Books Edition.

⁹³ Bernays, E. (2005). *Propaganda*. Ig Publishing, NY. (Original work published 1928).

⁹⁴ Lasswell, H.D. (2013). *Propaganda Technique In The World War*. Martino Publishing, CT. (Original work published 1927)

⁹⁵ Ponsonby, A. (1929). *Falsehood in War-time*.

⁹⁶ <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/canadian-military-to-establish-new-organization-to-use-propaganda-other-techniques-to-influence-canadians>.

campaign.^{97,98,99,100} This propaganda has been so effective that it has led not only to the shuttering of a large number of churches, but also to the wide acceptance of this unprecedented travesty even by a large number of Christians. The people of God would do well to be discerning (Matt 16:1-3; 6:22-23) with regard to any and all information that emerges from our secular sociopolitical institutions, subjugating these to Scripture, and not the other way around.

2. Pandemic-related propaganda has focused on several messages relevant to the argument in support of church closure. First, there has been the use of the scientifically crafted message¹⁰¹ that failing to follow government mandated prevention policies means harming (and even killing) one's neighbour. This propaganda has been effective in manipulating the opinions and actions of Christians, particularly in relation to the acceptance of (and demand for) church closures and Divine Service modifications. We have perceived that some clergy were among those who were unknowingly influenced by this propaganda. Pandemic-related propaganda has also focused on messages that instill fear,¹⁰² for people are much more easily manipulated, influenced and controlled when they are afraid.¹⁰³ It is the excessive fear fomented by media and government messaging that keeps some of our laypeople from returning to the Divine Service even though churches are currently open, and that motivates some people to demand Covid-related modifications to the Divine Service (note: we are not opposed to modifications such as spacing and improved air filtration etc. since these are not constitutive of the Divine Service). This sort of fear is misplaced (2 Tim 1:7), for we are called not to fear entities "that can kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matt 10:26-28).
3. Views that contradict the mainstream pandemic narrative have been systematically suppressed,^{e.g.,104,105} with individuals deemed to be holding 'unacceptable' views being

⁹⁷ Betsch, C. (2020). How behavioural science data helps mitigate the COVID-19 crisis. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1–1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0866-1>

⁹⁸ NYU Professor Mark Crispin Miller discussed Covid-19-related propaganda in his popular university course on propaganda only to have his course shut down. See <https://tomwoods.com/ep-1760-heterodox-leftist-opposes-lockdown-and-democratic-establishment/>

⁹⁹ For a discussion of Covid-related propaganda see: <https://notconformed.show/episodes/episode-20-death-o-meter>

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of Covid-related propaganda see: <https://notconformed.show/episodes/episode-23-model-covid-citizen>

¹⁰¹ Betsch, C. (2020). How behavioural science data helps mitigate the COVID-19 crisis. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1–1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0866-1>

¹⁰² https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/how-fear-appeals-and-disinformation-may-be-manipulating-the-public-on-covid?utm_source=top_news&utm_campaign=standard.

¹⁰³ Tannenbaum, M. B., Hepler, J., Zimmerman, R. S., Saul, L., Jacobs, S., Wilson, K., & Albarracín, D. (2015). Appealing to fear: A meta-analysis of fear appeal effectiveness and theories. *Psychological bulletin*, 141(6), 1178–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039729>.

¹⁰⁴ Former New York Times journalist Alex Berenson's book criticizing the mainstream narrative of Covid 19 was censored by Amazon. Berenson, Alex. Unreported Truths about COVID-19 and Lockdowns: Part 2: Update and Examination of Lockdowns as a Strategy (p. 2). Blue Deep, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰⁵ An episode of "Uncommon Knowledge with Peter Robinson" was initially banned because Dr. Scott Atlas shared counter-narrative Covid-related information: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZqGSnVt8c8&feature=youtu.be>; It was reposted on September 28, 2020, but had to include a series of disclaimer required by YouTube censors. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biC4nHPYtbA&feature=youtu.be>.

deplatformed,^{e.g.,106,107,108} vilified,^{e.g.,109} or simply ignored.^{e.g.,110} Concerningly, the reigning technology companies which provide “free” infrastructure to social media platforms have made—and published—policies that acknowledge their goal to suppress views that contradict their own; one can use their product only if one agrees to avoid contravening their views. To the consternation of the scientific community, counternarrative Covid-19-related information is now being actively censored on these platforms.¹¹¹ This kind of content monitoring and control is concerning given the recent decision in our churches to move towards online offerings. Indeed, Christian online content is routinely censored and it is conceivable that in the near future pressure may be exerted on churches to compromise their message to meet the guidelines of technology companies and the dictates of ‘politically correct’ speech.

Series 2: Concerning political agendas

1. Scripture teaches that the devil and his evil forces have had a large impact on people and on world events. Indeed, our “adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). There are “rulers,” “authorities,” “cosmic powers over this present darkness” and “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” that oppose the Church and which must be “battled” by the Church (Eph 6:12; Rev 12:1-17). Furthermore, these powers are associated with territories/nations (Dan 10:13) and they influence the views and actions of people (Matt 16:23; Mark 5:8) and governments (Rev 13:5-8). In fact, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19) and the impact of antichrists will increase as we near the end times (Matt 24:21-22). In addition, God has warned that kings will tend to oppress their people (1 Sam 8:6-18). Given this pernicious and unrelenting influence of the devil and his forces on people and institutions, it seems reasonable to assume that secular politicians, educators, journalists and other influential figures will rarely promote ideas, and act in ways, that are beneficial for the people of God. Furthermore, the current government of Canada opposes the Christian worldview as it pertains to many fundamental societal issues (e.g., marriage, abortion, gender, family values, education, religious freedom). Jesus said, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt 12:30). Thus, the secular authorities are against Christ and should not be trusted, nor should their intentions be assumed to be pure and benevolent. The current pandemic situation is not

¹⁰⁶ The website of the “America’s Frontline Doctors” was taken down by the website hosting platform Squarespace. See <https://www.fastcompany.com/90533570/americas-frontline-doctors-website-goes-dark-as-platforms-scramble-to-scrub-misinformation>; They are now hosted on a different platform: <https://www.americasfrontlinedoctors.com/>.

¹⁰⁷ Former Pfizer Vice President, Dr. Mike Yeadon, was banned from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MABUNWhqRs4>; See also: <https://www.rt.com/uk/507321-yeadon-interview-banned-youtube/>.

¹⁰⁸ Dr. Roger Hodkinson, who is the CEO of a company that makes a Covid test, has been vilified and his video has been removed from YouTube: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEo3rnU12jw>). Some of his credentials can be found here: <https://www.westernstandardonline.com/2020/11/senior-doc-says-alberta-politicians-playing-medicine-media-driving-hysteria/>; and here: <https://rairfoundation.com/renowned-pathologist-calls-coronavirus-the-greatest-hoax-ever-perpetrated-its-just-another-bad-flu-watch/>.

¹⁰⁹ Dr. John Ioannidis (Stanford University) was a highly regarded epidemiologist before he stated his counter-narrative position on Covid-19. He is now widely vilified. As an example, see this article and the associated editor’s note: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-ioannidis-affair-a-tale-of-major-scientific-overreaction/>.

¹¹⁰ This group of preeminent researchers has been almost completely ignored in the mainstream media because of their counter-narrative view of Covid-19: <https://gbdeclaration.org/>.

¹¹¹ Niemiec, E. (2020). COVID-19 and misinformation. *EMBO Reports*, 21(11), e51420. <https://doi.org/10.15252/embr.202051420>

immune to these concerns, especially since one outcome of the pandemic has been the suspension of the Divine Service, which is undoubtedly a central goal of the devil and his minions (Eph 6:12), for in the Divine Service heaven and earth intersect and Christ feeds His own with the food of immortality (John 6:51).

2. During this pandemic, the application and enforcement of government orders, rules and bylaws have been systematically biased. For example, they have been enthusiastically enforced for the activities of Christian communities¹¹² (e.g., Old Order Mennonite services),^{113,114,115} but not for those of other groups (e.g., aboriginal ceremonies¹¹⁶ and Marxist protests^{117,118}). Furthermore, government-issued ‘financial rescue packages’ have included stipulations that are inconsistent with biblical teachings, which selectively disadvantage Christians and Christian churches.¹¹⁹ This discriminative application of restrictions and benefits reflects the government’s implicit and explicit values, which are increasingly inconsistent with Christian values. Consider also that during the lockdown the governing authorities deemed some businesses “essential” (including cannabis stores) while recommending churches to close. One disconcerting outcome of such biased pandemic-related recommendations and restrictions is that they have garnered general acceptance of the notion that the Divine Service is indeed not essential, and that it is less important than access to cannabis stores. Will Lutherans abide by this characterization of the Divine Service? The Lutheran Church Fathers note in the Formula of Concord that during times of persecution, one may not even compromise on matters of adiaphora, much less on matters of Christian liberty (how much less still on matters pertaining to the Divine Service!) and that during such times it is particularly important to have a clear and correct confession against all sorts of corruptions.¹²⁰

Series 3: On political engagement in Canada

1. In Canada, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* affirms citizens’ freedom of religion, which according to the Department of Justice is defined as “the right to entertain such religious beliefs as a person chooses, the right to declare religious beliefs openly and without fear of hindrance or reprisal, and the right to manifest religious belief by worship and practice or by teaching and dissemination.”¹²¹ Moreover, it has been determined by the courts that “measures that undermine the character of lawful religious institutions and disrupt the vitality of religious communities represent a profound interference with religious freedom.”¹²² Thus, before

¹¹² <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/christian-church-to-sue-ontario-govt-after-police-threaten-attendees-at-drive-in-service>.

¹¹³ <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/health-and-wellness/resources/Documents/December-2-Section-22-Order-Schools.pdf>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/health-and-wellness/resources/Documents/December-2-Section-22-Order-Places-of-Worship.pdf>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/05/health/health-care-open-letter-protests-coronavirus-trnd/index.html>.

¹¹⁶ <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/dark-stain-minister-says-indigenous-ceremonies-to-continue-despite-covid-19>.

¹¹⁷ <https://nationalpost.com/news/trudeau-defends-decision-to-attend-protest-despite-advice-to-avoid-large-crowds-during-covid-19>.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/06/06/trudeau-takes-a-knee-with-protesters-newton-sot-vpx.cnn>.

¹¹⁹ <https://ceba-cuec.ca/>.

¹²⁰ See Epi. X:6, 11 and SD IV:29, X:3,28.

¹²¹ <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art2a.html>

¹²² <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art2a.html>

submitting to governmental recommendations and orders—especially those that have been rapidly issued in a moment of crisis—we urge the leaders of our churches to remember that in Canada we do have fundamental God-given rights and freedoms as documented in our Charter. Furthermore, history shows that citizens generally do not regain rights forfeited during times of crisis.

2. In Canada, we have an adversarial political system in which opposition to the powers that be is encouraged (i.e., we have an Official Opposition in parliament). In such a political system, civilian pushback against overly restrictive, unjust and tyrannical governmental edicts, orders, and laws is required as it is one of the system’s fundamental components. Citizens must engage in principled pushback against governmental overreach to prevent tyranny.¹²³
3. Principled dissent in Canada can take the form of “lawful disobedience”¹²⁴ of a particular governmental order, because in the Canadian legislative and legal systems, the full meaning and circumscribed application of any given order is ultimately determined and clarified by the courts. At times, then, it may be more appropriate to disobey than to submit. Furthermore, given that many government orders are necessarily (and sometimes deliberately) vague, contacting low level government officials for clarifications may simply lead to an unreasonably strict ad hoc interpretation. Government orders ought to be interpreted by citizens in a way that is most consistent with the supreme law of the land, the Constitution, and they ought to be interpreted by Christians in a way that is most consistent with the mission of the Church.

Concluding Statements

The unexpected worldwide changes brought about by the rapid emergence of Covid-19 have precipitated a crisis in our Synod, leading to divisions among our people, including the clergy, Synodical leaders, seminary professors and the laity. Perhaps the most fundamental division concerns the pandemic-related interruption and disruption of the weekly Divine Service. Evidently there are, in LC-C, different views: about the importance and priority of the Divine Service in the life of the Church; about how the foregoing relate to God’s commands and His grace; about how avoiding harm to one’s neighbor during a pandemic relates to loving one’s neighbour through the Divine Service; and about how the life of the Church ought to be influenced by the scientific and sociopolitical spheres of life. These are not small theological issues that can remain publicly unaddressed.

We are also deeply concerned about the way the pandemic was handled by the Synod and our clergy. While we are thankful that our church leaders demonstrated genuine concern for the physical health of the laity, we are disheartened by the fact that our church leaders gave up on the Divine Service so quickly and voluntarily. We were surprised that the Synod was willing to recommend the suspension of the ancient and enduring practice of the weekly gathering of God’s people around Word and Sacrament, which to us communicated a low view of the Divine Service. If our Synod recommends for churches to close in the face of Covid-19, how will it respond when much more significant challenges come? On the other hand, we were encouraged by the discerning counsel issued by our Seminary, although we were dismayed at the rocky reception it received from some quarters of our church body.

¹²³ <https://ccla.org/cclanewsites/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/June-2020-COVID-report-working-document.pdf>

¹²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlZzNXDfMfw&feature=youtu.be>

When we look at our church, we see discord and conflict. When we look at our government, we see ambiguity and confusion in hastily enacted recommendations, directives and laws. When we look at science, we see poor data, inconsistencies and weakly-founded conclusions. We, as laymen, are at the mercy of all these three combined. Lord, help us!

We believe that all of the aforementioned issues must be discussed among us with urgency, respect and grace, with the goal of attaining unity and peace in the Church, healing frayed relationships and rebuilding eroded trust. With this declaration, we wish to stimulate a dialogue by offering statements for further discussion. We are aware and prepared to accept that if God does not bless this document and use it for His purpose, it is all for naught (Ps 127:1).

We hope that the clergy and the leadership of LC-C take heed of our requests. We call and rely upon the church leadership at all levels to guide us as we follow Christ, even if that means treading an arduous path. We wish to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ who gave His life for our sins, and to continue to receive His precious gifts of Word and Sacrament with our fellow Christians in the Divine Service regardless of any restrictions imposed upon us.

We, the undersigned laymen of LC-C, respectfully submit this document with much hope and prayer. Hope, that it will bring our leadership to reflect upon the declarations and petitions offered therein. Prayer, for our words not to cause ire, or wrath on, or from, our brothers of the clergy, but for these words to have enough strength to break through the present impediments.

On December 17, 2020, in the third week of Advent, this declaration and petition was authored and signed in Waterloo, Ontario, by (in alphabetical order):

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