1. **How does the COVID-19 outbreak and the accompanying isolation shift the role that faith communities play in people's lives?**

To start, perhaps a brief view of how Lutherans understand themselves within the world. We believe in the two kingdoms (or realms) theology, whereby God uses legally constituted government to provide for the common good. Simplifying to the extreme, the kingdom of the right-hand deals with the spiritual and eternal while the kingdom of the left-hand deals with the temporal or earthly. In other words, our Lutheran theology acknowledges that God is active in the world, blessing and preserving what He has created both through governing of duly elected civil authorities and the ministry of His Church. Both, we believe, are essential to full human flourishing. The church gladly obeys government authority unless and until it contradicts the clear Command of God to preach His Word without apology or compromise.

The presence of this pandemic may be new to us, but it is nothing new to the history of the Holy Christian Church. As history shows, Christians have lived in and willingly ministered to people during such plagues, as well as countless other various natural afflictions or calamities. Following the lead of our Lord, and since its beginning in the Book of Acts, the Church has always sought to care for and minister to those in need or who are afflicted with disease, misfortune, or any kind of malady. Thus, the presence of the pandemic does not change the mission of the Church nor its central mission and endeavor to proclaim and deliver the forgiveness of sins earned by the shed blood of Christ the Crucified. However, it has caused us to think through how we will continue to care for our neighbor (the simple Lutheran term for fellow human beings), while dutifully obeying the government for the good of our neighbor. Should the government become too intrusive or fail to offer a compelling reason for any restrictions adversely and severely affecting religious communities, particularly our ability to care for souls and provide the means of grace for the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, then the Church must obey God rather than man (Act 5:29).

The “stay at home” or “shelter in place” orders that various state governments have issued are certainly shifting the focus for daily life of most individuals. As such, it certainly also impacts the Christian community, which is made up of those individuals. Isolation is taking a toll on many, while at the same time providing families more time together. This can strengthen many relationships while also revealing the cracks in marriages that are now becoming fissures. Additionally, fear of the disease, loss of gainful employment, and uncertainty about the future are all weighing on people’s minds.

All this simply means that the regular soul care that our congregations and pastors are generally attuned to have now taken on more common and shared symptoms as a result of the pandemic. Nonetheless, pastors do have more opportunity to meet individually or in single family groups than under more ordinary circumstances. Some of these are still social distanced face-to-face interactions, though many are also done by phone and some also on video depending on individuals’ comfortability with technology. Coupled with the amount of time people have to simply think about life in general and their life in particular, and dwell on their own mortality and their shortcomings and sins, people are having many more feelings of personal crises, which therefore in turn create the need for many more serious pastoral conversations about their status with the God who created them. Therefore, the Church is standing attentive and alert to the tremendous evangelism opportunities that are occurring as a result of this pandemic, while encouraging our members to be all the more ready to give a reason for the hope that we have (1 Pet. 3:15).

1. **How has your routine changed during this past month or so?**

I served as a parish pastor for 15 years and now for the last nearly 2 years I have been serving as a District President (Bishop) for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), Minnesota South District. As the ecclesiastical supervisor of nearly 1,200 church workers (pastors, teachers, and deaconesses) and 243 congregations of this district, ordinarily I would regularly travel to meet with congregations and pastors, in addition to preaching and teaching around the district. All of that travel has stopped for the time being. I now spend much of my time on the phone or in video conference meetings and corresponding via email. Adhering to social distancing guidelines, many in our church offices around the district are also working from home.

1. **I'm writing about privacy of faith interactions during the COVID-19 crisis, during which many people are using videoconferencing to talk candidly with their pastors, priests, imams, etc.,. Could you describe if/why it's sometimes important for faith leaders to have confidentiality when conversing with their congregants?**

LCMS Lutherans practice ordinary care and extraordinary care of souls. The ordinary care of souls is done through the Divine Service (worship service) wherein the means of grace (Word and Sacrament) are publicly administered to the congregation for the forgiveness of sins, instruction and the strengthening of faith, and the delivery of a good conscience. Extraordinary care is all other care given to troubled or wanting souls in the various circumstances of life, usually always in a private setting. All soul care conversations would be expected to be confidential. This affords for a safe and trusted setting wherein a soul can bare his or her burdens in a manner conducive to exploring and ministering to all the dynamics being presented.

Additionally, LCMS Lutherans do practice private confession and absolution between a penitent and his/her pastor. Confidentiality in this setting is divinely mandated and must not for any reason be violated. In fact, in our ordination vows we pastors pledge never to divulge the sins confessed to us. This confession/absolution ordinarily occurs in personal meetings, but in certain circumstances can take place by phone or video connection. Regardless, all care of souls conversations would be expected to be confidential, no matter over what medium.

1. **One focus of my piece is a Senate bill that could have the effect of requiring technology providers to break the encryption that keeps things like Skype conversations private and prevents digital eavesdropping. How would you see that change affecting relationships between faith leaders and their congregants?**

I would not necessarily see that changing those relationships to any significant degree. Please do not mistake that for any kind of endorsement of that Senate bill. Far from it. Rather, it simply means that regardless of what the government may attempt and unduly introduce, we will continue to give care to the souls of our congregations and community as the Lord has mandated us to do. Of course, we may need to be more savvy and careful of how we use electronic media and technology should we perceive someone is eaves dropping, but that will not prevent us from continuing on with the mission and ministry our Lord has commissioned us to do. Even so, passing such a bill would be a tremendous intrusion into the privacy of citizens and violation of privacy, which could easily lead to tyrannical governmental oppression of Christians (or other religions for that matter) for their beliefs, as is already being done in many despotic countries right now.

In short, preaching and teaching that is podcast, video streamed, broadcast, etc. must be free of interference by either government suppression or—more likely in our current secularized times—public opinion. Religious freedom in many ways is threatened in our country as much (or more) by “political correctness” than it is by government intrusion. Again, I am not speaking specifically to any Senate bill currently under consideration, but simply expressing the importance for religious liberty in general and speaking against those incrementally stripped away rights of citizens that would also deeply impact religious freedom.

1. **I am writing this from Berlin, where some living people still have very strong memories of government organizations listening in on every aspect of their lives. Pastors were often especially strongly targeted by the East German government because of their roles as community leaders. Is that kind of surveillance a worst-case scenario for faith leaders in the United States, either now or under some future administration?**

I would be concerned with that even more as a citizen than merely as a Christian. Such surveillance would violate the founding principles of our democratic republic and open up serious concerns for tyrannical governmental intrusion and loss of the fundamental right to the free exercise of religion and the privacy rights inherent in the U.S. constitution, as the recent NSA debacle of the previous decade demonstrated.

Nonetheless, we do our best to live in the two kingdoms, recognizing the governing structure the Lord has put in place for our well-being, while also serving the Triune God first and foremost. We recognize that in America we have the bill of rights, the first of which begins with “congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It goes on to include freedom of speech and the right to assemble peaceably. As our church is observing the social distancing and assembly limitations while the pandemic is being suppressed, treated, and remedied out of love for our neighbor as mandated by the fifth commandment (You shall not murder) and out of respect for legal authority implied in the fourth commandment (Honor your father and mother), we will not and cannot stop the care of souls as mandated by the third commandment (Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it Holy) and commissioned by Christ Jesus—the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (Matt. 28:18-20, John 20:22-23)—as we are able to do without endangering the health of our neighbors.

1. **The Lutheran church that I attend does corporate confession, while Catholics do individual confession. Can you talk a little bit about the role that confession plays for a lot of worshippers? What useful purpose does it serve?**

Confession and absolution have tremendous importance for Christians. This goes for both corporate confession and private confession. Based on the words of Jesus in John 20:22-23, confession is a means to unburden a troubled conscience and receive the forgiveness of sins through a duly authorized pastor, bestowing to the penitent a right standing before almighty God. Lutherans believe that “…when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself” (Small Catechism, Part V, Confession). Therefore, confession is a central part of Lutheran worship. The useful purposes it provides may be initially be seen to be primarily spiritual in nature, i.e. the forgiveness of sins and the giving of a good conscience before God, but that overlooks the fruit of repentance and the power of a good conscience. Such fruit results from the love of Christ received in absolution and is now at work in the believer for the good of his or her neighbor, which is often seen in greater compassion and care for the neighbor.

1. **Do you feel that I'm leaving anything big out of this set of questions?**

Our pastors and church leaders have adapted marvelously to current restrictive conditions, implementing new communication tools in service of the gospel and—in many locales—providing a multiplicity of small group or family services that provide the Means of Grace in settings that conform with the mandated social gathering restrictions being utilized to curtail and stop the spread of the virus. Yet at the same time we are stressing that virtual gatherings of God’s people using online technology will never supplant the need for Christians to assemble together in real time and space as one family of believers. The Christian faith is an embodied faith. While we are thankful for virtual tools and “new media” during these days of exile, they cannot sustain us for the long haul. We long to return to God’s house to receive His gifts together in the worshipping assembly.

Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford

District President, MN South District, LCMS