

## SCHMIEDELEUT I KONFERENZ DER HUTTERISCHEN GEMEINDEN

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March 24, 2020

To all Hutterite communities,

On Monday afternoon, March 23, thirty-four ministers and brothers met at Acadia-Gemeinde to discuss how we will proceed with our Easter observances and other community events in light of the emerging COVID-19 crisis.

To open the meeting, Arnold Hofer reminded the assembly of the importance of listening to the still voice of God in tumultuous times. He also emphasized that we need to make good decisions for our communities so that everybody remains safe, and shared readings from Psalm 46:1-12, 121:1-8, and 1 Cor 12:9-10.

First, there was a brief discussion about accountability and bad theology. The question posed was, “How can we hold communities who aren’t taking the situation seriously to account?” Of the ministers assembled, it appeared that most of them had already implemented response plans for their communities. Should there be instances of communities who are careless, they will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, if need be, with the support of the Hutterian Safety Council. One example of bad theology that was given is the notion that Christians who have a firm faith don’t need to worry about this virus or take precautions because their faith will somehow protect them. While we must always be spiritually prepared to depart from this world, such a careless attitude may endanger the lives of others by transmitting the virus to vulnerable members in our communities. Additionally, it may very well be that some of our beloved community members may pass away in this pandemic. Let us never forget that death is an enemy God has overthrown—the upcoming Easter holy days are a profound reminder of the fact that Jesus’ resurrection is the “first fruit” of this, and we eagerly await the time when God’s kingdom will fully come “on earth as it is in heaven” (1 Cor 15:23; Matt 6:10).

Secondly, Mark Waldner from Decker provided an update regarding the work of the COVID-19 Taskforce, which operates under the umbrella of the Hutterian Safety Committee. Its role will be to distribute timely and reliable information to all Hutterites and to advise community leaders as needed. Thus far, the Taskforce has connected with the provincial government on behalf of our communities to address the issue of mixed messages coming from MLAs. Understandably, the government is overwhelmed by this crisis. The assembly agreed that the Taskforce is responsible to lead the church through this challenging situation. If leaders have questions, need advice or encouragement, please contact Mark Waldner, one of the Taskforce leaders (Decker Community, mwaldner@pwsd.ca, 204-764-0536).

Mark reported that the key message of the HSC is as follows: All federal and provincial orders apply to our communities. This means that Public Health Orders **MUST** be obeyed. At the same time, it is in our best interest, health-wise and because of our relations with the rest of society, to observe the same measures as everybody else. As Christians, we are called to live as model citizens in all fitting things (1 Pet 2:13).

In light of these recommendations, the assembled ministers discerned the following guidelines for upcoming church and community events (these are in addition to the earlier guidelines):

**Erklären:** This takes place on Sunday, March 29. For individuals in isolation, it may be done via speaker-phone. This is an earnest matter and the best case should be sought in each situation without breaching safety protocols. Human lives matter infinitely more than traditional practices.

**Tauffesten:** If at all possible, ministers are to find a way to move forward with the baptisms. There are two options for communities with *Täufling* to consider, should the situation become worse: First, the baptism service could take place a week earlier on March 29. Second, postpone the baptism indefinitely until the pandemic subsides, perhaps until *Pfingsten*. Riedemann’s *Rechenschaft* states that “*Weil...die Gemeinde den Schlüssel hat, soll es vor der Gemeinde geschehen.... Wo es aber je nicht sein mag und die Gemeinde nicht mag erlangt werden, so mag es auch der Täufer besonders und allein tun* (Acts 8:29-38; p. 75).

How brothers and sisters greet the newly-baptized will also have to be modified. In the spirit of how we observe *Abendmahl*, where we do not personally express ourselves, but rather extend to each other “the hands

of our hearts,” communities will have to be creative in ensuring that this takes place within the limitations of our situation. The responsibility for discerning the right course of action rests with each community.

The **Oster Leadn** should be observed as much as possible while keeping the health and safety of our members in mind. (See the guidelines for *tägliches Gottesdienst*.)

**Des Herren Gedächtnis:** This meal of remembrance serves two purposes: First, it commemorates the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Second, the bread and wine symbolize our unity in the Spirit (*Einheitheit des Geistes*, Eph 4:3):

*Gleich wie ein Brot von vielen Körnlein  
und auch ein Trank von vielen Beerlein,  
also sein all wahrhaftig' Christen  
Ein Brot, ein Trank, ohn' Trug und Listen.  
An Christus dem Herren, er tut uns nähren,  
die wahre Lieb' und Gemeinschaft mehren.<sup>1</sup>*

The assembly was reminded that our present situation calls for flexibility. Indeed, if considered rightly, each communal meal we share is a “mini-Abendmahl.” Therefore, as with *Tauffesten*, each community must discern the best and safest way to observe the *Abendmahl* in their context. As much as possible, communities are encouraged to maintain our traditional form and timing. However, should the present crisis escalate, we may well have to postpone until it is safer. Sam Waldner from Decker summarized it well: “Let us find a way around this challenge without impacting the holiness of the matter.” Zach Waldner from Maple Grove reminded those present that Jesus put traditions aside when they oppressed or endangered human lives.

**Wochtn und Leichtn:** The hosting community will have to make decisions surrounding these events. It was suggested that to accommodate the limitations regarding public meetings, it may take two wakes to permit close relatives a time for grieving. For the present, funeral attendance should be limited to a by-invitation-only basis. Again, individual communities are responsible for discerning the proper, safe course of action. The COVID-19 Taskforce is available to advise.

**Tägliches Gottesdienst:** Communities are encouraged to find means to come together for worship in a way that respects the Public Orders. Numerous options are available via technology or dividing into groups that gather in different areas. If too many cannot attend, encourage devotions at home. Children and the vulnerable should remain at home.

**Caring for our elderly and Obwoetn:** The Public Health Orders must be observed and each community must discern the best way to ensure that people who need support are well cared for.

**Schools:** When schools are closed, as per orders by the authorities, fathers and mothers are encouraged to guide the learning of their children as directed by our teachers.

**Hochzeiten:** Given the challenges that recent weddings have already presented, these should also be postponed.

Plans for **Predigerwählen und Einsetzungen** are on hold indefinitely.

Samuel Waldner (Decker) concluded the assembly with warm wishes and an earnest prayer for protection in the days ahead. May God help us find ways to meet the needs of our communities in these strange times, and ensure they are spiritually nourished.

May God protect us all,

  
Arnold Hofer

  
Samuel Waldner

  
Josh Hofer

<sup>1</sup> Hans Schmid, “O Gott Vater im Himmelsthron,” 26.