



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Dear Gulf Coast Synod Leaders,

Thank you for your leadership in this most challenging moment. It is a great honor to serve this synod, especially in times like these. I am reminded of the psalmist's words: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble!"

In this letter I am offering recommendations and responses to questions I have received over the last few days. The situation has been evolving quickly, so keep in mind what we say here may change. It is best to stay current with our Gulf Coast social media accounts to get the most current news.

This Friday, [Bishop Eaton](#) and Houston religious have asked us all to stop at 12 o'clock noon for a few moments of prayer. Wherever you are, stop and whisper a prayer. If you are online, join me for noon prayer at the Gulf Coast Synod [Facebook](#) page.

Worship

As you know, our recommendation has been no in-person worship until the end of March, including a suspension of the sacrament for the safety of the most vulnerable among us. This is still my strongest recommendation. The deans and synod staff met today, and given the recommendations and urgent pleas of health officials and medical experts, we concluded that **the best recommendation we can provide is to extend the recommendation to discontinue in-person worship *until further notice*.** Many in major metropolitan areas of our synod are under "stay at home" orders anyway, so there will be no question. We encourage those in rural areas to also continue to suspend in-person worship until further notice.

We fully expect this to extend past Holy Week and Easter. This will be sad for all of us. We encourage you to start planning right now for an online Easter celebration. Also, begin considering what your first Sunday back will be like, whenever that is. It may be soon, or it may be summer. Get your team to start thinking about it now.

To offer pastors and deacons support, I have videoed a sermon for this Sunday, based on the raising of Lazarus story from the Lent V periscope in the Revised Common Lectionary. You can use this to steal ideas for your own sermon, or broadcast my sermon, and give yourself a break. [CLICK HERE](#) to download the video and/or a PDF of the sermon.

I have also recorded a Maundy Thursday sermon. Bishop Sue Briner (Southwestern Texas Synod) will record a Good Friday sermon. Bishop Erik Gronberg (North Texas-North Louisiana Synod) will record an Easter Sermon. When these videos and PDFs are available we will email you information.

Communion

Our deans were not of one mind about this matter. Holy Week and Easter are coming. Some were adamant about not exposing members to the risk of transmission and therefore felt strongly about suspending the Sacrament. Still others, hearing the people's yearning for the means of grace, especially in a time of crisis, are already exploring a variety of ways to provide the Sacrament of the Altar in unique ways. The ELCA churchwide resources around worship and communion are [here](#). The recommendations from Lutheran World Relief can be found [here](#). The deans resolved to offer best practices for congregations who choose those options. Here are five patterns we see being practiced in our synod:

1. Suspend the Sacrament

It is most likely that we will not have Easter services in person. We are not the first Christians who have had to miss holy days because of plagues, war, or violence. Luther said Christians should take the sacrament at least once a quarter, so he would not have balked at a suspension such as we are experiencing now. This is the path our Roman Catholic siblings have taken.

2. Drive-in

Dean Marcia Kifer at Shared Lutheran Ministries of Fayette County is planning on this option, in which congregations come to the parking lot and stay in their cars. They will be able to see her and tune their radios to a provided frequency, transmitted through an FM transmitter (\$150-180 online).

Congregations that use this option may choose a Service of the Word. Those who have communion should take great care that communion assistants bringing bread and wine to cars use hand sanitizer after every wafer, and after every cup. Gloves don't change that. If a gloved communion assistant touches one infected hand, every person they commune afterwards will be exposed. Also, sanitizer does not stop airborne transmission. An additional option is to purchase pre-filled communion cups and package them at least three days prior to distribution in plastic bags or to-go containers. The safest choice right now is suspension.

Dean Richard Rhoades reminds us that this option won't work for some congregations, like First Galveston that have very small parking lots. Likewise, some congregations are in areas that are under orders that will not permit such a gathering.

3. Drive-through

Pastors Shea Berbaum (St. John of Prairie Hill in Brenham) and Mark Groves (Christ Brenham) offered communion in the parking lot, however not *en masse*, but rather as people drove through, much like drive-through ashes on Ash Wednesday. At St. John Prairie Hill, people drove into the cemetery for affirmation of baptism and confession, then to the parsonage where an assisting minister read the gospel, then to the church where the pastor read the Words of Institution to every car (they had 80), used hand sanitizer, then provided a wafer, then used hand sanitizer again, then provided wine. This careful approach is thoughtful but will not prevent airborne transmission.

The first two options still require people to leave their homes, which may not be possible if people are in a place under orders to shelter at home. The Houston order says, "All public gatherings of any number of people outside a single household are prohibited." Also, even if you are not in such an area, there are people who are over 60 or who have pre-existing conditions who should not leave home anyway. Consider how you will minister to them.

4. Online

Some of our colleagues, like Adriana Johnson Rivas (Principe de Paz Houston) and Brad Otto (Messiah Cypress), held worship online, including the Words of Institution. They communed the small group providing worship, while inviting people to commune themselves at home.

5. At home

Some are going to invite people to celebrate communion at home, during this crisis. This is not a practice our deans would encourage under normal circumstances, but these are far from normal circumstances. The liturgy would be similar to Distribution of Communion to Those in Special Circumstances in *Occasional Services*. This is an extension of the Lord's Supper to those, such as the sick and the homebound, who are unable to be present at the celebration of the congregation. Well, are we not all homebound these days? Normally, the elements would be brought from the Sunday morning Eucharist, but since that is not possible, this would be considered a special circumstance.

Gather for prayer, song (if you dare), Scripture, creed, prayers, and offering (send it in or give online). One person in the household would lead a confession, such as,

Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.

An assurance of forgiveness with these or similar words:

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you, and for his sake, God forgives you all your sins. To all who believe he gives the power to become the children of God and bestows upon them the Holy Spirit. Amen

After sharing the peace with a bow, lifting the wine and bread, saying, as per the homebound liturgy,

When our congregation last gathered, the pastor proclaimed the words of Jesus, saying, "In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me."

Say the Lord's Prayer, then share communion. Afterwards, a prayer may be said. Bless one another with the words, "The blessing of almighty God be upon you and remain with you always."

Our lay staff reminded us that some of the most powerful moments of Holy Communion for them have been communion at non-standard time and in non-traditional settings: retreats, mountain tops, etc.

We understand that different congregations are in different contexts. We know you appreciate the high value of protecting people from transmission, and we trust that you will act wisely.

Offering

Congregational income is down already. Figuring out how to make ends meet at this time will be a challenge. It is more important than ever to use all your congregation's communication channels to share the impact and importance of your ministry. Encourage people to send in their offerings or give online.

It is critically important now that we focus on how we tell our story of impact, how we invite people to generosity, how we envision a future where our congregations are more important and vital than ever.

Join me on **Thursday, March 26th, 2:00 - 3:00PM** for a one-hour virtual conversation with GSB Partners, The Rev. Mike Ward, CFRE, and Evan Moilan about Stewardship in Uncertain Times. Click [here](#) for more information including the link to resources and Zoom meeting details.

Funerals

We do not recommend you hold any funerals. We would encourage families to wait. If a family insists, then it should be a graveside burial with only family, limited to ten people, unless you are under stay at home orders.

Boundaries

There are more Zoom meetings and Facebook Live events going on than ever before. The deans reminded us that we are letting people into our homes. Choose carefully what parts of your home are available to the public and which are not. Carefully consider what is behind you when recording. Also, when considering boundaries, think carefully about your time. When are you online and available? When are you offline and resting?

Pace yourself

Gulf Coast Synod leaders are experienced in dealing with disasters, given our periodic hurricanes. This is a different kind of disaster, but some of the rules apply. Don't work 24/7. Decide when you are available and when you are not. Take time off. Take your Sabbath day of rest. Pastors and deacons cannot be all things to all people. You cannot call every member. Don't try. Organize your congregations and let your leaders help, just as our deans do in the synod. Limit your social media time. Limit the amount of time you watch news. Tend to your spiritual and emotional health.

Congregation

As you organize, consider those who live alone. Consider those over 60 and those who have pre-existing conditions. Assign congregational caregivers to stay in contact with these folks. Do they have enough food? Are they feeling okay? Do they have medications? What do they need?

Neighbors

This is a great time to serve your neighbor. One person I know printed a note and put

it on the porch of the four homes to his left and the four homes to his right, some of whom he did not know. The note said if they needed anything they could call, and gave contact information. Encourage your people to carefully reach out to their neighbors. Consider reaching out to the neighbors of your congregation, being careful to obey the directions of health workers and elected leaders.

Communication

We have several different ways to communicate information. We realize not every way works for every person. If you know someone who does not have access to social media or email, consider reaching out to see if someone is willing to help keep that person connected. The synod has a website and 3 Facebook pages that are regularly updated:

- Gulf Coast Synod [website](#) – Resources and updates
- Gulf Coast Synod [Facebook](#) page – General information regarding the synod
- Gulf Coast Synod [Disaster Response Facebook](#) page – COVID Updates
- Gulf Coast Leaders Facebook page – private group for pastors, deacons and other synod leaders

The ELCA also has [resources](#) available at elca.org/publichealth - guidance for congregations and members

Conclusion

How might we see this as a holy opportunity? In the midst of the struggle and grief, we may encounter Christ in new ways. There will be learning and growth through this time.

As a pastor in China reminded us - *Christ's peace is not to remove us from disaster and death, but to give us peace in the midst of disaster and death.* You were called for such a time as this. My prayers are with you.



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