



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

April 1, 2020

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders,

Right now the world is spinning with anxiety. Be kind to yourself. Be kind to others.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ~ Ephesians 4:32

Recommendations

The recommendations in this letter supersede all earlier letters and recommendations. Our current recommendations have been the suspension of in-person worship and communion until further notice. This does not change in this letter.

Louisiana residents are aware of Governor Edwards' stay-at-home order, issued on March 23. This requires residents of Louisiana to stay at home unless providing or securing essential services, visiting a family member or traveling to a place of worship.

Texans are aware of Governor Abbott's stay-at-home order, issued yesterday, that goes into effect tonight at midnight. The order has suspended on-campus learning at schools until May 4 at least, and orders Texans to stay at home unless providing or securing "essential services." Gov. Abbott designated churches as essential services. The order says,

If religious services cannot be conducted from home or through remote services, they should be conducted consistent with the Guidelines from the President and the CDC by practicing good hygiene, environmental cleanliness, and sanitation, and by implementing social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

While I appreciate the impulse of religious freedom, I would dissuade congregations from having parking lot services, especially in urban centers. Why risk putting the most vulnerable in danger? The most loving thing we can do right now is make the sacrifice to stay home and keep them safe.

Worship

Videos and PDFs of sermons for Maundy Thursday (Bishop Mike) and Good Friday (Bishop Sue Briner) are already up on the synod website, by clicking "Resources in Response to COVID-19." An Easter sermon (Bishop Erik Gronberg) will be up soon.

I will also post a sermon for Easter 2. Bishop's Associates Tracey Breashears Schultz and Chris Markert will post sermons for Easter 3 and 4, respectively. Please feel free to borrow from these sermons or use the videos, dropping them into your livestream.

There are a host of other useful resources at the above link to the Gulf Coast Synod

website, which can be found easily by going to gulfoastsynod.org and clicking "Resources for COVID-19."

Starting today, LEAD has [Holy Week digital liturgies](#) available for free. Go take a look to see if these might be helpful to you.

It is recommended that you have an offering time in your online services. Post information on giving by mail or giving online, and use the time to share impact stories of your congregation's essential ongoing ministries. How are lives being impacted by your ongoing work?

Communion

If your people are asking you to find a way to have communion on Maundy Thursday and/or Easter, it is understandable. Take it up with your Congregation Council.

Consider the following:

- If you have communion in the parking lot, many who are in the highest risk group will be tempted to come, against their best interests and the interests of the community at large. It is quite difficult to distribute communion without some risk.
- If you choose online consecration over the internet, you may exclude those who don't own computers or who aren't online for financial or other reasons. If you offer for some, you should offer for all, which means mailing a detailed bulletin to all homes, so those not online can participate. If you need help with that, contact me.
- At least one congregation I spoke to is using their new Zoom account for worship, so that those not online can call in.

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."

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.

Funerals

We do not recommend congregations hold any funerals at this time. Encourage families to have a memorial service after restrictions are lifted. If a family insists on moving forward now, then it should be a graveside burial with only family, limited to ten people, obeying local laws, and observing strict social distancing.

The Care Act

The Care Act bill is 1,400 pages long. It appears to have some provisions that will be helpful to congregations, including unemployment insurance for laid-off church employees and paycheck protection provisions that allow small businesses, including churches and other non-profits, to apply for loans which can convert to grants. Here are a few helpful sites:

- <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-nonprofits-can-utilize-the-new-federal-laws-dealing-with-covid-19/>
- <http://frontporchnewstexas.com/2020/03/27/cares-act-could-bring-financial-relief-to-churches-amidst-bans-on-large-gatherings-by-john-litzler/>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-stimulus-package-questions-answers.html>
- https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/COVID-19_Relief_Summary_033020.pdf

Thank you

I deeply appreciate all that you are doing in these uncertain times. For example, Friday and Monday St. James in Houston delivered 52 food baskets to struggling families. Bethlehem in New Orleans served 134 packaged meals on Sunday in less than an hour. Hosanna in Mandeville, Louisiana served 300 meals on Sunday and 300 more on Wednesday with the help of another congregation. I have heard more stories than I can tell.

My prayers are with you as you prepare for Holy Week. Synod staff have been working harder than ever fielding your calls and providing resources. Noon prayer has been a blessing to us as it has to many of you. Saturday will be our final prayer at

noon as we make space for Holy Week.

Be well. Pace yourself. Love your neighbor. Keep everyone safe.

Yours in Christ,



Michael Rinehart, bishop

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PS: The Department of Labor has issued the required Notice of Employee Rights under the FFCRA. Employers with fewer than 500 employees are required to email, direct mail or post [this notice](#) (*spanish*) on their website, to all current employees **today, April 1st.**

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