



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 God's work. Our hands.

May 13, 2020

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders in Louisiana,

If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn't you first sit down and calculate the cost, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? ~ Luke 14:8

"Everything is permitted, but everything isn't beneficial. Everything is permitted, but everything doesn't build others up. No one should look out for their own advantage, but they should look out for each other." ~ 1 Corinthians 10:23-24

This morning, the ELCA Churchwide Organization posted [Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship](#) in [English](#). (Spanish will be available soon at elca.org/publichealth.) These guidelines recommend waiting until Phase 2 (as determined by White House guidelines or state and local before inviting people back into your building. This is prudent council.

Here is the Louisiana graph for today:

By The New York Times Updated May 13, 2020, 8:53 A.M. E.T.



Louisiana peaked in April and has been declining since. Louisiana Governor Edwards has given permission for businesses and houses of worship to move into Phase 1 starting this Friday in Louisiana. **Just because we can does not mean we should. This is not a mandate to open.** The New Orleans' Mayor has agreed to Phase 1, but with tighter restrictions:

PHASE 1	What Stays the Same	PHASE 1	Open at 25% Capacity & with Restrictions	PHASE 1	Not Allowed to Open
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay home except for essential needs & permitted activities Seniors & people with medical conditions should continue to stay home Gatherings limited to "household" size Wear a mask in public Practice social distancing, wash hands & disinfect surfaces Stay home if you feel sick <p style="text-align: right;"></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shopping Malls and Retail Stores Beauty Salons, Barber Shops & Nail Salons Childcare, Early Learning Centers & Extra Curricular Programs Food Service Establishments Office Buildings and Businesses Museums, Zoos, Aquariums Outdoor Recreation Spaces, Sports Complexes, Parks and Playgrounds Houses of Worship Libraries Movie Theaters Gyms and Fitness Center Racetracks <p style="text-align: right;"></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Casinos & Video Poker <small>Only in Orleans Parish</small> Children's Museums Spas, Tattoo & Massage Parlors Live Entertainment, Amusement, & Event Venues Bars Without Food Permits Private gatherings with more than a reasonable household size <p style="text-align: right;"></p>

We still have much thoughtful planning to do, and many preparations to make. Here are some questions that need to be answered before you hold in-person worship and programming:

Twenty Questions for Congregations Considering In-Person Worship

1. Have pastor and congregation council prayed about this together? Are we in agreement that it is time to start in-person worship? Have we voted on this?
2. Has there been a decline in cases and fatalities over the last 14 days? Are the hospitals overwhelmed? Is there sufficient testing and contact tracing? [State and Local Emergency Management websites](#)
3. What percentage of our congregation are part of a vulnerable population that should not be meeting in groups yet? (65+, pre-existing conditions, compromised immune systems...)
4. Is our pastor a vulnerable individual? Other staff?
5. Will people 65 and over be allowed to come to worship? How will we make it clear that vulnerable populations should not come? Communications? Signs on doors? Will we turn them away?
6. Will we require masks? Will we provide masks? What will we do if people refuse to wear masks?
7. People not living in the same household should stay at least 6 feet apart. How will we facilitate this? Tape on the floor?
8. People should sit every third pew. How will we facilitate this? Tape off pews?
9. If cases and fatalities begin to grow again, will we stop having in-person worship? What will be the benchmarks for this decision?
10. In Phase 1 there is no nursery, and children cannot wander from their household group. Will small children be allowed to come to worship? What age? What will we do if they wander?
11. In Phase 1 churches can only operate at 25% capacity. What is that number for your worship space? Is there overflow seating available? What will we do when we reach that number? Will ushers block people from entering?
12. Will we continue to livestream for those who are unable to be present?
13. It is recommended that hymnals be removed, and worship materials not be distributed. Do we have projection? If not, will we announce everything?
14. Singing increases the distance aerosol and viruses can travel. Singers are super spreaders. Will we sing? Choirs? Masks reduce risk, but do not eliminate the spread.
15. Do we have a written plan for sanitizing all surfaces after each worship service?
16. Communion preparation and distribution require a much higher and more complex set of protocols. Are preparers, distributors and communicants trained and ready for communion yet?
17. How will this plan change if somebody tests positive for COVID-19? Will everyone who is in the room self-quarantine for the next 14 days? Will we cease holding worship in person? How will this plan change if somebody dies from COVID-19?
18. Have we called our insurance company to see if we have liability insurance for claims against us if a lawsuit is filed due to infection or death by COVID-19 as a result of our ministries?
19. Will we have baptisms? Babies are in the low risk group, but they can and have become infected with COVID-19. Is it worth the risk right now?
20. Will we allow outside groups to use our space? What expectations or guidelines will we expect them to follow? (Masks? Social distancing? Sanitizing?)

Other information:

- Register your congregation at <https://opensafely.la.gov> to get recommendations and regular updates on opening safely. Outdoor services can be held without an occupancy limit as long as people stay six feet apart and wear masks. The Governor asks that you not have choirs for now.
- Synod Assembly registration refunds are being processed by Cvent. We expect those to be issued very soon.
- A Synod Staff sermon offered, by Pastor Chris Markert, for May 24, is available [here](#).
- Presiding Bishop Eaton is providing a sermon that congregations can use for Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday in June. The link will be available soon.
- Below is a list of guidelines for each phase. A rationale for these can be found in our earlier document: *Guidelines for Coming Back Together as a Congregation* in [English](#) or in [Spanish](#) and *Coming back together for Worship* in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).
- Lutherhill will update us about summer camp this Friday.
- [39 Dead in New York Latino Lutheran congregations](#).
- [How one Roman Catholic parish is handling re-starting in-person mass](#).
- [The Risks — Know Them — Avoid Them](#).
- [Calgary Church: I Would Do Anything for a Do over](#)

Our prayers are with you daily.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Michael Rinehart