



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

May 6, 2020

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.
John 14:1

Thank you for your innovative response to this current pandemic, and for your outreach to those most in need. Your willingness to suspend in-person worship and take everything online is helping to keep our hospitals from becoming overwhelmed and most certainly saving lives.

There were many learnings this week. The aerosol we produce through breathing and speaking is the biggest threat for passing on the virus. Singing projects that aerosol even further. Outdoors the wind and sunshine tend to dissipate that aerosol. Outdoor services may be the safest option for restarting.

For the safety of the most vulnerable, we are not yet recommending in-person worship. Here is why we are counseling caution:

- In 1918 the first wave of the Spanish Flu was difficult, but after a summer of complacency and an attempt to return to normal, the deadliest months were September, October and November, with nearly ten times as many deaths.
- Churches have been identified as centers of COVID-19 outbreaks. Of the 11 outbreaks in Kansas three of them were tied to churches (and the remaining eight to nursing homes).
- Louisiana continues to be on stay-at-home orders until at least May 15. Register your church at <https://opensafely.la.gov> to get recommendations on opening safely.
- Although Texas is not under stay-at-home orders, the state has not yet met the gating criteria of 14 days of declining cases and fatalities as established by the White House.
- As much as we yearn to come together, is it worth the loss of one life to restart in-person worship?

It's a good time to intentionally start planning for when you will begin gathering together in person again. Pick a date, but don't publish it yet. Some congregations are considering Pentecost, or a Sunday in June, unless there is a May spike in COVID-19 cases. Begin making a list of what must be done to follow the phase one guidelines.

Below is an updated list of guidelines for each phase. A rationale for these can be found in our earlier documents: *Guidelines for Coming Back Together as a Congregation* in [English](#) or in [Spanish](#) and *Coming back together for Worship* in [English](#) and [Spanish](#). The summary guidelines below are updated with more recent information. Consider having a Service of the Word for your first Sunday back. Carefully get used to being in the building together safely before reintroducing the Eucharist.

When we do start coming together again in person, after 14 days of declining cases and

declining deaths, and when we have adequate testing and contact tracing, it will involve strict physical distancing, face masks, and sanctuaries at limited capacity. How will you keep high-risk populations, like those over 65 and those with compromised immune systems from coming? For the next year or more, until there is a vaccine, crowded areas, and particularly large crowds, are going to be dangerous. Read the guidelines and begin careful planning.

Our synod is big and covers two states. There's no one-size-fits-all approach.

Below are some responses to questions we continue to receive:

What recommendations do you have about baptisms?

We still recommend waiting. There is simply too much proximity and risk.

Should we wear masks?

Absolutely. "I wear a mask to protect you. You wear a mask to protect me." We are human aerosol cans. This aerosol carries viruses and can hover in the air for hours. We wear masks out of charity for others. Don't buy or borrow N-95 masks. Healthcare folks who work with COVID-19 desperately need them, and they are in short supply. [Make a mask](#) or use a bandana.

Can we still apply for the Payroll Protection Plan (PPP)?

Yes! Many of our congregations have received this and found it helpful. The ELCA Federal Credit Union has already helped congregations receive millions of dollars through SBA PPP forgivable loans. They only work with ELCA organizations. While you do need to have an account with them, you can file both applications simultaneously. <https://www.elcafcu.org>

When we enter Phase 1 can we sing?

This virus has disproportionately impacted the church. The church is all about community, and many of the things we routinely do are now dangerous: talking, praying, sharing bread and wine, shaking hands, hugging, and yes, singing. Singing increases the velocity and volume of aerosol we shoot into the air. If everyone is wearing masks the risk is substantially lower, but not eliminated. How will you ensure that everyone wears a mask? Here is an article to get you thinking: <https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19>.

What about weddings and funerals?

Many funerals and weddings have been postponed. If possible, wait. In Louisiana, private funerals may be held at graveside, with ten immediate family members or less, and proper physical distancing. Many are using livestream for friends and coworkers. In Texas, yesterday (May 5), [Governor Abbott issued clarifications](#) of his executive order from last week. These clarifications cover weddings and funerals. Basically, the rules for weddings and funerals follow the same rules as Sunday services. Once you open, follow the same rules for all services of any kind. Masks. Every other pew. 6 feet apart unless you're in the same family. No physical contact.

How about camp?

A team is working on this. The team meets later today. A decision will be made by May 15.

- [Finding Direction for Camps Report](#)
- [Lutherhill Finding Direction Report](#)

Should we call our insurance company before starting in-person worship?

Yes. A couple of non-ELCA congregations in Louisiana that continued to meet after the stay-at-home order were dropped by their insurance company. Call your insurance company before you restart in-person worship.

How are Synod Assembly registration refunds coming?

We are working closely with Cvent to get refunds issued as quickly as possible. We apologize for the delay and will continue to send updates as more information is available.

Refunds will be issued using the original method of payment. If you sent a check to the synod office for payment please email gretchen@gulfcoastsynod.org.

Bishop and staff reports, partner reports and publications that are generally shared at Synod Assembly will be available on the synod [website](#) soon.

Synod Staff are continuing to record weekly sermons through May 24, making the texts and videos available. We are honored to come into your homes and congregations. You can find those sermons [HERE](#).

Our prayers are with you daily.

Yours in Christ,



Bishop Michael Rinehart

Michael Rinehart, bishop
Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

May 6, 2020 Updated Recommendations for Returning to In-person Worship

Phase 1: Once your region has had 14 days of declining cases and fatalities

1. Pastor and council decide when gating criteria have been met and it is safe to resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with **strict** physical distancing protocols:

- 25% occupancy, sitting every-other pew, six feet apart, unless you are from the same household
- congregational singing only if everyone is masked [READ](#)
- doors propped open
- no handshaking, hugging or touching
- bulletins are not recommended
- pass the peace with a bow only
- no passing offering plates, plates on a table at entrance
- no choir, unless masked and six feet apart [WATCH](#)
- no sharing microphones unless disinfected after each use
- no nursery
- no baptisms yet

2. Everyone should wear face masks. Face masks should be provided for those who have none. Cloth face masks should be washed every day when used, and disposable face masks should be thrown away after each use. Do not use N95 masks, which are needed for healthcare professionals. You may preach without a mask if you are at least 6 feet away from anyone. Decide what you will do with those who do not comply. ("I wear a face mask to protect you. You wear a face mask to protect me.") [READ](#)

3. No gloves. Gloved hands can pass germs. Instead, all worship leaders should wash hands

before worship, and immediately if coming in contact with anyone else. [READ](#)

4. Hand sanitizer is available at the door, and in the pews.
5. Every other row is blocked off, and one household per pew. View the Louisiana Fire Marshall's diagram [HERE](#).
6. Ask anyone not feeling well and all vulnerable individuals (those 65+ years of age and those with pre-existing conditions) to stay home.
7. Children must stay with their family unit, and if this is not possible, they should stay home with adequate care.
8. No communion yet. Give your people a couple weeks to get used to physical distancing before adding this complexity.
9. No homebound communion, or visits to hospitals or senior care facilities. Stay in phone contact with seniors and homebound members of your congregation and community.
10. No schools, daycare, camps or youth activities.
11. Encourage church staff to work from home as much as possible.
12. Fellowship activities outdoors, no food, and with six feet of physical distancing.
13. Offering counters maintain six feet of distance and wear masks, using sanitizer frequently.
14. Pews, handles, toilet flush, toilet seats, doorknobs, faucet handles, soap dispenser pumps and all surfaces must be sanitized after each use.
15. Consider outdoor worship where practical.

Phase 2: Once your region has had 28 days of declining cases and fatalities without resurgence

1. Continue in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *moderate* physical distancing protocols. Increase to 50% occupancy, sitting every-other pew, six feet apart, unless you are from the same household. Nursery may resume if attendants wear masks.
2. Continue to wear face masks with the protocols above.
3. No gloves. See above.
4. Hand sanitizer is still available at the door, and in the pews.
5. Every other row is blocked off, and one family per row.
6. Anyone not feeling well and all vulnerable individuals (those 65+ years of age and those with pre-existing conditions) should continue to stay home.
7. Children must stay with their family unit, and if this is not possible they should stay home with adequate care.
8. Consider introducing communion.
 - Altar Guild and Communion Assistants must think of their work in terms of food service preparation, like going through a drive-through restaurant. Do any in your congregation work in the restaurant industry? Do any have food safety or food handling training? They could be a helpful resource. Communion preparers wash hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds prior to preparing communion. Washing is twice as effective as hand sanitizer.
 - Commune with wafers and individual cups. Glass and reusable plastic cups should be soaked for a minute in soapy water after the service. Consider using a diluted chlorine soak after washing. Glasses are placed in trays sufficiently spaced so that communicants can take their cup without touching the others. After filling the cups with wine the trays are placed on the altar.
 - Plastic-wrapped wafers are emptied onto patens without touching them. There should be separate patens for each communion assistant distributing bread.
 - Pastor and communion assistants wash hands during the offering. Washing is significantly more effective than hand sanitizer.
 - The pastor consecrates the elements without touching them. The fraction and elevation are omitted for the time being.
 - Those distributing wafers avoid touching communicants' hands as much as possible. If you have touched a hand, stop and use hand sanitizer.
 - Trays of wine are on a table. The communion assistant 6 feet away says "The blood of Christ shed for you." Used cups are placed in a basket.

- Communion assistants commune last. This keeps them attentive to hygiene during distribution, and also makes the congregation aware that communion assistants are confident.
 - Communing in one kind (wafer only) is acceptable and appropriate. The crucified and risen Christ is fully present for them in, with, and under one element. (UMG 44D)
9. No homebound communion still, or visits to hospitals or senior care facilities. Stay in phone contact with seniors and homebound members of your congregation and community.
 10. Schools, daycare, camps and organized youth activities may resume with **moderate** physical distancing.
 11. Continue to encourage church staff to work from home as much as possible.
 12. Fellowship activities may move indoors with **strict** physical distancing (masks, six feet of separation, etc.). Food may be served with careful preparation.
 13. Offering counters maintain six feet of distance and wear masks, using sanitizer frequently.
 14. Pews, handles, toilet flush, toilet seats, door knobs, faucet handles, soap dispenser pumps and all surfaces must be sanitized after each service.

Phase 3: Once your region has had 42 days of declining cases and fatalities without resurgence

1. The same physical distancing protocols, only 75% occupancy.
2. Follow health officials' counsel regarding face masks.
3. No gloves. See phase 1, above.
4. Hand sanitizer is still available at the door, and in the pews.
5. Every other row is blocked off, and the middle of the row is blocked so that people are spaced out.
6. Vulnerable individuals (those 65+ years of age and those with pre-existing conditions) may return, with careful physical distancing. Crowds should be avoided.
7. Children may roam, with caution.
8. Updated communion recommendations will be provided as we learn.
9. Home bound communion, and visits to hospitals and senior care facilities may resume with great care.
10. Schools, daycare, camp and youth activities may continue with **limited** physical distancing.
11. Church staff may work without restrictions.
12. Fellowship may resume with **limited** physical distancing.

Worship resources are available on the synod webpage and also on the ELCA website: <https://www.elca.org/publichealth>. A litany of return and other worship suggestions may be found [HERE](#).

The fastest vaccine ever invented was for the mumps. Mumps appeared and was first diagnosed in 1963. A vaccine was ready in 1967. We've got the best minds working on this, but it will take time, and anyone who tells you otherwise isn't considering history. "We're going to have to learn to live with this for a while."

—Dr. Don Godbee, Medical Director, East Baton Rouge Parish & Emergency Medicine

