



# Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

March 3, 2021

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders,

Let me start by saying thank you for giving generously to the [Emergency Winter Freeze Appeal](#). Our goal is to reach \$100,000 and 400 givers. Click [HERE](#) to give, and please encourage others to give generously as well.

Yesterday, Texas Governor Abbott announced that he is lifting the mask mandate. How does this affect churches? You may recall that last year Governor Abbott said, as a matter of religious freedom, that churches were exempt from these requirements. Any mitigation efforts you are currently using are voluntary, not mandated by the state. You are still free to social distance, sanitize, and wear masks.

The number of infections, hospitalizations and deaths have been falling. We hope they will continue on their downward slope. 657,000 Louisianans have their first vaccine. 7 million Texans (out of a total population of 30 million) will be vaccinated by next Wednesday, nearly a quarter. I am told that nearly 30% of the population of Austin county is now vaccinated. 1.5 million people are being vaccinated a day in the U.S. By all reports anyone who wants a vaccine will be able to get one by this summer. Things are looking up.

But, we are not yet out of the woods. The vast majority of people in Texas and Louisiana are not yet vaccinated. If congregations send out the signal that it's safe to go back to business as usual, we are putting many vulnerable people at risk. (If you are offering communion now, it's probably a good idea to continue your safe practices.) It is still wise to follow CDC guidelines. Let's use our freedom in Christ to love and serve our neighbors.

As we have advised since the beginning of the pandemic, follow the numbers in your county or parish. Some places are more densely populated than others. Some of you have few people in large sanctuaries, which is relatively safe. It is not yet time to cram people together in tight crowds. There are still over 50,000 infections and nearly 1,500 deaths a day (the same as last July). Now is not the time to throw caution to the wind. Don't let fatigue call the shots. Let's see this through.

Begin your plan for gradually opening up. Follow your mitigation team's advice. Make sure your Council approves any changes in safety procedures with worship. Many of you added services to keep numbers thin. Hang on to that for a while. Why not?

If you need to talk, please call me. We will get through this, in time. Fall is going to be better than last year. A new season of ministry is coming.

**Michael Rinehart, bishop**  
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