



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

August 19, 2020

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders,

Grace to you and peace in the name of the one who walks with us through all the pandemics of life.

As we start angling towards the fall and the sixth month of the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, all of us are trying to figure out how to be faithful to our mission, maintain public safety, and serve one another with joy and kindness. Wilderness times are filled with unknowns. It's difficult to come up with long-term plans; however, we can set short-term goals. Many are engaging in month-by-month decisions about how to engage worship and ministry.

Wilderness periods are an important time to be clear about mission. When the old ways of doing things break down, it forces us to refocus on why we exist in the first place. If much of what we do cannot be done right now, what is most important? What can be done, and how can we do it well? *The mission of the church is not to have church on Sunday morning.* How can we proclaim the good news, make disciples, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, and release the captives in a time of pandemic, beyond Sunday morning worship?

Historically, the church has stepped up in times of plague and pandemic. In the second-century Antonine plague, Christians preached not about a God who had sent pestilence to punish people for their sins, but a God who loves us in the midst of a broken creation. During a third century plague, Cyprian encouraged Christians to focus on caring for the sick and dying. In the fourth century, the emperor Julian noticed the Christians were not just caring for their own, but for those outside their religious and cultural communities. The church knows how to respond in times of crisis and social upheaval. How will the 2020 church be remembered for its response to the pandemic? My prayer is that we will be remembered for serving those in greatest need, not for being centers for outbreak, demanding our rights, or refusing to be inconvenienced to protect others.

Recently, Deans and Synod Staff met to pray about and deliberate on how we as leaders might best serve and support congregations in the months ahead. We came up with the following resources:

1. **Mental health and anxiety:** How do we care for one another, for health care workers, school teachers and staff, first responders, working parents with school-age children?
2. **Technology:** How do congregations learn alternative ways of worship and community life in the era of COVID-19?
3. **Fall faith formation in the congregation and continuing education for leaders** How do we do socially distant Sunday school, Bible study, confirmation? What online continuing education options are available?

Your deans and staff are not the font of all information, so we know we will need to crowdsource this. We are going to curate information from you and others around the church. Rather than creating yet another platform for collaboration, we plan to use existing platforms. Watch for questions in the Gulf Coast Leaders Facebook Group, and be willing to share what you are doing. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Watch for Connections articles that will share what we hear and learn. Visit the Synod website for updates.

Finally, a word about worship. The CDC recommendations remain unchanged. Keep an eye on your Texas county or Louisiana parish statistics. If cases are on the rise, stick to online worship. Councils and pastors should work together to know what phase you are in. If there are two weeks of declining cases, you are in phase 1. Four weeks, phase 2, and so on. Work as a team, even if the team is not in total agreement. Know your limits. If you or your family are immunocompromised, do not put yourself at risk. If you are healthy and bold, be sure not to inadvertently put others at risk. At any time, we have to assume that it is possible that we are unknowingly infected and contagious. Protect and serve your church flock and your community.

I know some of you have not had communion in six months. I am mindful that Lutherans in the early part of the century were accustomed to having communion one to four times a year, not because of pandemic, but because there weren't enough pastors to get around to every congregation. It's okay. There are also

some of you that have found ways to provide the sacrament. Outdoor worship is much safer than indoor worship. If you are restarting in-person worship, that's the best place to begin. Some are using prepackaged communion cups and wafers available at the door, so that the congregation has communion, but no one comes forward and there is no hand-to-hand, face-to-face distribution. Some of you have tried online communion. These are abnormal times. I trust church leaders are listening carefully to God's people and tending to their spiritual needs, while also heeding the witness and wisdom of the wider church around the world.

Bishop's Associate Tracey Breashears Schultz is working on a 50/40/10 video sermon series that will start in September. Look for more details by email later this week. Utilize these resources to give your congregation a different voice in the pulpit, and perhaps to get a break from sermon preparation.

Remember, Synod Staff are available to lead worship online in your congregation, or come to your space for live streaming. Let us know how we can support you in these unprecedented times.

In Christ,



Bishop Michael Rinehart, with your Deans and Synod Staff

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