



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

May 13, 2020

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders in Texas,

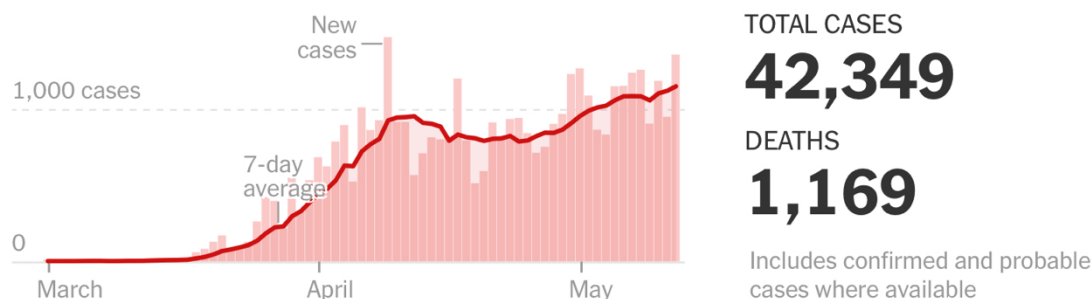
If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn't you first sit down and calculate the cost, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? ~ Luke 14:8

"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 county recommendations) before inviting people back into your building. This is prudent advice for many in hot spots.

Here is the Texas graph for today:

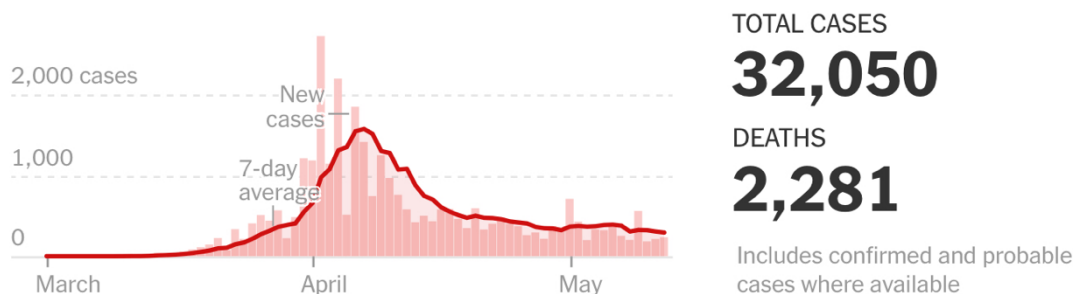
By The New York Times Updated May 13, 2020, 8:53 A.M. E.T.



Compare this to the Louisiana graph, which peaked in April and has come down due to stay-at-home orders set to expire Friday:

Louisiana Graph for Today:

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



Some places in Texas have very low counts. Others are hot spots. Go to your county public health page to get up-to-date information. Governor Abbott has opened the door to Phase 1. **Just because you can does not mean you should. This is not a mandate to open.** There are many factors to consider as will be shown below. 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:

- 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.
- [Seguin and Texas during the 1918 epidemic.](#)
- [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