

## Coming Back Together as a Congregation Guidelines

From the three Texas-Louisiana ELCA Synods

*Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.*

Jeremiah 31:2-4

Beloved ELCA leaders in Texas and Louisiana,

The COVID-19 pandemic reluctantly moved us in to physical distancing. Then, as the number of cases and fatalities spiked, we ceased meeting together for worship and other activities, in order to protect the most vulnerable: the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. This has been a difficult act of love. Our goal was to keep cases to a minimum, so that hospitals would not be overwhelmed beyond their capacity. Once cases begin to fall, we will begin to meet again, with great care. This is a roadmap to that hopeful eventuality.

Last week Texas' Gov. Abbott said infections are "beginning to level off." On Monday, April 20, state parks will reopen. Beginning at 11:59 pm on Tuesday, April 21, surgery restrictions will be loosened. Some elective surgeries will be permitted, as long as hospitals leave 25% of their capacity for COVID-19 patients, and don't deplete their supplies. On Friday, April 24, retail stores will be allowed to offer "retail to go" through curbside pickup.

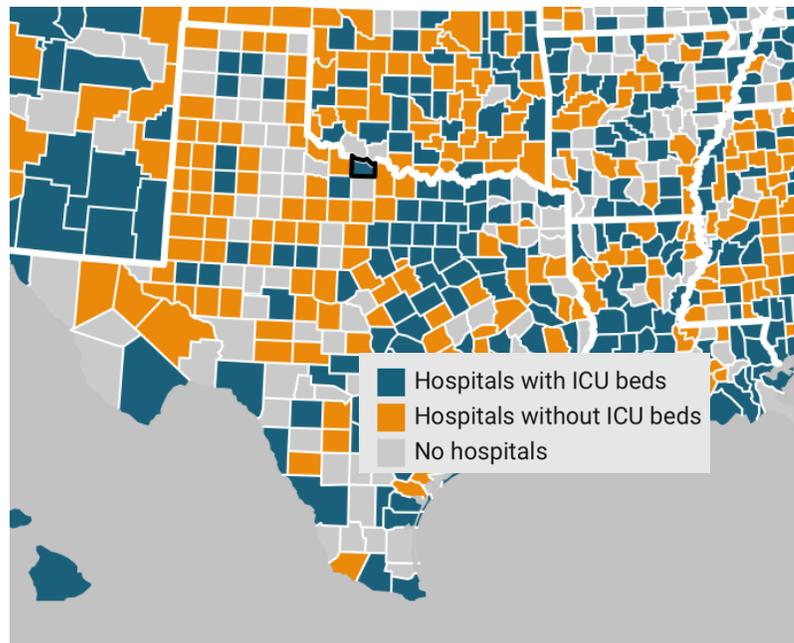
This relaxing of state restrictions does not affect local stay-at-home orders, so it is likely that churches will need to stay abreast of local executive orders from mayors and county judges. While it is clear that densely-populated areas are more at risk than sparsely populated rural areas, it is also true that rural areas account for less than 2% of all ICU beds. Most Texas counties and Louisiana parishes have no ICU beds. Many don't have hospitals. It is also important to keep in mind that there are hot spots in many low-population states.

### **When will we restart in-person worship?**

The decision to begin worshipping in person again is one that is made by pastor and council together, with careful consideration of the following:

- Legally binding orders
- The safety of the community and congregation
- Recommendations from health officials
- Recommendations from the synod office
- Following federal guidelines for a three-phased reopening

Large gatherings are the most dangerous venue for a community-wide viral outbreak. You don't want to be the cause of a resurgence. If one life is lost, in the congregation, or community, it is not worth it.



In-person worship will likely resume at different times in different places. Resuming in -person worship will happen in phases. We in the synod office are available to help you evaluate the situation and make recommendations.

## **What are the three phases?**

A summary of the three phases is spelled out in this article. The 18-page federal document on reopening in phases can be found [HERE](#).

Before proceeding to these phases, the document says the following gating criteria should be met, in order to mitigate against resurgence and protect the most vulnerable.

- 14-days of declining symptoms
- 14-days of declining cases
- Hospitals able to treat all patients without crisis care
- Robust testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing

Texas and Louisiana as states have not seen 14 days of declining cases. Most of our communities are at least two weeks from implementing any of the phases below. When all of the above criteria are true for your region, then elected officials and health experts will begin with phase one. In all phases, good hygiene practices like washing hands and wearing masks in public are strongly recommended. People who feel sick should stay at home, not go to work or to school. Social distancing will be important for the foreseeable future. Here are the phases.

### **Phase 1 – For states and regions with 14 days of declining cases**

- Schools, daycare and organizers youth activities stay closed.
- Bars stay closed.
- Large venues like **churches**, movie theaters, ball parks and arenas may reopen, but observing *strict* social distancing protocols.
- Gyms may reopen, with appropriate social distancing.
- Elective surgeries may resume.
- Return to work in phases. Close common areas at work where people gather. Encourage telecommuting.
- Avoid non-essential travel. (The DOD has suspended travel until the end of June.)
- Hospitals and senior centers remain closed to visitors.

Once a community has seen 14 days of declining cases, and the hospitals are not overloaded, churches may begin to meet in person, though we will need to practice extreme hygiene and social distancing. The fellowship hall/gathering space should remain closed. Next week we will provide recommendations for social distancing at church, along with some liturgical recommendations for the first Sunday back. .

### **Phase 2 – For states and regions with no evidence of a rebound and who satisfy the gating criteria for a second time**

- All vulnerable populations continue to shelter in place.
- People need to understand that if they return to work, they could be putting vulnerable residents in their household at risk.
- All people should continue to maximize physical distance in public.
- Non-essential travel may resume.
- Employers should continue to encourage telecommuting and keep common areas closed.
- Schools, daycare, camps and organized youth activities may resume.
- Bars may reopen with diminished standing room occupancy.
- Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals remain prohibited.
- Large venues (sit-down dining, movie theaters, and **churches**) can operate with *moderate* social distancing protocols.

### **Phase 3 – For states and regions with no evidence of a rebound and who satisfy the gating criteria for a third time**

- Vulnerable individuals can resume public interactions but should prescribe physical distancing.
- Low risk individuals should minimize time in crowded environments.
- Worksites may now resume without restrictions.

- Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals may resume, remaining diligent with hygiene.
- Large venues (sit-down dining, movie theaters, and **churches**) can operate with *limited* social distancing protocols.
- Bars may resume operation with increased standing room.

### **How does this apply to our church?**

Here is what the three phases mean for congregations:

**Phase 1:** Once your region has had 14 days of declining cases, you may resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *strict* social distancing protocols (sitting every-other pew, six feet apart, no hand shake, passing of the peace, etc.). Continue to strongly discourage vulnerable individuals from attending. No visits to hospitals or senior care facilities. No schools, daycare or youth activities. Encourage church staff to work from home as much as possible. Fellowship activities are suspended still. Stay in phone contact with seniors and homebound members of your congregation and community.

**Phase 2:** Once your region has had 28 days of declining cases without resurgence, you may resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *moderate* social distancing protocols. Strongly discourage vulnerable individuals from attending. No visits to hospitals or senior care facilities. Schools, daycare, camps and organized youth activities may resume. facilities. Continue to encourage church staff to work from home when possible. Fellowship hour and activities may resume with maximum social distancing. Stay in phone contact with seniors and homebound members of your congregation and community.

**Phase 3:** Once your region has had 42 days of declining cases without resurgence, you may resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *limited* social distancing protocols. Strongly discourage vulnerable individuals from attending. Visits to hospitals and senior care facilities may resume with great care. No schools, daycare or youth activities. Church staff may work without restrictions. Fellowship may resume with limited social distancing. Resume homebound communion.

### **In Closing**

There are no hard and fast dates we can give you by which you can safely re-open. It is vital that you stay tuned in to your local/regional conditions. If you have a local ministerium, you may want to coordinate decisions and messaging with them, where possible, just as we are working to do with other judicatory leaders on a broader scale. As always, it is our love of neighbor that guides us. If you have significant reservations as you look at specific dates, it might be a sign that it's too early. Err on the side of caution. Thank you for your faithful leadership and do not hesitate to contact your synod office with questions or concerns.

**April 22, 2020**

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