States and Cities Change Course on Reopenings as Coronavirus Cases Rise

The Wired Word for the Week of July 5, 2020

In the News

Plans to reopen swimming pools, bars, nightclubs and other businesses across the United States are being reconsidered as the coronavirus continues to spread. As of Friday, June 26, daily coronavirus cases were increasing in at least 29 states. The increases were particularly steep in southern states, including Texas and Florida. According to CNN, only two states are reporting a decline in new coronavirus cases, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

"This is a continuation of the first wave," said Dr. Amesh Adalja to Business Insider. "Some places that might have been relatively spared early on in the winter and the spring are now facing cases higher than they had before." Adalja is a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security. In response, a number of states and cities are reversing course on their reopening efforts, moving back to earlier phases or postponing additional steps.

In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott rolled back his state's plan to reopen. Bars had previously been allowed to open with restrictions in place, but Abbott decided to shut them down except for delivery and takeout. He also closed tubing and rafting businesses and mandated that the government approve gatherings of 100 or more people. "The rise in cases is largely driven by certain types of activities, including Texans congregating in bars," Abbott said in a statement.

On a single day, June 23, more than 5,000 new cases were reported in Texas, which Abbott described as a "massive outbreak." That was followed on June 24 with 6,500 more cases. The situation in Texas is "absolutely horrifying," according to Dr. Peter Hotez, who is working on a Covid-19 vaccine.

In Florida, regulators prohibited drinking in bars after nearly 9,000 new cases were reported to the state in one day. When Florida began its reopening in early May, daily new-case counts were below 1,000, and then in early June Gov. Ron DeSantis allowed bars to reopen with modifications. "We are where we are," he told reporters on June 25, holding back on an announcement of when they would go to the next phase.

According to Fox News, the City of Jacksonville did an about-face on June 29 and mandated the wearing of masks in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Jacksonville is hosting portions of the Republican National Convention this August. Hundreds of Florida doctors sent a letter to the city council that said allowing 40,000 "people to descend on Jacksonville is unequivocally provocative of disease, predictably harmful, and medically disrespectful to the citizens of this city, much less the rest of the country."
Louisiana has postponed its next phase of reopening by a month and will stay in phase 2, which allows most businesses and houses of worship to operate at half capacity with social distancing. "We need to do a better job of wearing masks when we aren't at home," said Gov. John Bel Edwards to WWL-TV. Louisiana reported more than 53,400 cases and 3,100 deaths as of June 26.

Nevada is waiting several more weeks before considering phase 3, since its seven-day average case count has risen steeply since the state reopened its casinos in early June. Phase 3 could allow employers to bring staff back without restrictions, as well as to increase occupancy for bars and allow the reopening of movie theaters and sporting venues. Nevada's case count rose by 41 percent in the last two weeks of June.

North Carolina has also paused its plans to move into phase 3, and Gov. Roy Cooper has mandated face masks in public places. "North Carolina is relying on the data and the science to lift restrictions responsibly, and right now our increasing numbers show we need to hit the pause button while we work to stabilize our trends," Cooper said in a statement.

On June 28, California governor Gavin Newsom ordered the state's bars to close in several counties as the coronavirus spreads. CNBC reported that California's seven-day average of new cases increased by more than 40 percent compared with the previous week. "Covid-19 is still circulating in California, and in some parts of the state growing stronger," Newsom said in a statement. San Francisco has decided to delay its plan to reopen businesses ranging from tattoo parlors to swimming pools. The Los Angeles public health director, Barbara Ferrer, said that it is "highly likely" that the spike in the Los Angeles area is related to the protest gatherings of two weeks ago.

Washington governor Jay Inslee announced on June 27 that he was pausing the state's reopening plan due to rising numbers of cases. Some counties were preparing to enter phase 4, which would essentially mean no restrictions, but the governor put a hold on those plans. In similar manner, Maine postponed the reopening of indoor bars, Oregon mandated face masks in indoor public places for most residents, and Boise, Idaho, reversed course and reverted to an earlier stage of its reopening, which includes the closing of bars and nightclubs.

More on this story can be found at these links:

- Only Two US States Are Reporting a Decline in New Coronavirus Cases, CNN
- California Is Prohibiting Indoor Wining, Dining, and Entertainment as Coronavirus Cases Spike, Here's How States Are Rolling Back Their Reopenings, Business Insider
- More States Reverse or Slow Reopening Plans as Coronavirus Cases Climb, CNBC
- Jacksonville, Host of Republican Convention, Mandates Wearing Masks, Fox News
- For Third Day in a Week, L.A. County Reports More Than 2,000 New Coronavirus Cases, LA Times

Applying the News Story
The Greek word *metanoia*, translated as "repentance" in the Bible and defined as "change of mind," relates to this news story. The changes being made in response to the spread of the coronavirus raise questions of when it is appropriate to make a course correction.

**The Big Questions**

1. When is it important to repent, have a change of mind and go in a new direction? What usually drives such a decision?

2. Repentance is connected not only to sorrow for sin, but to a change of mind or attitude. In what areas do Christians need such changes today?

3. New information often leads people to a change of mind. What sources do you trust as you make decisions about the direction of your life? What sources make you skeptical, and why?

4. In your community of faith, what decisions are being made to keep people healthy during the coronavirus pandemic? How are these decisions made and communicated?

5. What prevents individuals from repenting and having a change of heart? How can they, or we, be encouraged to change course and move in another direction? What good comes of taking such a step?

**Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

*Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:*

**Exodus 32:14**

And the LORD changed his mind ["repented," KJV] about the disaster that he planned to bring on the people. (For context, read 32:1-14.)

When Moses was delayed in coming down from Mount Sinai, the people made a golden calf and worshiped it. The Lord said, in anger, that he would "consume them" (v. 10). But Moses implored God, saying, "Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people" (v. 12). So God changed his mind about destroying the people.

**Questions:** How did the impatience of the people lead them to make the golden calf, and what trouble did this create for them? Where do you see people getting impatient today, and what is the result? Why did God change his mind about consuming the Israelites, and how is this a model for our repentance? How does this kind of change reveal compassion and strength?

**Jonah 3:1-3**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. (For context, read 3:1-10.)

Although the prophet Jonah is best known for being swallowed by a large sea creature and spit onto land, the central message of the book is repentance. When God called Jonah to go to
Nineveh, he went at first in the opposite direction, hopped on a boat, encountered a storm, was thrown overboard and was swallowed by the famous fish. After three days, Jonah was spewed out on dry land, and then God said again, "Get up, go to Nineveh."

Upon hearing God's command a second time, Jonah repented -- he changed course and went to Nineveh. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" he shouted (v. 4). This stinking, sticky prophet cried out against the city’s 120,000 residents, not knowing if they would hear him, heed him or tear him to pieces. To his surprise, the Ninevites believed in God and repented of their sins. When God saw "how they turned from their evil ways" (v. 10), God changed course. Instead of overthrowing them, God let them live. "God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not" (v. 10, KJV).

**Questions:** When have you, like the prophet Jonah, run away from God and then turned back in the right direction? What was the result of this course correction? Where have you seen examples of communal repentance, such as was shown by the people of Nineveh? How does such a change of mind affect the heart of God?

**Matthew 4:17**

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* (For context, read 4:12-17.)

Jesus began his ministry by withdrawing from Judea to Galilee and making his home in Capernaum. In so doing, the words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled, "Galilee of the Gentiles - - the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" (vv. 15-16). Then he called people to repent and turn toward the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

**Questions:** To what new reality was Jesus calling people to turn, and how are we challenged to continue to do this today? What keeps people from making such a change of heart and mind? How can the church better model the values of the kingdom of heaven?

**Acts 26:19-20**

*[Paul said,] "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.* (For context, read 26:1-23.)

In the city of Caesarea, Paul faced charges of being an agitator, and he defended himself before a king named Agrippa. He spoke of his Jewish upbringing and his persecution of the followers of Christ, and then told the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus. He ended by reporting that the voice of Jesus had called him to help people "turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (v. 18).

**Questions:** What does it mean to you to repent and turn to God? How are the words of Paul still applicable today? How do you understand the challenge to "do deeds consistent with repentance"?
For Further Discussion

1. "Having humility to remain open to possibilities that lead to changes of any type is hard work, yet is the essence of Christian growth," says TWW team member Mary Sells. "We have to adopt an attitude that God can always offer us more teaching and purification." What is the importance of humility in repentance and change? How has this been true for you, if at all?

2. According to NBC News, South Dakota governor Kristi Noem said that the people attending the celebration for Independence Day at Mount Rushmore would not be required to practice social distancing. "We told those folks that have concerns that they can stay home," she said, "but those who want to come and join us, we'll be giving out free face masks, if they choose to wear one. But we will not be social distancing." State officials have told the people of South Dakota "to focus on personal responsibility," said Noem. What is the proper balance of government mandates and personal choice in the face of the pandemic?

3. "The topic of changing course figures greatly in the other major discussion we are having in our nation right now, too, about our troubled history as it involves race," notes TWW team member Joanna Loucky Ramsey. In Nehemiah 9:2, the Israelites "stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors." How can we continue to change course over race, rooting out the white supremacy that supported the institution of slavery?

4. The Washington Post reports that "air travel in the age of covid-19 will probably be a more socially distant, do-it-yourself experience, relying on travelers to wear masks, submit to temperature scans and check their own bags." People are changing their minds about air travel and beginning to fly again. How do you feel about returning to air travel? What safety measures will you expect to see in place? In your opinion, are airlines reopening routes in the correct ways? Why or why not?

5. TWW team member Heidi Mann observes that we often don't want to repent because we think it means losing face. How would our life of faith -- and life in general -- be easier to navigate if we could acknowledge that sometimes we need to change direction because of new information, but that there's no need to worry about "saving face" in the process?

Responding to the News

Think of a way in which you are being challenged to repent and "change your mind" about a course of action that is leading you away from the health and wholeness that God desires for you. Make a course correction without worrying about losing face, because God supports changes that bring people closer to the values of his kingdom.

Prayer

God of repentance, renewal and new life, we ask you to give us the courage to turn around and follow you, in ways that lead to abundant life, in the name of Jesus. Amen.