

Guidelines for the Phased Reopening of Churches in West Texas

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" (Psalm 122:1)

May 1, 2020

Dear Clergy and People of West Texas,

We have traveled a long, strange road during the COVID-19 pandemic, and our journey is not over yet. Personally, congregationally, and nationally, our lives have been changed in ways we will not fully understand for some time. Much of the strangeness of this journey, ironically, stems from our lack of physical movement, from our willingness to stay home and stay away, from our withdrawal from those networks of relationships so central to our lives, and last, but not least, from the suspension of in-person gatherings for worship, fellowship, and ministry.

Shortly after Ash Wednesday, life in the congregations in West Texas began to change, with the restriction on in-person worship and other gatherings put in place in mid-March. Though it's been less than two months, it feels like a lifetime ago.

We find ourselves at a threshold, one of several that lie ahead, where the course of the pandemic now allows us to begin planning to reopen churches and church offices. This reopening cannot be every program and all at once or one-size-fits-all. Our decisions and the types of gatherings we can consider will still depend on the incidence of the Coronavirus in our many communities and upon the best guidance of public health officials at all levels. Even as we begin to reopen, we must all prepare for further delays and the possibility that we may have to cease in-person worship again.

Though the State of Texas has lifted or eased many of its restrictions on social and economic life, please note that almost all safeguards are still strongly recommended—including physical distancing, hygiene and cleaning practices, and limiting gatherings.

From the start of our pandemic responses, diocesan leadership has sought to respond to the pandemic by keeping in mind three touchstones: do our best to take the next right step; love of neighbor; and distinguishing between what Christians *can* do and what we *should* do.

The Guidelines you are receiving reflect those three priorities. Before you read them, please keep in mind these underlying principles.

First, they are phased. We have not attempted to look way down the road. The Guidelines focus **only** on the planning and beginning stages of reopening churches and church offices. They do not address fellowship, formation classes, meetings, or day school operations. Current restrictions on those remain in place for now.

Second, they are shaped by our Lord's command to love God and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The Guidelines strongly emphasize decisions to reflect this love in each congregation's planning and protocols. We can show this love in self-restraint and moderation, in patience and forbearance. We must take seriously the limitations placed on us by the pandemic, for the sake of all our neighbors, whether they are the person who will sit six feet down the pew from us or fellow citizens in our community.

Third, they call us to consider our policies and phased actions in light of our freedom in Christ, which is about what we **should** do for love of Christ, before it is about what we **can** do. Emergency orders and government policies are not the maximum standard

for Christian behavior in this time; they are a starting point to build upon. We are called to take up our cross and follow, a call to love sacrificially. The bar is set far higher for those who seek to follow Jesus.

We are all weary of staying apart. We miss ‘normal’ and long to pick up our lives again. I get that fully. If you have ever wondered what your church could possibly have in common with a church hundreds of miles away, on the other side of the Diocese, know that almost everyone has rediscovered that worship matters to them, not theoretically but **really** and **deeply**. Being together as Christ’s Body matters. We all long to “go to the house of the Lord.”

We are almost there. But, not yet. We are still waiting for signs that the pandemic is ebbing across the Diocese. A 14-day decline in confirmed cases of COVID-19 is a primary indicator that public health and medical professionals are awaiting, and one that we are monitoring as well.

As we stand here at this threshold, looking towards the phased reopening of our churches, there is more work to be done. The work given to our clergy and lay leadership is to take to heart the diocesan Guidelines and to develop Church plans and protocols to implement the Guidelines in each local setting. **The diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening are not optional. Your church’s leadership may choose to do more than the Guidelines require, but they may not do less.** My staff and I will host a webinar for all clergy next week, to review these guidelines together and to address questions.

Clearly, we cannot *eliminate* risks when we regather. We will still be living in the midst of the pandemic. But we can do many things to *reduce* the risk. Indeed, by and large, we *have* been doing them for the past two months by physical distancing, methodical hand-washing, faithful mask-wearing, and serious cleaning of surfaces. Our reopening plans will need to be more detailed than that, of course, but our aim is to promote, and insist upon, public health practices that will reduce health risks and serve our communities and our nation by limiting the spread of COVID-19.

Reopening will be more complicated in some of our churches than in others, and I expect some congregations will be ready to reopen before others. The diocesan Guidelines will not solve every problem or address every situation. Nor will the plans and protocols developed by your church be able to speak to every aspect of this season. We will continue to learn. We will continue to make mistakes, and when we do, we will need to take a deep breath, give each other a break, and ask for and receive forgiveness. And then, we get up and start again.

Everywhere I look in the Diocese of West Texas, I see signs of hope and powerful reminders that although we are temporarily confined by the Coronavirus, we are not defined by it. It is the risen Christ who claims us and defines us. I see this Easter life in the countless ways that you have continued worship and ministry in the name of Christ and your determination to make that happen. I see it in the countless hours spent learning technologies, so that you can continue to be together in Christ while physically apart. I see it in the compassion and caring you show to so many whose suffering and anxiety in this time is greater than our own. I see it in the life-giving ways that you are facing our present circumstances with both clear-eyed realism and rock-solid hope.

We have traveled a long way during these past two months. We are not yet where we want to be. But that day is coming, and there is work for us to do to get ready. I look forward, more than I can say, to that day we can be together.

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.” (Colossians 3:12-15)

Love in the Risen Christ,

+David

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