



## A PASTORAL LETTER AND DIRECTIVES FROM BISHOP CLARK LOWENFIELD *for worship in this extraordinary time*

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Fifth Friday of Eastertide 2020

To the Saints of the Diocese of the Western Gulf Coast,

Greetings in the name of the Risen Lord and Savior of the world. Our hope is in our Sovereign King, Jesus, and now more than ever, we need to affirm that truth and His presence in our lives.

Despite living in a time of pandemic and economic upheaval, we are blessed. One hundred years ago, during the Spanish flu, churches were shut down for months on end. With the benefit of technology, most of our churches have been able to continue to worship, to have Bible studies, small groups and house church gatherings, as well as essential meetings and events in online format.

The COVID-19 disease remains prevalent in our communities, and the number of new cases and hospitalizations continues to need to be monitored carefully on a daily basis. While we have used the state's orders to help inform our decisions, and since before the States of Texas and Louisiana "stay at home" orders were issued, out of love for each other and our neighbor, we have continued together in the desire to not have the Church "close" in her ministry, while at the same time not be a source of risk, fear or infection. Meeting regularly with heads of congregations, clergy and lay leaders, we are all taking guidance from the state and local authorities when it comes to how we consider gathering again. Church life together will be certainly a new world for us all in the coming months. Even as I write this, we are awaiting additional guidelines from our state and local officials regarding how coming events like our important summer youth event, Soul in the City,

will look in this new world.

Many of us are more than ready to get back to “normal,” but we must recognize that it will be this “new normal” for quite some time. It has been frustrating and even difficult for some clergy to preach and celebrate communion to empty rooms while also being banned from visiting the sick in hospitals, but we are attempting to continue ministry with grace and mercy, taking care of the least and each other.

The clergy and lay leaders of our parishes have received a great deal of useful information from my office regarding recommendations and guidelines for in-person worship from **the CDC** and from **the State of Texas** which will direct us as each congregation makes their own decisions regarding the reintroducing of gathering for in-person worship. I am so proud of and impressed by the faithfulness of all of the leadership within our diocese. They continue to be innovative, positive, and bold in ministering effectively in this age of pandemic. The clergy and lay leadership have put a great deal of prayer and work into thinking through how we gather as Christians, while at the same time striving at every turn in limiting the risk to the most vulnerable among us. Over these last many weeks this has included outdoor worship services, drive-up Communion, and online offerings in almost every parish.

As we move forward into the summer months, and with this communication, **I do give each parish my permission to resume in-person worship as of the Ascension Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> of May.** This is simply *permission*. I have said many times on leadership calls, I honor each of our congregation’s leadership in making their independent decisions of when they will actually re-gather in person. Of course, this is driven by the individual context of dealing with their own unique demographics, geographical and facilities considerations. They have been instructed to provide for me protocols for their own processes of regathering for in-person worship as well as keeping me abreast of numbers of hospitalizations in their areas and statements and guidelines from state and local officials. Some parishes will be worshipping in-person on May 24<sup>th</sup>, others will in the weeks to come.

As each community walks through this season, I call each of us to love one another. Keep one another safe. Give much grace to each other. And to honor our Lord Jesus in all our decisions. To this end, and for the encouragement of all of you, I issue the following updated directive regarding each congregation's leadership decisions to gather again in-person.

### May 14: Updated Pastoral Directive

1. Obviously, the safest place for all of us continues to be at home, where we can maintain maximum social distancing. Individuals with significant health problems including obesity, lung, liver, kidney or heart disease or those who have impaired immune systems, including those on chemotherapy for cancer, should take the maximum measures to stay safe during this pandemic and should consider very seriously whether it is time for them to attend public worship.
2. The importance for individuals and families to make personal decisions regarding whether and when they chose (choose) to return physically to their church community needs to be honored and given overt Grace by everyone. For all of our senior members, at-risk members and anyone concerned about being infected with the virus or infecting others with the virus must require continued online offerings of worship and the option of *Spiritual Communion* integrated into the liturgy.
3. The norm for reception of the Communion will continue to be in "one kind" through the end of June. This is still considered "full communion"
4. For us to safely gather in groups or for worship together, we will have to maintain clearly defined social distancing by household. Alternating pews or spacing between chairs will need to be maintained in and around the communion table (Altar) and elsewhere. Following state and local governmental guidelines, it is encouraged that seating be limited to 25% of the capacity of the space.
5. Special seating for any households feeling at risk will be provided along with the ability to exit the congregation ahead of the "crowd" or as households.
6. Members (the word 'attenders' is used later) are expected to hand sanitize before and after worship services, perhaps even being asked to bring their own hand sanitizer and wipes. Clergy and Lay Ministers will sanitize their hands before and after distribution of Communion or after any contact is made with someone else.

7. Church surfaces and items that are regularly touched must be sanitized before and after gatherings.
8. The collection plate or basket must not be passed but can be set out in an area where people can make their offerings.
9. Dismissal should be done by pew, section or household to avoid a gathering at the door.
10. All parishioners are asked to wear face coverings or masks out of love for one another. As communities who foster Grace, we will, together, resist a “shame” atmosphere developing regarding the wearing of masks or toward those who choose or do not choose to gather in person.
11. Please do not shake hands or hug at the Peace or at any other time. A simple verbal greeting, or head nod, or making of a heart with your hands is lovingly sufficient.
12. All other church meetings and gatherings outside of Sunday worship services need to observe defined social distancing guidelines set by the parish leadership.

Personally, I am beginning to discuss with the clergy the resuming of my visitations, confirmations, and I am looking forward to doing two ordinations in the weeks ahead.

Please continue to pray for those impacted by this virus either physically or economically. Please pray for the clergy, the first responders and the health care workers who are currently ministering to so many. Please send your personal prayer requests to our Diocesan Intercession Team at [GulfCoastPrayers@gmail.com](mailto:GulfCoastPrayers@gmail.com) and those things you would like me to pray for to [BishopClarksPrayers@gmail.com](mailto:BishopClarksPrayers@gmail.com).

Finally, brothers and sisters, remember that, in St. Paul's words from Romans 8, ...***we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.*** God in His Sovereignty, and Jesus as our King, still rule and guide us in this unique and unprecedented time. Let us follow and trust Him while we serve each other and those around us.



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***For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power.***  
**1 Corinthians 4:20**