



From the Bishop

Regarding the Phased Reopening of Diocesan Churches for Worship Services

May 21, 2020

“And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy.” (Ezra 3:11-12)

Dear Friends in Christ,

We need to understand that it will not be the same. As churches across the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas prepare their phased reopening plans for modified public worship, we need to know that the services we will be returning to will be less, *for a season*, than what we remember and have been longing for. We will be like the Israelites returning after a long exile and beginning to rebuild the Temple - it will bring us joy, and at the same time, we will also feel disappointed that it is not the same.

Returning to worship in our local house of the Lord will be a great and joyful day, but it also signals another challenging phase in this difficult COVID-19 journey. We will need to rely on all of the hard work, planning, collaboration, patience, and forbearance that has carried us to this point together as we begin to regather in person to rebuild the life, worship, and ministries of our beloved churches. We begin this next phase weary from the work of the last three months and still anxious about the uncertainties ahead. We will need to pray for renewal and refreshment in the Spirit and for a rekindled commitment to love one another.

During this disruption, we have rightly remained focused on the mechanics of being Church while physically separated. Now, we need to consider carefully the powerful spiritual and

emotional undercurrents moving within each of us and within our church families as we all plan the next right steps. What follows are updates, clarifications, and emphases as you and your congregation plan to restart in-person public worship. As with so much else, all that follows remains subject to change, based on the pandemic, and local and state orders and guidance.

This Sunday, May 24, remains the date *after which* churches may choose to begin their phased reopening for in-person worship and church offices. As the state of Texas moves quickly to reopen, further extension of our diocesan-wide closure no longer contributes to a state-wide effort to slow the spread and flatten the curve. In addition, allowing this date to become a continually moving target adds another layer of uncertainty to these already uncertain and anxious times. For these and other reasons, and in close consultation with the Standing Committee, staff and other bishops, I have decided to maintain this date as the end of the current diocesan-wide restrictions on in-person worship services.

The Diocesan Guidelines for the Phased Reopening of Churches remain in effect. No church may begin in-person worship until the church's leadership has **returned the signed Covenant** agreeing to implement the Guidelines, developed a local plan for implementation, and communicated that plan in detail to their members. **Plans for implementing the Covenant** locally are also requested so that diocesan staff might review them.

Rectors/Vicars and Vestries/Bishop's Committees are entrusted with the timing for reopening. While churches may begin to reopen after May 24, assuming the above conditions have been met, they are *not required* to do so.

A consistent, fourteen-day decline in confirmed cases remains an important marker for consideration by church leaders, based on the guidance of health professionals and emphasized by the Diocese since mid-March. Following the increased availability of testing, which leads to increasing numbers of known cases, church leaders should also pay careful attention to the percentage of positive test results compared to total tests, or "**positivity rate.**"

Church leaders are expected to stay informed about local trends, including confirmed cases and positivity rates, and to consult local medical and public health officials regarding advisability of phased reopening. Clergy and lay leaders should **be prepared,** and prepare their congregations, to further restrict or suspend their reopening, or close again, if there is a rapid spread of the virus, or if directed by local officials.

Risk remains. We are still living in the midst of a global pandemic. The Diocesan Guidelines and local plans cannot eliminate the risk. Our goal is act intelligently and faithfully to reduce risk to one another and to our communities.

Phase Two for Reopening the Diocese, "A Modified Return to Public Worship," applies to worship services and church office operations only. For the time being, other church activities and use of facilities by outside groups remain suspended. Please focus on the

immediate next step. It will be much easier to consider Phase Three, and a broader reopening, after we've had some experience with worship and office work.

Continue to offer live-stream and recorded services for individuals or families who should stay home and those who choose to do so. If your church is not equipped to do this, diocesan staff can help; we encourage you to consider alternative ways of connection with your parishioners, as well. It need not be fancy or expensive.

Be practical and, as much as possible, keep worship services simple as you reopen. Morning Prayer is beautiful and logistically simple. Meeting outside is easier than inside for spreading out and for cleaning. In figuring out the mechanics of offering the Eucharist, do not lose sight of the purpose or the several components that create the fullness of the Eucharistic feast. *Do not discard theology and tradition for the sake of "making it happen."*

Across the 66,000 square miles of the Diocese, the pandemic landscape remains as varied and unpredictable as it was the day this all started. Comparing confirmed cases from May 4th to May 19th shows that nine of our 60 counties are still experiencing a significant presence of the virus. Eight counties report between 10 to 25 confirmed cases during this time, and twenty-two of our counties report fewer than 10 new cases. In eleven counties, there has been no increase during that time period. Keeping up with the rapidly changing data plus the different ways information is reported and interpreted is daunting, but to ignore it or to not take it seriously is to increase the risk to those we love.

While I am entrusting the development and implementation of plans for phased reopening and modified worship to local leadership, please do not hesitate to contact diocesan staff with questions, particularly if you feel like your plan may be bumping up against the boundaries of the Guidelines.

Like the Israelites returning from Babylon, we, too, will be rebuilding. We will need to rebuild our worship, fellowship, and ministries. There will be joy and grief. And like the Israelites, we will be remembering. We will begin again to "sing the Lord's song," remembering his love and faithfulness that endures and redeems and saves. We will remember and celebrate that, even in the midst of disruption, the love of God abides. Hold fast to the hope that is yours in Christ Jesus.

Love in Christ,

+David Reed

Bishop of West Texas