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Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches in West Texas

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1. INTRODUCTION

All our consideration of COVID-19 and our churches must begin with “thank you.” Thank you to each and every one of you who have worked so hard to carry on the life, worship and mission of the Church in the midst of this pandemic. Throughout the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, clergy, lay leaders, and congregations as a whole have given themselves wholeheartedly to learning or improving ways to faithfully keep their churches connected in worship, study, outreach and pastoral care. In the midst of continual disruptions and uncertainties in your own lives, you have committed to being sources of encouragement and hope, sources of the Light of Christ to one another and to your communities.

This commitment has required a lively trust in the love of God and a steadfast commitment to persevere by grace. Rapidly changing circumstances have required us to adjust and adjust again. The tragic, worldwide effect of the pandemic has shaken us to the core. And then we find that the very place we turn to in times of trouble, our churches, must be closed down, for the sake of everyone. Our response, surely the work of the Holy Spirit, has been to redouble our efforts to love one another and stick together, even while physically distant. We have met and worshiped using social media platforms that we had never heard of two months ago. To get from where we were when we entered this strange world to the threshold of a phased reopening, and to arrive here together has required the very best from us: patience, trust, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, cooperation, and (not least) sacrificial love. The novel coronavirus did not arrive with a training manual or a pandemic road-map, and it is no weakness to say, as many of us have, that “we’re making this up as we go.”

And so, thank you. And thanks be to God for you and for your determination to be fully the Church. “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it.” (John 1:5)

The same traits and virtues that have brought us this far together will continue to be vitally important as we begin our movement toward a phased regathering for in-person worship. As the State of Texas begins to “open up” again, the Church in West Texas is called to plan our own reopening, based not on fear or on reckless wishful thinking, but on the call of Jesus to follow him and love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

All clergy and local church leaders seem to understand and agree that the reopening of the 87 churches of our Diocese must be gradual and carefully phased. There will be no flipping of a switch or grand announcement that we can all “go out and play.” It will not happen all at once, and it won’t look exactly the same in all our churches. This will feel unfair to some, but please keep in mind that we seek to take the next right step, as a Diocese and in each of our congregations, and to take that step in ways that honor Christ and reveal his love.

The image of “normal” that we may have in our minds and imaginations will probably look different from reality, at least for a while. It may be a long time before church looks and feels like it did before COVID-19. Even then, we may discover that COVID-19 has changed us in ways that we won’t realize until we are able to take a collective breath and reflect on what “post COVID-19” worship, life, and ministry looks like. Once that time comes, the people of the Diocese of West Texas should set aside intentional time to reflect on what we’ve learned about ourselves, our communities, our churches, and our God.

The Guidelines are intended to assist your church plan and facilitate its reopening, so that people may begin to return to the worship life they so deeply long for, in the safest way possible and mindful that risk remains.

Clergy and Vestries/Bishop’s Committees in each congregation must give assent to these Guidelines before the Bishop will give permission to begin this next Phase. Vestries and Bishop’s Committees may choose, given their local conditions, to make their plan more restrictive than these Guidelines, but may not make them less so. Implementation of the Guidelines will require much conversation and work, and that is being entrusted to the leadership of each church. The Guidelines cannot possibly answer every question or address every local issue. The intention is to provide a strong, clear structure that can be developed locally. Members of the Bishop’s staff are available to assist churches in developing their local protocols in accordance with the Guidelines.

A final word of thanks. These Guidelines are the result of countless hours of meetings, study, discussion and debate, and all of it done in an environment that seems to change daily. Several members of the diocesan staff have labored long on the document. We have studied government pronouncements and public health reports and sat in on more webinars than is healthy. Our Chancellor and Standing Committee have reviewed this work carefully. A cross-section of our clergy were consulted, and we have received very helpful insights from clergy and laity across the Diocese. More broadly, our Bishop has been in regular conversation with the Presiding Bishop’s office and with bishops throughout the United States since early March. He has also consulted closely with the Episcopal bishops of the dioceses in Texas, Province VII Episcopal bishops, and with ecumenical partners. We have all shared freely and there’s been no pride of ownership. All of these collaborative efforts are reflected in the Guidelines.

There’s a proverb of obscure origin that says, “If you want to arrive fast, go alone. If you want to arrive together, go slow.” Our hearts’ desire is that we will move carefully and deliberately, indeed, that we will walk in love as Christ loves us, so that we will arrive together on the other side of the pandemic. May these Guidelines serve us all in reaching that great day.

2. CURRENT SITUATION AND EXPECTATIONS

Since mid-March, the Rt. Rev. David Reed has called the congregations of West Texas to refrain from in-person gatherings for worship and meetings. At present, the restrictions are in place through May 15; however, they may be extended further by the Bishop.

Clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees should begin conversations about phased reopening now.

The decision to allow the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas to resume modified in-person worship will come from the Rt. Rev. David Reed, in collaboration with guidance from the Standing Committee as well as state and local authorities. Once Bishop Reed has issued a public worship authorization, local congregations may choose to hold modified public worship or to remain in physically-distanced, online worship mode. While you are being invited to begin planning for a modified return to public worship, be reminded that just because you can, does not mean that you must. Clergy at higher risk of COVID-19 infection will not be expected by the bishop to lead public worship.

Modified public worship cannot begin until your congregation has submitted its signed covenant to Archdeacon Mike Besson, at mike.besson@dwtx.org, ***and after Bishop Reed announces that churches may begin implementing a phased reopening within the Guidelines.*** Following this, everyone should rigorously follow the practices specified in these guidelines to facilitate a safe and measured reopening for Texas.

Clergy and lay leaders must stay well-informed about local information, directives, and changes concerning COVID-19 in their communities and should be prepared to adapt their plans based on new information. Once public worship begins, the gatherings should be in compliance with local, state, national, and diocesan policies. Taking into consideration their local community, clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees may choose to be more restrictive than these guidelines, but not less. Each congregation will decide how to offer worship within these guidelines, using the checklist below to formulate a plan. There are some places in this document that conflict with lighter restrictions published by the Governor; our congregations will not be allowed to be less restrictive than the state and local ordinances or diocesan Guidelines. Clergy are not permitted to organize or lead worship away from church premises that is not in compliance with these Guidelines.

Even after a phased reopening begins, congregations should continue to offer online options for worship to accommodate families who should not or cannot attend in-person services. Discussions about public worship will take place with the following premise in mind: if we are out in public, we are at risk. During this phase, risk can only be minimized, not eliminated. Additionally, the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas will not approve a service only for the at-risk population, as we do not want to encourage our most at-risk people to gather in public. The at-risk population is anyone 65 years old or older, and anyone with chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma; chronic heart disease; severe obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis; liver disease; or weakened immune system.

Following the bishop's authorization, church offices may reopen at the rector/vicar's discretion. Offices can reopen only if all social distancing and sanitation guidelines can be followed in your office space. Employees and volunteers who wish to continue to work from home/shelter in place must be allowed to do so. In congregations with no rector or vicar, the Senior Warden or Bishop's Warden will make the decision to reopen the office.

Future resurgences of COVID-19 cases may result in Bishop Reed requiring churches to return to

physical distancing restrictions and no in-person worship. Church leaders should share this reality with congregation members and prepare their community emotionally and practically to return to physical distancing restrictions and no in-person worship, at any time. On the other hand, when confirmed cases begin to decline and as other public health milestones are met, the diocese will send updated guidelines for the next phases for reopening the Diocese at that time. More details about the four phases established by the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas for church reopening is included below.

3. PHASES FOR REOPENING THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

In accordance with Governor Abbott's executive order GA-18, the following guidelines present the minimum recommended health protocols for all churches¹, congregations, and places of worship in Texas. Churches, congregations, and places of worship may adopt additional protocols consistent with their specific needs and circumstances to help protect the health and safety of all. The same health protocols apply to funeral services, weddings, burials, memorials, confirmations, and bishop's visits.

Many of these guidelines have been developed in consideration of protocols distributed by The Episcopal Church, federal and state guidelines, public health recommendations, clergy focus groups, other denominations in our region of Texas, including the ELCA Southwestern Texas Synod, and more.

The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is still circulating in our communities. While the scientific community, public health officials, and federal government work to distribute accurate and widely available testing as well as study the virus and develop a reliable vaccine, we should continue to observe practices that protect everyone, including those who are most vulnerable. While in some parts of Texas the spread of COVID-19 seems to be slowing, the great majority of public health and medical experts report that we have not yet reached the peak of confirmed cases. The practices of limiting non-essential travel and physical distancing are working. A controlled reopening in several phases will allow our churches to continue limiting the spread of COVID-19 while gathering for modified worship and exercising appropriate caution, in case of another widespread outbreak. Currently, there are four phases for reopening the Diocese.

Phase 1: Our Current Phase - Stay at Home Orders and Work Safe

Health Characteristics: There is widespread community spread of the virus, slowly at first and then rapidly. Health system is overtaxed; medical supplies fall short. No vaccine or therapy is available. No protective supplies are allocated for the public, characteristics of the virus are still unknown.

The Church Responds: Moratorium on public worship, including "Drive-In Eucharist"; online and live-streaming church begins. All in-person church meetings, events, and gatherings canceled. Video-conferencing becomes a part of our life together. Church schools close and move instruction online. Church offices close. Diocesan office closes.

Phase 2: Our Next Step - A Modified Return to Public Worship

Health Characteristics: Downward trajectory of COVID-19 cases, as well as influenza-like and covid-like cases, reported within a consecutive 14-day period. Cities and state are testing all people with COVID-19 symptoms and can monitor the activities and interactions of people with confirmed cases.

¹ ["Texans Helping Texans: The Governor's Report to Open Texas,"](#) released April 27, 2020 and including Minimum Recommended Health Protocols for individuals, churches and places of worship, and others.

Hospitals can treat all patients without resorting to crisis standards of care, and a robust testing program is in place for at-risk frontline workers, including emerging antibody testing.

The Church Responds: Church offices with facilities that can accommodate proper social distancing and proper sanitizing may reopen. Online worship continues as a supplement to in-person worship. Modified in-person worship begins with proactive health and safety protocols in place (detailed below, see Section 4).

Phase 3: A Full Return

Health Characteristics: Negative community spread. Mass vaccination and therapeutic availability. Mass testing for virus and immunity. No social distancing requirements. Global vaccination.

The Church Responds: All restrictions on in-person worship, formation, meetings, community ministries, and gathering lifted. Online worship and meetings are still offered.

Phase 4: A Time for Reflection

The COVID-19 pandemic will forever change us in ways we may not fully know or understand for a long time. The church has found new ways to adapt, to reach out, and to serve as well as experiencing much fear and loss. Together the clergy and people of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas will discern ways to reflect on how we've changed, what we've learned about ourselves and about the God we serve, and how we can bring our experiences as individual Christians, as congregations, and as a Diocese into the future and share what we've learned with the world.

4. DIOCESAN PROTOCOLS AND GUIDELINES

Protocols and guidelines for diocesan churches during Phase 2.

a. Protocols for Facilities

- Clean and disinfect any regularly touched surfaces frequently during 'business hours' and at the end or beginning of the day (ex. doorknobs, tables, chairs, and restroom facilities).
- Disinfect seats and/or pews between all services.
- Disinfect any items that come into contact with attendees.
- Make hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, soap and water, or similar disinfectants readily available.
- Place easily visible signs explaining hygiene best practices (use bilingual signs or signs for young children, as needed).
- No meals, food, or drinks (coffee) of any kind should be provided.

b. Protocols for Employees and Volunteers

- Train all employees and volunteers on appropriate cleaning and disinfection, hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette.
- Train all employees and ushers/greeters not to shake hands or embrace attendees.
- Screen employees and volunteers before coming into the church, congregation, or place of worship for potential signs of illness.
 - Send home any employee or volunteer who has any of the following new or worsening signs and symptoms of possible COVID-19:
 - Cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, known close contact with a person who is lab-confirmed to have COVID-19.
 - Prevent employees or volunteers with any new or worsening signs and symptoms, listed above, from returning to work until the following criteria are met:
 - For an employee or volunteer diagnosed with COVID-19: the individual may return to work when all three of the following criteria are met: at least three days (72 hours) have passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications); respiratory symptoms improve (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); and at least 7 days have passed since symptoms first appeared;
 - For an employee or volunteer who has symptoms that could be COVID-19, but does not get evaluated by a medical professional or tested for COVID-19: the individual is assumed to have COVID-19 and cannot return to work until the individual meeting the same three-step criteria listed above;
 - For an employee or volunteer who has symptoms that could be COVID-19 and wants to return to work before completing the above self-isolation period: the individual must obtain a medical professional's note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis.
 - Do not allow an employee or volunteer with known close contact to a person who is lab-confirmed to have COVID-19 to return to work until the end of the 14-day self-quarantine period, from the last date of exposure.
- Require employees or volunteers to wash or sanitize their hands upon entering church facilities.
- Require employees or volunteers to maintain at least 6 feet of separation from other individuals.
- Ask employees, volunteers, and attendees to wear cloth face coverings or non-medical grade face masks over their nose and mouth.
 - When attendees are present, face masks are required (detailed below, see Section C).
- Encourage people who are in the at-risk population to refrain from volunteering.
- Keep the number of worship leaders to a bare minimum.
 - The more lectors, servers, greeters, etc. there are, the greater the risk. It also adds to the number of people that must be mobilized, trained, and equipped to lead worship under restricted conditions.
- Social distancing and other forms of protection should be used by clergy, when with others.

c. Protocols for Protecting Attendees

Worship services under these guidelines include Holy Eucharist, Morning and Evening Prayer (with or without Eucharist), Drive-In services, and Healing services; services on any day of the week are under these guidelines.

Communication

- Send all church protocols in digital and/or printed forms to church communication lists at least 2 weeks prior to your reopen date to let people know what new physical distancing and hygiene practices to expect at church.
- Provide all protocols in written form to each person attending services **before they enter the building.**
- Post printed copies of church protocols in an easily viewable location, inside all open facilities.

Sunday Services and Weekday Services

- Strongly encourage your congregation's at-risk population to participate in the service remotely.
 - Consider reserving a seating area where vulnerable members or those in at-risk populations may choose to sit.
- Ensure proper spacing between attendees:
 - Keep at least six feet separation, approximately the width of two seats, between parties in any row, except two or more members of the same household can sit adjacent to one another, with six feet empty on either side of the group.
 - Alternate rows between attendees, leaving approximately every other row empty.
- Attendees cannot enter the building without a mask or face-covering.
 - Congregations should prepare to give masks to attendees who show up without one.
- Strongly discourage attendees from engaging in any physical contact with each other whatsoever, including shaking hands, hugging, fist-bumping, high-fiving, etc. whether in the building or elsewhere on church premises.
- Prop open doors inside the building and to the outside, so that no attendee has to touch a doorknob or handle.
 - If necessary or preferred, assign volunteers or staff to open and close doors for individuals as they come in and out.
 - Mark any locked interior or exterior doors, so that attendees do not try to open them.
- Public surfaces that are touched should be sanitized before, in between, and after each service. This includes doorknobs, altar rails, pews, contact areas in restrooms, hymnals and Books of Common Prayer, etc.
- Collection plates should not be passed. Provide a container or plate in a place that allows people to give their offering without touching anything.
 - Online giving is an option that should be encouraged and continued.
- Provide online/digital service materials where possible.
 - Consider removing prayer books and hymnals from the pews if you are using a full-service bulletin or projecting the liturgy and lyrics on a screen.
 - Printed bulletins cannot be reused from one service to the other and must be discarded.

- No “receiving line” should be held after church; ask families and individuals to exit pew by pew and to maintain social distancing.
- Gathering for conversation and fellowship after church should be discouraged.

Communion

- Communion will be distributed in one kind only until further notice.
- “Drive-through Communion” will not be permitted.

Preparation

- Only use wafers (no homemade or store-bought bread).
- Clergy, Lay Eucharistic Ministers, and anyone assisting in the distribution of the sacraments must wash hands for 20 seconds, prior to the distribution of the elements.
- Washing hands properly is twice as effective as hand sanitizer. However, if hand sanitizer is the only option, servers should use it before communion.
- Altar guilds should follow all sanitary protocols for vessels and items used during services.

Consecration and Distribution

- The priest presiding at the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer is not required to wear a mask at that time. However, he or she should ensure that the bread, and wine, are covered during consecration, and that only the priest’s host is touched.
- Clergy and Eucharistic Ministers are required to wear a face mask during distribution, covering nose, mouth, and chin. Gloves are optional. Several methods of distributing the Bread are acceptable, so long as proper protocols are followed.
- Diligently avoid hand-to-hand contact when distributing a communion wafer, even if wearing gloves, by dropping the wafer into the hands of the recipient. This reduces the risk of possible contamination from communicant to priest and by default, priest to everyone else.
- Communicants will receive the wafer while standing (no kneeling).
 - Before the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, the clergy should remind attendees to remain standing while they receive communion.
- Train communion ushers to help recipients maintain six feet of distance between households while walking to the front for communion.
 - Consider marking the floor with tape to indicate the 6-foot distance required between persons coming forward for communion, similarly to H-E-B and other gathering places

Spiritual Communion

- Before the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, the clergy should
 - Announce that attendees may remain in their pews if they are not comfortable with coming forward to receive the sacrament, and
 - Explain the theology of Spiritual Communion so that those who do not come forward to receive, as well as those watching from home, can understand the meaning of Spiritual Communion.
- At the end of communion, offer a blessing from the altar area for anyone remaining in their seats or participating from home.

- The Book of Common Prayer refers to Spiritual Communion in the form for Ministration to the Sick, directing the priest to assure a person unable to eat and drink the bread and wine “that all the benefits of Communion are received even though the Sacrament is not received with the mouth” (*Book of Common Prayer, page 457*).

Formation Classes, Coffee Hour, and Outreach

- In-person fellowship, coffee hour, meals, bible studies, Sunday School, etc. are still suspended until further notice; this includes all children and youth activities and all other meetings, gatherings, and programs outside of worship.
- Outreach ministries that are meeting an immediate need can continue to operate as long as the protocols for health and safety are in place, including social distancing.

Other Services (Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, etc.)

- Weddings and funerals, including graveside services, are permitted.
 - Wedding coordinators must agree to abide by your church’s protocols.
 - Coordinate with funeral homes to maintain their protocols as well as yours.
 - The same social distancing, sanitizing, worship service protocols, precautions, and guidelines must be used for these services as a Sunday Worship Service.
- Baptisms should not be take place, except in cases of emergency.
- Healing services are permitted, but laying on of hands and anointing are restricted to urgent/emergency pastoral care only.
- All other worship services must be approved by the Bishop. If it can wait, it probably should.

Childcare

- Childcare services should not be provided under any circumstances.
- Ensure that open restrooms have adequate and available cleaning supplies for any diaper changing stations.

5. QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WITH YOUR LEADERSHIP WHILE PLANNING PHASED REOPENING OF CHURCH WORSHIP SERVICES

- > Is our worship space large enough to accommodate social distancing if the “regular crowd” shows up? If not, do we have an alternative, “overflow” space to offer (parish hall, chairs 6 feet apart, etc.)?
- > How many people can we accommodate safely in our worship space with proper social distancing? How will we communicate this adjusted capacity with attendees, and what will we do if that number is exceeded?
- > For congregations with large numbers of people, small spaces, or both: could we create an attendance schedule where people can sign up to attend one or two Sunday services each month? This would allow families to take turns and could help ensure that everyone has the opportunity to worship in your space 1-2 times a month.
- > Is outdoor worship possible in our community? Can this allow for more people to participate and lessen the work of sanitizing the space? What happens if the weather turns bad suddenly on a Sunday morning?
- > Can we gather sufficient volunteers or staff to sanitize our space before, in between, and after services? Can our congregation sustain this cleaning team for the “long haul”? Are there adequate cleaning supplies available to us or are they still hard to get?
- > How and when will we conduct training for ushers, servers, altar guild, etc. to ensure they understand and follow the guidelines, and can answer questions if asked?