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The Next Right Step: Extending Closures Through May 24th

1 message

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From the Bishop

Extending Closures for In-Person Worship and Gatherings through May 24

May 8, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

For the sake of those who are our church family, and for the sake of our communities, I have decided to extend the closure of church facilities for in-person worship and other gatherings *through* Sunday, May 24.

This new starting date for a phased and gradual reopening of our churches replaces the May 15th date I announced on April 24th. After Sunday, May 24th, "Phase Two - a Modified Return to Public Worship" will begin. During Phase Two, church offices may open and in-person worship services held, *provided that their Covenant Agreement is returned to Archdeacon Mike Besson and that a congregation specific plan for modified worship, responsible social distancing, and increased cleaning practices has been developed and communicated to the congregation.* During Phase Two, gathering in-person for Christian formation, fellowship, or other meetings is still off limits. This new date does *not* assume or require that all churches begin in-person worship at that point. And, we must all keep in mind that increased rates of community spread may require churches to delay reopening further or close again in the future.

As with all other diocesan decisions made concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, I have sought to be prayerful, fully informed and collaborative, and have consulted widely. Following the release of the diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening on Friday, May 1st, and the webinar held for clergy on Tuesday, May 5th, about the Guidelines, diocesan staff and I have spent much time considering questions, recommendations, and responses to the Guidelines from clergy and lay leaders throughout the Diocese. I've sought out the widest possible perspective,

specifically regarding the date for beginning to reopen, including the Standing Committee and a large group of clergy representing all parts of the Diocese and all sizes of our congregations.

Though not unanimous, a large consensus formed around May 24th. While just nine days longer, it includes two more Sundays, giving local church leadership more time to address the requirements of the Guidelines, develop their plans, and communicate clearly with their parishioners. It also allows more time for public health officials to assess and communicate the possible impact of our Governor's orders to relax government restrictions related to the pandemic. Please note that while Governor Abbott authorized the gradual reopening of businesses and other arenas of public life, he continues to strongly recommend social distancing and wearing masks in public - measures that have proven very effective in "flattening the curve."

I fully understand the ongoing frustration and weariness you feel. I know that pushing back the start of the phased reopening once more will disappoint some, even as it will be a great relief to others. Please trust that we are all trying to work together, so that when we come joyfully to the other side of this, we will see that we have arrived together - one in Christ. I am blessed to have so many people working and praying with me toward that goal. And they are doing that for all of us. I ask that you continue to practice patience and loving-kindness with one another as your church's leaders work hard to develop plans that will allow you to gather together again, in person, in your church.

Keep in mind that it is still Easter. Christ is risen, and the challenges of this present time will not outlast the power of his love.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+David

David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas

Below are responses to several frequently asked questions, received by the Bishop and diocesan staff after the release of the Guidelines for Phased Reopening and the webinar regarding their implementation:

Masks

Everyone should wear masks in the church sanctuary, facilities, and office buildings. Clergy and lay members who are leading or assisting in worship services should wear masks, except when leading parts of the liturgy, as preacher, celebrant, lector, etc. Maintain at least six feet, *and more when possible*, between the speaker and members of the congregation. Gospel processions are discouraged. Worshippers should be instructed to bring their own masks, and churches should have a supply to offer anyone who doesn't bring one. [Click here](#) for information from the CDC concerning effective and safe cloth face mask protocols.

Choirs & Singing

The Guidelines do not address this directly. Given how much air is expressed by singing, clergy and choir directors should carefully consider the spacing of singers, who should be significantly more than six feet apart and not facing one another, 'in the round', in addition to the additional risks inherent in choir rehearsals. The diocese discourages choirs in procession and recommends the use of soloists, small ensembles and instrumentalists during Phase Two. Congregational singing presents similar challenges. Individuals developing their church's plans for reopening should give much attention to whether and how to include congregational singing in modified worship services.

Day Schools

All Episcopal schools in the Diocese are closed, and do not plan to reopen until next fall. If you have questions about a particular school, please contact the head of school, respectively. For more general school questions, please start with the Bishop's Deputy for Episcopal Schools, [Mary Katherine Duffy](#).

Cleaning & Supplies

All church plans for reopening must include the regular and careful cleaning of all areas used for worship, as well as church offices, if used. This cleaning may be done by staff, outside cleaning services, or volunteers. Churches should consider the sustainability of thorough cleaning when planning the frequency of services, especially if they plan to rely on an outside cleaning service or volunteers. Numerous effective products are available. [Click here](#) for the CDC's step-by-step guide to making a plan for cleaning and sanitizing a public space, like a church. [Click here](#) to read or download "Six Steps for Safe Disinfectant Use," a one page guide from the EPA that includes instructions for selecting approved cleaning products.

The 14-Day Decline

Many health professionals and political leaders say that a consistent 14-day decline in confirmed cases of COVID-19 is an important indicator to begin to reopen our society. The Bishop has referred to that benchmark several times and used public health officials' projections for potential decline in his decisions about the date to begin reopening our churches. But good questions have come up regarding which numbers to consider: national, state, diocesan counties, individual communities, etc. The diocese has focused primarily on the number of cases within its borders, but also paid careful attention to statewide information, since government policies are generally based on that data. Though the rate of confirmed cases in each our 60 counties varies widely, we have tried to monitor the entire, rapidly changing situation, taking into account the best medical advice, as well as the directives of state officials, in order to form a response that is reasonable for the entire Diocese. ***The Phase Two Guidelines require that clergy and lay leaders keep up with developments in their own communities and prepare to stop in-person worship again if there is a local spike in the number of confirmed cases.*** Once Phase Two begins, after May 24th, local churches will assume more responsibility for responding effectively to local changes in the pandemic and continually assessing the risks of gathering for their congregation.

Many websites are available to assist you in tracking COVID-19 within Texas and in each county. Here are some that have been helpful to the Diocese:

[Dept. of State Health Services](#)

[Texas Association of Counties](#)

[Covid-19.direct](#)

[San Antonio/Bexar County](#)

As a reminder, the diocesan staff is always available to you to answer questions and to assist. You are invited to utilize the [Shared Congregational Resources](#) Basecamp to share questions, discuss ideas, and work together to sustain, and even grow, our ministries and worship during this season and beyond.

Guidelines for Phased Reopening

COVID-19 Resources Page

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