



BISHOP OF THE  
EPISCOPAL DIOCESE *of the* RIO GRANDE

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THE RIGHT REVEREND MICHAEL BUERKEL HUNN

April 27, 2020

Dear Diocese of the Rio Grande,

It is hard to believe that it has not even been two months since the first outbreak of the coronavirus in the diocese of the Rio Grande. We have all struggled to come to terms with the reality of our lives and the reality of our churches in this time of the global coronavirus pandemic. In these frightening and difficult times, I have been impressed with the work of our clergy and congregations as we have sought to adapt our ministries and to continue to do the work Jesus calls us to do under extremely difficult circumstances.

In just a few short weeks almost all of our congregations are now broadcasting liturgies live. We are reaching out by phone and video conference to all of our parishioners. We have adapted each of our ministries to continue without being able to meet in person. I have watched our soup kitchens, food pantries and ministries to those in recovery extend their reach, serving and caring for more people with the love of Jesus Christ. People are sewing masks then hanging them on gates and distributing them in our communities. Parishioners are picking up groceries and prescription medication for one another. We are deepening our lives of prayer. And through the generosity of so many people who continue to contribute financially online, our congregations and our Diocese remain financially viable. Thanks be to God for you and your ministry! You are a witness to God's love, hallelujah!

It is now clear that economic and political pressures will be pushing local and state governments to "open up the economy." It is also clear that public health experts and physicians have many concerns about how "opening up too early" might be disastrous. It is important to me that we in the Diocese of the Rio Grande do all we can to keep this from being a political issue. At stake are the lives of our parishioners, our neighbors, and the most vulnerable among us. Over half of our church members are in the high-risk category by virtue of their age. Even if certain towns or counties or states begin to open up, it is not wise for our church to move too quickly towards public gathering.

The following is the framework by which we as a diocese will move from today until we can freely and safely gather and enjoy public life in the church. Enclosed is a personal meditation on our Christian values which I hope will deeply ground the decisions that each of our congregations makes in the days ahead. Also included is a three-phase approach to how each congregation, and the diocese as a whole, will move forward. It is important to remember that we will not all move forward together—certain parts of the diocese may be able to safely open more widely or earlier than others. Safety will be our primary concern because God gave us life and every life is precious.

I will be in direct contact with each congregation in the diocese as we move together through the phases. Each congregation will develop a plan for each phase working with the Diocesan workbooks which they will receive next week. At each phase, we will ensure that any steps or activities are done in compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws and with the best medical advice

available. Leadership should check with legal counsel for each congregation, and/or one of the Chancellors, if and as needed.

We will learn from each other, we will adapt, and we will continue to be the church focused on the mission Christ gave us: to help people love the Lord their God with all their heart mind soul and strength, and love their neighbors as themselves.

May God bless us, and may our ministry be a witness to the love of God in the world.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "A. J. Hill" followed by a stylized flourish. To the left of the signature is a small cross symbol.

*The following is Bishop Hunn's personal meditation on our Christian values during this time of pandemic. While it follows the shape of the creed, which is the shape of our faith, it is not to be used as a liturgical document or doctrinal statement. Please feel free to use this for small group reflection or private devotion.*

**We remember**

In this moment we remember that:

We are here on earth to Love God

with all our heart

with all our mind

with all our soul

with all our strength

We are here on earth to Love our neighbor as ourselves

We remember that each day is a gift from God and an opportunity for us to deepen our faith

through prayer and learning to pray

through study of Holy Scripture, Christian Tradition and using our Reason

through rest and enjoying God's gifts

through participation in the community of faith where we learn what love is

We remember that each day is a gift from God and an opportunity to love our neighbor as ourselves

by acting out God's love

by sharing what we've been given

by witnessing to God's love by the way we live

by listening with God's heart of love

by working for justice, freedom and peace

by honestly sharing our feelings and needs so others can love us

We remember that God gave us minds to think:

That means God wants us to use our heads

That means science, health care, and common sense

We remember that God gave us hearts to love:

That means not putting others at risk

That means my needs (money, food, toilet paper) are not more important than others

We remember that God gave us hands to serve:

That means we are called to act in love and service those around us

That means we are called to speak out for and protect the most vulnerable

We remember that God loves us, is with us, and will never abandon us.

We remember Jesus' teaching:

Our lives are focused on Loving God with all our heart mind soul and strength

Our lives are focused on loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We remember Jesus' suffering:

Jesus Christ suffered here on earth and suffers with us still

Therefore we do not fear suffering, for God is present when we suffer.

We remember that God gives us strength and resilience to endure

We remember that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, bringing eternal life:

We know that Jesus went ahead of us, and will bring us to where he is

We remember that Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead:

Therefore God cares about what we do.

May the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth be our guide

We remember the gift of the Holy Spirit:

God is present with us even when we can't gather in church

God's power, strength, comfort and love are available everywhere

God is listening to every prayer and responding to every request

Even when God is silent, God is present

We remember that we are part of Christ's One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church:

The church is present in all times and all places

The church never just a building, a rite, or a social group.

The church is the Body of which Christ is the head and of which all baptized persons are members

We remember the Communion of Saints:

We take comfort from the examples of those who survived plague, oppression, and disaster

We are grateful for their witness

We will witness here today

We remember that Jesus Christ forgives the sins of the world therefore:

We do not blame others but offer understanding, kindness, love and forgiveness

We know God wants not our perfection but our faithfulness

We understand failure not as a shame but as an opportunity to learn

We hope in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting therefore:

We know every life is precious here on earth

We know every life endures beyond the grave

We do not fear death

Even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, alleluia alleluia.

# Three Phases for returning to Public Life <sup>1</sup>

## Phase I – Flattening the Curve: Digital Worship and Gatherings

*In Phase I we learn skills and develop practices that will be essential to sustain our congregations as we move in to Phase II and Phase III. This can be a highly creative time. By getting good at living and ministering with psychical distancing in place we deepen our faith in Jesus Christ and our trust in Him. That strong faith means we do not need to feel pressure from government or economic pressures but can choose what to do as a church based on what God is calling us to do and with the safety of the most vulnerable among us as our priority.*

*Phase I is an opportunity for the church to remember what is essential about what we do and to strengthen our ministries, our churches, and our relationships with our neighbors. Strengthen your Faith! Call your priest for a spiritual checkup and for ideas about spiritual practices! Call your Deacon for opportunities to serve! Try new patterns of prayer, find spiritual practices which can sustain you if you have to be at home for a long time. Find ways to connect with others to share God's love and care. Some of the things we learn in Phase I will become part of what it means for us to be church in the future. We need to be intentional about what we carry forward and what we let go of. God is present now, God is not waiting for us to gather in church, God is with us.*

*If Phase I lasts for months, we will keep our focus on Jesus and he will provide for our daily needs. We need not fear.*

*As we get good at being church in phase I, please ensure that any steps or activities are done in compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws. You should check with legal counsel for your congregation, and/or one of the Chancellors, if and as needed.*

*In Phase I each congregation puts its Phase I Plan in writing and shares it with the bishop. In phase I each congregation develops a Phase II plan in consultation with the bishop's office.*

### **Phase I Public Health Characteristics**

In Phase I the following public health characteristics may look and sound like the following:

- Widespread community spread of the virus
- Overtaxed health system
- Shortage of medical supplies
- Tests not widely available or accurate
- No effective treatment for those who get the virus
- Many in serious danger if they get the virus

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<sup>1</sup>

The framework and formatting for this outline was provided by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, adapted by the Episcopal Diocese of the Rio Grande.

- No effective vaccine
- Everyone needs to stay at home to keep virus from spreading out of control
- Only essential public services and businesses open
- Strict protocols for essential service providers

### Phase I in Churches

Churches are thinking through and practicing the following:

- We DEEPEN our lives of prayer— deepening prayer, Bible study, Rule of Life
- We BROADEN our connections with our congregation and our neighbors— calling family and friends, zooming with church members, praying together by phone, checking on your neighbors, delivering groceries to vulnerable members of our communities.
- Liturgy is delivered online.
- Bible Study is delivered online.
- Small groups meet online.
- Congregational fellowship happens by phone or online.
- Increased Pastoral Contact: Phone trees, and telephone “buddy systems” keep our congregation connected.
- Adapt outreach ministries with distancing and PPE.
- The congregation is growing through integration of new people worshipping remotely.
- The business of the congregation is conducted online as much as is possible.
- Bishop’s Sunday visitations happen from the Cathedral of St John, with online coffee hour following.
- Eucharist, Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, and Ordinations proceed under the guidance of the bishop and with careful protocols with no more than five people per gathering.
- Pastoral visits from clergy done online unless otherwise impossible—including Last Rites
- Practices for online giving are developed and communicated to the congregation.
- Diocesan and Church budgets adjusted in the face of new financial realities.
- Each Church notices, records and shares learnings as we seize the opportunities to strengthen and expand our ministry.

## Phase II – Learning to Manage Risk

*No congregation moves to Phase II without the agreement of the bishop that the congregation’s Phase II plan is ready and that it is safe for the congregation to enter Phase II.*

*We also need to prepare ourselves for the reality that we will not move into Phase II together. The diocese is big and we will be living in different realities at the same time. What is right in Terlingua might not fit what is right in Santa Fe. Just as we saw different parts of the diocese enter the crisis and Phase I at different times, we can expect the same as we move out.*

*Not unlike Phase I, this phase also has distinctive public health characteristics. These have to do with both the preventative measures, and guiding principles for returning to measured public life.*

*This phase is likely to feel disjointed as different places are doing different things and are in different stages of “open”. Your personal prayer practices and spiritual disciplines will give you strength. We must make sure that we leave no one behind. Even as some people can go to church, we need to*

*keep phone trees and online worship happening. There will be increased need as our country deals with economic crisis, unemployment, and hunger. There will be increased spiritual and psychological needs: prolonged trauma and adrenaline will take their toll. Churches need to care for their members who may lose jobs, need food, or feel depressed. Churches need to find new ways to use our buildings and resources to meet community needs.*

*Please ensure that any steps or activities are done in compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws. You should check with legal counsel for your congregation, and/or one of the Chancellors, if and as needed.*

*In Phase II each congregation must constantly monitor the safety of our “opened” ministries being ready to increase safety.*

*In Phase II each congregation must be ready to immediately return to Phase I in case of fresh outbreaks in your area.*

*In Phase II each congregation develops a Phase III plan in consultation with the bishop’s office.*

## **Phase II Public Health Characteristics**

In Phase II the following public health characteristics may look and sound like the following:

- Still no vaccine, perhaps clinical trials beginning.
- Some effective treatments are being discovered.
- Tests are becoming more accurate and available.
- Fewer cases, and local health officials can track and isolate those who get the virus to slow or prevent community spread.
- We have a clearer understanding about how the virus is spread and how to avoid getting it.
- Personal Protective Equipment is widely available.
- Some more services and businesses can open.
- Essential services and businesses can open wider.
- Some (those in high risk categories) still need to isolate.
- Some (those in lower risk categories) can take steps toward public life.

## **Phase II in Churches**

- Phase I procedures remain in place so those at home remain connected.
- Online fellowship groups may be able to meet in person using distancing and PPE.
- Churches are in regular communication with local public health officials.
- Churches implement cleaning and sanitation regimen as outlined in congregational plan.
- Some Small gatherings/meetings resume with distancing protocols and PPE
- Bishop and Diocesan staff may resume non-essential travel and visitation.
- Clergy may need to be regularly tested for the Virus, or for Virus antibodies.
- Churches need to be prepared to cease public worship and revert to Phase I in case of new outbreaks.
- Every Church works on Phase III Plan.

## **Phase III – A Full Return to Public Life**

*We will slowly move into Phase III as we enter negative community spread of the virus. This could happen over a period of 12-18 months. Authors of Report 12— The global impact of COVID-19 and strategies for mitigation and suppression write:*

*“Moreover, suppression strategies will need to be maintained in some manner until vaccines or effective treatments become available to avoid the risk of later epidemics. Our analysis highlights the challenging decisions faced by all governments in the coming weeks and months, but demonstrates the extent to which rapid, decisive and collective action now could save millions of lives.”— Authors of A Roadmap for Reopening, the Diocese of Texas*

*Phase II measures can be lifted when safe and effective tools for mitigating the risk of COVID-19 are available. Please ensure that any steps or activities are done in compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws. You should check with legal counsel for your congregation, and/or one of the Chancellors, if and as needed.*

### **Phase III Public Health Characteristics**

We are looking for the following cultural road markers will include:

- Negative community spread
- Mass vaccination
- Mass therapeutic availability
- Mass testing for virus and immunity
- Lifting social distancing
- Global vaccination

### **Phase III Church Characteristics**

- We can gather with no social distancing requirements.
- Church buildings can return to regular “open” hours, and regular office patterns.
- Even as we return, many will feel wary about a return to public gatherings-- Online worship continues to reach those who can't join us in person
- Further integration of those who joined our communities in Phase I and Phase II.
- Aspects of our Phase I and Phase II life are now seen as “essential.”
- We share increased appreciation and gratitude for being with people again.
- We thank God for sustaining us.
- Our personal faith has deepened.
- Our community reach has broadened.
- Our churches and our diocese are stronger with deeper faith and broader reach.