

March 27, 2020

**To: Clergy, Wardens, and Congregations of West Texas**

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

I write to you concerning two important matters: the apportionment and worship in our churches.

**The Apportionment**

Yesterday morning, the Executive Board of the Diocese of West Texas met via Zoom with all members present and voted unanimously to cancel the April apportionment payments from every parish and mission of the Diocese.

This vote followed my request to the Finance Committee on Monday, March 23, to consider such a recommendation, as a response to the present and anticipated economic impact of the pandemic. On Tuesday, the Committee unanimously recommended that the Executive Board take this action.

This decision means that no congregations in West Texas will be expected to send the Diocese their apportionment payment for April.

I hope this decision will be welcome news and provide some relief from the many stresses and anxieties confronting all of our churches in these difficult and uncertain times. I also hope that you will not interpret this as a fearful pulling-back by your Diocese; rather, it is an act of trust in the abundance of grace and love we receive daily from God and an expression of confidence in the strength and generosity of you, the people of West Texas.

We are all aware that this is a first step, and that further steps may need to be taken. Diocesan staff, the Finance Committee, and Executive Board will continue assessing the situation across the Diocese and will act in reasonable, measured ways when necessary.

I remind all of us that the diocesan family has just spent two years renewing our focus on faithful Christian stewardship, which is rooted in God's own generosity and arises out of our gratitude for all we have received for this life, most especially the gift of his Son. I call on our clergy and lay leaders to emphasize the vital importance of generous financial stewardship in their communications to congregations, in order to support the life and ministries of our churches as well as the charitable organizations that provide so many critical social services in our communities.

### **Worship in our Churches**

Secondly, I am extending the current suspension of in-person worship and meetings in our churches through Thursday, April 30. Therefore, there can be no in-person gatherings for worship on church premises until after April 30. Should the situation improve dramatically before that day, then I will be as happy as anyone to withdraw this restriction. Though this decision is mine alone, I have the full support and encouragement of the eighteen clergy and lay members of the Executive Board.

Though many of the sixty counties within our diocese do not have confirmed cases of COVID-19, it is clear the virus continues to spread and that the surest means of reducing community spread, illness, and death is to follow local, state, and national directives. This requires sacrifice on our part. As I have said previously, we seek to act in love and not from fear. We truly are free in Christ, which means that we are free to deny ourselves for love of others, including for the larger community and the most vulnerable among us. We cannot be part of Christ's healing work in this world - and in this pandemic - if we think the pleas of health and medical experts don't apply to us.

The ethical standard to which Christians are called is not "what we can get away with," but "how we can best love God and our neighbor." Many of us have family members, friends, and parishioners in the health and medical professions, who do not have the luxury of "staying home, working safe." What must they think of those who continue to do as they please? Today, one of our priests reminded me of these words from St. Paul, "*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.*" (I Cor. 6:12) In the preceding verse, Paul proclaims, "*You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our*

*God.*” Because we are baptized, and our lives are hid with God in Christ, we do not live as “free agents,” but as people whose lives are bound to Christ and one another by the Spirit. We are called to a new life of generous self-offering and self-restraint.

I realize the great disappointment we will experience by being unable to gather in our churches for Holy Week and Easter. I hope my letter sent to clergy last week will assure them that I fully share their heartache over this. However, considering the many and varied ways that I’ve seen so many of our churches “go to the house of the Lord” even while away from their buildings, I have great confidence that we will find beautiful and powerful ways to “keep the feasts” that are at the heart of the Christian year.

The **Shared Congregational Resources Basecamp** will be a good place to share ideas and questions about planning worship and celebrating Easter during this pandemic.

**I cannot stress enough that Church is *not* cancelled. Easter is *not* cancelled. We *are* the Church, gathered in person or not; and we are worshiping together as the Church, whether we’re in the same room or not.**

Several have suggested to me that I declare the first Sunday when we can all return and be together in church again as Easter Sunday. While several bishops have decreed this in their dioceses, and there is some appeal to the notion, I encourage you all to celebrate Easter on April 12, whatever the circumstances and in whatever ways you find to worship together while physically apart. For Jesus Christ is risen, and we will certainly all be in need of some Alleluias.

I propose this. As soon as it’s practical, after we can resume church activities, we will schedule several “Resurrection Festivals” around the Diocese, inviting everyone to come and worship and celebrate: all the Easter hats and foods, piñatas, fireworks, mariachis, flowers everywhere, whatever. Incense and bells and bagpipes and accordions will not even be out of place.

My prayer for you, for all of us, just now comes from an unusual source: an Eagles’ song from 1975, written by Bernie Leadon and Patti Davis - “I Wish You Peace.”

*I wish you peace when the cold winds blow  
Warmed by the fire's glow;  
I wish you comfort in the lonely time  
And arms to hold you when you ache inside.  
I wish you hope when things are going bad,  
Kind words when times are sad.  
I wish you shelter from the raging wind  
Cooling waters at the fever's end.  
I wish you peace when times are hard  
The light to guide you through the dark.  
And when the storms are high and your dreams are low,  
I wish you the strength to let love grow,  
I wish you the strength to let love flow.*

Amen.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+David

David M. Reed  
Bishop of West Texas