



Dear Friends in Christ,

The key consideration Gov. Abbott stressed repeatedly when introducing his three-phase plan to slowly reopen Texas businesses is that we must protect the “vulnerable” and “at risk” members of the population. The same consideration is also found throughout his [Open Texas Report](#), which defines “vulnerable” or “at-risk” persons as “those who are 65 or older, especially those with chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma; chronic heart disease; severe obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis; liver disease; or a weakened immune system.” In fact, Gov. Abbott stressed that during Phase One of the plan “vulnerable populations” should continue to stay at home as much as possible. You can access a copy of Gov. Abbott’s executive order and the Open Texas Report at ctcumc.org/coronavirus-covid-19-updates.

It is my conviction that it is unwise to return to in-person worship at this time. I am also convinced that it is counter to our Wesleyan core value to do no harm. I strongly urge churches to “Breathe Deep” and stay the current course of online worship and ministry only. As the economy slowly reopens, it is possible, if not quite likely, that there will be a rise in confirmed COVID-19 infections. Our desire to reconnect with each other via in-person worship must not disregard our Christian responsibility to care for our community. **The vulnerable are not disposable and we must not put them at risk.** As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 (CEB) *“Everything is permitted, but everything isn’t beneficial. Everything is permitted, but everything doesn’t build others up. No one should look out for their own advantage, but they should look out for each other.”* Now is a time for us to behave like the Christ we serve, not demanding our rights, but showing care and compassion for our neighbors.

Since this crisis began and the Shelter-in-place orders were given, the Cabinet and I have steadfastly advised that we should be a people who are guided by faith and not driven by fear. It is not out of fear that we call on the churches of the CTC to continue with online worship only. Rather, it is out of faithfulness – faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ who commands us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. There is a distinct difference between being fearless and being reckless, and it would be reckless to rush back into in-person worship since many of our congregations have faithful members and guests who are in the high-risk category.

However, while I cannot stress enough my belief that churches should not return to in-person worship for several more weeks, I remain committed that the decision of whether and when to return to in-person worship ultimately rests with the local churches **as long as they do so in consultation with their clergy, lay leadership and DS and follow ALL civil and medical orders and protocols.** I have already outlined a list of guidelines from the CTC’s perspective (ctcumc.org/COVID-19-cabinet-guidelines). Additionally, there are several health protocols prescribed in the Governors [Open Texas Report](#) that churches **must** follow in order to return to in-person worship, including...

- Health Protocols for Serving Church Attendees
 - Strongly encourage the “vulnerable/at-risk” population to worship remotely; reserve an area for the at-risk population or offer an “at-risk only” service; ensure non-family units sit six feet apart and leave every other pew row empty.
- Health Protocols for Your Facilities
 - Regularly and frequently clean and disinfect any regularly touched surfaces (doorknobs, tables, chairs, and restrooms) and/or items that come in contact with attendees (hymnals,

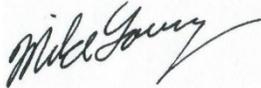
- Bibles, etc.) between each service with CDC approved disinfectants – not just a wet cloth or furniture polish.
- Make hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes (still in short supply) readily available
- Health Protocols for Staff & Volunteers
 - Train all employees and volunteers on appropriate cleaning and disinfection, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
 - Screen employees and volunteers before coming into the church, congregation, or place of worship and send them home if they demonstrate any new or worsening signs or symptoms of possible COVID-19. Such as a cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit and/or known close contact with a person who is lab confirmed to have COVID-19. (A complete list of possible COVID-19 symptoms is found on page 40 of the [Open Texas Report](#).)
 - Refrain from passing collection plates (provide a central collection box and encourage online giving) and offering childcare unless you comply with [CDC guidelines for childcare facilities](#).

A complete listing of all State, CDC and Central Texas Conference health protocols for returning to in-person worship, including a guide to help prepare a written plan for all staff and volunteers is available on the conference website at ctcumc.org/COVID-19-cabinet-guidelines.

Please contact your District Superintendent with any questions or for additional guidance.

I want to personally thank each of you for your continued patience and the creativity you are showing in reaching out to each other and the community during this time. The Lord IS with us.

Yours in Christ,



Bishop Mike Lowry

Resident Bishop of the Central Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church