



TEXICO CONFERENCE

## Plan for Re-opening Texas Churches April 29, 2020

Over the past six Sabbaths, members of the congregations in the Texico Conference in both Texas and New Mexico have participated in worship service experiences via Facebook Live, Zoom, YouTube and other video platforms. Pastors have recalibrated sermon presentations and have delivered their messages into a camera lens or a smartphone. While their messages have been inspiring and encouraging, and the technology accurately delivered their words of hope to the people, something very meaningful and important has been missing. The feeling of loss from the interruption of physical gathering and the fellowship experienced with our brothers and sisters at church has been very real and folks are anxious to assemble for church again soon.

On April 27 Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced that the 'stay at home' orders that have been in place for nearly two months would expire on April 30. In addition, Governor Abbott released a major declaration that allows significant portions of the state's economic system to begin a phased re-opening. This statement includes religious organizations and houses of worship and is accompanied by very specific instructions relating to the importance of continuing certain public health guidelines.

In light of these recent actions by the State of Texas it is important to understand that this is an enabling action, not a requirement. Each organization, each church, and each person involved are individually responsible for deciding how, or if, they will participate in this provision to gradually return to a more normal worship experience. We must remember that if steps are being taken to re-open activities, religious services and social interaction more quickly than any particular individual is comfortable with, that person is free to remain at home while others proceed to engage as may be allowed under the revised guidelines.

The following information is being provided in accordance with the guidance for religious services and houses of worship in Texas as issued by Governor Abbott. The Texico Conference presents these recommendations to establish guidelines for a return to congregational activities for our churches that are located in Texas. Please note that this guidance does not apply in New Mexico given the current stay at home and limited gathering orders that remain in place.

### **The First Step - Phase One**

The process of returning to functioning worship services must be reasoned, gradual and should follow a very intentional plan of action. The desire to rush quickly into what we have missed must be tempered with a strong commitment to the safety and well-being of both ourselves and also of our fellow worshipers.

In accordance with the most recent guidance of the Governor and the Attorney General, conference administration shares the following recommendations effective May 1, 2020:

- Strongly encourage vulnerable members, such as those over the age of 65 or anyone with serious underlying health conditions, to stay at home and continue to participate in online services until conditions further improve.

- Designate an area inside the sanctuary to be reserved for at-risk members who choose to attend or offer a service for at-risk attendees only.
- Communicate clearly to members that no one should attend church if they are ill or are experiencing any of the widely publicized symptoms of COVID-19, or if they have had close contact with anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19.
- Churches should meet only for the Morning Worship service, adult Sabbath School, AY/Vespers and Mid-Week Services employing all the guidelines contained in this phase.
- No Children's Sabbath School divisions should meet during this phase as the children will be unable to abide by the social distancing rules of the governor and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- If a children's story is provided during the service, children should remain with their parents and the Children's Offering should be suspended until a later phase.
- Encourage the use of an offering receptacle at a specific location in which members may deposit their Tithes and Offerings rather than passing an offering plate, or bag, among the attendees.
- No potlucks or large gatherings should occur until the required restrictions are relaxed, especially if COVID-19 cases continue to increase in the local community.
- Before the congregation returns to the church facility for the re-opening service, the church facility should undergo a deep cleaning with special attention devoted to the church foyer, sanctuary, restrooms and drinking fountains. This guidance extends to regularly disinfecting the church facilities before and after each use.
- Develop an ongoing process to frequently clean and disinfect all of the often-touched surfaces such as doorknobs, tables, chairs and pews throughout the time when attendees are present. Specific people should be designated to care for this cleaning responsibility.
- Practice Social Distancing between attendees in all of the following guidelines:
  - Greeters should be positive and welcoming and should remain inside the foyer and somewhat away from the direct path of entrance to minimize direct interaction with arriving worshipers.
  - Entry doors should be open as members arrive to reduce the need to for multiple people to touch the handles.
  - Members should be instructed, and frequently reminded, to refrain from touching each other. **Please do not engage in hugs or handshakes.**
  - Bulletins, if available, should be placed on a table for attendees to pick up for themselves to minimize the number of people who handle them.
  - Some attendees may wish to wear face coverings while they are in the church. While this is not a requirement, a face covering is recommended whenever it will be difficult to maintain the recommended social distancing guidelines.
  - Members should be encouraged to maintain six feet between themselves and every other attendee unless they are family members currently residing together.
  - Attendees should keep at least two empty seats (or six feet of separation) between, and on either side of, family units in any row.
  - Designate approved seating rows and maintain an empty row between every two occupied rows.
- Churches should have hand sanitizer readily available for use in foyers and restrooms.
- Attendees should be encouraged to wash their hands frequently and to cover all coughs and sneezes.

### **Making Progress – Phase Two**

After four weeks of conducting our worship services in accordance with the above recommendations, and if there has not been a spike in new COVID-19 cases in the local community, then **Phase Two** recommendations may be implemented. Please note that any new pronouncements by federal, state, county, or city leaders must be considered in decisions to move forward.

All Phase One guidelines should be carefully continued during Phase Two and the following activities may now be added:

- Children's Sabbath School programming.
- Children's Story with children gathering at the front of the sanctuary.
- Children's Offering as may be the practice in each church.
- Baptisms may be scheduled during this phase.

### **The Journey Continues – Phase Three**

After an additional four weeks of church activities operating within the guidelines of Phase Two, and if there has not been a spike of COVID-19 cases in the local community, then Phase Three recommendations may be implemented. Please note that any new pronouncements by federal, state, county, or city leaders must be considered in decisions as we move forward.

Continued vigilance related to public health counsel and the activities of the church in conjunction with Conference guidelines, as they may be updated from time to time, should be followed. This includes the social distancing and facility cleaning activities. Effective with week 9 of these re-opening guidelines it is recommended that:

- Fellowship meals (potlucks) may be added to the activities permitted in the church facilities. An extra measure of care should be taken to maintain the cleanliness of the preparation and dining areas for the benefit of the participants.
- Hand sanitizer should be readily available, and leaders should continue to encourage regular and frequent hand washing.
- Club ministry activities can be resumed in a physical setting.

### **Summary**

While the guidelines and recommendations of these 3 Phases of our plan to re-open the churches in Texas are presented with a view to the future, we hope that these steps will be a blessing to all who participate in church life from week to week. We continue to pray for God's blessings to rest upon each member of the Texico Conference. May we daily grow in our dependence upon the providence, protection and provision of our Heavenly Father. May our hope in the promised, soon return of Jesus bring a renewed longing for all of the current challenges to fade into history. May we always remember that Jesus has promised to be with us always and that soon we will experience the joy of eternity with Him.

**Texico Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administration**  
**Corrales, New Mexico**  
**April 29, 2020**

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