



THE DIOCESE OF THE SOUTH

Orthodox Church in America

P.O. Box 191109
Dallas, TX 75219

Saturday of the Second Week after Pascha

Dear Reverend Fathers,

Christ is risen!

You have received copies of two decrees of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, the first being an address to the Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful and the second being “Synodal Directives Towards a RE-opening of our Churches.” Both of these documents are effective as of Friday, May 1, 2020.

Please read these documents in their entirety very carefully. As you will surmise, they actually point towards a time when our churches may be re-opened publicly and actually provide us with the steps that we need to take on a local level to ensure that the appropriate reopening of our churches will be done in an orderly and wise manner. This is clearly delineated in Point 2 of the *Synodal Directives*.

Initially, it is very important to understand that these directives are meant to comply with civil law, beginning with federal directives and then down to the local level. Point 4 addresses the Phases of reopening based on Federal Guidelines for “Opening up America Again.” It provides a chart of the Phases and Stages as Appendix E. Please note the “Proposed State or Regional Gating Criteria” that are to be satisfied before proceeding to Phased Opening. There is to be a “downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses (ILI) reported within a 14-day period” and a “Downward trajectory of COVID-like syndromic cases reported within a 14-day period.” Most of you are very aware of the trends that are taking place in your communities. In cities such as Dallas, TX we do NOT meet these criteria. For purposes of reference our Diocese of the South will use the “Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center” for determining how each county and parish meets these criteria.

I state this at the beginning of this letter so that you do not presume that our Holy Synod or our Archbishop has given you *carte blanche* authority to begin the opening of your parishes. Neither a mayoral nor gubernatorial decree makes your parish or mission ready to open for public worship this Sunday.

Fortunately, in the Diocese of the South most of our parishes are presently operating under Phase 1, Stage 1 practices by the previous authority given to us by our Archbishop. The Archbishop in his pastoral letter will set forth an additional series of guidelines that you are to implement in your parishes.

I strongly urge you not to disseminate any article or post on the internet that mitigates the Preventative Measures in Appendix A, nor the Considerations and Cautions provided in Appendix B. For example, until your Archbishop informs you otherwise, the faithful in attendance at your parish/mission are to wear the proper protective gear including facemasks, despite whatever article one of your parishioners happens to post on social media. In addition, please observe the civil guidelines that indicate what preventative and hygienic measures have been stipulated by Federal, State, Provincial, and local institutions, even if you think that they do not work. A priest does not determine which of these measures to follow and which he thinks to be tomfoolery. If you do not want to ensure the safety of your flock, then it is best that you serve with **only** two people in church: yourself and a chanter that trusts you.

The opening of our churches for public worship entails that we expend great energy to make a public gathering safe for those that attend our churches.

The Archbishop will make several recommendations that may be more “severe” than those required by the Holy Synod. He will these forth to ensure that our Diocese does not become a breeding ground for the Novel Coronavirus. Many of you have read articles about the spread of the Covid-19 illness in Russia and Ukraine. There are certain media outlets that revel in pointing the blame at the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, there is some portion of truth regarding the failure of Orthodox hierarchs to implement safety measures in their dioceses. You now are under such public scrutiny. It is clearly God’s Providence that some of our priests will need to make serious changes in the cleanliness and orderliness in their sanctuaries.

Some priests will question [and habitually push back] against recommendations of the Holy Synod. For example, in Appendix B, Point 4: “Precise records of who comes on which day will have to be kept so that those who attended can be contacted if necessary.” Some of our priests will say: “Aha, Big Brother.” On the contrary, this is a wise step that, in case of the spread among Parish members of the coronavirus, your parishioners may be alerted and not infect their friends and loved ones.

Please receive these directives as a call to Vigilance rather than fear. You serve at the behest of the Archbishop and not the other way around. The Archbishop is technically the Rector of the parish where you serve, and you serve in his absence. This is a fundamental principle of Orthodox ecclesiology. All of you want to see the full liturgical life reinstated in your parish or mission. The decrees of the Holy Synod and the Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Alexander provide you the blueprint how to do this.

In addition, it is imperative that you instruct your parishioners NOT to go from parish to parish. This seriously compromises the well-being of your community because there are a number of parishes that breed naysayers, that will have no or little regard for observing preventive measures during this pandemic, and will use their disregard as a banner of “true-Orthodoxy.” They will say that intend to go wherever they can to receive Holy Communion as often as possible, as stated in the Bill of Rights. Perhaps I am exaggerating, but not by much. You do not want such people, in flagrant disregard of the instructions of your Archbishop, worshipping together with your flock.

We want every parish in our Diocese of the South to be a safe place to worship as Orthodox Christians. The priests have the responsibility to see that this is the case.

In Christ,

Archimandrite Gerasim
Administrator of the Diocese of the South

A Phased Reopening of Parishes and Missions in the Diocese of the South

May 2, 2020

Since our original directives were based on Federally established guidelines, we will, following the lead of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, follow the [new federal guidelines](#) (link: <https://bit.ly/3eyMdfT>) beginning May 1, 2020. These guidelines take a phased approach to the relaxation of restrictions.

First, please become familiar with the [Holy Synod's directives](#), and implement them judiciously (with this diocesan directive used as “further instruction” that illuminates our application of the Holy Synod's directives). All directives from the Holy Synod regarding sanitation, PPE / face coverings etc. are mandatory and in effect in the Diocese of the South. “Suggestions” made in the Holy Synod's directives, as such, *may* be implemented as appropriate.

This phased approach for each parish should be followed according to state orders **and** county infection trends – in other words, if your entire state has approved implementing “Phase I” statewide, and the trends in your **county** are indicative of a downward trend, then act accordingly. This allows us to accommodate some large states with rural counties that might be unaffected while urban capitals suffer increasing numbers of infections.

Please follow your local news closely, and do not assume that since a parish 30 minutes away is in a new “phase” that your parish is as well. These changes in protocol for your parish should follow **the data related to your county's infection rate and** your local government directives. These new DOS guidelines will *not* be implemented on a diocesan or even deanery-wide basis, but it will be directly triggered by infection rates for the county in which your parish or mission falls, not “where your parishioners live.” If, however, you know that your parish is at risk from a high volume of parishioners in a neighboring county where infection rates might be higher, then it is your prerogative to act **with greater rigor** in limiting services.

Finally, please note that our current DOS guidelines allow more freedom than some of our sister dioceses in the OCA – this is due to the geographic disparities related to infection rates across our nation. So, as you read the OCA guidelines for “opening up” our parishes, take note of the term “limited cohort” – the DOS has already asked that services be conducted by a cohort of 5. With our new directives, during “Phase I” (under the federal guidelines), our intention is to increase attendance, with an expanded, but still limited, cohort of attendees per the guidelines below.

Prior to May 1, our limited cohort in the Diocese of the South was “five” (including the clergy). During Phase I, this limited cohort *may* increase based on infection activity in your city/town and the size of the space available to you for liturgical services.

Finally, this is not a simple directive – it requires some discernment and research to figure out how this directive applies in your parish or mission. You will also be asked to revert to more stringent standards if and when infection rates increase in your county. No parish or mission is to implement any practice that contradicts these expectations.

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Phases for Opening our Parishes in the DOS:

PHASE I Stage 0:

If your state/county has asked houses of worship to cease offering services. Close your doors and wait for this to change.

PHASE I Stage 1:

If your county is in a current “hot zone” of increased activity of the virus, conduct your services with no more than your core (same) five in attendance if this is safe in your eyes, otherwise, close the parish for the sake of safety.

PHASE I Stage 2-3 (A):

If your state has lifted its “stay at home” or “shelter in place order,” but your county has **not** demonstrated a sustained decrease in the number of cases for 14 days, per the federal guidelines, the DOS will permit an increased (above 5 total) number in attendance at divine services, but will limit the number to 50% of the total allowed under PHASE I, Stage 2-3 (B).

Follow the “**Steps to Increase Your ‘limited cohort’ in Attendance at Services**” below, but **divide your result by 2 (cutting the total in half)**, and space your parishioners out at double the distance.

PHASE I Stage 2-3 (B):

If your municipality or county (*not* State) has observed a downward infection trend for 14 days straight, then the following guidelines should be followed in your parish or mission. Follow the “**Steps to Increase Your ‘limited cohort’ in Attendance at Services**” below. *Once you are in this phase, you must check your local statistics at least 3 times weekly* to assure that the trends are holding steady. **If there is an uptick in infection rates**, you should reassess your position, and **move back (at least) to Phase I Stage 2-3 (A) for a minimum of 14 days.**

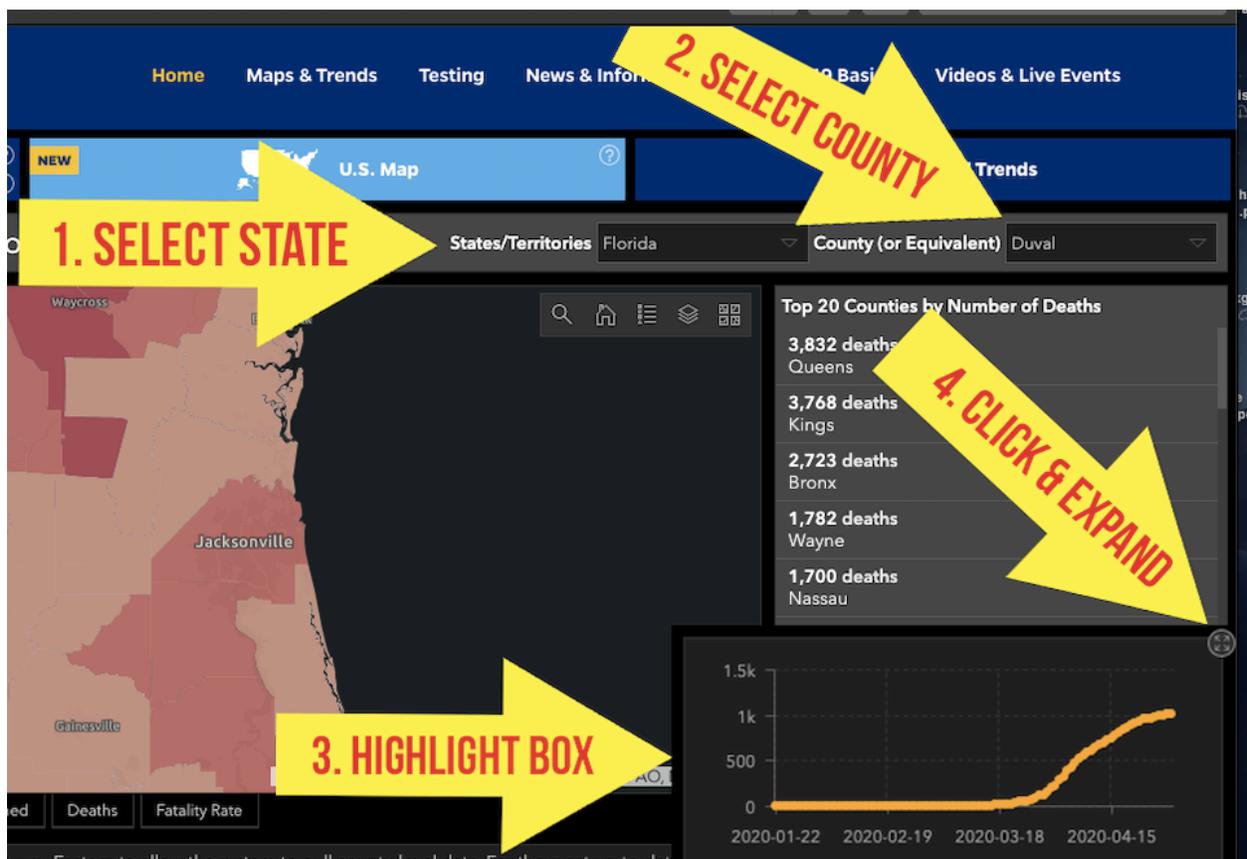
PHASE II and III:

While the Holy Synod has offered guidelines on Phase II and III, please await word on how we will respond as a diocese during this (and future) phases. It is unclear how “moderate physical distancing protocols” differ from the more stringent specified in Phase I. This phase might be simply mean increasing the number of participants by 25 - 50% over the number in Phase I while keeping (where applicable) the other precautions in the place.

*Please refer to **Appendix A** at the end of this document for more concrete guidance on the application of these phases.*

Gathering Data:

- 1) *Using a desktop computer or laptop* (the mobile optimized site does not work consistently for this exercise), find your State & City/County statistical data on the John's Hopkin's Website (do **not** use another source as the DOS should all be working from the same page, as it were). **If your specific county is not available, please use the city/county of your Metropolitan Statistical Area / MSA (e.g. Powhatan County, VA is not in the Hopkins database, but it falls within the Richmond, VA Metropolitan Statistical Area).**
 - a. To determine the incident rate in your municipality (the county in which your parish or mission resides), go to <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map> , and filter by **1) States/Territories**, and then your **2) County** (or equivalent). The graph showing your trends locally will appear in the **3) bottom right corner** of the web browser – **4) Click the “circle”** to expand it. This will display the “curve” that you should be tracking.¹



¹ We are looking at “active cases” in a region – NOT total number of cases to date.

Calculations:

One priest in our diocese diligently worked through this data from John's Hopkins, and now has a path forward (note that his region is nowhere near approaching our "scenario B"). A contact at the CDC in Atlanta has suggested that the best data for us to follow to indicate a downward trend are “net new cases.” So, look at your trend lines, and count the net increase day over day. Keep accurate records, and update this at least 3 times weekly.

https://coronavirus-map	Total Cases	New Cases
April 19 2020	116	
April 20 2020	118	2
April 21 2020	124	6
April 22 2020	124	0
April 23 2020	129	5
April 24 2020	133	4
April 25 2020	140	7
April 26 2020	141	1
April 27 2020	146	5
April 28 2020	149	3
April 29 2020	152	3
April 30 2020	156	4
May 1 2020	160	4
May 2 2020	168	8

Note that the last 5 days above are **3-3-4-4-8** ... this is an **upward trend**.

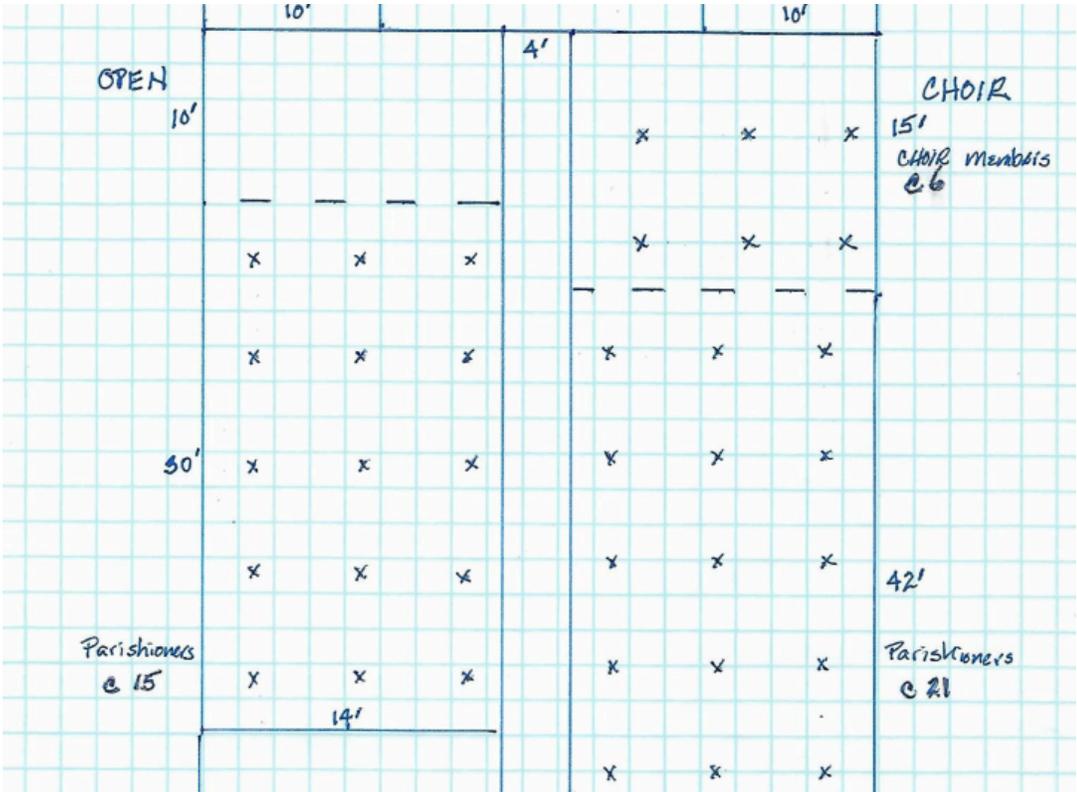
If the reverse of this were true (e.g. **8-4-4-3-3**) you would be observing a downward trend. Note – a single day increase during a 14-day trend does not break your trend – as long as the persistent trend is down and “to the right,” your trend is downward.

If you cannot get this data from the Hopkins site (large metro areas and hot zones will be problematic), you may use state or county health department data, and if you can't get it online, then call your health department. There is a way to get the data you require, and it might take some extra work.

Once you have assured that your state’s “shelter in place” or “stay at home orders” have been lifted, **and** that the data are indicative of a downward trend in your community, you may continue with the steps to increase your “limited cohort” in attendance at services from **Phase I, Stage 2-3 (A)** to **Phase I, Stage 2-3 (B)**.

Steps to Determine Your “limited cohort” in Attendance at Services:

1. Measure the square footage of your nave only (do not include the sanctuary or other square footage that cannot be used for parishioners during a divine service), and [enter these measurements](#) using 6 feet as your distance here: <https://bit.ly/3bwHHw9>
2. With the maximum capacity determined (from the calculator above), you will have your total number of attendees allowed at a given service.
3. You should mark an “X,” cross or other marker on the ground or seats with clearly visible tape (e.g. masking tape) to assure that there is an 8 foot radius between each marked spot (these 8 feet will account for body mass and inevitable shifting during a service – with this spacing, you should be able to accommodate close to the number calculated using the tool above).
4. Communities with pews/seats must assure that all demarcated spaces are at least 8 feet apart, center to center.
5. Use an 8 foot length of string or rope to assure that the distance from center to center of any “X” on your floor/seats is at least 8 feet (6 feet in the calculator; 8 feet when laying this out. Don’t let this throw you off!).
6. **You must send your dean your final numbers and square footage calculations once this step is complete.**



(for illustration purposes only)

Directives:

- Civil directives that are more stringent than our DOS guidance will take precedence until the more restrictive measures are lifted.
- You should clearly communicate that parishioners in your community who are attending crowded events / parties etc., or attending other parishes where social distancing and safety precautions are not in place, are *not* permitted to attend services in your community until they have had 14 consecutive days without exposure.
- Services may resume with attendance strictly monitored by an assigned greeter at all services. Those who arrive after capacity is reached are *not permitted to enter*.
- The priest/rector must check his city's local stats at least 3x weekly to stay informed on changes in trends and move "backward" in the stages as appropriate (during an uptick in rates).
- All in attendance continue washing hands upon entering the temple and shall maintain social distancing throughout the service. E.g. keeping at least 6 feet of space between choir members, or communicants when coming forward for communion.
- **All in attendance**, except for choir singers, concelebrants and readers (while reading), *must wear cloth masks or face coverings* according to CDC recommendations.² These should obviously be removed for communion and promptly applied again.
- Continue to refrain from venerating the holy objects, priest's hand, etc.
- Continue to refrain from the distribution of antidoron or zapifka.
- At communion, the priest alone holds the red cloth – communicants are not to wipe their lips on the common cloth, but are encouraged to wipe their lips with paper, disposable "cloth" that can be collected in a common container and burned.
- Some parishes (and even entire dioceses in the OCA) have adopted practices that involve cleansing the spoon, or the use of separate cleansed spoons, between distribution of the elements to each communicant – Archbishop Alexander's request is to follow the Moscow Patriarchate's example by using a spoon (or several) soaked in grain alcohol and cleansed each time (it is permissible to have 2-3 spoons in a container on a stand/table adjacent to the chalice, while rotating through the spoons so that they may disinfect for an appropriate period of time). Additionally, if the parish priest is comfortable doing so, communicants may approach the chalice, their mouths open wide with head back, so that the elements may be placed in the communicant's mouth.³
- In any case, red cloths are to be washed thoroughly between each use and parishioners are *not* permitted to wipe their mouths with them one after another.

² There has been some negative feedback about the requirement for masks or face coverings for non-singers/celebrants, but these were uniformly based on "optics." Understanding that these masks are even more effective than social distancing in preventing the transmission of the virus, we will employ this tactic as a matter of "due diligence" until it becomes clear that this is no longer appropriate or required.

³ Please read [Jean-Claude Larchet's interview](#) with *Orthodoxie* for commentary on this.

- We encourage the practice adopted by some jurisdictions of using disposable napkins or tissues for each communicant to wipe their lips – these should be burned on a regular basis.
- Gatherings should be limited to liturgical gatherings only. **Activities such as coffee hour, education and youth events should not take place.** Of course, they may continue to be shared via video conferencing or other virtual means.
- The temple and grounds (door handles, etc.) must be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized following each service.
- The easiest way to control attendance would be to have services designated by groupings of family units where, “if all in each unit attended,” capacity would be reached. Alternatively, you may coordinate signups or use electronic means such as www.signupgenius.com (but you must account for those who don’t have access to the internet in such cases).
 - Per the OCA guidelines, parish priests must keep an accurate accounting of who has attended each service for the purposes of “contact tracing” (if necessary) and to assure an equity in who is allowed to attend services.
- Clergy should lead by their parishes and communities by example, using a mask or face covering when shopping, running necessary errands, etc.
- Family units do *not* need to observe social distancing precautions with each other while in the parish, but please note that **a family of 5 will “consume” five of your allotted slots for attendees in every case.**
- Children under the age of 8 are not required to wear face masks or coverings.
- At the archbishop’s direction confessions may resume at a distance of at least 8 feet (do not hear confessions over the phone). Absolution should be done at a distance of at least 8 feet while, “Holding the stole high as the penitent bows.” There is to be no general confession. Both the confessor and penitent should be wearing masks during confession.
- With our “still limited numbers” in place, priests should do their best to resume a regular cycle of services that resembles a pre-COVID-19 cycle as far as possible. Encourage a process that allows your people to sign up for a Vespers one week and a Liturgy the next. Add a liturgy for a revered saint to encourage communion.
- Clinicians who are caring for COVID-19 patients are not permitted to attend services, but family members are.
- Please remind your parishioners to depart promptly, maintaining social distancing as avoiding proper safety protocols (even with those we might not have seen for a while) is irresponsible and reflects poorly on the parish to the community that will be watching.
- Continue to stay in close contact with your parishioners via email, text and phone calls while perhaps continuing to stream the services offered *from your temple*. The faithful should begin to see some sense of your normal schedule as a reassurance that things are progressing toward a goal.

- Consider the stamina of your core servitors and singers and offer your extra services “with a different crew” (even if this requires the services to be offered in a simpler manner). Give your faithful who have been serving a break, and encourage more participation – even perhaps having some who cannot sing well contribute by chanting/reading parts of the liturgy.

Finally ...

- Vulnerable individuals (the *elderly whose health is frail* and/or those with underlying medical conditions that put them at risk) should remain home.⁴
- Those who have been exposed to, or are caring for those with, COVID-19 should remain home.

If, under any circumstances, a parish or mission takes liberties with these directives by continuing with increased/elevated numbers in attendance at services while infection rates in their municipality are increasing, there will be no option but for the bishop to strictly limit the number of parishioners and services in that parish/mission until further orders are given. Please work to follow the letter and the spirit of this directive, and so to act “with one voice” under the guidance of our bishop.

We ask that you, please, share updates with us about the evolving nature of the infection in your municipalities, highlighting the particular concerns in your parishes and missions.



⁴ Elderly individuals who are in frail health or Individuals with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised such as by chemotherapy for cancer and other conditions requiring such therapy. **Those senior citizens who are strong, and willing to attend should not be prevented from attending services** with proper precautions in place.

APPENDIX A – ATTENDANCE CALCULATION WORKFLOW

