



DIocese OF BAKER

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23 April 2020

Tony DeBone, Patti Adair, and Phil Henderson
Deschutes County Commissioners
tonyd@deschutes.org

Dear Commissioners DeBone, Adair, and Henderson,

I write to request your assistance in the official re-opening of COVID-19 restrictions on religious services in Oregon.

As bishop of the Diocese of Baker I have oversight responsibility for the 57 Catholic parishes and mission east of the Cascades to the Idaho border, and south of the Columbia River to California. A handful of our churches have sizeable congregations (Bend, Klamath Falls, Hermiston, Redmond); most are much smaller (Prineville, Burns, Lakeview); and a number are very small indeed (Jordan Valley, Wasco). The space and seating available to accommodate such varied Sunday Mass populations varies greatly from one town to another, as do the possibilities of arranging them differently and safely.

Whatever their size, however, for the past month each and every church in the Baker Diocese has faithfully observed Governor Brown's social gathering orders. On 19 March I announced the cancellation of all public Masses within the diocese, and that decree remains in effect until further notice.

Our parishioners accept the Governor's guidelines as a temporary necessity to contain coronavirus because they appreciate the gravity of the COVID threat. But as the weeks go by and we all get used to social distancing in supermarkets and pharmacies, Catholics increasingly feel the need prudently to phase in larger social gathering numbers for churches, comparable to those which other much-visited institutions have learned to live within—or will soon be permitted to open up to.

Looking ahead to that possibility, I have asked each pastor to draw up plans to seat safely in his church various numbers of people that might be allowed to gather there at a time (25, 50, 75, 100, 250). Drawing on his parishioners' common sense and common self-interest, how would he partition his church in a way that effectively enforces social distancing? Like people on the way to the grocery store, our parishioners know what it takes to "guarantee" their safety in public these days. They will rightly insist on the same precautions in worship, and that assurance we mean to give them.

We are in a crisis, and the Governor is responsible to protect the common good of the whole state, *which includes the good of religious worship*. The Governor has wisely invited the “most-affected” industries to contribute their informed input to the decision of how and when best to open up their “sector” of the economy. Should she not seek the informed counsel of religious believers about the optimal ways of opening up their distinctive sector of society?

Regrettably, her “Reopening Oregon” framework of 20 April shows no interest in conducting such an inquiry. The section on “Specific Types of Employers” contrasts the Phase One Federal criteria that allow the opening up of “large venues” like churches (“strict physical distancing and sanitation protocols”) with “Oregon Modifications Under Consideration” (“Likely remain closed during Phase One”). Later, in “For Discussion—Under Consideration” for Oregon, we learn of “sector-specific *discussions*” beginning 20 April, a “next step” to “*consult* with most-affected industries” that commenced on 17 April, and “*workgroups* for six sectors being established” on a date unspecified. In each of these listings the same candidates for consultation rightly appear: restaurants, retail, childcare, personal services, transit, and outdoor recreation; in none of them do we read the word “churches.” I am hoping you will agree this is an oversight in need of swift and sincere repair and that you will work to give churches a voice in their reopening just as hair and nail salons, and massage and tattoo parlors have been granted in theirs.

To give priority for reopening to “essential” over “non-essential” businesses is to ask the wrong question, one writer observed. What counts is not whether a business is essential or non-essential but whether it can be run safely.

Boeing is calling back 20,000 workers to what must be a socially distanced job site reasonably certain to keep COVID at bay. It shouldn’t be too much to ask that churches be given the chance to demonstrate the same possibility on a much smaller-scale.

Thank you in advance for your kind attention to this request.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bishop Liam Cary". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Liam Cary