March 3, 2021

Friends:

Yesterday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued an executive order that lifts the mandated use of masks as protection against COVID-19 and returns all business and facility capacity to 100%. The governor’s stated purpose in lifting this mandate is to allow the state economy to begin to recover.

At the same time, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has warned that relaxing protective measures now could subject the country to a “fourth surge.” While the number of cases has dropped after the holidays, and COVID testing has become much more accessible, many of our citizens are still waiting on vaccines, and broad community protection from the virus is still weeks or months away.

In response, we are writing to strongly encourage the continued use of masks, social distancing, and sanitation practices in our churches, as a means of caring for one another in Christian love. We also continue to believe that these decisions are best made at the local church level, prayerfully and wisely.

While the state mask mandate and facility restrictions were never binding on churches under Texas law, many of our congregations have been committed to wearing masks, distancing inside facilities, and gathering outside or online to protect their participants. Churches are permitted to continue these practices. Given the high number of people who can carry the virus asymptomatically, we can easily infect others without knowing it. This process may become even more true as variants of the virus emerge.

In the words of Governor Abbott, “Today’s announcement does not abandon safe practices that Texans have mastered over the past year. Instead, it is a reminder that each person has a role to play in their own personal safety and the safety of others.” And in the words of our own tradition, “Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.” We know how to keep our neighbors and loved ones safe, while we wait for this crisis to pass.
When we keep our purpose clear—serving our neighbors with the love of Christ—God will bless and strengthen our path. We will continue to pray in earnest for you and for our communities as we navigate the days to come, and we give thanks to God for your faithfulness.

Grace and peace,

Bishop Robert Schnase
and the Rio Texas Conference Cabinet