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## BC's Restart Plan – Church Guidelines & Considerations

BC has made significant progress in the fight against COVID-19 and on May 6, 2020, Premier John Horgan and Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry outlined [BC's Restart Plan](#) for slowly and carefully easing restrictions. As well, on July 21, 2020, the BC Centre for Disease Control (CDC) released an updated [Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations](#) and on July 27, 2020 a new order on gatherings was issued by Dr. Bonnie Henry. This document is intended to provide guidelines and considerations for churches as they navigate these changes in their unique contexts.

**Disclaimer:** This is our best understanding of the information provided by the BC Government and its implications for our churches. These are not directives that the District will be policing or enforcing, but rather guidelines we believe are wise and questions that your Board and pastoral leadership should consider and work through. There may be legitimate areas of interpretation where the implementation in your church context could look different than in other settings, however, please be aware of your responsibility and the ensuing consequences should you choose to deviate from provincial guidelines and the guidance provided below.

### The New Normal

We are currently in [Phase 3](#) of the [BC Restart Plan](#), and to continue to protect seniors, those at risk, and our health care system, we must continue to modify our behaviour and keep protective measures in place until a vaccine is developed. These changes in restrictions are not a return to normal, but instead a move to a new normal. Yet, there is increased freedom, and this is encouraging!

For churches, this new normal allows for the following, provided physical distancing is maintained and enhanced hygiene practices are in place:

- Larger gatherings of up to 50 people to take place
- Personal gatherings in small groups of 2-6 people outside those in your immediate household (your 'bubble')
- In-person counselling
- A return to office-based work settings
- Opening of parks and outdoor spaces
- Childcare

## **Health & Hygiene Practices**

The health and hygiene practices that undergird these new allowances and continued easing of restrictions are:

- Stay informed, be prepared, and follow public health advice
  - The pandemic is a fluid situation and restrictions may change, so paying attention to news and updates is essential.
  - The [BC Government](#) and the [BC Centre for Disease Control](#) websites are the primary sources of information.
- Practice good hygiene
  - Frequent hand washing
  - Avoid touching your face
  - Cough into your sleeve
  - Disinfect frequently touched surfaces
- Stay at home and away from others if you're feeling ill
- Maintain physical distancing of two metres from others outside your household
  - No handshaking or hugging
  - Small numbers of contacts
  - Keep a safe distance from others
- Clean your home, workspace, and in churches, clean common spaces and washrooms more frequently
- Consider using non-medical masks when physical distancing isn't possible

## **Contact Tracing**

To aid public health in their work to identify and support those that may have come into close contact with a person who has COVID-19, the July 27, 2020 order requires that at each church gathering or event each attendee's first and last name and either telephone number or email address be collected. This information must be stored for 30 days and provided to health officers if requested. The CDC also recommends that current contact information be maintained for employees and church volunteers.

**Questions to Consider:**

- How will health and hygiene protocols be implemented in your church?
- How will you physically distance in your facility? Are there any physical changes that need to be made to the building?
- What cleaning practices will you need to increase in your church building?
- What high touch areas need to be cleaned more often?
- How will you communicate your health and hygiene practices and protocols to your congregation and community?
- Do you have current information for employees and volunteers as well as a method for recording contact information for those attending a church gathering?

**Gatherings**

**The order given by Dr. Henry, to restrict gatherings to no more than 50 people has not been lifted.** In fact, it has been repeatedly emphasized that gatherings of no more than 50 people are here to stay in BC until there is a vaccine available or there is community immunity to COVID-19. The 50-person gathering restriction was kept in force in the July 27, 2020 order as well.

In a local church setting, this means that groups like the following will be able to meet:

- Board of Elders
- staff teams
- worship teams for recording or live streaming
- youth groups
- small groups
- ministry committees and teams

Groups must practice physical distancing and the health practices outlined on page 2. Dr. Henry has emphasized that gatherings of small numbers of people should be held in the largest room possible. This may mean that groups may need to meet in a different place in the church than they are accustomed to. As a reminder, all in-person gatherings must keep a record of each attendee's first and last name and telephone or email address for at least 30 days to allow for contact tracing should an outbreak of COVID-19 occur.

There is freedom under the 50-person limit for creativity within your church context. Creativity should be held in tension with the care that must be taken to prevent transmission of the virus.

Reconnecting with others after many weeks of isolation has been encouraged, however this is with the proviso by both Dr. Henry and Premier Horgan that the number of contacts be kept small. The government has noted that personal gatherings should be small and kept to 2-6 people outside your 'bubble'. This gives freedom to interact with others, but in small groups and again, is taking into consideration the health and hygiene practices outlined on page 2. We would encourage you to exercise this freedom with common sense and use the largest possible space to allow physical distancing.

### **Seating**

Seating at gatherings should be carefully considered before attendees arrive to allow for physical distancing. At any gathering, family/household groups and individuals should be two metres from each other when standing or sitting. If you are using tables for seating, no more than six people in total are allowed to sit at a table, even if they are in the same family group. Additionally, there must be at least two metres between the backs of the chairs at one table and the backs of the chairs at another table unless the chairs are separated by a physical barrier.

### **Communion**

Communion is an important reminder Jesus' sacrifice for us and a part of the rhythm of church life. In keeping with the information on providing food above, Dr. Henry has asked that leaders adapt or modify communion to allow for physical distancing to eliminate physical contact between people.

You may need to consider alternate methods for providing communion such as pre-packaged kits or asking attendees to bring their own elements. Rather than passing elements among the congregation, consider how physical distancing can be maintained and how best to protect those that clean up any cups or wrappers.

### **Baptism**

Given that baptism involves physical contact between individuals, this could increase the chance of transmission. WorkSafeBC recommends that baptism be done in an alternate way that minimizes physical contact if possible.

## **Congregational Singing**

Congregational worship through singing is an important part of church worship services. There is emerging research on congregational singing that has highlighted this as a potential problem in the spread of COVID-19 as it is widely recognized that singing propels droplets further than talking does. The number of singers, the size of the room, the room's ventilation, and the duration of singing all contribute to the risk of transmission. Singing is noted as a "higher risk activity" in the CDC's [Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations](#) and Dr. Bonnie Henry has cautioned churches to limit public singing as much as possible.

In the order from Dr. Bonnie Henry on August 7, 2020, if live music is provided indoors for a church gathering, a physical barrier (ex. plexiglass) must be installed between the singers/musicians and those attending to block the transmission of droplets or there must be a three metre separation between singers, musicians, presenters, speakers, and those attending. Other recommendations, including avoiding singing in unventilated rooms, are included in the [Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations](#).

We suggest that as a leadership and Board that you research and discuss this issue and determine what your approach in ensuring congregational safety in this matter will be. We have found [this article](#) by Dr. Heather Nelson to be helpful in understanding the issue.

## **Providing Food**

In the conference call with faith leaders on May 27, 2020, Dr. Henry said that the first line of defense is to not serve food. However, it is possible to provide food at a church gathering, though, however meals must be prepared by people who are physically distant using proper food handling and hygiene protocols. Meals must be plated or pre-packaged, and buffets are not allowed. Food and drink containers and utensils should not be shared, and physical contact should not occur between those providing the food and those receiving it.

More information is given in the [guidance from the BC Centre for Disease Control](#) and the [WorkSafeBC guidelines](#) to faith organizations.

## **Children's Ministry and Summer Day Camps**

Providing a children's ministry brings unique challenges as children may have a harder time maintaining physical distancing and the health and hygiene practices on page 2 and may also need extra encouragement and support from leaders.

While children in BC are now able to attend school in person, similar to schools, a children's ministry will require enhanced cleaning, physical distancing, and other accommodations such as not sharing materials.

Summer day camps may be possible, and WorkSafeBC has provided [protocols for childcare facilities and day camps](#). The [BC Go-Forward Management Strategy](#) also notes that the following should be in place:

- routine daily screening for all leaders and participants
- a policy in place that anyone who has symptoms of a cold, flu, or any COVID-19 symptoms does not attend or participate
- support for low contact sports, especially outdoor ones

### Weddings and Funerals

Weddings have not been restricted in BC during the pandemic, however gathering restrictions have impacted the number of people who are allowed to be present at celebrations. Weddings must be officiated in person in BC, and the [BC Centre for Disease Control](#) has encouraged small gatherings, with officiants allowed to require that no more than 5 people (the officiant, bride and groom, and two witnesses) are present.

Wedding gatherings may have up to 50 people, however physical distancing must be followed, and health and hygiene practices should be in place.

Funerals should also follow the gathering restriction of 50 people and follow physical distancing and health and hygiene practices should be in place. We recommend that Boards and pastoral leadership discuss how requests to hold weddings and funerals in the church will be handled. It may also be helpful to reach out to a local funeral home for further information.

### Questions to Consider:

- How will you determine when you have reached 50 people for a gathering? Is there a protocol in place to deal with more than 50 people attending a gathering?
- How can you accommodate small groups in the church and ensure health and hygiene practices and protocols are followed?
- How are you demonstrating to your congregation and the public that you are following government restrictions and working to protect those that are vulnerable?
- How can you be creative in your context while following gathering restrictions?

**Questions to Consider (cont'd):**

- While being creative, there will be a breadth of opinion about what you're doing, from adventurous to conservative, in both your congregation and community. How are your creative efforts being perceived? Are they helping to further your ministry or undermining it?
- How will you adapt communion and baptism to allow for physical distancing?
- After researching congregational singing and its risk in transmission of COVID-19, what do you feel is the safest approach for your church?
- Does your church facility allow for greater physical distancing if you have congregational singing? How will you provide barriers and greater physical distancing if you provide live worship in your facility?
- What creative options are available to both protect your congregation and incorporate worship through music in your services?
- How will you handle serving food for church gatherings?
- Will you offer in-person children's ministry during a church service? If so, how can you protect both children and leaders? If you're considering a summer day camp, what practices and activities need to be considered?
- How will requests for weddings and funerals be handled?

**Workplaces**

To reduce the risk of virus transmission for church employees, the [BC Restart Plan](#) states that it is important to keep a low number of contacts (the number of people present at the same time) and a low contact intensity (contacts distant and length of contact brief). There are steps that support reducing the risk in the workplace:

- Physical distancing measures – measures to reduce the density of people
- Engineering controls – physical barriers (like plexiglass at high interaction areas) or increased ventilation
- Administrative controls – clear rules and guidelines
- Personal protective equipment – like the use of non-medical masks

## **Developing a Safety Plan**

The CDC stated in their [July 21, 2020 update](#) that, "All faith-based organizations must develop a COVID-19 safety plan in accordance with protocols set by WorkSafeBC." As employers, churches are required under the Provincial Health Officer order issued on May 14, 2020 to post a copy of their safety plan to on their website and to post a copy in their workplace.

Along with the health and hygiene practices outlined on page 2, employers are also encouraged to:

- Create and implement clear workplace policies that ensure people who are ill don't come to work and that allow people to be off or work safely from home when they are ill or have symptoms of a cold or flu.
- Provide work from home options, when possible, to reduce contact intensity. When it's not an option, consider measures such as staggered shifts and virtual meetings as much as possible.
- Implement strategies that reduce the number and intensity of contacts.
- Clean high-touch areas frequently and provide hand sanitizer at entrances.
- Focus on higher-risk employees including those over the age of 60 and those with underlying medical conditions – from more flexible hours, to work from home options and workspace accommodation

## **Questions to Consider:**

- Have you developed a safety plan and posted it on both your church website and in your church office or workspace?
- Are there any physical distancing measures or implements that need to be put in place (ex. plexiglass barriers) before staff return to the workplace?
- How will lunch and coffee break areas, and high-touch or high traffic common areas be addressed?
- What work from home options are possible? What other measures, including staggering staff or virtual meetings, need to be in place?
- How will you support higher-risk employees?

## **Communication**

Ultimately, everything we do is about making Jesus known. We are called to be a light in our community, and we can demonstrate love and care for our congregation and community by creating a safe place for people to gather. People may react with curiosity, concern, fear, or even anger in the midst of uncertainty and change. We encourage you to communicate the changes you make with honesty, authenticity, compassion, and integrity, to enable your church to understand both the practical steps you are taking and the reasons behind them.

When your next steps for the easing of restrictions are agreed upon, communicate these to your staff, leaders, congregation, and to visitors that may come to the church. Consider outlining the steps you are taking to maintain a clean, safe environment and who they can contact for any questions they have.

As a reminder, the [Crisis Communication for Churches – COVID-19](#) document is a resource should you need help with communication or have any media requests.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- What will be communicated regarding gatherings? Health and hygiene protocols? Next steps and practical considerations?
- How will you communicate your response to the new normal and the easing of restrictions?
- Who is the church's contact for congregants or those in the community who have questions?

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Are we able to hold drive-in church in our parking lot for more than 50 people?**

The Provincial Health Officer's order on July 27, 2020 allows drive-in church with specific restrictions that attendees must only be present in a vehicle and that there are no more than 50 vehicles present. Attendees must be provided with washroom facilities and ability to wash their hands, must stay in their vehicles except for using the washroom, and food and drink cannot be sold.

**Our building is large and can host multiple separate groups of 50 at a time. Are we able to hold multiple gatherings at the same time provided each gathering isn't over 50 people?**

[WorkSafeBC has stated](#) that in large facilities with more than one area of worship, the 50-person limit applies to each area within the facility, not to the facility as a whole. The emphasis has been that in any gathering, physical distancing remains critical to reducing the spread of COVID-19 and that the 50-person gathering restriction applies provided that physical distancing can be maintained.

It is important that church facilities ensure physical distancing is always possible, provide hand washing facilities, and utilize physical barriers to support safe contact. We recognize that there are a few churches, given the size of the building, available parking, and unique access points, that may be able accommodate physical distancing for two separate groups of 50 people. Provided the building can meet physical distancing requirements, holding services for multiple groups in separate areas is possible.

There are other questions to consider with this approach, though, and we encourage your leadership and Board to discuss them:

- Does your church facility allow for separation of two 50-person groups, including separate entrances, washroom facilities, and gathering areas?
- Does your church facility ensure that physical distancing requirements are met for both groups simultaneously?
- While two or more groups of 50 people are possible, is this a wise use of your facility? How would your neighbours and local community view these gatherings?

**Our small group is more than 6 people. Can we still meet in homes?**

While we want to encourage compliance to the government's restriction of 2-6 people for personal gatherings, we recognize that some small groups may be larger than 6 people. Therefore, you may have opportunity to gather in a home provided you can maintain physical distancing in your backyard or outdoor space, or in a large room.

We encourage you to use your common sense as you determine an appropriate setting for holding your small group gathering, and where a home setting is not able to provide adequate physical distancing, we encourage you to consider using your church facility or a public park.

## **Resources**

BC Centre for Disease Control – COVID-19 Information

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19>

BC Centre for Disease Control – Event Planning

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/event-planning>

BC Centre for Disease Control – Faith-Based Organizations

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/community-settings/faith-based-organizations>

BC Go-Forward Management Strategy

[https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/covid-19/bc\\_covid-19\\_go-forward\\_management\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/covid-19/bc_covid-19_go-forward_management_strategy_web.pdf)

BC Response to COVID-19

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support>

BC Restart Plan

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/bc-restart-plan>

CPD COVID-19 Resources

<https://pacificdistrict.ca/covid-19-church/>

WorkSafeBC COVID-19 Information

<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/covid-19-updates/covid-19-industry-information>

WorkSafeBC Faith-Based Organizations: Protocols for Returning to Operation

<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/covid-19-updates/covid-19-returning-safe-operation/faith-based-organizations>

The District Office is here to support you as you navigate these changes. Please contact our office at 604-372-1922 or [cpdoffice@pacificdistrict.ca](mailto:cpdoffice@pacificdistrict.ca)