
Pandemic Restrictions and Civil Disobedience: The Canadian Pacific District Position

By Errol Rempel, District Superintendent, Canadian Pacific District

Introduction

As the pandemic persists, several churches in British Columbia are defying health authorities and conducting in-person worship services each Sunday. Some of those interviewed by the media appeal to a divine command to gather for embodied worship that trumps human authority as justification for their civil disobedience. Others accuse the government of overreach and appeal to Charter rights that enshrine religious freedom in Canadian law.

More broadly, we are all aware of the continuum of opinions present in Canadian society, often reflected in those who attend our churches, on other restrictions imposed by health authorities, and on the forthcoming vaccine, and so on. The word I've heard most frequently in both the media and personal conversation to describe our current circumstances in church and society is the term *polarized*, namely, to break into opposing factions or groupings (Merriam-Webster).

In highly polarized situations where individuals are unlikely to change strongly held opinions and where satisfying everyone is inherently impossible, sometimes the best one can do in service of others is simply to offer clarity on one's stand. The purpose of this article is to provide that clarity on behalf of the staff team at the District Office.

Which Lens?

The Canadian Pacific District views the restrictions on corporate in-person worship in all buildings used for religious gatherings in British Columbia through the epidemiological lens of a necessary and temporary tactic for mitigating the viral transmission of a serious disease.

Yes, we believe that COVID-19 is a serious disease. Beyond the number of global fatalities (over 1,600,000 as of writing) there are two widely reported phenomena that we find deeply concerning:

- Contrary to the insistence by some that the virus is an 'old person's disease', there are recorded deaths of individuals in every age cohort from infants to those in middle age, some with underlying medical conditions and some without.
- The first-person testimony of COVID 'long-haulers' is chilling: this growing number of individuals report, in aggregate, a long list of serious symptoms months after recovering from the virus, some of which are debilitating.

In viewing the pandemic restrictions through the medical lens, we are explicitly rejecting the lenses of conspiracy theories, the restrictions as attempts to undermine and marginalize the Church, as attempts to remove the freedom of religion from the populace, or as an example of persecution of Christians. We find no compelling evidence for these narratives.

The Heart of the Matter

Love for the other trumps rights for myself. Voluntary self-surrender in the best interests of the other, as modelled by Jesus on the cross, is at the heart of the gospel.

We stand with Frank Berto, Senior Pastor of Living Hope Fellowship, Surrey, BC:

"If I can care for my neighbour by briefly shutting down gatherings in the building and going to online meetings, what a wonderful thing! It's a way of serving my community... How can I love my neighbour? Close the building for a little while! Prevent the spread!"¹

We voluntarily and temporarily abstain from in-person worship in our buildings for the sake of the other. For the sake of bending the curve downwards. For the sake of preventing further infections. We are fundamentally motivated by the desire to protect every human life of any age; each one is created in the image of God and infinitely precious to Jesus.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

This is not about rights snatched away from us by malevolent authorities; it is about rights freely relinquished for a season.

Dr. Franklin Pyles, former President of The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, writes:

¹ Lynda Steele radio show, 980 CKNW, December 7, 2020

As I understand it there was a law or rule in Jesus' time that a Roman soldier would stop anyone and make them carry a burden one mile. Note: this was from an oppressive government. What did Jesus say was the proper response? Was it "assert your rights?" You know what it was, it was "carry it two miles." This is my take. What we are hearing from people is a spirit of rebellion [in defying pandemic restrictions]. It is not just a matter of obeying the magistrate who does not carry the sword in vain, it is a matter of bringing the humility and generosity of Jesus into the foreign territory of the world. When we do that, even in a simple thing like wearing a mask, or briefly forgoing meeting in person, a space is made for the Kingdom to begin to grow, that little seed that sprouts.²

Dr. Bonnie Henry, Minister Adrian Dix, Premier John Horgan

Since March 2020, the Canadian Pacific District has been invited to eight teleconference calls with our health and governmental authorities who have been diligent to communicate directly with faith leaders throughout the province. We have had district representation at seven of those calls.

During each call, information was provided regarding current and coming restrictions followed by a lengthy time of Q&A. These authorities regularly and repeatedly thanked religious leaders for all they and their adherents were doing to support the vulnerable and to encourage one another and those in their sphere of influence while adhering to the restrictions. They repeatedly affirmed the value and place of religion and faith communities in imparting hope and strengthening the endurance of parishioners as well as caring for others not necessarily connected to their churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.

While we believe there are some inequities and inconsistencies in the restrictions and while we believe the messaging and implementation of restrictions has been imperfect at times, we are strongly supportive of our authorities as they lead the battle against the pandemic. We are supportive of them for the Lord's sake and in the spirit of Romans 13:1-10 which argues for respectful submission to imperfect governments that have nonetheless been established by God.

We note that Paul quickly pivots from that exhortation (submit to the imperfect government because it is divinely established) to exhorting his readers to be led by love which fulfills the law *and does no harm to a neighbour*.

² C&MA Theology & Doctrinal Issues Discussion (2020, December 1) Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/groups/905481503206428/permalink/1117302955357614/?comment_id=1119752115112698

When is Civil Disobedience Appropriate, even Required?³

First, if the government forbids us to do that which God commands, or requires us to do that which God forbids, we must obey God rather than human beings (Acts 5:29).

The obvious question here then is: what about Hebrews 10:24-25?

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

We do not take this exhortation lightly. We are embodied, three-dimensional persons created for community-in-the-flesh. Zoom is two-dimensional! The apostolic pattern in New Testament Scripture was to gather converts to Jesus and his Kingdom into local communities for worship, teaching, prayer, and participation in the Lord's Supper and for those communities to meet weekly on the Lord's Day.

We are no doubt collectively experiencing the deleterious effects of not being together as church families for many months now. Our district team is very concerned about this.

However, the contextual target of the Hebrews 10 exhortation appears to be those who were abandoning the regular gathering of Christ-followers out of spiritual lethargy, diminished passion for Jesus, or some other unworthy and illegitimate motivation.

It is something very different to temporarily and voluntarily suspend in-person worship in submission to human authorities who are fighting a pandemic and to do so for the Lord's sake (Romans 13) and as an act of sacrificial love for individuals and for the common good.

Second, civil disobedience may be permissible, even required, if the government explicitly and maliciously targets the Church (universal) or the local church.

³ I'm indebted here to Paul Carter for the phrasing of these two points. See his post at: <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/my-threshold-for-civil-disobedience-in-a-covid19-world/>

We do not see compelling evidence in our current circumstances that this is in fact the case. We in our churches are in a similar situation as concerts, plays, ballets, live theatre, art galleries, and banquet halls. That is, events that bring groups of people together, who arrive and leave at roughly the same times and bring them into a shared space for extended periods of time where the danger of viral transmission is higher. The Provincial Health Officer has repeatedly stated in various contexts that the danger of increased community transmission in such contexts is her sole justification for restricting such events.

Conclusion

We do not view our present circumstances as an occasion permitting or requiring civil disobedience and the rejection of pandemic restrictions. Regrettably, the Canadian Pacific District will immediately and publicly distance itself from any Alliance church that opens for in-person worship when not allowed or otherwise flaunts its non-compliance to restrictions or directives imposed by the Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry.

We are very empathetic towards all who are currently under those restrictions and are suffering. We are very empathetic towards our pastors and church elders who are closely tuned to the destructive effects of a lack of corporate worship on many. These consequences are real and will be more fully appreciated when we are able to gather together again, can share our stories, and leaders can assess the damage done.

Consequently, your District Office team has directed the majority of its energies in recent months to resourcing, supporting, encouraging, and strengthening our district pastors, elders, and churches in these burdensome circumstances.

My final words are directed to all who are suffering, perhaps feeling isolated and mourning the loss of in-person worship. Years ago, I was deeply affected by reading Herbert Lockyer's wonderful little volume on the theology of suffering where he invokes a metaphor from the traditional craft of weaving fabric. He titled his book *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs*:

When the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly, then the Weaver will explain why the dark threads were as needful as the threads of gold and silver. As the skies continue dark and overcast, and shades of night obscure the light, may grace be ours ever to remember that the God who cannot err is able to make us perfect through suffering.