
Updated Position on Pandemic Restrictions and the Canadian Pacific District

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Introduction

This document is supplemental to our previously released [*Pandemic Restrictions and Civil Disobedience: The Canadian Pacific District Position*](#). Please read or review that document prior to reading what follows. Potential for misunderstanding or misrepresenting our position is high without consulting that previous document.

Since that first document was posted, we as a district team have interacted with many dozens of Alliance pastors, members, and adherents who called, emailed, and texted to offer opinions both pro and con on our document, to make additional arguments, to probe our rationale for our position, and in many cases, to express personal support and gratitude. We are not merely being polite in expressing our thanks to all who communicated with us. Many of your comments and questions triggered healthy discussions and helped us refine our convictions and opinions. We are grateful to you and for you!

Our Fundamental Posture

Our core convictions on these matters as articulated in the document referenced above remain unchanged. We continue to affirm the gravity of the pandemic, the centrality of the epidemiological lens, the commitment to compliance with government restrictions for the Lord's sake and out of love for others, the government's efforts to communicate often and effectively with faith leaders, and our opposition to civil disobedience in the name of 'our rights'.

Cumulative Damage; Troublesome Inequities

However, as the pandemic lingers, we are increasingly sensitized to the cumulative mental, spiritual, emotional, medical, and relational toll on many Alliance pastors, members, and adherents due to our collective inability to meet in groups or for in-person worship.

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Furthermore, we are aware of growing anger and frustration among us over inequities in the treatment of faith communities over against other entities and enterprises and what they are permitted to do. We have come to share the concerns of many over these inequities.

We have grown concerned about how 'event-like' (in epidemiological terms) shopping at 'big-box' stores has become where hundreds of people are shopping simultaneously and breathing the same air at chokepoints such as entrances, escalators, and checkout lines. These stores are nonetheless open while churches are closed for in-person worship because church services are classed as 'events' with higher risk of transmission.

We have grown concerned over the government's lack of engagement with faith communities over against some commercial interests. We note that when transmission was spreading in fitness centres in November, and particularly with group fitness activities, these gatherings were prohibited. There was swift government action taken to work with the industry to develop safety protocols and plans that both considered the epidemiological concerns and also allowed for the resumption of some individual and group fitness activities by December. In contrast, while religious gatherings were noted to be a cause of transmission and subsequently prohibited in November, to date there has been no government action to develop appropriate health and safety protocols and plans that would allow for churches to hold any gathering of any size.

We have grown concerned over the allowance for support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to meet in person while religious support groups such as small groups, mental health support groups, or grief support groups, etc. are not currently allowed to gather. We believe in the value of groups such as AA and understand their importance in the recovery of individuals, but we also believe that there are many in our churches, including some with mental health diagnoses, that are suffering from a lack of support for their mental and spiritual health during the pandemic. We believe that this support is essential and that there is inequity when some support groups are allowed to meet, and many others are not.

We were recently very disappointed by the decision of the Public Health Officer (PHO) to grant variances allowing outdoor worship for up to 25 people to three churches that had flouted Public Health Orders and were/are conducting weekly in-person worship. In effect, the PHO rewarded civil disobedience but provided no consideration to churches that were/are respecting the prohibition of in-person worship and have been highly supportive of the PHO.

The prominence and consequences of these inequities have prompted us to write the PHO.

We do not wish to be misunderstood here. We have enormous respect for the PHO and believe she brings superb experience and training to her current task. We believe that task to be extremely complex and that it involves balancing a myriad of competing interests and priorities, an impossible balancing act. Our core posture towards her, along with respect, is comprised of empathy and support. We pray for her often.

However, we believe there must be some adjustments to, and greater flexibility in, the public health orders for faith communities in light of the above concerns.

Concerns and Requests

Consequently, on March 5, 2021 the CPD wrote to Dr. Bonnie Henry and respectfully expressed the concerns listed above and requested:

- That faith organizations be allowed to create documented safety plans in accordance with appropriate public health guidance that will allow them to reopen for worship in groups of 50 people if they so choose.
- That faith organizations be allowed to have religious support groups focused on mental and spiritual health gather under the same restrictions as support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

We will report on the response we receive from the office of the PHO.

Conclusion

As the province moves to vaccinate all who are willing over the coming months, many of us are finally seeing some light at the end of the tunnel. Our district team remains committed to doing all we can to support, strengthen, resource, and encourage our pastors, elders, and churches while the horizon brightens!