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## COVID-19 Church Gathering Restriction Guidance

In light of increasing cases of COVID-19, virus variants, and the resulting strain on health care capacity, Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry issued a province-wide [order](#) that includes gathering restrictions. The order will be kept in place until further notice based on direction of the Provincial Health Order. A [variance](#) to the order was granted on March 23, 2021 for outdoor worship services. A separate [variance](#) issued on March 25, 2021 for holding indoor worship services is currently suspended. The following represents our best understanding of the information provided by the BC Government and its implications for our churches.

**Disclaimer:** These are not directives that the District will be policing or enforcing, but rather guidelines we believe are wise 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 potential consequences should you choose to deviate from provincial guidelines and the guidance provided below.

### Gathering Restrictions

**The province-wide [order](#) given by Dr. Henry prohibits all indoor gatherings of any size but does allow for outdoor social gatherings of up to the same 10 people.**

**A [variance](#) to the order was granted on March 23, 2021 that allows for outdoor in-person worship services with 50 people present, as well as people in 50 vehicles, providing that there is a COVID-19 safety plan in place. No more than 50 vehicles may be present at any time.**

**The indoor worship service [variance](#) issued on March 25, 2021 is suspended. At this time, no indoor worship services are allowed.**

**Pastors may continue to visit the home of a church member or congregant to provide spiritual care.**

Dr. Henry has noted that the current order and variance will be in place until at least the end of the May long weekend on May 24, 2021. We encourage your Board and leadership to carefully plan in accordance with the restrictions for outdoor worship services and to prepare for potential changes in light of changing restrictions.

## **Outdoor Worship Services**

Worship services may be held outdoors for up to 50 people, plus 2 extra people to ensure compliance with the [variance](#). All attendees must practice physical distancing of at least 2 metres. Masks are required to be worn by all in attendance, with the following exceptions allowing for them to be removed:

- Worship leaders or soloists when singing
- Musicians who need to do so to play their instrument (ex. flute)
- Preachers when speaking
- Readers when reading aloud

Worship teams of up to 5 people are allowed, however, only the worship leader or a soloist is allowed to sing, and no congregational singing is allowed. A 3-metre separation of physical distancing must be maintained for worship team members and speakers or a physical barrier must be used.

No social gatherings are allowed either before or after the service.

## **Pre-Registration, Health Checks, and Contact Tracing**

Outdoor worship services are required to pre-register attendees in order to control attendance and allow for contact tracing. Each person's first and last name and telephone or email address must be collected and stored for 30 days and the information must be destroyed.

As part of pre-registration, a health check must be completed, and any person who does not pass the health check may not attend the service. The key questions to ask attendees can be found on [WorkSafeBC's website](#).

The outdoor [variance](#) also states that organizers must caution the following people about attending an in-person worship service because of their higher risk of serious complications from COVID-19:

- Those 70 years of age or older (even if they have been vaccinated)
- A person living with another person who is infected with COVID-19, or who has upper respiratory or influenza-like symptoms
- A person with an underlying medical condition or a compromised immune system

## **Social Gatherings**

The current [order](#) does not allow social gatherings of any size indoors with anyone other than your household or core bubble. Home-based watch parties and small group meetings are considered social gatherings and are not allowed.

Small groups of up to 10 people may meet in person outdoors, however, they are not allowed to meet indoors at the church building or in homes during this time. If small groups do meet outdoors, there is a maximum of 10 people, and the group that gathers need to be consistent (i.e., the same group of 10 in one bubble) and maintain physical distancing. Individuals may still visit a church for personal prayer.

Both Dr. Henry and Adrian Dix have repeatedly stated that if there is any question about whether any type of meeting should be held in person, to move it online or postpone it in order to lessen social interactions and slow the transmission of the virus. We recommend that every church meeting be moved to a virtual meeting at this time and encourage your Board and leadership to navigate this wisely.

## **Support Groups**

Formal in-person meetings, health-focused support group meetings like Alcoholics Anonymous, and critical service meetings such as a Board business meeting may still take place in the church provided physical distancing and health and hygiene practices are in place, and with no more than 50 people present. However, it is recommended that virtual meetings be held as much as possible. Churches are encouraged to review their safety plans and ensure that they are implemented for each formal meeting.

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.

## **Drive-In, Drop-Off, and Drive-Thru Events**

Drive-in and drop-off events are allowed to take place with a maximum of 50 cars in attendance, a small number of staff and volunteers, and a COVID-19 safety plan in place. All attendees must stay in their cars and congregating is not allowed.

As well, all drive-in, drop-off, and drive-thru events must maintain physical distancing and control the entry and exit points to ensure that the number of cars are restricted to 50 at one time. As a reminder, those in each car should come from the same household or core bubble.

## Weddings, Funerals, and Baptisms

**Funerals are allowed to be held outdoors for up to 50 people. Weddings and baptisms are allowed to take place under the new order; however, they are restricted to a maximum of 10 people, including the officiant. Receptions of any size, at any location, for any event are not allowed.**

For weddings and baptisms, event organizers and staff present are not included in the 10-person limit. However, if the event organizer also acts as the officiant, that person is included in the 10-person limit.

As a reminder, weddings must not be held in private homes at this time and must be officiated in person. Physical distancing and health and hygiene practices should also be in place.

The [BC Centre for Disease Control](#) has provided guidance on organizing a funeral or memorial service that may be helpful. It may also be helpful to reach out to a local funeral home for further information.

Baptism involves physical contact between individuals, and this could increase the chance of transmission. [WorkSafeBC](#) recommends that this be done in an alternate way, if possible, to minimize physical contact.

We suggest that as a leadership and Board you determine what your approach in ensuring the safety of participants will be for weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

## Children's and Youth Ministry Gatherings

Under the [Provincial Health Order](#), programs for children and youth are allowed provided that a COVID-19 safety plan is in place, health and hygiene practices are in place, and physical distancing is maintained. Only the youth participating, leaders, and persons whose presence is necessary to care for a child or youth participating are allowed to attend.

The 50-person limit does not apply to staff or volunteer leaders but does include presenters or speakers. This means that 50 people may attend a church worship service or event in addition to church staff and volunteer leaders.

During any gathering, attendees who leave are not allowed to be replaced with other attendees, and the number of attendees must be monitored to ensure that the maximum number in the church's safety plan is not exceeded.

In large facilities with more than one gathering area, the 50-person limit applies to each separate area within the facility, not to the facility as a whole. As well, the [order](#) allows multiple concurrent gatherings for a youth event provided the following are in place:

- each group of 50 attendees is entirely separate from any other group
- each group has no contact in the building with anyone outside their group
- there is a separate entrance for each group
- there are separate washrooms for each group

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 of two (2) metres can be maintained for all attendees. Health and hygiene practices must be in place for all groups, and cleaning and sanitization must be cleaned in between events where no attendees are present.

### **Workplaces**

Employers are asked to review their COVID-19 safety plans and ensure that they are being carefully implemented. Employees have been asked to monitor themselves daily and stay home if they have any symptoms. Masks are required for shared work areas (ex. meeting rooms, kitchens, hallways) and where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

Dr. Henry has asked that all office-based employers support and enable employees to work from home wherever possible to help reduce transmission of the virus. We encourage you to consider making it possible for your church staff to work from home during this time.

## **Resources**

BC Centre for Disease Control – Event Planning (Weddings & Funerals)

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

BC Centre for Disease Control – Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations

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

CPD COVID-19 Resources

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

Provincial Health Officer Orders, Notices, and Guidance

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/current-health-topics/covid-19-novel-coronavirus>

Provincial Health Office Province-Wide Order

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

WorkSafeBC Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations

<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) if you have any questions.