



2/1/2021

To the Faith Communities of the Saskatchewan Synod

Dear friends

As February, 2021 begins, I write to inform our faith communities of the the challenge we are facing in this latest phase of the pandemic including notes on the latest Health Directives to faith communities from the Sask Health Authority; and the updated Synod Guidelines for our faith communities in the synod, based on the Town Hall consultations late last week.

Where we find ourselves in this pandemic.

- Early in the spring of 2000 as the pandemic dawned, we found ourselves isolated in our homes. Our faith communities responded by closing down in-person worship while engaging in a number of innovations: engaging in virtual worship services, distributing printed orders of prayer with printed sermons, telephone-tree caring ministry, funding through increasing the use of PAR or e-transfer, and many others.
- Through the summer, we participated in the “re-opening” of Saskatchewan; gradually moving more freely in the province. In the late summer, after consultation across the synod via Zoom, Synod recommended returning to in-person worship where possible, while strictly following Health directives and Synod guidelines.
- In the late fall as COVID numbers across the province rose, Sask Health authority issued new Directives. Again synod gathered faith community leaders by Zoom in November for a consultation on the issue. The resulting synod guidelines recommended returning to virtual worship where possible until the end of January, 2021. (Where not possible, local faith community leaders who chose to continue in-person worship services were urged to rigorously follow Health Directives and Synod guidelines.)

Now, as January closed last week, synod gathered about 110 of our faith community leaders by Zoom. We met to attend to a presentation by Pastor Ali Tote on the state of the pandemic in our synod, and to confirm a decision that, given no change in Health Authority Directives, synod would continue with the current guidelines. **The Synod guidelines, then, will remain in place for the duration of the current Health Directives which are set to be reviewed Feb 19th. Synod will convene a virtual Town Hall Feb 19th to consider new Synod Guidelines.**

While it is not possible to confidently predict how the world will look in three weeks, the sense of Pastor Ali and the consultation, was that we will likely see similar Health Directives until the end of March. It appears likely that we will be in virtual services for Holy Week and Easter Day. **Anticipating that, Synod will be offering a series of virtual services for the week of Holy Week.** Look for details in coming Synod news.

Health Directives for Churches:

As we have said throughout the pandemic, Synod expects our faith communities to abide by the Directives of the Health Authority to ensure the safety of the people in our faith communities and of the communities we serve. Please continue to monitor the Sask Health link for any changes to Directives for faith communities. [Sask Health Directives for Faith Communities](#)

Synod Guidelines for Faith Communities

Please review these guidelines that were presented in November 2020 and reaffirmed last week.

1. General recommendation: **Do continue to be the church.** We urge you not to close down *being* the church. Do not close down worship. Do not close down faith formation. Do not close down caring for one another and for your communities. During a pandemic, people of faith are needed even more than in 'normal' life. During a pandemic, nurturing faith in our hearts and in the hearts of our children has never been more important.
2. **Specific recommendation: We urge you, wherever possible, to cease meeting for in-person worship until Feb 19th, 2021 when we will meet to review guidelines.**
 - COVID-19 is no longer something we read about. It is in the stores, in our workplaces, in the rinks, in the gyms, in our church buildings. The broad thrust of the Health Directives urges us to limit public outings to essentials. Yes, worship is essential for us. But we have proven over the last 10 months, that we can worship virtually, we can deliver worship orders and sermons manually. We can keep our communities safe and our vulnerable people safe by putting off gathering in-person during this phase of COVID.
 - If your church council and pastor together agree that in-person worship following Health Directives and Synod guidelines is the best course for your particular context, then do so. Having said that, synod guidelines need to be in the conversation. They are the distilling of the medical expertise of Dr. Ali Tote, and of our consultation with 110 church leaders.

For churches, the basics of the Directives remain:

Limit gatherings to 1/3 of capacity to a maximum of 30.

Mask when gathering indoors.
Maintain a physical distance of 6 ft.
Wash hands frequently.
No singing.
No sharing of food.
Stay home if you have any COVID symptoms.

[Full text of detailed Synod Guidelines \(last revision Nov 27, 2020\) for in-person Worship](#)

Closing Remarks

I'm reminded in these pandemic days of an incident in Victoria some years ago. We left the hotel to head for worship but the exit from the hotel was blocked by a long line of runners completing a marathon. So we parked the car, stood on the sidewalk, and watched. It was amazing. Runners came around the corner—all weary, some clearly labouring—and were met by friends, relatives, and coaches. Some came right out on the street to run alongside them. What we heard was this: "Keep it up! You're doing great!" "You're almost there." "Just this stretch, around the corner, and you're home." What a message!

We have run this COVID marathon now since March 2020. It has been a challenging road, no question. And while the end may not yet be in sight yet, with vaccines gradually rolling out; better days seem to be 'around the corner'.

So, people of God: "Keep it up! You're doing great!" "You're almost there." "Just this stretch, around the corner and you're home." Or to put it in the word of Hebrews: "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12)."

Peace,

Bishop Sid