



11/27/2020

To the Faith Communities of the Saskatchewan Synod

Dear friends

I write today to our faith communities about the challenge we are facing in this latest phase of the pandemic; the new Health Directives to faith communities from the Sask Health Authority; and the revised Guidelines to the faith communities from the synod, based on the Town Hall consultations earlier this week.

We find ourselves in a new phase facing this pandemic.

Early in the spring 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 entered a new phase. We participated in the “re-opening” of Saskatchewan, gradually moving more freely in the province while re-opening many of our faith communities for in-person worship following Health directives. Now in the late fall a third phase is upon us as COVID numbers across the province rise. If, in the summer we may not have personally known anyone who tested positive, as November closes the pandemic is getting personal for most of us. To address this new phase, the Sask Health authority issued new Directives over the past week. This week, 110 of our faith community leaders met over Zoom with me and with Pastor Ali Tote our synod’s pastor/epidemiologist to discuss what advice Synod should give to the faith communities.

Changes to the Health Directives for Churches:

Over the last week, on the face of it, only two direct changes were made to Health Directives for Faith communities. One was the change from *recommending* masking in indoor gatherings to *requiring* masking both for those who are attending and those who are leading the service. The second is the change from limiting attendance from 1/3 capacity to a maximum of **150**, to 1/3 capacity to a maximum of **30**--including weddings and funerals.

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 our faith communities and of the communities we serve.

Synod guidelines in this phase, as you will see, respond not only to the new specific directives for faith communities but to the *repeated emphasis of overall Sask Health Directives for all sectors* in the province in this phase of the pandemic.

Revised Sask Health Directives for Faith Communities

Synod Guidelines for Faith Communities

In this next phase of the pandemic, Synod guidelines urge our faith communities to do two important things:

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 for two months: from the beginning of December, 2020 to the end of January, 2021.**
 - COVID-19 is no longer at our doors. 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 8 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.
 - Some of our faith community leaders noted in our Zoom call that there may be situations when communities have no access to the internet, or may be unable to work around a shut-down of in-person worship. Please remember that while the Health Authority Directives are not negotiable, the Synod Guidelines are guidelines open to interpretation in each faith community. 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 earlier this week.

Should you choose to meet in person, faith community members need to call each other to account on the basics of fighting the COVID virus for churches. If you have people who have reservations about the need for any of these basics, call on them to be part of the team. No coach ever has the full agreement of the team on a decision, but a team needs the players to work together—whatever their personal reservations may be. This is a basic part of being part of a community. For churches, the basics of the Directives are not new:

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 Synod Guidelines for in-person Worship](#)

Closing Remarks

Recommending a two month close to in-person worship was a difficult decision for synod and may perhaps come as a bit of a surprise to you. We did wonder about making this a recommendation for a shorter time. Our thinking is that setting the two month period will allow faith communities to settle into an actual plan for that time. How will we handle Christmas celebrations? How can we provide resources for an at-home Christmas worship? How can we support faith formation in children and youth without our usual in-person gathering? How can we continue to reach out to our communities? It may be that before the two months is over, there will be relaxed Health Directives and Synod Guidelines. If that is the case, we will respond to that as synod.

I'm tired of this struggle with COVID-19—I think we all are. (Those working in hospitals, I'm sure, have been saying that for some time!) It does sound like vaccines are coming during the first half of 2021 and the experts are saying that 'will be a game-changer'. I pray that they are right.

In the mean time, we have faith that God is at work. One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, once wrote that 'patience' is not like waiting for a train that will at some point—early or late—arrive. Patience, for people of faith, he says, is not believing that God will one day come through; but that God is already working, under our feet, already quietly, slowly, surely bringing in a new world. That sounds like the seed parables from Mark 4, doesn't it?

So we live and work, rest and play. And we keep faith.

Peace,

Bishop Sid