



Greetings, people of the Diocese of New Westminster

On March 11, more than 120 faith leaders throughout British Columbia had a conference call with Premier John Horgan, Minister of Health, Adrian Dix, and Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry. Below is what I can pass onto you from the conversation. It affirms the [Pastoral Directive of March 5](#) and my [March 7 communique](#) to the Diocese about safe practices in our churches. I'm also highlighting below what I took away from the conference call in terms of implications for churches of the Diocese.

What was shared with us in the conference call:

1. We as faith leaders are important in the midst of this outbreak and the decisions we make now have serious implications for our health and the health of the communities we live in.
2. The practices of increased personal hygiene actions (hand-washing, social distancing, coughing or sneezing into our elbows, refraining from touching, staying home if sick, etc.) are essential.
3. The need to prepare for a possible time of suspending gathering in a physical way is important and should be attended to NOW.
4. Dr. Henry and Minister Dix continued to emphasize the risk to older and health-compromised people, encouraging them to stay home if they are at all worried about attending in-person gatherings.
5. Gatherings in enclosed spaces with food and drink and close contact with each other can be a risk to health.
6. While the BC government has not yet taken steps to suspend large public events, they ask that if we can postpone hosting such events, we should consider cancelling or postponing them.
7. Some specific practices in worship or gatherings were mentioned: creating distance (2 meters between each person), clergy administering the bread making sure that they do not touch the hands of those receiving the bread, and making sure vulnerable elders and health-compromised people know that physically gathering is optional.
8. Disinfecting surfaces and other objects that people touch frequently (tables, doorknobs, bathrooms, kitchens, etc.) is important.
9. While our Provincial authorities have not yet banned specific types of gatherings, more directive actions may be on the horizon.

What I am taking away from the conference call and implications for our churches

- Our current no-touch directive in worship (to include suspending the use of the chalice) and at any other events is consistent with what we heard from Minister Dix and Dr. Henry. Likewise, our emphasis on personal hygiene practices and the disinfecting of surfaces continues to be very important. **I had not earlier addressed the question of anointing. Given the BC Health Authorities' strong emphasis on no-touching, I'm directing that we suspend anointing for now.**
- **The continued suspension of Coffee Hour is the best course of action for now.**
- Parishes need to consider how to put 2 meters space between people attending worship and people attending meetings and social events. **For now, parishes need to exercise their best judgment in cancelling any gatherings they do not feel they can conduct in a way that supports the health of those who attend. Parishes need to be particularly careful about anything involving food in enclosed spaces.** ([Please see article #3 in my May 10 communique about this](#))
- **Parishes need to continue to plan NOW for the probable suspension of in-person worship and other gatherings in the near future.**

I sincerely hope this is helpful to all of you. Please know of my continuing prayers for parish leaders, for our parishioners and for the communities we live in and affect. The next communique from my office will focus on resources for planning for the future possibility of moving away from in-person worship and other in-person gatherings.

No person is an island. Our Christian belief in the inter-connectedness of all people in Christ is real. Now is the time for us to care for ourselves and for others and to be attuned to the changing news and the changing practices we may need to adopt for the future.

In Christ,
+ J. Melvin