



PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP JOHN STEPHENS, JULY 5, 2021

To All Clergy and Lay Leaders of the Diocese,

On June 30, the Provincial Health Officer, Dr Bonnie Henry set out the latest health order related to worship in British Columbia, which has now come into effect. It was very short and very clear:

There are no capacity limits or restrictions on indoor or outdoor religious gatherings and worship services.

Rabbi Dr Robert Daum who has been working closely with the PHO over the last number of weeks, summarized her statement in this way, to clarify the differences between worship and other gatherings of people in the province:

- As of July 1, please note that the PHO has confirmed that there are no more mask requirements, capacity limits or physical distancing requirements for religious gatherings.
- Singing is permitted.
- Gatherings before and after services are permitted.
- Sharing meals is permitted.
- These activities are permitted whether indoors or outdoors.
- Wedding and funeral ceremonies that have a "religious worship" component would be considered "worship services", and therefore would be exempt from remaining restrictions on some other kinds of group activities.
- Baptisms and related "new birth" ceremonies are likewise considered religious by definition, so they too are exempt.
- Wedding receptions would have the capacity restrictions as outlined in the order.

For our diocese, I needed time to study and confirm these details as they are essentially ending all of the health orders related to the pandemic. Given the preceding information, we have reached the end of the Provincial Health Officer's restrictions placed on our

worship services and liturgies. I am so grateful to God and to all of you for all your hard work and attention to detail as we have all helped to protect the people around us. I give thanks as well to Dr. Henry as she has worked tirelessly to try to ensure that all of us be kind, calm and safe.

I am well aware that many may have concerns about onsite worship and being in close proximity to others. It will take time for all of us to get comfortable once again and we need to be careful how we manage people's expectations and the concern for the safety of all.

With this in mind, effective July 5, 2021:

- a. It is strongly encouraged that masks be worn upon entry to the church and kept on for the entirety of the liturgy.
- b. Greeters/welcomers should wear masks.
- c. Anyone speaking or leading singing can remove their mask for this role.
- d. People should be encouraged to still distance from one another (unless from the same household) to help build confidence for those hesitant about returning to in-person worship.
- e. Prior to receiving Communion, individuals should sanitize their hands.
- f. A choir leading the music in worship is permitted.
- g. Congregational singing is permitted.
- h. It is no longer necessary to pre-register or collect contact tracing information for those attending worship.
- i. Washrooms no longer need to be designated "for emergency only"
- j. Social times before or after worship are permitted, however, please ensure that those handling food/beverages have sanitized their hands.

In terms of Communion, the Peace and Offertory plates, there are protocols that will continue to be in place for the time being:

- **Communion is in one kind only (except for the priest), the bread/body of Christ. The cup/wine/blood of Christ will not be offered to anyone other than the presider at this time.**
- **At the time of exchanging the Peace of Christ, there must not be handshaking or hugs (except between members of the same household). Please nod or bow to one another.**
- **At this time, do not pass Offertory Plates. Offertory plates can be placed at the door and could be brought forward during the time that the offering is received.**

Please have hand sanitizer on site and encourage its regular use. At the entrance, please have masks available. Please help people to regain their confidence in attending in-person worship once again. It is optional for priests to wear a mask when offering Communion (the bread/body of Christ) but it is encouraged that they do so.

It is possible for in-person Sunday School and Youth Groups to resume once again. It will be important to create a COVID awareness plan for these gatherings and to ensure the

comfort and safety of the leaders. A maximum of 50 people can be present at an indoor event, hand sanitizer must be available and it is advised that all be masked and distanced as much as possible (as per the PHO guidelines on gatherings and events).

All of this brings enormous change in a very short time for all of us. While some are very eager to get back to “normal,” others in our parishes are hesitant. I urge all of you to be aware of both views (and those in between), and be as pastoral and helpful as possible to bring comfort and confidence to those attending in-person worship.

Some parishes (and other places of worship) are ready to move back into in-person worship with few restrictions in place. Others will need to take more time. In consultation with the people in your parishes, and offering ongoing options for online worship, please set the appropriate time-line for your parish (place of worship) for returning to in-person worship and what that will look like. If you need guidance from me (or the other two members of the COVID Safety Team: the Rev'd Tellison Glover, the Rev'd Philippa Segrave Pride), please contact us. If you have any questions or concerns about any of this, please contact us.

May God continue to bless us, and the Holy Spirit guide us as we live out our baptismal calling to be the Body of Christ in this part of our world.

BLESSINGS & PEACE

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