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While COVID case numbers have started to decline in the past two weeks in Alberta, they are still considered to be high. Hospitalizations and ICU admissions remain at critical levels and our healthcare system continues to be stretched beyond capacity. In addition to this, we will not know for two weeks whether Thanksgiving celebrations will contribute to another spike in numbers. As long as case, hospital, and ICU numbers remain high, the COVID Taskforce will advise that suspension of in-person worship in our buildings should continue. The reason for this is that by reducing opportunities for gathering, we help to reduce the possibility of adding to the stress on the healthcare system. It's not just about COVID-19 anymore. It is GI infections, heart attacks, broken bones, cancelled surgeries, tests, treatments, and countless other conditions that people may experience and yet be denied full access to healthcare because COVID is taxing our healthcare resources. We are asking people in our parishes to do their part to reduce the strain on the healthcare system. That means limiting gatherings to help reduce potential sicknesses or injury.

With these variables in mind, the COVID-19 Taskforce has recommended, and the Archbishop has concurred with, extending the current suspension by one Sunday until, and including, October 24. It is our hope that we will be able to return to offering in-person worship, with restrictions, in our buildings starting on October 31, the Eve of All Saints. The COVID Taskforce will be meeting again on October 26 to review the data to determine if Thanksgiving has contributed to an increase in numbers that could warrant extending the suspension further. Parishes should be prepared for this possibility, but for now we are anticipating being able to return to our buildings on October 31.

No parish is compelled to reopen on October 31; online efforts continue to be a commendable option. Any parishes that are planning to open should follow previous guidelines for masking, distancing, sanitizing, vocal performances, children's ministry, contact tracing, etc. Parish clergy and corporations are asked to use their discretion to determine best practices in their context. Participant pre-registration is encouraged in situations where anticipated numbers could exceed capacity limits. Attendance is limited to 30% of fire code capacity.

We are very aware of the burden this places on our parishes and we want to extend our appreciation for all who have made such sacrifices in the hope of reducing the effects of this pandemic. We encourage continued creativity in meeting people where they are, whether in outdoor small group gatherings, walks in the park, porch visit communion distribution, or just phoning somebody that we are wondering about. As God's people, we have many possibilities for gathering in creative ways beyond our indoor spaces, and where two or three are gathered in his name, God is there in the midst of them.

It is with thanksgiving that we remember the witness and ministry of the parishes of the Diocese of Calgary. We ask God's blessing on all our endeavours as we continue to serve in the name of Christ in trying times.

Archbishop Greg and the COVID-19 Taskforce