

Regathering Guidelines for Congregations as Restrictions Ease

June 15, 2020



The question of when and how to begin “re-gathering” as churches has come to the forefront now as the various provincial governments across the country have granted permission for houses of worship to begin re-opening. With this good news comes the realization that reopening in a COVID-19 world will certainly be much more complex and challenging than shutting down was.

Rather than just reacting to what others are doing, churches need to model responsible decision making and exceed basic health guidelines to protect the most vulnerable. **Simply because churches have been granted permission to begin re-gathering does not necessarily mean that your church should.**

As a denomination the Be In Christ Church of Canada wishes to give the following directives to our congregations regarding re-opening:

1. Churches **must** follow all government restrictions and protocols if they choose to reopen. Unless churches can guarantee on a weekly basis that they can meet and exceed these protocols then opening should be delayed until proper training, staff, preparation of facilities, guarantee of cleaning, etc. can be put in place. These directives are clearly published on the various provincial web-sites.
2. Churches **may not re-open for public services without first dialoguing with the Executive Director** and satisfying denominational leadership that the necessary preparation for re-opening has been done and can continue to be done. The potential liability of each local congregation can affect us all. It is the responsibility of the Pastor to call the Director and report on their plans.

3. One size does not fit all when it comes to re-gathering. In this case it is an advantage to be a smaller congregation and these congregations will have a somewhat less complex challenge of re-opening. **For this reason we are strongly suggesting that any church with an average pre-Covid attendance of more than 75 should not consider re-gathering for services until after Labor Day weekend.** Churches of under 75 may consider opening for services but should feel under no compulsion to do so. We really believe that we need to work to get this right and that the Lord has granted us a time of jubilee before heading back into meeting live again. This summer can be a time of preparation and rejuvenation before gathering this fall. This of course assumes there is not a second wave of COVID-19 which would cause us all to have to re-think things yet again. In small churches we commend the use of outdoor service gatherings as a much safer and viable option churches should consider for meeting.
4. Churches that re-open **must not run a separate children's ministry** until at least September when we will provide further direction.
5. For churches that do not resume public services we suggest that over the summer **meeting in small groups as restrictions ease for fellowship and "viewing parties" might be a great transitional strategy.** Youth gatherings may be able to be held as well as long as proper protocols are followed.
6. We must realize that this is a time when emotions are running very high on both sides of the re-open / don't re-open conversation. **The temptation for people on either side of these conversations to try and shame others and be critical of leadership will be great.** Recognizing this we encourage local church Pastors and leaders to speak wisely and confidently into the life of their congregation calling for love, trust and understanding. This is not a time to divide but to stand together.

Above all - please remember, the church has never closed. The church remains open, even if we don't physically gather in our building.

Several weeks back we gave the following counsel to churches which we continue to stand by as wise advice when it comes to re-gathering. Here are those points once again:

- Reopen with grace. Clearly communicate to your congregation that a person's faith in God and their loyalty to their congregation will not be judged by their presence or absence at the reopening of your worship services. Each individual

and family has a number of important factors to evaluate personally. We would do well to remind everyone to love their neighbours as themselves, and to offer each other as much grace as possible.

- Listen to local authorities. Submission to these authorities honours the Lord, promotes social order, and is a positive witness.
- Create a workable plan that includes a number of different scenarios. Does your seating allow for social distancing? How many people can gather at one time? Should a congregation move to multiple services to accommodate its attenders? Pastors and leadership will be forced to consider not only what they *can* do, but what they can do *well*. Each congregation should consider their priorities and their limitations in ministry, and set forth to accomplish those to the best of their ability. Flexibility and adaptability will be key.
- Create a safe environment. Many of our attendees will continue to be concerned about personal health and safety as they re-engage in public worship services. Monitor cleaning vigilantly. Screen carefully at the door. Limit entrances. Always know how many people are in the building. Maintain physical distancing. Insist that sick people to stay home and watch online. Tell people it's ok to wear a mask. Multiply your hand-sanitizing stations. Develop a team of people to be on duty while gatherings happen to wipe down surfaces and handles. Encourage the use of broad smiles as a replacement for handshakes and hugs. Do all you can to ensure that everyone who attends feels welcomed, but also feels safe.
- Do away with food and drink. For a congregation to gather for worship without coffee, refreshments, and fellowship meals seems the antithesis to our BIC sense of community and love of food. However, since areas of food and drink are most often self-serve, it seems best to hold off for now on providing these opportunities at gatherings. Instead, consider encouraging people to bring their own refreshments, and to consider eating together in smaller groups in homes following the service.
- Offer consistent guidelines for weddings, funerals, and other gatherings. If your congregation has a building of its own, when assemblies like funerals and weddings do start up again, make clear that the same rules for physical distancing, food, etc., apply to everyone and for every gathering.
- Train and re-train your workers on new post-COVID-19 protocols and procedures. Greeters will need to be trained on how to greet from a distance. All these new ways of “doing church” will need to be decided upon by Pastors and boards together and then communicated carefully, consistently, and compassionately to volunteers.

- Commit to an ongoing online ministry. Most congregations have begun online services, meetings, and small groups with great success and, at times, an expanded audience. Consideration should be given as to how best to continue this. Do congregations have the right staff to do this well? What equipment needs to be purchased? The new reality of expanded online ministry opportunities requires pastors and congregations to consider the best ways to be wise stewards of their time and resources.
- Creatively consider how to do communion and baptism while keeping people safe.
- Offer extra care to the addicted, depressed, and lonely. In the midst of this pandemic, the time of separation from brothers and sisters in Christ has been particularly challenging for those struggling with addiction, depression, and loneliness.
- Continue to minister to needs in the community as well as your congregation. During these days churches have come up with new ways of bringing blessing to their community. Many have connected in new ways with friends and neighbours. As we begin to return to congregational gatherings, it would be such a loss if we do not retain, and even expand, our contacts and ministries in and to our communities.
- Provide people with multiple ways to give. It may be that passing the offering plate is a thing of the past. As one blogger suggested, how would you feel if you were the 100th person in a worship service to touch an offering plate that 99 other people had just touched? Would you be worried about COVID-19 transmission? Most of our congregations have already given attention to the issue of giving as they have moved their services online. Pastors should consider best practices when it comes to providing people with options of how to worship through giving in this post-COVID-19 world.

In the coming weeks and months may we humbly let Jesus guide us. May we take the posture of learners who are willing to listen. When the time is right we will be reopening our doors to a world not only filled with new challenges, but one also brimming with fresh opportunities to share the love of Christ.

May we be willing to leave behind the things that need to be left behind and embrace the new things God has brought to us through this most unique time we have lived through together.

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