



MANITOBA NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO SYNOD
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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Dear Rostered and Lay Leaders of the MNO Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Christ our Saviour.

It is difficult to believe that two months have passed since the Bishops of the ELCIC issued a letter calling for the suspension of all worship services and other gatherings. In that time we have seen unprecedented closures of public spaces and strict restrictions on private gatherings.

Thankfully, it seems, the worst of the threat is beginning to pass and we are taking our first tentative steps to restoring services and social interaction. I am thankful for the work of our governments, those who were called on to continue their work, and those who maintained distance in order to safeguard our communities. I am thankful for our rostered and lay leaders who had needed to adapt and create new ways of caring for our communities of faith. And I am eternally thankful for God's enduring faithfulness to all of us during this time.

As we anticipate a return to worship and physically gathering as the Body of Christ, there will be many questions. Included with this letter is a general guideline for reopening your church buildings. We hope that this will give guidance and direction for many of the common questions that I have already been hearing. Please remember that this guideline must be read alongside the most recent provincial and regional health authority directives. In all cases, those regulations take precedent. This guideline is simply an offer of explanation about how provincial health regulations specifically affect worship and gathering as the church, along with some practical suggestions for ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone who comes through the doors. If your ministry cannot reasonably meet these guidelines and health authority stipulations, then my suggestion is that your facility is not ready to open and resume in-person gatherings.

If you need further explanation, please don't hesitate to ask. But before asking, please also remember that our goal is not to look for a 'loophole' or way around the regulations. Our goal should always be to engage in practices that will ensure the health and safety of our community while also addressing the spiritual needs of our members.

God's blessings to you all.

Rev. Jason Zinko
Bishop
Manitoba Northwestern Ontario Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada



Planning for In-person Worship

As our churches prepare to reopen and provide in-person worship services, we encourage you to follow and consider these guidelines. These are not comprehensive guidelines that will apply to all congregations. Each ministry will need to adapt and apply these guidelines as they fit best within a particular context. Provincial and federal health regulations must always be followed. ***** Please remember that as of May 22, 2020 all provincial regulations limiting the size of gatherings still assume that all physical distance strategies remain in place*****

STEP 1: Assessment and Preparation

BE INFORMED

- Know the risk factors for the virus. This can help you make decisions on staffing, volunteers, and whether you will return sooner or later. For example, those with preexisting conditions and those over 65 years old are at a higher risk of experiencing worse symptoms than others if they contract the virus.
- Poll your congregation on their expectations. Be in constant communication. Also know that there is no rush to return to the building. You can continue to worship online or other means if your congregation is still experiencing anxiety and fear. Consider sharing worship resources with neighbouring congregations.
- Review the latest provincial government and health authority information with respect to maximum size of gatherings, whether or not church staff are allowed to be in the building at the same time, etc.
- Review your insurance policy to ensure that proceeding with in-person worship does not introduce a potential liability to the ministry. Ministries use different insurance underwriters so do not rely on what you have heard in another setting. Only your insurer can tell you what you are covered for. This will also apply to rental groups.
- Assess if your building will allow for proper physical distancing. It is possible that a return to in-person worship at this time is impossible or impractical to accomplish. If you cannot follow health authority regulations, your building should not re-open at this time.

SAFETY

- Staff, visitors and members should use the self-assessment tool (<https://sharedhealthmb.ca/covid19/screening-tool/>) before entering the building or interacting with anyone. If you have any doubts about whether or not you should be attending, please stay home.

- Staff, visitors, and congregation may choose to wear gloves and non-medical masks. However, it is not required if physical distancing is maintained at all times. Your congregation may set a policy of requiring masks. If so, ensure you have spare masks available for those who arrive without them.
- Consider offering multiple worship services to reduce the number of people to less than that prescribed by provincial health authorities. It may be necessary to devise a process for pre-registering or assigning members to certain worship times to avoid groups gathering outside the building or needing to turn people away after the attendance limit has been reached.

STAFF AND LEADERS

- Lay and rostered leaders should support COVID-19 prevention activities, procedures, and education. However, employees cannot be required to return to a workplace that they feel is unsafe.
- Staff and volunteers should be given information and training about appropriate physical distancing, processes, and hygiene practices.
- Staff should wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) if they are unable to maintain 2 meters of separation from congregants. The congregation should provide PPE where possible.

Step 2: Opening

FACILITIES

- Deep clean your entire facility before and after all gatherings, paying specific attention to high-touch surfaces. Sanitize pews (seats, backs, and ends), communion rails, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, and microphones. Consider shampooing carpets.
- Use chemicals and disinfectants as directed and allow for the proper dry times. Here is a list of approved disinfectants for COVID-19. (<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html>)
- Control and stagger entry into facilities. If required, put barriers in place, or tape on the floor, to direct people. Organizations should maintain a single point of entry and a separate point of exit.
- Hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol content must be available at facility entrance and exit and available throughout the building.
- Close spaces/rooms in the building where people do not need to be. Consider removing everything nonessential from preschool and children's areas to limit surfaces for potential contamination.
- Temporarily remove Bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, etc., from the backs of chairs/pews. For congregations without access to projection, consider lending a hymnal to each member that they can take home and bring with them for worship so that members aren't sharing books. Try to avoid printing entire services, as this practice does not align with our call to care for creation.
- Post signs in all prominent locations indicating COVID-19 physical distancing protocol. Posters from Manitoba Health and the MNO Synod have provided a for your use. Ontario resources can be found here: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/respiratory-diseases/novel-coronavirus/public-resources>

- Tell your congregation through flyers on the doors, email, and social media about how you've prepared the church for their arrival, including your protocols for cleaning and sanitizing, precautions. Be sure to use the words "clean, safe, and mindful of health needs and issues in preparation for a non-touch experience" or something similar. Also say that if they are sick, then they should not be present and can join online instead.

Step 3: Worship Considerations

- Seating should be arranged or marked (in case of pews) to ensure social distancing. Consider removing or blocking off pews to allow for proper distancing. Consider providing tape lines every 2 meters (6 feet) down the aisle if you will be providing communion.
- Congregants should be reminded to clean their hands on entry and exit.
- Infants and children should remain with their parents or guardians at all times. Nursery/Sunday school/children's church should not be permitted.
- Train greeters and ushers so they are familiar with traffic flows and revised practices.
- Develop an alternate means for distributing bulletins (if required). Consider pre-placing bulletins on seats where several people are not touching the same place.
- Microphones should not be shared by worship leaders.
- Limit people's movement in worship to minimize opportunities for contact.
- Pastors and worship leaders should avoid greeting all members as they exit the sanctuary.
- Individuals not from the same household should be reminded to maintain physical distancing when returning to vehicles or homes.

MUSIC / COMMUNAL RESPONSES

- Singing during worship is not permitted at this time. This applies to congregational singing as well as choirs, soloists, cantors, etc. For an explanation and discussion, see: <https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Returning-to-Church-Church-Music-final.pdf>
- Consider playing live instrumental versions of hymns and inviting congregants to read along with the words, engage in silent prayer or meditation, or 'sing' along silently. Use recorded music or video versions of songs from Youtube or similar services.
- Communal responses (speaking in unison) including recitation of the creed, Lord's Prayer, etc. should be discouraged. Invite worshippers to take part in these important expressions of faith silently.

OFFERING

- Do not collect offering by passing a plate among worshippers or similar means.
- Encourage members to make contributions through electronic means. See: <https://elcic.ca/publichealth/documents/March2020Treasurers-GivingAlternatives.pdf> The MNO Synod has also provided link to give to congregations through CanadaHelps (<http://mnosynod.org/donate/>)
- Provide a central place where worshippers can deposit physical offerings, such as a basket near the entrance or exit.

BAPTISM

- Discourage the practice of remembering your baptism by touching water in the font and making the sign of the cross. Consider providing an alternative prayer or practice for members.
- Sanitize and provide fresh water in the font for each baptism.

COMMUNION

- Communion may be celebrated, but care must be taken to ensure that physical distancing is maintained and that elements and surfaces are touched as infrequently as possible.
 - Avoid bring the elements to the table during an offering procession, or having them moved from a credence table. Minimize the number of times vessels and elements are handled. It is advisable to have all elements on the table/altar at the beginning of worship.
 - Common cup and intinction are not permitted.
 - Those preparing and serving communion should sanitize their hands immediately before and after distributing communion.
 - Provide hand sanitizer for communicants to use just prior to receiving communion.
 - Communicants must not stand or kneel close together at a communion rail or in line.
 - Consider using wafers rather than fresh bread to minimize handling of the elements.
 - If distributing wine in small glasses in trays, ensure that the glasses are spaced far enough apart to avoid contact of other glasses.

Step 4: Other Ministries

VISITATION

- Care home visits are currently not permitted. It is likely that outdoor visits, with proper distancing, will be permitted in the very near future.
- Visiting with members is best done at the church building with proper cleaning and sanitation between visits.
- At-home visits may take place, provided physical distancing is possible. Fully assess the risk for the person you are visiting. When possible, delay in-person visits until such interactions are specifically deemed safe by local health authorities. If you are visiting, it is advisable to limit visits to one per day to minimize increased social interaction and potential spread. Where possible and practical, continue to check in on members through alternative means. Avoid physical contact and wash hands regularly.

RENTERS / OUTSIDE GROUPS

- Outside groups may use the facility providing they follow local health regulations regarding physical distancing, etc. Facility rentals should be suspended if groups cannot or will not adhere to gathering restrictions.
- The entire facility will need to be cleaned and sanitized before and after all gatherings, paying specific attention to high-touch surfaces. See “Step 2: Opening - Facilities” above for specific information. Unless the rental agreement specifies that the renter must clean and disinfect, then the congregation is required to do this.