

INFORMATION FOR FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Faith-based organizations and leaders are pillars of strength in communities across Alberta. In this time of uncertainty, it is critical Albertans have a place they feel they can belong to that provides a source of hope and comfort; however, it is also critical that faith-based communities are able to worship in a way that doesn't put people at risk.

The following questions and answers are designed to provide guidance to faith-based organizations and leaders as they work to find new and creative ways of worship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Frequently asked questions for faith-based organizations:

Can we continue to offer daily prayer service at our place of worship?

- The Government of Alberta is taking COVID-19 extremely seriously, and acting quickly to minimize risk and keep Albertans safe and healthy.
- In light of the extraordinary circumstances, restrictions have been issued on mass gatherings to limit the potential spread of COVID-19.
- No gatherings with more than 15 people are allowed, including faith-based gatherings.
- Places of worship are encouraged to offer virtual or live-streamed activities instead of in-person events, whenever possible.
- If gatherings with less than 15 people do happen, there must be proper mitigation measures in place:
 - people who are sick with a fever or cough must not attend (even if symptoms appear to be mild or resemble a cold)
 - anyone at high risk of severe disease should not attend
 - reduce the number of participants or change the venue to allow for physical distancing of at least 2 metres between attendees
 - stagger arrivals and departures times to maintain physical distancing
 - increase access to handwashing stations or alcohol-based sanitizer
 - frequently clean surfaces that are touched often (door handles, washrooms, etc.)
 - change the event program to remove activities that increase the risk of disease transmission, such as those that require physical contact between participants

Are places of worship mandated to close?

- We are looking very closely at the numbers of cases acquired through community transmission and the risk in the province and making determinations on the measures required to keep Albertans safe.
- At this time, we have restricted all gatherings of more than 15 people, including faith-based gatherings.
- These restrictions may change as the situation evolves.
- Faith leaders and organizations are encouraged to consider innovative ways to deliver services, such as through webcasts, teleconferencing, texting and social media.

How can we continue to offer support and fellowship to our faith community if we can no longer gather together for services?

- Faith leaders and organizations are encouraged to consider innovative ways to deliver services, such as through webcasts, teleconferencing, texting and social media.
- We must continue to find new ways to connect with one another, while being physically separated.
- This is also true for families and friends who are planning to celebrate upcoming religious holidays such as Easter, Passover, Vaishki and Ramadan. Albertans should be planning to celebrate virtually, not having large gatherings, and even avoiding smaller gatherings outside of their immediate household.

What about families that typically travel to celebrate for religious gatherings?

- Families and friends who are planning to celebrate upcoming religious holidays such as Easter, Passover, Vaisakhi and Ramadan should be planning to celebrate virtually.

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- Albertans should not be travelling at this time and should not have large gatherings or even smaller gatherings outside of their immediate household.
- We must continue to find new ways to connect with one another, while being physically separated.

If our church has a big enough parking lot, could we look at having a drive-in theatre style Easter Sunday service where people stay in their own vehicles and listen to the service broadcast over large speakers?

- Yes, this type of drive-in style service is permitted, as long as the following conditions are met:
 - Individuals must stay in the vehicle they came in for the entire duration of the service.
 - Individuals cannot leave their vehicle, and must leave the parking lot if they need to use the washroom, etc.
 - Individuals in different vehicles are not allowed to share items or come into close contact with each other.
 - There must be a distance of 2 metres between each vehicle. Vehicle windows should be no more than a third of the way down to hear the service.
 - Leaders must clearly state that this drive-through service is for a special event only, and virtual mediums for faith communities should be enacted for regularly occurring services.

Should we cancel events we typically plan for the summer months?

- We know Albertans are anxious to resume their regular lives, but the restrictions put in place are the “new normal” for the foreseeable future.
- While it is too soon to say for sure, large gatherings may not be able to go ahead as planned over the summer months.
- While there is a possibility we could see reduced transmission over the summer, it is prudent that organizations put plans in place to cancel larger gatherings over the summer months, if required.

Can we still offer in-person services for small groups (i.e. one family at a time), if we are taking the proper precautions?

- Yes, as long as there are no more than 15 people at one time, and the proper mitigation measures are in place:
 - people who are sick with a fever or cough must not attend (even if symptoms appear to be mild or resemble a cold)
 - anyone at high risk of severe disease should not attend
 - allow for physical distancing of at least 2 metres between attendees
 - increase access to handwashing stations or alcohol-based sanitizer
 - frequently clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched often (door handles, chairs, washrooms, etc.)
- All Albertans should practise good hygiene, such as frequent handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home if feeling ill.

Can communion still continue?

- Any activity that involves multiple people touching the same object, such as tongs or a cup, should not continue.
- While we understand activities such as communion may be an important part of faith-based services, all Albertans must be vigilant in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

How can we help people struggling with grief, anxiety and mental health issues?

- It is understandable and completely natural for people to feel anxious, overwhelmed, stressed or scared.
- Text4Hope is a free service providing text messages of advice and encouragement from mental health therapists to help develop personal coping skills and resiliency. It is a helpful option for people in self-isolation who can't access face-to-face services, as well as for those in remote locations. Just text COVID19HOPE to 393939 to subscribe.

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- Alberta Health Services offers a number of helplines, including the Addiction Helpline (1-866-332-2322) and the Mental Health Helpline (1-877-303-2642) which are available 24/7.
- The Kids Help Phone is also available 24/7. Just text 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868.

What about funeral services?

- No gatherings with more than 15 people are allowed, including funerals.
- Organizations may wish to look at offering phone or video arrangements.
- Those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID (e.g. those with chronic health conditions) should be encouraged to participate virtually if possible.
- If funerals are held, those attending in person should be reminded that, although it is difficult, hugging and close physical contact should be avoided. All physical distancing and cleaning measures mentioned above should be followed.

Can we still offer food programs for those in need in our community?

- Yes. Not-for-profit community kitchens, soup kitchens and religious kitchens are exempt from the gathering restrictions at this time, but risk mitigation strategies must be followed:
 - Maintain a distance of at least 2 metres between patrons
 - Have hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations available for people to use pre- and post-drinks, snacks and meals
 - Provide utensils (people should not use their hands to eat finger food, sandwiches, etc.)
 - Do not provide open snack dishes (e.g. peanuts, candy)
 - Ensure people do not share dishes and drinks
 - Consider offering pre-packaged take-away meals, rather than sit-down meals
 - Frequently clean surfaces that are touched often

Are there special protocols that should be followed when we are preparing meals? Or delivering meals to those in need in the community?

- Anyone who has cold or flu symptoms (cough, fever, shortness of breath, runny nose or sore throat) should stay home and should not be preparing or delivering meals.
- As always, when preparing food, it is important to follow appropriate food handling precautions in accordance with Food Regulations and other applicable provincial and federal legislation, including cleanliness, good personal hygiene, and proper hand washing as often as necessary to prevent contamination of food or food areas.
- When delivering food, it is important to wash your hands before and after delivering food. Food should be delivered to the door, without going into the person's house, if possible, to maintain physical distancing.
- If it is necessary to go into a house to deliver food, due to mobility or other issues in the recipient, the person delivering should stay 2 metres away from others at all times, place the food where directed, and immediately leave, sanitizing hands after leaving.

Can we prepare activity kits/bags to place outside of the church for families to come and pick up?

- Anyone who has cold or flu symptoms (cough, fever, shortness of breath, runny nose or sore throat) should stay home and should not be preparing activity kits/bags.
- Those preparing activity kits/bags should practise good hygiene, including frequent handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Items that go into the activity kits/bags should also be carefully considered. Disposable items (i.e. colouring sheets) and items that can easily be cleaned are a good idea, while items that are more difficult to clean (i.e. stuffed animals) should be avoided.
- The process for picking up activity kits/bags must allow for physical distancing (2 metres between people).

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How can we safely mobilize our volunteers so that they can help seniors and others in need in our community?

- It is still okay to volunteer in the community, so long as appropriate mitigation measures are in place.
- All Albertans should practise good hygiene, such as frequent handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home if feeling ill.
- It is important volunteers know how to keep themselves and others safe if they are delivering food or supplies.

What is the protocol for informing our faith-community if someone tested positive for COVID-19?

- If someone in your faith-community does test positive and they were symptomatic while at a gathering of your faith community, public health officials would be actively contacting anyone who is considered to be at risk of having being exposed.

How can we help our congregants to be prepared and stay informed?

- It is important to direct people to accurate information: alberta.ca/COVID19 is the trusted source for information on the situation in Alberta.