

Q&A -Religious Services

This document has been updated from the June 19, 2020 version. The following changes have been made:

- Churches are required to maintain a record of names and contact information of all persons who attend the church services
- Gathering limits are no longer in place.

What are the requirements for religious organizations to offer in-person services? Will they require an operational plan?

At this time, indoor and outdoor religious services can resume provided that public health measures are in place, including physical distancing (2 meters) between each individual or each family bubble. Religious organizations offering the service will be required to complete an operational plan to indicate how they will be implementing public health measures during their services. Considerations should be made for high risk populations (such as older adults or people with underlying health conditions), who could be disproportionately affected by complications related to COVID-19. It should be noted that outdoor gatherings have lower risk and can be adapted to meet public health guidelines. Churches will need to take attendance logs for each service, noting names and contact information for each person present. This will help Public Health with contact tracing processes should an outbreak occur.

Where possible, outdoor religious services could be considered in order to lower the risk, but physical distancing measures should continue to be in place, and all other public health measures should be outlined in an operational plan. The lowest risk continues to be through virtual services.

Why is the limit 50 necessary?

The limit of 50 is no longer required. Physical distancing and the other public health measures are still required. Smaller group gathering sizes carry lower risk and better supports ability for physical distancing.

Person-to-person spread is more likely in any setting where there is prolonged close-contact (contact closer than 2 meters lasting more than 15 minutes). This contact can also be cumulative, meaning that it can happen over multiple interactions, and not just one interaction of 15 minutes or longer but multiple shorter interactions. Confined indoor spaces with no windows that can be opened or spaces with poor ventilation can increase this risk. In the event of an outbreak, large indoor gatherings can trigger exponential contact tracing and self-isolation. This would increase the risk of having to shutdown the province again, or to reverse to a stricter level of containment measures, to limit the spread and prevent overloading the capacity of our healthcare system to respond.

Are congregations allowed to distribute communion? Wine and host? (measures for sharing food and drink)

Providing food and drink at a gathering could increase the risk of spreading the virus.

If food or drink must be provided as part of a faith-based ritual (e.g. communion), the following precautions must be taken:

- Food or drink must be served to congregants in pre-packaged or individual portions by a small number of designated individuals.
- Food and drink containers or utensils (e.g. chalices or plates) should not be shared or passed between congregants.
- Physical contact between the designated serving individuals and congregants must not occur while serving food or drink (e.g. placing food in a congregants' mouths). Instead, the server can place the individual food or drink portion in a congregant's outstretched hand, or on a table for the congregant to pick up. At no time, should individuals eat or drink from the same vessel.
- The designated serving individuals should wash or sanitize hands immediately before serving and should wear a clean, properly-fitted non-medical mask for the duration of time spent serving.
- Measures should be put in place to provide hand washing/hand sanitizers (alcohol content over 60%) for the congregation in a way that will not require congregation members to come within 2 meters of each other, prior to consuming the host.

Are we allowed to have a choir sing? Can the congregation sing?

There is some evidence that singing, chanting, cheering increases the risk of transmission of the virus, as droplets may be projected over a longer distance. Choirs would also increase risk of transmission if members were not appropriately physically distanced from each other and from the congregation. Congregations should consider having music played over a sound system rather than having congregation members sing or having choirs sing.

Would members of the congregation be allowed to shake hands as a greeting or peace offering?

Physical contact increases the risk of transmitting the virus from person-to-person, particularly with individuals who are not members of your immediate household bubble. Handshakes or other forms of physical contact (e.g., hugs) should not be practiced as part of the service. Encourage congregation members to use alternative forms of greeting such as a wave, smiles, head nods, or peace sign.

Are we allowed to share hymn books?

Any shared materials used during a service should be sanitized between use or be isolated for an appropriate amount of time (placed in a bag for 5 days) for the virus to no longer be active before being used by other individuals. Hand washing or hand sanitizing stations should also be provided to all members of the congregation upon entry to the service in such a way as to avoid bottlenecks where physical distancing would not be possible.

Are we allowed to collect donations (alms) during the services?

The exchange of cash continues to be a risk. If collecting donations during the service provide options for members of the congregation to drop their offerings in a location where they are not required to come within 2 meters of others. Consider allowing a lapse of time between the donations and the handling of the cash to allow the virus to become inactive, prior to accounting.

Are clergy, staff, and workers included in the maximum count allowable for a service?

There is no longer a maximum count for service. Limit gathering sizes based on the size of your venue or facility. Physical distancing and the other public health measures are still required.

Are young children expected to physically distance, and to what age are they considered children?

In the context of day camps, the [guidance for Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps](#) would need to be followed, under which there is not a requirement to physically distance within groups of 15 or less. In a religious service setting, children are expected to physically distance as they are under adult (parent) supervision, and therefore need to follow the same guidelines as adults.

If there is a gathering of children, are the trained staff and workers that are needed to manage those children counted in the number of those gatherings?

Gathering limits are no longer in place provided it is not in the context of a day camp, in which case, guidance should be sought from the [Guidance Document for Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps](#). Limit gathering sizes based on the size of your venue or facility. Physical distancing and the other public health measures are still required. In the context of a day camp, the Guidance Document for Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps should be consulted and provides guidance for group sizes and separation of groups to limit risk.

If we were to have an indoor church service for kids how many kids can attend?

The same rules would have to be followed for children as for adults. Gathering limits are no longer in place provided it is not in the context of a day camp, in which case, guidance should be sought from the [Guidance Document for Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps](#). Limit gathering sizes based on the size of your venue or facility. Physical distancing and the other public health measures are required.

Is it possible to have an outdoor church service for kids, managed by staff, where the parents stay in their cars and watch the event from a distance?

The same rules would apply to children in an outdoor service as to adults. Gathering limits are no longer in place if it is not operating in the context of a day camp, in which case, the guidelines for a day camp would have to be followed. If it is a short duration camp, it needs to respect the [Guidance Document for Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps](#). Limit gathering sizes based on the size of your venue or facility. Physical distancing and the other public health measures are required.

Are outdoor drive-in services still limited to 50 cars?

That is no longer the case. There is no numerical limit to cars or a minimum distance between cars required for outdoor drive-in services.

Are people allowed to get out of their cars in an outdoor drive-in service and use the washroom?

Yes, as long as physical distancing is respected. Washrooms and other common areas should have enhanced [cleaning and disinfection](#).

Is a food truck allowed at an outdoor drive-in church service?

Yes, as long as physical distancing is respected. Additional consideration should be given for handwashing and hand sanitization stations near the food truck.

Can a larger church building host two indoor events in two different floors using separate entrances, separate washrooms and separate staffing?

Yes. The two services would be considered distinct and the physical distancing and the other public health measures must be respected. The operational plan would need to provide details of how public health measures would be implemented.

Does the church have to maintain a record of the names and contact information of the people who attended the church service?

Yes, the Mandatory Order issued on June 19 states: “where anyone admits patrons to a venue at which seating is offered for purposes of eating, drinking, socialization, celebration, ceremony or entertainment, they are required to maintain a record of the names and contact information of all persons who attend and must make the records available to Public Health Inspectors (if asked for them). Where anyone hosts, organizes or permits gatherings larger than 50, they have the same requirements. A “gathering” implies common intent or purpose associated with socializing, celebration, ceremony or entertainment”.