

Alberta bishops cautiously welcome government lifting of church attendance limit

Alberta's Catholic bishops are welcoming the lifting of crowd limits on Mass as the province moves to the next stage of its relaunch strategy, but they are also sounding a note of caution.

"The return of these public celebrations has been a source of joy for our parishioners and priests alike," the Alberta bishops said in a [statement](#) June 9. "We are grateful to all those who have worked so hard to make the necessary preparations, and to our parishioners for the patience and the responsibility toward others that they have demonstrated as they have returned to Mass."

Premier Jason Kenney announced that as of June 12, there would no longer be any limit on attendance at worship services – as long as social distancing measures and other protocols are in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Under Stage 1 of the relaunch strategy, worship services were limited to 50 people in total.

"We demonstrated we can do this right," Kenney told reporters June 9 as he announced that Stage 2 of the provincial relaunch strategy would begin June 12, a week sooner than expected.

"People shouldn't feel guilty now about going out responsibly with their family to a restaurant. They shouldn't second-guess going to their local places of worship within the limitations that are in place. Enjoy life. Do it safely. No need to panic."

Kenney made the surprise announcement just a little more than a week after churches began hosting their first masses with a congregation present in nearly three months.

Nevertheless, Alberta's bishops cautioned against expectations of a quick return to "normal" Mass attendance.

"It is important to note, however, that the pandemic is still with us. Therefore, the expansion of the attendance limit will not mean an immediate return to full churches. Each parish will need to determine the maximum number they can accommodate while still observing physical distancing protocols."

The Alberta bishops said their current guidelines for public celebrations of the Mass remain in effect for now. They include a sign-up requirement for Mass attendees, a physical distance of two metres between people who are not of the same household, health and travel questions, contact tracing, hand sanitizing,

and requiring masks for volunteers and all those who wish to receive Communion.

Singing will not be permitted because public health officials say it's a high-risk to spread COVID-19.

Stage 2 of the relaunch strategy will mean extra cleaning and resources are needed, so a full-capacity Mass will depend on each parish's ability to meet those guidelines, the bishops said.



Archbishop Smith

For months now, an Alberta bishops' task force -- co-chaired by Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith and Calgary Bishop William McGrattan -- has been navigating the relaunch of Mass within the limits set by Alberta public health and government officials.

In [Stage 2](#), there are no restrictions on kindergarten-to-Grade 12 schools for requested diploma exams and summer school, as well as libraries, restaurants and bars, movie theatres, indoor recreation facilities, community halls and other venues. Indoor weddings and funerals will still have a maximum of 50 people. Outdoor ones will be limited to 100.

The Alberta government also announced an expansion of cohort groups, with a family able to increase its interactions with others up to 15 people.

Also, up to two people are allowed to visit patients in an acute-care hospital under new Alberta Health guidelines. Visitor restrictions for long-term care facilities -- considered high risk for COVID-19 -- are being reviewed by public health officials.

Non-essential travel outside of the province is not recommended. And large-scale conferences and events are still not permitted.

Regular in-school classes for kindergarten to Grade 12 won't resume until September. Kenney said Alberta Education is expected to provide his cabinet with a plan which will allow schools to spend the summer preparing for this fall.

The premier said progressing to Stage 2 is possible because Alberta has seen a nearly 70-per-cent decrease in cases and hospitalizations while testing has been increased to as many as 5,000 per day.

Five people were in intensive care, down from 22 at the peak of the pandemic. The decrease in hospitalizations has been particularly sharp in Calgary and Brooks, which were hard hit by COVID-19.

Kenney noted that the Alberta government set aside 2,800 acute-care beds for COVID patients at the height of the pandemic, as well as hundreds of ICU beds and ventilators. "The issue is whether or not our health-care system becomes overwhelmed ... We never came close to maximizing that capacity."

As of June 8, there were 355 active cases and 44 people in hospital across Alberta.

Kenney said the government expects that cases will fluctuate and there will be local outbreaks, and he acknowledged that critics may say the relaunch is too fast and too soon.

"I'll say to them as I did on Day 1, three months ago, in the legislature. As Britons said at the height of the Blitz in 1940: Keep calm and carry on. That's what we should do as Albertans, keep calm and carry on," Kenney said. "The point was not to indefinitely shut down everything we do in society."



Dr. Deena Hinshaw

In spite of the lifting of some COVID-19 restrictions, Albertans must remain “vigilant” about social distancing, said Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the province’s chief medical officer of health.

“I know that it’s taken a lot of effort for us to get to this point. While we’re still not back to our pre-pandemic lives, and we need to accept precautions as part of our new normal, we are closer than we were,” Hinshaw said.

“If we continue to get the relaunch right, our recovery will be quicker and stronger,” Kenney said.

As a precaution against the spread of COVID-19, the government is providing masks for free distribution from the drive-thrus at A&W, Tim Hortons and McDonald’s and to other organizations as well.

The province is also gauging interest from faith leaders in distributing free masks for worship services or faith-based activities. Two web conference calls with faith leaders are planned for June 11 and June 12 during which the government will provide more details.

Kenney said public health and safety remains the top priority, contact tracing will continue, and an interactive map will help Albertans track COVID-19 in their own community.

The success of Stage 2 will determine when Alberta progresses to Stage 3.

