

As restrictions ease, Alberta Bishops prepare for resumption of public masses

Alberta's Catholic bishops are expected to provide further information soon on when and how public Mass will be reinstated within the latest provincial guidelines to protect against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

The bishops were among more than 1,000 faith leaders who joined a May 21 conference call with Premier Jason Kenney and Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer of health. It was a chance for them to ask questions, and for the provincial leaders to reiterate their support.

"I also know the spiritual health of your faith community is just as important to you as their physical health," Hinshaw said.

"I want to assure you that I am not here to dictate how you practise your faith or how you should look after the spiritual needs of your community. But my job is to provide you the best possible advice on how to protect your community from illness and in the worst case, death. I take that responsibility very seriously."

Kenney added that faith leaders will be called upon even more as Alberta deals with the economic toll of COVID-19, including an unemployment rate that could rise to 25 per cent or half a million people.

"We are really going to need to work with the faith communities to address those desperate needs of people," Kenney said. "Thank you for being really in many ways the heart and soul of our society and in bringing that loving care and attention to your congregants and the broader community."

Public masses have been cancelled for the last two months. Since then, Alberta's bishops have been working on a plan for the reinstatement of Mass through a task force co-chaired by Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton and Calgary Bishop William McGrattan. The bishops say that any announcement of the date for the gradual reintroduction will be made at least five days before the first scheduled Mass.

In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, churches have remained open for personal prayer and confessions provided that no more than 15 people attend at one time and physical distancing rules are observed.

Under the latest provincial guidelines issued as part of the Stage 1 provincial relaunch strategy, places of worship will be allowed to host gatherings of up to 50 people if they follow sector-specific guidance. That includes bans on serving and sharing food and beverages, handshaking and other personal contact, sharing of communal items, and group singing. The restrictions on sharing food

don't apply to soup kitchens and food banks run for charitable purposes.

Some callers questioned why restaurants are being allowed to serve food and beverages to groups of up to 50 when churches are not. Hinshaw explained that unlike at a worship gathering, diners in a restaurant are not part of a common community or single gathering, and that means there's a much lower risk of the virus spreading. The sacrament of Holy Communion is allowed, with some restrictions, she said.

Stage 2 of the relaunch strategy, expected no earlier than June 19, may include further easing of restrictions on worship services, depending on how Stage 1 goes.

Hinshaw noted that singing is a high-risk activity because the virus can be transmitted through saliva or respiratory droplets. It has caused COVID-related deaths in faith communities both in Alberta and in the U.S.

Now, and when restrictions are eased further, Hinshaw said public health recommends but does not require congregants to wear face masks. Nor is there is an age limit on participants; congregants assume their own individual risk.

As of May 23, 18 new cases have been reported for a total of 814 active cases of COVID-10 in Alberta. The virus has killed 135 people in Alberta.

As well as the crowd limits, others on the conference call raised the issue of privacy.

Jeffrey Jones, a pastor at Grace Church of Cochrane, wondered about a "precedent" being set by having a list of worship service attendees for contact tracing, which is a part of the public health strategy in the event of an outbreak.

"I have to point out first of all, that's practically unworkable. We don't know everybody who comes in our door. We get visitors that we don't know," Jones said. "I know that some people actively steer away from our services if they know that their names are being put on the list."

Hinshaw noted that the list can be voluntary. It would be kept by the parish and only be used to let people know of a possible exposure if it was learned that someone with COVID attended a service. Revised guidelines will clarify its use.

The premier noted that even at 15, Alberta has had the highest limit on worship gathering in Canada.

And Hinshaw noted that public health officials are not trying to "micromanage," but because of the size and activities of worship services, there are guidelines that are recommended.

“Tragically we’ve seen in Alberta and elsewhere that this virus poses the greatest danger when people gather together in one space for a common purpose such as socializing together or worshipping,” Hinshaw said.

“This guidance isn’t something that we’re setting out because we have enforcement officers who are going to be watching churches to make sure they follow all of this. This guidance is actually for your benefit.”

To help faith communities, Kenney noted the government’s \$50-million civil society fund, partnering with faith community leaders, and \$200 million for mental health support and addiction treatment.

Hinshaw said she herself recognizes the role of faith communities throughout the pandemic.

“I know that for me personally, one of the things that has sustained me through this pandemic has been the daily prayer that one of my pastors has been sending to me – a unique prayer every single day – and her faithfulness has been a sustaining thread for me throughout this journey.”

In addition to the Alberta dioceses, others across Canada are taking similar steps on the path to relaunch public celebrations of the Catholic Mass.

In Vancouver, Archbishop J. Michael Miller has released guidelines that will allow the reopening of some churches to public masses with a maximum of 50 people as early as the weekend of May 23-24.

Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have indicated that they would gradually ease restrictions surrounding coronavirus lockdowns, but they will do so in stages.