

Faith camps, conferences and events in limbo, leaders told in call with province

The future of upcoming summer camps, conferences and pilgrimages in the Archdiocese of Edmonton remains uncertain, as public health officials renew calls for social restrictions in an effort to stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

“I think it would be prudent to consider that future gatherings may not go ahead as planned,” Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta’s chief medical officer, told more than 300 Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh faith leaders from across the province in a March 24 conference call.



Dr. Deena Hinshaw

Hinshaw said it’s too early to recommend cancellations, but religious organizations – including the Archdiocese of Edmonton – should be prepared for that.

The annual [Catholic Family Life Conference](#), held in Lac St. Anne every June, brings nearly 3,000 people each year. The [Lac St. Anne Pilgrimage](#) in July is attended by as many as 30,000 Indigenous people, and the [Skaro pilgrimage](#) in August attracts more than 5,000.

The Archdiocese plans to open one of its two summer camps this year – [Our Lady of Victory Camp](#) at Gull Lake. [Camp Encounter](#) at Lac La Nonne remains closed for

now.

The future of these events will be determined by the Alberta government's recommendations in the coming weeks.

"We can rely with confidence on the directives they give to the province as we navigate our collective response to this pandemic," said Archbishop Richard Smith, who was on the conference call.

"I was grateful that they made this opportunity available to faith communities."

As of March 24, Alberta reported a total of 358 cases of COVID-19 and two deaths. A total of 2,792 confirmed cases have been reported across Canada.

"It is challenging to know what is ahead of us," Hinshaw said. "At this point, we know this virus will not have a vaccine available by the summer. There is a possibility we could see reduced transmissions in the summer, such as we see with influenza, but that's not a guarantee."

Faith leaders from Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Lethbridge and other communities are worried that restrictions to their services are just beginning. Public masses have been suspended since May 16 in the Catholic dioceses, but churches remain open for prayer, adoration and confession.

Ontario dioceses have closed their churches to comply with a government order shutting down non-essential businesses. There are no immediate plans to order places of worship to shut down in Alberta. Hinshaw said she personally believes they should be counted as an essential service.

"In this time of anxiety, uncertainty and significant upheaval, it's critical that people have a place they feel they can belong, and a place they get a source of hope and comfort from," Hinshaw said.

"My personal opinion would be that churches, mosques and synagogues are an essential service, but how that service is delivered may have to change."

Rabbi Steven Schwarzman said it's clear this pandemic will be a long-term problem, but it's comforting that faith groups have come together to protect their faithful.

"We know this is not going away anytime soon and the economic impact is going to be enormous," said Schwarzman of Beth Shalom Synagogue in Edmonton. "But there was a clear message that we're all in this together. The role of faith organizations is to be on the frontlines to get the message out, keep everyone safe, and look after those who are isolated as best they can."

Premier Jason Kenney said faith communities are needed now more than ever.

"Our resilience will depend in large measure on the spiritual reservoir of our

faith communities. There's a lot of human suffering in this province. There is going to be a greater need than ever for pastoral care for people," said Kenney, who participated in the conference call along with Health Minister Tyler Shandro.

"We need your spiritual support, your pastoral support and your active charitable support for people facing this health crisis and the broader economic challenges going forward."

Hinshaw said there are no plans to restrict priests from visiting the terminally ill in hospitals and other care centres.

"We recognize that to have a priest go and provide that pastoral care is critically important," she said.

"We're trying very hard to limit visits to hospitals and senior care facilities because we want to limit the opportunities for the spread of this virus. We just ask that the priest visit only one individual and they explicitly follow our guidelines."

As the uncertainty around this global pandemic continues, Archbishop Smith thanked the provincial government for its guidance.

"We know you're under a lot of pressure and you're in a lot of prayers right now," he said.