

Updated: No easy path to re-opening churches as pandemic restrictions are eased

As provinces phase in plans to restart economies by gradually reopening some businesses and public spaces, re-opening churches will be no walk in the park.

“It’s certainly a good sign,” said Regina Archbishop Donald Bolen about an easing of restrictions in Saskatchewan. “We wouldn’t want to guess at a timeline for ‘normalcy,’ but it is encouraging.”

Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick indicated April 22-24 that they would gradually ease restrictions surrounding coronavirus lockdowns, but do so in stages. Some businesses that entail small gatherings of people will be reopened, but large gatherings such as church services will not be among these.

Alberta’s bishops are working to develop a plan for the eventual reinstatement of public celebrations of the Mass. They have established a task force, led by Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton and Bishop William McGrattan of Calgary, to determine when and how this gradual reinstatement will be initiated.

The reinstatement of Mass will be informed by the advice of Alberta’s chief medical officer of health and the provincial government’s staged COVID-19 recovery plan.

“We are acutely aware of our parishioners’ fervent desire to return to the Eucharist, and we share their concern,” Archbishop Smith said in a statement.

“Our careful discernment now will ensure that when the time comes, we will be ready to begin inviting the faithful back to the churches they miss so much. We are extremely grateful to all those who have made great sacrifices in the common effort to protect our brothers and sisters by preventing the spread of COVID-19.”

Gerald Gabriel, chancellor of the Diocese of Charlottetown, expects it to be at least phase three in the P.E.I. plan before churches can expect to hold Sunday Mass again. That means well into June or longer.

“Entering a new normal is going to be a slow, gradual process,” said Gabriel.

Dioceses in Saskatchewan have welcomed the plan but understand it is going to be several weeks before their churches will be welcoming Catholics back to the pews. Premier Scott Moe indicated in a five-stage plan that by phase three the

province will allow gatherings of up to 15 people, and increasing to 30 in phase four. The final phase would likely see a total lifting of restrictions. No dates have been set for when these would be implemented.



Archbishop Donald Bolen

“As such, there are no immediate plans to return to larger public Mass celebrations of any kind,” Bolen wrote in an e-mail. “But as restrictions ease, our consultative bodies will meet and we will discern what is possible and responsible at each step of the way.”

That means continued rigorous adherence to health directives and “hard sacrifices” that are evidence “it is possible to keep people safe.”

Adapting to restrictions that have closed churches and temporarily suspended all services, from the Sunday liturgy to funerals, weddings and baptisms, has been difficult, said Saskatoon Bishop Mark Hagemoen.

But the diocese has kept in touch with parishioners with live-streamed services and devotions, through electronic communication and social media, even “offering such things as the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a way that fully abides by the limit on gathering size and the required physical distancing,” said Hagemoen.

P.E.I., New Brunswick and Saskatchewan have been hit relatively lightly by the coronavirus that has killed more than 2,700 Canadians. By the time P.E.I. made its announcement, the island with a population of 158,000 had only recorded 26 cases with no deaths, and all were travel related, said Gabriel.

New Brunswick had only recorded 118 cases, with no deaths and 107 recoveries by

April 27, while Saskatchewan had 353 confirmed cases, with four deaths and 288 recovered.

Those numbers pale in comparison to Quebec and Ontario, which account for about 60 per cent of Canadian cases. Quebec had by far the most cases at more than 24,000, compared to about 15,000 in Ontario.

These numbers have left dioceses realistic that churches will not be opening soon, despite both provinces announcing plans April 27 to gradually reopen society. In Quebec, schools outside Montreal are to be up and running by May 11, May 19 for Montreal. Ontario schools will be closed until at least the end of May. No one expects Ontario churches to open before then.

"We recognize that there will likely be restrictions on large gatherings in the initial stages of reopening so we will need to be mindful of direction in that regard," said Neil MacCarthy, director of public relations and communications with the Archdiocese of Toronto.

A number of working groups have been established to formulate a reopening plan, and the archdiocese is working with local public health officials, priests, senior team members and the bishops "as we discern the path forward," said MacCarthy.

"While we are all anxious to open churches as soon as possible, we also must be prudent recognizing the many challenges that will come with the 'new normal' that we are all anticipating," he said.

The London, Ont. diocese has committed to keeping churches closed until at least the end of May, but is keeping its options open should there be any change in provincial directives, said Bishop Ron Fabbro.

"If the lockdown is lifted sooner, we will adjust our diocesan directives as we are able," he said. "We are aware, however, that there will likely be a gradual lifting of the lockdown."

No one expects a quick process, judging from comments Premier Doug Ford made in announcing Ontario's phased-in reopening. Ford called the plan "a road map, not a calendar," and said the province wants to see a steady decline in COVID-19 cases before rushing back to how things were before the province was essentially shut down in mid-March.

Meantime, diocesan officials are working behind the scenes in preparation for days religious communities can gather once more for public worship. Key among these are plans for celebrating the sacraments of initiation, "especially for

those young people and adults who anticipated receiving these sacraments during the Easter season," said Fabbro.

The Ottawa archdiocese has discussed modified, small, private church weddings and funerals to conform with current regulations, said Bob DuBroy, who handles communications for the archdiocese.