

Summer dreams dashed as Our Lady of Victory Camp reopening postponed

Young people and parents who had planned to attend Our Lady of Victory summer camp will have to wait another year, after the camp closed as a precaution against the spread of COVID-19 coronavirus.

The Archdiocese operates two camps, Our Lady of Victory Camp at Gull Lake, northwest of Red Deer, and Camp Encounter at Lac La Nonne, about 110 kilometres northwest of Edmonton.

OLVC was set to reopen in July, as part of the Archdiocese's \$5.6-million business plan to redevelop the camps. Camp Encounter at Lac La Nonne was set to open in 2022.



Lucy Kaakyo

It was a difficult decision for the Archdiocese to make. But after the provincial government's March 24 recommendation to suspend all large gatherings, there was no other reasonable option.

"We just can't put the kids at risk," said Lucy Kaakyo, chair of the archdiocesan camps renewal committee. "It's very tragic really. Everything was in place to reopen and now we cannot do it."

"It all has been put on hold for now. We will resume the work once it is safe to do so, but there is just too much uncertainty right now to know how soon that will be."

Families who have already paid the \$340 registration for OLVC will get a refund.

Both OLVC and Camp Encounter are geared towards kids aged eight to 14. Teens can be counsellors and adults can volunteer or apply to be staff.

Campers can participate in canoeing, archery, swimming and other sports as well as faith-based activities, sacraments and Catholic fellowship. The camps run throughout July and August and typically serve more than 300 Catholic youth. In 2018, they attracted a total of 667 campers.

Around \$30,000 of the \$5 million needed to renovate the camps has already been raised. All future fundraising efforts and renovation work have been postponed until the COVID-19 pandemic is over.



Natalie Cote

The cancellation did not come as a shock to Natalie Cote, but it was certainly a disappointment.

“It’s impacted my life from a lot of different perspectives, far beyond the physical camp,” said Cote, who has spent 14 summers as a camper, counsellor, staff member and lifeguard. “Much of my Catholic community stems through the relationships I’ve made at camp. It’s the place I learned how to pray.”

Organizers had planned new programming for OLVC for both parents and youth, including outdoor activities like fire building, shelter building and scavenger hunts. There were also planned renovations to the campsites, beachfront and dorm rooms.

“It was an exciting time to reimagine how we could serve families through camp

ministry with a lot of things we hadn't done before," said OLVC camp director Lisa MacQuarrie. "I'm sure it will eventually happen – we're assured of that. It's just hard to have to wait another year."

"But when it's safe to do so we'll return to do this again. We trust in God's timing for when we should re-open camp."

Natalie Cote said she will miss the friendships, prayers, and daily Mass that made OLVC the highlight of her summers, but her friends have already planned other ways to keep in touch.

"We can use this extra time to still build our community that originated at camp," she said. "We decided we're all going to watch online Mass together and have a video call afterward, to connect like we would usually do after Mass at camp."



Lisa MacQuarrie

"I'm also part of a Bible study and youth group right now where the majority of us are camp alumni."

MacQuarrie said the archdiocesan camps play an important role in bringing the Catholic community together and she hopes it will become a reality by next summer.

"I do believe when we're back to whatever the new normal will be, the camps will be an amazing opportunity for families to re-connect with each other and their faith in a community setting," MacQuarrie said. "So many of us have experience that positive camp experience and been touched by it. We need this."