

Tam asks for church aid in bringing end to pandemic

The end of our long COVID crisis may be in sight, but until we get there churches and faith leaders still have a job to do, Canada's chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam told over 1,300 faith leaders on a nationwide Zoom call.

"All pandemics come to an end and this one will as well," Tam said.

With delays in vaccine delivery and the enormous logistical effort required to distribute vaccines to every corner of a country so vast it could fit almost all of Europe within its borders, just when COVID will end is still unknown.

Between now and then Tam is asking churches to promote the basics of safety under the pandemic – mask wearing, hand washing and social distancing. She also wants faith leaders' help in reassuring Canadians that the vaccines are safe, effective and our best hope for a return to normal.

While the majority of Canadians want and trust the vaccines, and 90 per cent of long-term care residents who have been offered it have rolled up their sleeves for the needle, there are still pockets of resistance and waves of misinformation washing over social media, said Tam.

She pleaded with faith leaders to use their influence to promote accurate information about the vaccines.

Calling the faith leaders "influencers," Tam praised their ability to reach out directly to their congregations and the high level of trust people place in them.

"You know what is in the hearts and in the minds of your members," she said in the Jan. 20 call.

There's no question that Canada's Catholic bishops want to contribute to a smooth rollout of the vaccines, including the effort to ensure accurate information, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops president Archbishop Richard Gagnon said after the Zoom call.

"Like many bishops, I would say our communications office, our web site and that sort of thing will be used to assist in the rollout of the vaccine and providing proper information and encouraging people to take the vaccine, for sure," he said.

While rumours of serious side-effects from the vaccine continue to circulate on

the Internet, the facts thus far are far from alarming, said Tam.

Out of 338,223 vaccine doses administered prior to Jan. 8, 24 recorded an adverse reaction and only 10 of those were serious. In total, adverse reactions came in at 0.007 per cent of all the doses administered so far, mostly to a highly vulnerable population living in nursing homes.

While the government projects four million Canadians will have received a vaccine by the end of March and the bulk of the population by September, in the meantime Tam would like faith leaders' help in persuading Canadians to observe safety protocols and thus drive down the numbers that need hospitalization. If Canada can get those numbers down it will "give the vaccines a bit of a runway to get going," she said.

The government's direct outreach to faith leaders is a positive step, said Gagnon.

"I think it's good to ask the faith communities to co-operate. It's appropriate. It's logical," he said.

"Maintaining social, community and spiritual closeness at this time is more important than ever," said Tam.