

# Top doctor says 'normal' church services could be a year or more away

It could be a year or longer before churches in Canada can begin welcoming large numbers of worshippers, said a member of the country's Special Advisory Committee on COVID-19.

Dr. Robert Strang said church-goers should expect limitations of 50, maybe a maximum of 100 people in the pews, until a vaccine is found for the new coronavirus. Asked when we may see churches return to full capacity, he replied: "That's highly questionable if that could be done in our new normal."

He stressed that we are only experiencing the end of the first wave of the pandemic in Canada. The severity of any future waves of the virus will depend on how this first wave is dealt with, said Strang, chief medical officer of health for Nova Scotia. He was part of a Zoom meeting hosted by the Global Leadership Network Canada May 28.

Full control of the situation won't be possible until there is widespread "herd immunity." He said a balance must be found between increased economic and social activity while keeping "severe outcomes" to a minimum. That will mean testing, public health follow-up and keeping tabs on organizational behaviour.

Strang is part of the pan-Canadian COVID-19 Special Advisory Committee that helps establish national protocols to deal with the virus. He predicts it could be one, possibly two years, before we can consider the pandemic over.

"It may be that COVID becomes like a flu virus that we'll have to live with," he said.

Church officials were not surprised by Strang's conclusions. They have expected it would take time to return churches to full capacity, said Neil MacCarthy, director of public relations and communications with the Archdiocese of Toronto.

"Everyone would like to know the 'date' for each phase but that is largely going to be determined by the health of our country and provinces," said MacCarthy. "In western Canada churches are opening up with limited capacity. We anticipate that will likely be the case here. How soon we can move to a point where we don't have capacity restrictions would just be speculating at this point."

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith understands there is no "normal" lurking around the corner and said it "would be my guess" that it will take the development of a vaccine before a return to full public Masses.

"I want that to happen as soon as anybody wants it to happen. I just miss being with the people, being able to celebrate fully, worthily and joyfully, the way that we're accustomed to," said Smith. "But these are the circumstances. We just have to accompany this with prayer, that the Lord is going to bring an end to this pandemic and let us get back to what we know and love, the full celebration of the Eucharist."

As it stands, weekday Masses can resume as of June 1 and Sunday Masses can start June 7, with maximum capacity of 50 or one-third of regular capacity, whichever is less.

Strang understands faith is essential to many religious people, but he says it can't be considered an essential service. To do so would take things down a "different, bureaucratic legal path," he said. So as it stands, while "faith communities are absolutely essential in building a healthy, viable community," they also have a greater role to play by following restrictions.

"In this new normal we have to protect people outside the faith community," said Strang.

Cardinal Thomas Collins has said from day one that health officials will guide the Toronto archdiocese's response and that hasn't changed. MacCarthy hasn't seen this as a suppression of religious freedom in any way, and realizes all work is to minimize risk in spreading the virus.

"Our priority should be love of neighbour, to take care of one another. Certainly in the short term, it will be difficult to have the wide range of programs that parishes are used to offering week to week," said MacCarthy.

While Ontario churches remain closed to the public, the conversation continues on how they will be able to re-open. That includes a church concern about the size of congregations, as it is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

In Saskatchewan, as of June 8 the allowable occupancy is one-third of the "defined occupancy rate of the facility" to a maximum of 30 people. The original guidelines permitting churches to re-open allowed only 10 people at one time, including the celebrant, no matter the church size.