

With church attendance restricted, parishes struggle to manage on reduced revenues

Half a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, parish and mission revenues within the Edmonton Archdiocese are down an estimated 35 to 40 per cent compared with last year.

“I’m worried. I think we’re all worried in terms of what the real effect of this is going to be in the end,” said Deacon Wayne Provencal, the financial administrator of the Archdiocese.

“All I know is that it will be a changed situation ... This is one of those experiences where everybody goes ‘Wish we had some information, but we’re trying to do the best we can with what we know.’ ”

On average, for the months of May to July, donations are 60 to 65 per cent of what they were last year. The Archdiocese has 61 parishes with resident priests in cities, towns, rural areas and indigenous communities, and another 64 parishes and missions without resident priests.



Deacon Wayne Provencal

While donations to parishes and revenues are down, so are the expenditures for parish staff and the operational costs of ministries and programs that have stopped entirely during COVID-19. There are 50 to 70 people on temporary layoff at parishes, and 20 people on layoff at the Pastoral and Administration Offices of the Archdiocese.

Archbishop Richard Smith is expected to provide details Sept. 9 on a renewed vision and structure for the Archdiocese.

Public celebrations of the Mass were suspended in March, and resumed – with crowd limits, registration and cleaning protocols – as of June 1. Normally, most parishioners would make their donations in the collection plates at each mass. It's an unprecedented situation that the Archdiocese is trying to navigate.

"There was no expectation as to what was going to happen," Provencal said. "The initial concern about just not having any revenue has been somewhat alleviated, but it's still not the best of what it could be right now.

"Given what's going on in the current situation, we're thankful for what we're receiving right now and encourage people to continually evaluate and consider the importance of the parish being their home spiritually. There are bills to be paid just for basic operations, such as utilities."

The Archdiocese recognizes that parishioners are facing their own challenges during the pandemic.

"We know that there are people out there who don't have a job," Provencal said.

"They're having to make some hard decisions for families, for living and all of that."

Most parishes have implemented a system for online donations or e-transfers, as well as accepting donations and envelopes dropped off at the church door. Provencal said Archbishop Smith's video appeal has helped, in addition to the communications parishes have made with individual parishioners.

More information is available on the website of each parish. Donations can also be made through the Archdiocesan website.

When COVID-19 restrictions began, Provencal estimated that 22 of the 125 parishes in the Archdiocese were in potential danger and monitoring revenue closely. That's now down to about five parishes. Those parishes can't be specifically identified because the revenues are moving targets which change monthly or even weekly. Provencal said they won't know exact figures until the end of the year.

Larger parishes – such as St. Thomas More, St. Theresa, St. Joseph's Basilica and Good Shepherd in Edmonton – that rely heavily on in-person cash collections at Mass have been hit harder. Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Sherwood Park is at 80 per cent of parish donations compared with last year. Meanwhile, St. Theresa's in Mill Woods has half the revenue it did a year ago.

Last year, donations to parishes totalled approximately \$20 million.

"The traffic is down just because of the volume of the people who are at church. They can't be at Mass because of the restrictions we're trying to comply with," Provencal said. "Rural parishes, where they don't have a lot of

walk-in traffic per se, the donations are pretty consistent in a comparison year over year.”

“Ordinary receipts are usually a good indicator of what happens. There are no other activities happening at the parishes. There are no meetings. There are no hall rentals. There are no other types of gatherings in the parishes where they may have been generating revenues for those types of uses. That’s just not happening.”

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Archdiocese has asked parishes to submit monthly financial statements in an effort to track their financial health. The Archdiocese currently collects 22 per cent of parish revenues for its own operations, although Provencal said that percentage may change.



St. Francis Xavier church in Camrose, one of the newest in the Archdiocese, is paying just the interest on its \$14-million mortgage. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media file photo

St. Francis Xavier Parish in Camrose has one of the newest churches in the Archdiocese. It was built at a cost of \$18.2 million and has a mortgage of nearly \$14 million. Dedicated just last fall before the COVID-19 outbreak, attendance has dropped from nearly 900 people on a weekend to roughly 170.

While many are making online donations, pre-authorized payments or dropping off envelopes, the church would normally collect an estimated \$4,000 per month in the collection plates.

To make ends meet, the church is paying \$35,000 per month, which is just the interest on the mortgage.

“It’s a big difference because there are crowd limits on coming to church,” said Rev. Joby Augustin, the pastor at St. Francis Xavier. “We know it’s not a good time to ask for money, but even if people can make a small sacrifice – one less restaurant meal or coffee – it would help.”

Father Augustin noted that if there’s a second wave of COVID-19 or the pandemic lasts more than a year, “it will affect us badly and we’ll really struggle.”

A letter appeal to parishioners is expected to be sent in the next few weeks, and the parish council is looking at physically distanced ways to raise money including an online raffle.

Right now, all churches in the Archdiocese are in a holding pattern as the COVID-19 virus runs its course while researchers race to develop a vaccine to control the worldwide pandemic.

Alberta has recorded 12,604 cases of COVID-19 – 1,084 of them active as of Aug. 19. The province is in the second stage of a reopening of the provincial economy. Schools are scrambling to welcome students back into classrooms next month, but crowd limits are still in place for churches and other places of worship.

When the next stage of reopening will occur, with restrictions eased further, is still to be determined.

“If we open up and do it successfully, then the expectation would be that churches would be able to put more people in the church to celebrate Mass, which everybody wants, and of course that will have financial repercussions,” Provencal said. “If, on the other hand, this takes a turn for the other way and there’s a shutdown, then there would be extreme concerns.”

A contingency plan is not yet in place, but measures such as church closures are not off the table.

“I hope we don’t have to do that, but we just don’t know,” Provencal said.