

Restoration of Public Worship on March 21, 2021

Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church

Information for neighbors, the media, and fellow Christians

- Gathering for worship is essential for us as Christian believers. Worship gatherings are the heartbeat of our religion. Worship is how we express and are strengthened in our identity as Christians. In worship, we glorify God who is our Creator and the Saviour of our lives. Additionally, it is through our worship gatherings that we are renewed in faith, in hope and in love. Worship is essential for our spiritual and mental health.
- We are not COVID-deniers. We do not wish to get this virus and we certainly do not want to be responsible for passing it on to others. For this reason, we will take all reasonable precautions to prevent the spread of this virus (just as we did when in-person services were permitted). We have a detailed COVID safety plan which includes the following basic components: social distancing, wearing masks when in the building or when entering or exiting the building, and limiting our numbers to the number of persons who can be safely accommodated according to our safety plan. The safety plan is available for viewing on our church website.
- Since March of 2020, the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church has complied with all Public Health Orders issued by the Provincial Health Officer of British Columbia in relation to COVID-19. Until November 2020, we limited our numbers to fifty persons per worship zone. We also practiced social distancing and took special measures for sanitization.
- On November 19, 2020, the Provincial Health Officer issued a new Public Health Order which prohibited religious gatherings. For sixteen weeks, we complied under protest with the Public Health Order which prohibits worship gatherings. Since November 19, we have made multiple attempts to communicate with the Provincial Health Officer and the Minister of Health. We also applied for a variance to the Public Health Order under the *Public Health Act*, as permitted by that *Act*, to allow each church to gather in limited numbers with proper observance of safety protocols. We submitted our 9-point COVID safety plan, including detailed infection control measures, for the Ministry's consideration.
- After all these efforts, we received only one generic response from the government—which didn't address any of the points we raised, didn't acknowledge the existence of our safety plan, and didn't meet what our

lawyers advise is the minimum standard of procedural fairness required by law. The government simply denied our request, ignoring the detailed evidence we presented that our churches were able to operate safely, and provided no reasoning in support of the denial, as required by law.

- Because the government's response indicated an unwillingness to honor its basic legal obligations under the *Public Health Act* and its own ethical framework for COVID-19 decision-making, our churches submitted a legal petition for judicial review to the B.C. Supreme Court on March 2, 2021. In addition to the above violations, our petition requests that the Court find that the B.C. government unjustifiably violates our *Charter*-guaranteed rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of religion.
- We support the protection of public health, but the health orders go far beyond what is necessary to protect public health. Churches are subject to special prohibitions of in-person gatherings which do not apply to non-religious gatherings. Pubs, bars, restaurants, gyms, exercise studios, low-intensity group fitness classes and retail establishments are all permitted to host gatherings, but *churches cannot gather under the same, or even under stricter, COVID safety protocols*. We do not seek special treatment. We wish to be restricted *no more than* other kinds of gatherings.
- Church gatherings do not represent a greater risk of COVID-transmission than do other in-person group activities which are permitted under the current Public Health Order. The B.C. government recently disclosed data that only one-quarter of 1% of all COVID cases can be linked to religious gatherings. The current evidence shows that the number of cases traced to religious services is *far less* than the number of cases associated with permitted in-person activities in liquor and food establishments (pubs, bars, restaurants), exercise facilities, ski resorts, and workplaces.
- Under the current Public Health Order, our church building could be used for support groups of up to fifty people, exercise groups of twenty-five people, a day care center, as a voting station for an election or as a venue for a movie production company, but it cannot be used for the purpose for which it was dedicated: the worship of God. We believe this is unjust.
- For information about our legal petition and our COVID safety plan, look under the COVID-19 tab at www.aldergrovechurch.com.