

COVID-19 Prevention Policy for Churches

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1 Introduction

God calls us to gather together to worship Him and hear His Word preached. We gather together as Christ's body, locally and physically present. Corporate worship cannot be replaced virtually. Worship gatherings are a unique and irreplaceable spiritual encounter with God. God himself calls Christians to worship and promises to be present in worship in a special way. To be a church without in-person worship gatherings is not sustainable. Live-streaming brings some benefits, but is not the same as in-person worship. There is no substitute for the God-glorifying, faith-sustaining, and love-renewing power of public worship.

We have complied with previous regulations for gatherings that set a cap of 50 persons per space and required social distancing. The Public Health Order of Dr. Henry dated December 15, 2020, however, bans corporate worship services while permitting retail shopping, in-restaurant dining, indoor group exercise, and other activities to continue. We have not seen evidence that churches, such as ours, which were already following social distancing and hygienic measures and attendance caps, are a significant source of viral spread, despite cases of transmission at a church being far easier to track than transmission between customers at a store, for example.

We have shown ourselves willing to bear significant difficulty and costs to prevent viral transmission. And we remain willing to do so, but not to the point of foregoing corporate worship entirely and indefinitely (Dr. Henry's Order was recently extended yet again). Thus, as an alternative to not gathering at all, we propose to adopt the following enhanced prevention protocols in our worship services for as long as the current Order remains in effect.

2 Summary of preventive measures

In particular, this proposal would enhance the preventive practices that were in place before worship services were prohibited by public health orders by:

- a) limiting attendance in each worship space or zone to the lesser of 50 persons or to 30% of regular seated capacity of a given space,
- b) instructing attendees to self-screen before attending worship,
- c) requiring masks inside the church building,
- d) suspending access to church mailboxes,
- e) revising the manner in which the sacrament of Lord's Supper is distributed,
- f) suspending the use of collection plates / bags for financial offerings,
- g) suspending children's programs and nursery care for infants,
- h) ensuring all worship spaces are well ventilated, and
- i) assigning specific responsibilities to specific categories of people (each church will further specify the relevant persons by name)

Other measures relating to social distancing, contact tracing, and cleaning will remain in place. These too are set out below. This proposal also ensures that specific persons within a church community are responsible for implementing it. We are prepared to be legally bound to follow these measures for as long as the Order prohibiting worship gatherings remains in effect.

The following proposal was developed based in part on the B.C. Centre for Disease Control's [guidance for Faith-Based Organizations](#), but with additional measures added that are specifically tailored to Canadian Reformed worship services.

This proposal is in no way intended to alter or detract from the guidance that church staff must follow while working at the church, according to [WorkSafe BC protocols](#).

3 Worship Services Times

There will ordinarily be two worship services per Sunday, with enough of a time gap between each service to ensure that worship zone are thoroughly cleaned, along with all instruments, podiums, washrooms, and door handles for entrances and exits.

As for those who are sick or who may have been infected with COVID-19 (see self-screening policy in Part 4.1, below) or otherwise unable to attend, the worship service will be livestreamed for their edification.

4 Contact Tracing and Self-Screening

4.1 Sign up and contact tracing

Members of the congregation are required to sign up with their names and basic contact information to attend each worship service, in order to enable effective contact tracing. Guests who may arrive unannounced or without signup will be accommodated at the service by our ushers as space allows, and be required to provide their names and contact information. The signup files will be saved securely for at least one month.

4.2 Self-screening

All who sign up will be asked to self-screen for symptoms of COVID-19 on the morning before the worship service and to refrain from attending if they have symptoms. We will include a link to B.C.'s self-assessment tool (<https://bc.thrive.health/covid19/en>) in the email.

5 Masks

Masks will be required in the building, including when entering or exiting the building, subject to medical exceptions. Signage will be posted at each entrance to remind of the need to wear masks and to maintain physical distancing between households.

6 Zone or Area of Worship

6.1 Division into worship zones

Attendance numbers will be determined according to each space or “worship zone”, each of which must have its own entrance, exit, washroom, and physically separated from others. Each zone will be clearly marked and signs around the building will indicate entry and exit locations and washroom locations.

6.2 Worship zone capacity limit

Each zone and area will have a max occupancy sign at the entrance. The maximum occupancy per worship zone must be the lesser of 50 persons or 30% of the ordinary seated capacity.

No one is to cross Zone barriers, nor leave one Zone to enter another Zone, for any reason. There are specific, limited exceptions for personnel with certain responsibilities (see Part 11).

6.3 Physical barriers between zones

To separate the zones completely, a physical barrier must be in place, such as building walls or plexiglass, between the worship zones and between their respective entrance and exit routes.

6.4 Exit and Entry Doors

Hand sanitizer will be provided at all entrances. Signage will be posted at each entrance to remind of the need to wear masks and to maintain physical distancing between households.

To minimize the handling of entry and exit doors, designated people will be opening and closing the doors. Before and after the church services, the doors remain open to avoid touching door handles; during the worship service the doors are closed.

Only the ushers will open and close the doors, and sanitize their hands after doing so. Ushers will wear masks. After each worship service, caretakers will clean door handles.

6.5 Spacing of pews and chairs

Each seated row in use for a worship service must be at least two meters apart. Members of different households must maintain at least two meters of space between them if seated in the same row as members of another household.

If a church uses pews or other fixed position seating, the church will designate every other row as open or closed, which designation can be switched for a subsequent service.

Attendees may only sit in an open row of the appropriate zone in the specific worship service they have signed up for.

Assigned people will further assist in each zone with seating people (see Part 11).

6.5 Ventilation of worship zones

B.C.'s Centre for Disease Control has stated its concern that the longer that a group of people breath the same air in an enclosed space, the greater the likelihood of viral spread becomes. Therefore, churches will ensure that each worship space is ventilated to allow for new air to enter. This may require opening a door or window.

6.6 Parking

Each worship zone has a designated parking area. Signs at the parking lot entrances indicate parking for the each worship zones.

7 Items in the Worship Service

7.1 Bibles and song books

People are encouraged to bring their own bible and book of praise. Bible and songbooks that the church provided will remain in designated benches / chairs, to have one use by one person or household per week only.

7.2 Collection

The Church will discontinue the practice of passing the collection bag or plate. Instead, members are encouraged to donate to the church online, through e-transfer, or by regular mail.

8 Use of specific rooms or areas

8.1 Washrooms

Each zone will have its own designated washroom with signage directing people to it.

Within the washrooms will be hand-washing signs. Outside of the washrooms will be signs reminding people to maintain social distancing. Door handles, faucets, flush levers, and other frequently touched surfaces will be frequently cleaned by the caretakers.

8.2 Mail Box Area

Access to members' church mailboxes will be suspended.

8.3 Kitchen

No food or drinks will be served in the kitchen. The kitchen may be used only for cleaning or washing or preparing the elements of the Lord's Supper.

9 Lord's Supper

Our Lord commanded us to commemorate His life, death, and resurrection by the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This sacrament signifies and seals to believers that they share in Christ's one sacrifice. By this sacrament, the Holy Spirit assures us that our salvation rests on Christ's work alone. (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 25 and 28)

Food Safe requirements will be maintained for the preparation of the elements of the Lord's Supper. To distribute the elements, a station will be set up to serve communicant members of each worship zone. Each member will maintain social distancing while moving in one direction to pick up one (his or her own) piece of bread and disposable cup, and circling back to his seat. This way, no items or objects will be shared. This will be done a single row at a time, with people moving down their row, up one side aisle, across the front, and back up the opposite side, all while maintaining social distancing between different households.

10 Pre- and post-service fellowship time suspended

Before and after the service, the separation of zones continues to be in effect, along with social distancing and masking rules. People must not mingle but must return to their vehicles immediately after the service.

11 Cleaning

Cleaning and disinfecting protocols will be implemented, focusing on high-contact surfaces throughout the facility, including doors, tables, chairs, break rooms, office spaces, washroom facilities, and pews. Cleaning is carried out by the Caretaker. Should the Caretaker allow others to assist, the Caretaker will train the cleaning staff/volunteers accordingly.

11 Personnel's responsibilities

The COVID virus and consequent restrictions affects all people in the congregation. Everyone is asked to do their part. Email and other communication tools, complemented by signage in the building, will help remind all members of the congregation of their responsibilities.

There are protocols and procedures for specific people and groups that use the building. These groups include:

- COVID committee
- Building Caretakers
- Ushers
- Elders and deacons
- Technical support teams
- Musicians
- Preachers and speakers

11.1 Personnel crossing zones

Due to the unique task of the above-listed special personnel, it might be necessary for them to cross zones. In the event that personnel is required to cross zones that person can do so when:

- The person has properly hand sanitized, before entering each zone.
- Is wearing a mask,
- Keeps zone-crossing to a minimum.

11.2 COVID committee

Each church will have a COVID Committee consisting of at least two members of consistory and at least one lay member. The COVID Committee must assign and oversee duties and ensure that all elements of this proposal are carefully followed. The Committee will assist the caretakers, ushers, and others as much as possible with the execution of the protocols. The Committee will be directly responsible to ensure that self-screening instructions are sent to members each week and that members are asked to sign up to attend service in specific zones.

11.3 Building caretakers

Tasked with the normal care of the building as well as extra duties due to COVID protocols:

- Setting up of chairs/benches for each Zone
- Ensure hand wash stations are in place and stocked
- Arrange for clean-up and sanitation of building and all objects after use
- Ensure physical barriers are in place

- Ensure adequate signage is in place at entrances, in parking lots, and throughout each worship zone

11.4 Ushers

Consistory will assign ushers to help with seating and provide information for the service. The ushers will also assist guests and families with maintaining social distancing protocol in seating. The ushers assist with:

- Greeting guests (socially distanced)
- Reminding attendees of protocols
- Guide people to the correct zone
- Seating arrangement
- Ensure people don't cross barriers
- Ensure people do not cluster within or outside of the building

11.5 Elders and deacons

Elders will oversee the Lord Supper and ensure that it is distributed in a manner that maintains social distancing and avoids touching common surfaces. Deacons will remain responsible for collecting financial offerings, but will not collect cash, cheques, or envelopes during the worship service as is their usual practice.

11.6 Technical support teams during worship services

Technical support teams, such as those in charge of setting up the sound system or the livestream, must maintain social distancing between members of the team and ensure that any equipment they may use is cleaned before another person touches or uses it.

11.7 Musicians

Musicians must maintain adequate social distancing from other musicians, congregants, and speakers at all times. Musicians will wear masks when possible. Musicians will ensure that a particular instrument is not used by more than one person without first being carefully cleaned.

11.8 Preacher or other speakers

Ordinarily, only the pastor and an elder or two speak during our worship services. The preacher or any other speaker will ensure that they maintain adequate social distancing from all other persons while preaching or speaking. If there is more than one speaker during a service, they will avoid sharing the same podium or the same book, printed notes, or other physical object. Speakers will speak from a designated place at the front of the church and may remove their mask for this purpose.