

Churches and Church Grounds Must Remain Closed for Now

There have been numerous questions about opening churches and their surrounding property for various parish-related activities, including everything from running day camps, planting community gardens, using kitchen facilities, holding prayer groups to operating farmers markets.

As a charity and a public institution, the diocese must comply with directions from provincial, municipal and public health authorities. After consulting their directions on COVID-19, as well as our insurers and diocesan chancellors, we have unfortunately had to conclude church grounds should not be used *for the time being*.

However, as we saw June 8, when Premier Doug Ford said churches could reopen at 30 per cent capacity, the rules around COVID-19 continue to change, and it's possible this decision might be reversed or modified as the province continues to open up more aspects of daily life (see the remarks from Bishop Shane, below, published in the June 9 COVID Communiqué). If possible, you may want to hold off on making decisions around property use, and plan to revisit them later this summer, if provincial and municipal COVID restrictions are adjusted. We are aware and concerned that parishes may lose much-needed revenue because of this decision, but in our opinion, the risks outweigh the benefits.

Please be aware that Ecclesiastical – our insurers — require us to provide details of any activity on church property during the shut down, to ensure we have insurance coverage in case a claim arises. Using church property without permission and without informing Ecclesiastical will mean insurance coverage will be denied.

If your parish has additional concerns, or has specific events that require further discussion, please contact Sanjay Grover (Director of Financial Ministry) at Sanjay-Grover@Ottawa.Anglican.ca or at (873) 355-0904.

Remarks by Bishop Shane (June 9, 2020)

*In a letter titled “A Summer Sabbath Rest” Archbishop Anne Germond expressed the Ontario House of Bishop’s common view that **regardless of where the Government of Ontario is with its reopening plan, our churches will not be reopening for in-person worship until at least September. This decision was made in consultation with public health experts as well as our diocesan executive officers and chancellors, with the well-being and safety of all our parishioners and the communities we serve uppermost in our hearts and minds.***

The framing of this decision as a call for a “sacred sabbath rest” has, understandably, caused some confusion, because it is clear that ministries of pastoral care, online worship, and our critical food security and other essential community ministries will continue throughout the summer months.

My understanding of the decision to set our own timetable for reopening is two-fold: first of all, it gives us time to develop, refine, and implement a science-informed, safe, staged plan; secondly, it means that we do not have to substantially change our current pattern in the middle of the summer, when many are attempting to have some kind of vacation. However, we all need to be aware that there will likely be a need to do some implementation work during the summer months.

The changes announced by the Ontario Government on June 8 concerning religious services will not fundamentally change the decision to not reopen our churches for in-person worship until at least September. Next week's COVID Communiqué will address this further.

Our plan is being drafted by the Reverend Michael Garner, our COVID-19 Public Health Advisor, and Carol Sinclair, our Director of Human Resources, in consultation with Dr. Bill Gardner, our COVID-19 Research Advisor, and with due reference to Public Health Authorities in Ontario and Quebec. A Zoom meeting for all active clergy on June 18 will provide a general briefing on COVID-19 as well as an overview of the plan, and a similar meeting for lay leaders will soon be announced.

It is very important to realize that this is not a one-directional plan to reopen: it will describe different stages of responding to the pandemic as the disease plays out and as either efficacious treatment or a vaccine is developed. We may be required to move back and forth between stages if there is a second wave or other unexpected developments.

We need to become expert at ministering in every stage, whether we are in a strict shut down, or a limited or partial reopening. Our plan will spell out what is possible in each stage, and the creativity of our talented clergy and laity will give shape to how ministry will happen in each stage in every parish or ministry of our diocesan church.

While we will not cease to follow Jesus and to serve whole-heartedly at any stage, it is extremely important to enable one another to take time for rest and refreshment—whether that is a summer or autumn vacation, or days off each week.

Please be careful with your time and energy during these pandemic days. Parish clergy have been diligently adjusting and innovating in order to live out their ordination vows, without the benefit of the familiar rhythms that anchor us. Some of our duties have disproportionately expanded, and the lines between working and not working have likely blurred for all of us.

The advice I have given to our clergy I offer to everyone: pace yourself and keep it simple. Measure what you feel you need to be doing now against what you would normally be doing, and if it seems like you are stressed and spread thin, then

aggressively assess what you need to scale back. Stay within your natural gifts and strengths.

As you contemplate vacation time, help one another to take time off: work with other parishes to ensure that ministry is being covered. Collaborate to offer online worship during the summer months, or simply invite your people to plug into a Sunday liturgy being streamed or offered by another parish if that allows your lay and clergy leaders to take time off.

Take good care of yourselves and one another. If you don't stay healthy in mind and body in the midst of a crisis, you will be unable to help others: there is nothing selfish about self-care.

+Shane