COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship

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Adapted with permission from Toronto Public Health.

Faith communities have continued their work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with the exception of in-person gatherings at their place of worship since these were prohibited by provincial order, as part of an unprecedented effort to contain the spread of the virus.

In-person gatherings for prayer and worship are now permitted with the certain conditions, as described in this guidance document. Faith community leaders should carefully consider how and when to re-establish face-to-face activities. Some faith communities may have many members who are older and/or have chronic medical conditions, and it is strongly recommended that provisions be made to enable them to participate in a safe manner. You may wish to continue with online services, either on their own, or in addition to in-person services.

This guidance reflects the current need for protection from COVID-19 in the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) region. As the spread of infection is brought under further control, revised guidance will be issued. Please also review the Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 Advice: Religious Services, Rites or Ceremonies.

All places of worship must adhere to the following requirements and recommendations:

- Participation of religious services is limited to no more than 30% capacity of the indoor premises or 50 attendees if being held outdoors.
- Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health recommends suspending all communion-related activities.
- Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health recommends suspending all social gatherings before or after in-person services, including those where food and drink are served, are suspended.
- If you choose to host a social gathering (e.g. reception) for the purposes of a wedding, funeral, religious service, rite or ceremony, it must not exceed more than 10 people.
- Maintain a distance of two metres/six feet between all people, as much as possible.
- Suspend regular childcare and children’s programming.
- Encourage the use of masks/face coverings amongst staff, volunteers and attendees when physical distancing is a challenge. The Class Order currently in place across WDG that requires any individual in a commercial establishment to wear a mask/face covering does not apply to faith-based settings.
- Suspend indoor singing activities and choir service, even if masks/face coverings are being worn by staff, volunteers and attendees.
• Suspend the sharing and distribution of the following materials and objects: books, communion objects, microphones, prayer mats, prayer shawls, water, chalices, collection plates (please note: this is not an exhaustive list).
• Discontinue use of the holy water stoup.
• Avoid opportunities for the virus to spread through touch, either directly or indirectly through surfaces and objects, including objects that may be used in rituals or ceremonies.
• Perform more frequent and enhanced cleaning and disinfection

Faith community leaders /organizers are responsible for preventing the risk of infection among staff, volunteers, community members, and visitors who participate in their activities.

**Preparation for Services**

• Consider adding COVID-19 information to your organization’s website.
• Consider alternative ways to include individuals who are at greater risk of serious consequences from COVID-19.
  o To support your members that are 70+ years old and/or have chronic medical conditions, it is recommended that virtual or drive-in services be made available. Holding an exclusive and dedicated service for vulnerable individuals may also be an option
• Plan how to ensure physical distancing (two metres/six feet) by calculating 30% of the capacity of the available space. This is the maximum number of participants allowed. The reduced capacity number includes all participants except children under two years of age.
• If the calculated reduced seating capacity (30%) is less than the anticipated number of attendees, consider creating a new schedule of services to provide more, but smaller, services.
• Cohort (i.e. group) individuals and families. For instance, organize attendance so the same individuals/families go to the same service each day/week to minimize the potential impact of mixing different individuals/families.
• Consider developing a system to RSVP planned attendance to specific services or events. This may be an opportunity to also pre-screen, however, it is also recommended that members self-screen upon arrival.
• Remove seating, or if seating is fixed, mark or rope off a two metre/six foot distance as being unavailable between rows and seats
• Plan how to manage entry and exit within your building to create a two metre/six foot distance between members.
  o If it is anticipated that crowds will form outside or in a vestibule, consider having a two metre/six foot distance markings on the ground, and someone to manage the crowd and remind members about physical distancing while entering and exiting.
• Separate entrances and exits may not be necessary as participants usually enter and exit within distinct time periods.
• Ensure all water systems (e.g. drinking fountains, taps) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown to minimize risk of diseases associated with stagnant water. If drinking fountains are available, ensure they are used safely and frequently cleaned and disinfected throughout the service.
• Develop and implement a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting. Allow for adequate cleaning and disinfecting of prayer and high traffic areas between services.

Prevent COVID-19 Outbreaks

• Encourage visitors to use the online self-assessment tool before every visit to the place of worship and/or set up screening station away from the entrance to avoid crowding. All individuals, including children, should be screened upon arrival, prior to entry, each day they attend services. Deny entry to any individual who:
  o Has any of the symptoms outlined in the COVID-19 symptoms.
  o Has come in close contact with a person with symptoms of COVID-19 or who has come in close contact of a confirmed case COVID-19, in the past 14 days.
  o Has travelled outside of Canada in the past 14 days.
• If anyone has even one symptom of COVID-19, they should get tested and stay home or return home.
• Consider creating a list of the names and contact information (phone number and/or email) of the staff, volunteers, members and visitors that attend your services in the event there is a case of COVID-19 who was contagious while attending services. Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health will use that list to notify and provide instructions to self-isolate or self-monitor for COVID-19 Symptoms.
  o Options include keeping a record of online RSVPs, having someone observe and record names, having members sign in through a safe method (i.e. do not provide a pen that can passed between people), or providing a list of members upon request.
  o Follow Public Health recommendations for cleaning and disinfection to reduce the risk of spread in the setting.

Establish Policies for Health Screening of Staff and Volunteers

If applicable, staff and volunteers must inform their faith community leader, and stay home if they are sick and/or unwell. Staff and volunteers must be screened before starting their duties. Persons who become ill must go home right away and self-isolate. Advise person to visit an assessment centre to be tested. Call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000, their health care provider or Public Health for more information.
Training

Instruct staff and volunteers on proper hand hygiene techniques and respiratory etiquette, when to use masks, how to wear a mask, and how to clean or discard single use masks appropriately.

Print and Post Signs

- COVID-19 self-screening signs should be posted at all entrances.
  - Should you get tested for COVID-19?
  - Business friendly sign
- Anyone with COVID-19 Symptoms, or who has been in contact with someone with COVID-19 is not permitted to enter.
- Hand washing, face covering, physical distancing signs should be posted in high visibility areas.

During Services

- Remind members and visitors who become ill or experience symptoms of COVID-19 that they must go home right away and self-isolate. Advise person to visit an assessment centre to be tested. Call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000, their health care provider or Public Health for more information.
- Modify all activities during the service to ensure that there is a two metre/six foot distance between leaders, staff, volunteers and visitors at all times.
- Children should remain with their parents.
  - Exclusive children’s activities should be suspended.
- Encourage visitors to bring their own non-medical mask/face coverings.
  - Cloth masks can be made with household items such as a T-shirt or bedsheets, or a bandana may be used. Physical distancing is still required even when using a mask.
- Avoid any physical contact with others from different households.
  - Encourage people to greet each other with a smile, bow or wave. For example, upon arrival, during exchange of the Peace, or at the end of services.
- Rituals involving close physical contact (e.g. baptism, circumcision) or shared items (e.g. chalices, utensils, plates, receptacles, washing facilities) are strongly discouraged at this time.
  - If rituals involving close physical contact must be performed, considerations need to be made to perform them safely such as use of appropriate personal protective equipment.
- Discontinue the use of holy water rites.
- Do not pass offering plates.
  - Consider a designated touchless area to offer donations or use online/e-transfer or debit/credit card tap machines.
- Encourage hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette with hand sanitizer stations (60-90% alcohol concentration). Young children should be supervised when using hand sanitizer.
Promote good respiratory etiquette. Cover the mouth and nose with elbow when coughing or sneezing or use a tissue then discard tissue in waste bin. Wash or sanitize hands afterwards.

- Avoid use of items that are difficult to clean, sanitize or disinfect.
  - Do not hand out or share items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized before and after use (e.g. books, hymns, prayer mats).
  - Use printed service leaflets and discard after the service, or use projection or audio-visual systems.
- Do not share microphones. Clean and disinfect microphones according to manufacturer's instructions after each use.

**Singing**

- Respiratory droplets and aerosols generated during singing, loud speech or the use of wind instruments may travel further than two metres/six feet.
- Public Health recommends that indoor singing be suspended, even if masks/face coverings are being worn by staff, volunteers and attendees.

**Instrumental music**

- Do not use wind instruments (flutes, clarinets, saxophones, trumpets, horns)
- If multiple non-wind instruments are being played, ensure physical distancing between musicians, unless they are from the same household.

**Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfection**

- Educate staff on the proper use of cleaning agents and disinfectants, including required disinfectant contact times (amount of time that the product will need to remain wet on a surface to achieve disinfection). Understand safety precautions and requirement for use of mask and gloves.
- Ensure adequate ventilation when using products (e.g. open windows, doors, or use fans).
- Ensure ventilation systems are operating properly, and replace filters as scheduled or sooner.
- Clean and disinfect all high-touch surfaces (e.g. toilets, sinks, door handles, light switches, remote controls, and microphones) twice a day or more, and when visibly dirty.
- Ensure washrooms are always stocked with liquid soap and paper towels.
  - Antibacterial soap is not required to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Disinfectant kills germs on surfaces. Remove surface dirt first in order for the disinfectant to work.
- Most regular household cleaning products are effective at eliminating the virus.
- Cleaning and disinfectant products should have an 8-digit Drug Identification Number (DIN) to confirm it is approved for use in Canada. Check the expiry dates of products and always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Keep products away from children.
• Cleaning/disinfection wipes should only be used for surfaces, and according to the manufacturer’s instructions.
  o Alternatively, chlorine bleach solutions may be used for disinfection.
  o Prepare fresh bleach solution daily.
• Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water immediately after cleaning the setting.
• See resource for cleaning and disinfection for public settings.

Note: Disinfectant wipes may have a combined cleaning and disinfectant in one solution, but depending on how dirty the surface is it may need to be pre-cleaned as disinfectants may become ineffective when dirt is present. Check instructions on the product’s label.

**Drive-in Religious Gatherings**

• Only members of the same household can be in one vehicle.
• Discourage people from leaving their vehicles during the service, except when using the washroom.
• Vehicles must be parked two metres/six feet apart or more. Discourage the idling of engines.
• No more than five people can conduct the service at one time from outside a vehicle, and they must stay at least two metres/six feet apart from each other.
• If faith community leaders, staff or volunteers are to approach a vehicle to provide service to its occupants, everyone is encouraged to wear a mask.

**Weddings, Funerals, Religious Service, Rite or Ceremony**

• The above requirements and recommendations apply to weddings, funerals, religious services, rites or ceremonies.
• If a wedding, funeral, religious service, rite or ceremony is occurring in a place of worship, the maximum number of participants permitted is 30% of the capacity of the building.
• If a wedding, funeral, religious service, rite or ceremony is occurring outdoors, it must be limited to 50 people.
• All social gatherings, including before and after these events should be limited to 10 people.
• All people attending the gathering must remain at least two metres/six feet apart from each other, and from the persons conducting the wedding, funeral, service, rite or ceremony, unless they are members of the same household.

**Other Businesses on Premises**

Places of worship that offer free or rented spaces to other groups or businesses must abide by the emergency orders of the provincial Chief Medical Officer of Health, and all applicable public health guidance documents.
More information

For more information, visit our website at www.wdgpublichealth.ca or call us at 519-822-2715 ext. 4020 (for non-health related questions) or ext. 7006 (health-related questions).

Also see Province of Ontario, A Framework for Reopening our Province: Stage 2.

References