

DIOCESE OF ONTARIO
Frequently Asked Questions
Loving our Neighbours - AMBER STAGE
Church Re-opening Guidelines

Pastoral Concerns

1. What are we saying regarding those who are in the vulnerable category due to age or medical conditions? Those in the 65 and older category or with underlying medical issues should be encouraged to remain at home until we have worked through the initial church re-opening phase. If a person in that vulnerable category wishes to attend services, they cannot be prohibited. Our role is simply to caution them of their potential risks and encourage them to remain home and continue to take advantage of online services and activities.

2. What if our church doesn't feel comfortable reopening even when permission is given? No church will be forced to reopen if the congregation and leadership feels uncomfortable doing so. Online worship, studies, small groups, etc. should be maintained as an offering even after it chooses to reopen.

3. What should we do if we are at our approved capacity and others arrive for worship? Each church determines a capacity based on the guidelines. The capacity is the LESSER of

- 30% of normal capacity (fire marshall determined)
- The maximum number of people that can be seated based on the Physical Distancing Guidelines (see the Planning Guide)
- A maximum of 50.

Once this has been determined, when maximum capacity is reached if others arrive to attend a service, they should gracefully be asked to either, return for the next service (if multiple services are being offered), or tune into the online worship experience. If there are other rooms that have been properly prepared (using the guidelines), they could be ushered to those spaces (utilizing speakers or internet if available). While it will be disappointing for the individuals, the greeters, wardens, clergy and congregation to have to turn people away, it is a matter of safety and in some cases Health Unit regulations.

For those that have larger numbers in worship, it is recommended to take advance registrations or "booking" for those wishing to attend.

Each local church will need to address this issue as it relates to their particular context and need.

Compliance Concerns

1. Should restrooms be open?

The recommendation is to attempt to limit use of restrooms. Shorter services and no social time or beverages should assist with this. If necessary, restrooms can be used, but only with strict adherence to the guidelines and need for disinfecting/cleanings after each use

2. Can family members sit together?

Yes. Those in the same “social bubble” may be seated together, with physical distancing to any other persons or bubbles. The number of total people cannot exceed the capacity determined.

3. What about the role of greeters and ushers?

These persons have played a key role in the life of our churches for years. They are most often the first wave of contact that a person has when they enter worship. Ushers and greeters should be well trained to assume a new function in this gradual reopening phase. They are the ones who should ask people on arrival if they have Self-Assessed for COVID 19, instruct them about the new entry/exit procedures, ensure that all persons have a mask and are wearing it, make sure that everyone understands the new protocols and then guide people to open seating. It would be helpful if a church would provide a simple, one-page document that explains the protocols and could be provided by an usher and/or greeter at the time of entry. Of course, Greeters/Ushers also need to demonstrate appropriate physical distancing, wear a mask and wash/sanitize their hands.

Anyone who is exhibiting symptoms should be encouraged to not enter and to seek further testing in order to ensure their safety and the safety of others.

4. Can cleaning before and after services be done by volunteers or should they all be professionals?

Before the official reopening takes place, it is wise to consider bringing in a professional service to clean the floors, pews, seats, etc. After this, the local church should secure the services of dedicated laity from the church to be a part of a “cleaning team.”

To seek professional services to clean following each service would be, in all likelihood, too expensive. To secure committed and well-trained laity to assume this responsibility will take great amounts of commitment and intentionality and will be one of the most important parts of securing a successful reopening plan and procedure.

Offering safe hospitality to our people, offering a space that has been thoroughly cleaned and sanitized (based on the guidelines) will go far in establishing trust and a sense of peace for all who attend.

5. Can we re-open offices, rentals, etc?

The Amber Guidelines provide detail for each of the major components of a church's life in the building. Each church receives approval for these activities/services based on what they have planned for and listed in their Application to Re-Open. Changes after that require re-submission for approval

Once again, strict adherence to the regular cleaning of each space before and after use as well as social distancing and wearing of masks must be followed. Regular Safe Church/Screening in Faith and other safety precautions should continue to be observed as well.

6. Should clergy and other worship or pastoral care leaders be tested for the virus and/or antibodies? Is this required?

Anyone who is exhibiting symptoms should be encouraged to not participate and seek further testing in order to ensure their safety and the safety of others.

7. Would you encourage measuring the temperature for all who come once our church reopens?

This is a practice that has been seen in a variety of settings throughout the course of this pandemic. While it is a good practice and would be considered a safeguard measure, it is not listed as a requirement. The Self Screening tool should be adequate, based on Health Unit guidance.

8. What if someone arrives for worship and doesn't wish to cooperate with the need for wearing a mask or social distancing?

In all matters related to the reopening, there needs to be intentional communications AND extreme kindness employed. If someone does not wish to be cooperative, those who encounter the person (front door greeter, usher, lay leader, or pastor) should exhibit a non-anxious spirit of grace but be undeterred in their response:

- Politely ask the person to wear one of the masks being provided.
- If they refuse, politely ask them to go outside so that they might listen to the service from a remote location (if possible) or return home and watch the service via the internet.
- If they refuse, explain to them that if they persist the entire worship service will need to be ended so as to not put anyone in potential risk of infection.
- If they refuse, the cleric should explain the situation to the gathered church, offer a benediction, and dismiss everyone.
- Confirm to the person that this is Diocesan Policy, supported by medical experts and the Public Health Unit.

We all hope and pray that this type of situation will not arise but to compromise our position is to compromise the health and safety of someone who has come for worship.

9. *How are we to do deal with visitors who come when they see the doors open? How do we deal in particular with the homeless and the hungry?*

Of course, our doors are always open to visitors. How we approach them is exactly in the same way we approach our regular attenders. The same guidelines apply and they will need to be informed of the limitations placed on everyone who gathers for worship.

We have not required our facilities to be closed to the homeless and hungry throughout the pandemic as they have been identified as “essential services” from the beginning. We have multiple churches that have established very clear social distancing guidelines for the homeless and creative techniques such as “grab and go” for feeding ministries. These essential ministries to poor and homeless are encouraged but they must be done with compliance to the guidelines provided.

10. *Must the Presider/Celebrant, Preacher, Readers, Singers, Musicians wear masks?*

Masks are required to be worn by all persons indoors other than those that have a medical condition that would prohibit. While this can affect the ability to project the voice and can be awkward or uncomfortable, this remains the best practice for safety of all, sets the proper example for all and complies with Health Unit guidance/requirements for indoors.

11. *Are Plexiglass Face Shields an alternative to Masks?*

Face Shields are useful as a supplement to Masks. However, there is no medical evidence that Shields by themselves are effective in limiting the wearer as a source or in protecting the wearer from infection. Masks must be worn regardless.

12. *What if we only have one handicap accessible entrance? How will we deal with entry and exit issues?*

This will be a matter that will need to be discussed by your Planning and Reopening Team. Great care will need to be exercised in creating a plan that allows for proper physical distancing in entry and exit for those who need to utilize the handicap accessible entrance.

Church Usage Concerns

1. *What about groups that use our facility and have anonymity concerns?*

The leaders of such groups should sign a compliance sheet (similar to template provided in the Guidelines) and be required to follow the restrictions and guidelines completely.

2. What if our church has a “Thrift Store” or “Feeding Ministries” or “Foot Care Clinics?”

Once approval has taken place, a thrift store must comply with all of the guidelines, especially making sure that less than capacity are in the store at any time, utilizing social distancing, wearing of masks, and frequent hand washing.

One of the challenges with a Thrift Store is the frequent touching of items by multiple persons making sanitation a very real and ongoing concern. This can create virus spreading and liability issues and often makes contact tracing somewhat problematic. Care and attention must be exercised.

Those who are overseeing Feeding ministries should re-think their method of ministry and distribution to take into consideration some of the similar problems stated above. The use of “grab and go” bags of canned goods, the distribution of gift cards, and food vouchers should be seriously considered.

Foot Care clinics must provide for the same building use requirements. The provider must also ensure their compliance with hygiene, disinfecting, contact, etc as outlined by the Province/Health Unit.

3. What about Music activities?

The guidelines are clear on singing. Under Amber Stage guidelines, only one person may sing at any time. This still allows for multiple singers antiphonally, but no more than one singer at any time. Singers must be masked and at increased physical distancing.

Instrumental lessons can only occur in well ventilated spaces with social distancing. Singing lessons would require the same protocols as worship singing (one person, masked, physically distant). Lessons should not take place in closed spaces, such as a choir room, but rather in a large well ventilated space like the church.

In-person Choir practices are not permitted at this time.

Churches that wish to record services for online with singers use the RED STAGE guidelines. A maximum of 5 people in the building (including the presider/celebrant and all musicians) are permitted. All persons, including singers must be masked. Recording sessions without singers can use the Amber Guidelines.

General Questions/Concerns

1. Is there any insight or guidance on acquiring necessary supplies that will be needed (PPE, hand sanitizer, wipes, etc.)?

The Diocese has provided guidance on supplies. Starter Kits are being made available. Churches will have access to the supplier and negotiated pricing for their ongoing needs if they wish.

2. Will there be additional financial assistance provided if needed?

We are still offering technological grants to our churches who need assistance with internet ministries. We are also providing a Cleaning and Disinfecting “Starter Kit” to churches free of charge.

Insurance premiums have been provided with an “interest free period” since March.

The diocese will continue to collect revenue data from churches and applies for the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy for each period we qualify. Any funds received are credited to churches Payroll Invoices in the following month.

Synod Council has approved a Pandemic Financial Support program for the Third Quarter (July, August, September). Churches who meet the criteria for revenue loss will be able to apply in October. More details will follow in the coming weeks

3. Are there any implications for Church Insurance?

While most general liability policies do not contain specific exclusions for legal liability arising from the transmission of infectious diseases, they do contain an exclusion for criminal and intentional acts. This can potentially result in denial of a liability claim “if” injury, sickness or death results from an organization or corporation – specifically its directors, officers or senior management – knowingly or intentionally breaking the law or not being in compliance with regulations or directives. .

The most important advice we can give to prevent avoidable lawsuits and potential issues with insurance is to take all steps to ensure compliance with the guidelines provided by the diocese and local health units.

4. Should we/can we launder Masks?

Best practice is for churches NOT to undertake either managing or laundering masks. Individuals can be given masks and then take them home to be laundered and re-used themselves. Disposable masks can also be provided (safely disposed of afterwards). The video is somewhat confusing on this topic.

5. If we only use our building once a week, do we still need to clean and disinfect?

There is clear evidence that the virus survives for different periods of time on different surfaces. This can vary from a few hours to 4-5 days, depending on the surface and the strain of Coronavirus. The best (and required) practice is that the building is cleaned and sanitized after each use. This protects anyone who may enter the building at other times, is the safest approach and avoids another potential liability situation.

6. Why the recommend hour between services/events in the church?

The recommend one hour is to allow sufficient time for cleaning/disinfecting and for several exchanges of the air in the building. Cleaning and disinfecting must always be thorough (which requires time), but this is even more essentially immediately after surfaces having been potentially exposed to the virus. It also allows time for droplets in the air to settle and fresh air to be circulated through the building. This can be adjusted somewhat for local situations and circumstances.

7. *How long can services or meeting last?*

The medical evidence clearly shows that the risk of infection is highest where three factors come together – Closed spaces (with poor ventilation), Crowded spaces with people near each other and Close Contact. It also is clear that the risk of infection increases with the length of time exposed to the virus. General guidance is to keep potential exposure under one hour if at all possible.

8. *How long must we maintain the contact logs?*

In the Diocese of Ontario, with the guidance of Health Units, Contact Trace Logs must be securely maintained for 30 days. Some other dioceses are requiring Logs be retained for 3 years, but this is not the case in the Diocese of Ontario.