

COVID-19: GUIDANCE FOR RE-OPENING PLACES OF WORSHIP

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 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 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 York Region. As the spread of infection is brought under further control, revised guidance will be issued. However, the general guidance below will still be required.

All places of worship **must** adhere to the following requirements:

- Participation of no more than 30% of the capacity of your premises
- Maintaining a distance of 2 metres between all persons as much as possible
- Encouraging the use of masks, and requiring that masks be worn if, in rare circumstances, physical distancing is not possible
- Limiting singing and loud speaking
- Avoiding 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
- 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

- Consider alternative ways to involve individuals at greater risk from COVID-19, including online services
- Plan how to ensure physical distancing 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
- Remove seating, or if seating is fixed, mark it unavailable or rope it off to ensure a 2-metre distance between rows of seating; plan the quantity of seating to allow for a 2-metre distance between individuals or household groups along each row; if the reduced seating capacity will be less than the expected attendance, consider re-arranging the schedule of services to provide more, but smaller, services

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- Plan how to control movement into and out of your facility, and within the space to ensure a 2 metre distance; separate entrances and exits may not be necessary as participants usually enter and exit within distinct time periods
- Discourage movement against the flow of people moving in the space; it may be necessary to mark off 2-metre distances outside and/or in a vestibule if it is anticipated that lines will form; consider having someone control leaving the space by seating row
- Consider developing a system to RSVP attendance to specific services or events; this may also allow online screening of attendees at the same time
- Ensure all water systems (drinking fountains) are safe to use after the prolonged facility shutdown to minimize risk of diseases associated with water; if drinking fountains are available, ensure they are used safely and cleaned and disinfected daily; discontinue use of holy water stoup
- Develop a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting

PREVENT COVID-19 OUTBREAKS

- Ensure you have a way to contact attendees in the event that someone has attended your place of worship while contagious
- Options include keeping a record of online RSVPs, having someone observe and record names, having members sign in through a safe method (do not provide a pen that can be passed between people) or providing a list of members upon request
- If there is a case of COVID-19 who was contagious while attending services, public health will use that list to notify the place of worship attendees and staff; this may include instructions to self-isolate or self-monitor for [COVID-19 symptoms](#)
 - Anyone with even one symptom of COVID-19 should get tested and stay home
 - Public health will advise of any additional cleaning and disinfecting measures needed to reduce the risk of spread in the setting

ESTABLISH POLICIES FOR HEALTH SCREENING

Staff and volunteers must report illness immediately to their manager and stay home if they are sick. Staff and volunteers must be [screened](#) each time before starting their duties. Persons who become ill while in the service must go home right away and [self-isolate](#). They can visit a COVID-19 Assessment Centre to be tested or contact Telehealth or their health care provider.

TRAINING

Staff and volunteers should use a mask or face covering at all times while providing services. Instruct staff and volunteers on proper [hand hygiene](#) techniques and respiratory etiquette, when to use masks, [proper use of masks](#) and how to clean or discard single use masks appropriately.

PRINT AND POST SIGNS

- [COVID-19 health assessment](#) sign should be posted at all entrances
- Anyone with [COVID-19 symptoms](#) or who has been in contact with someone with COVID-19 is not permitted to enter
- [Handwashing](#) and [prevent the spread](#) signs should be posted in high visibility areas

Add similar information to the organization's website. Encourage attendees to use this [self-assessment tool](#) before every visit to the place of worship and/or set up a screening station away from the entrance to avoid crowding.

DURING SERVICES

- Remind everyone not to attend the service in person if they are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.
- Modify the activities before and during the service to ensure a 2-metre distance between leaders, staff, volunteers and attendees at all times
- Children should remain with their parents; separate children's activities should be suspended
- Activities that increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission should be altered or discontinued
- Respiratory droplets and aerosols generated during singing, loud speech or use of wind instruments may travel further than 2-metres; the following practices are recommended:
 - No congregational singing and chanting; spoken responses should be in a low voice; leaders should use microphones unless the space is very small
 - No choir; a single cantor or soloist may be used, but should be located away from the congregation (minimum of 4 metres), facing sideways or behind a screen, or otherwise separated from the congregation, but not in a balcony; consider using recorded music, including of your own choir
 - With instrumental music (piano, organ, but not wind instruments), if more than one is being played, ensure physical distancing, unless players are from the same household
- Encourage attendees to bring their own non-medical mask/face coverings; cloth masks can be made with household items such as a t-shirt or bedsheet or a bandana may be used; physical distancing is still required even when using a mask
- Avoid any physical contact; encourage people to greet each other with a smile, bow or wave
- Allow for adequate cleaning and disinfecting of prayer and high traffic areas between services
- 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 (books, hymns, prayer mats); use printed service leaflets and discard after service, or use projection or audio-visual systems; do not share microphones
- Rituals involving close physical contact (baptism, circumcision) or shared items (receptacles, washing facilities) are strongly discouraged at this time; if they must be performed, considerations need to be made to provide them safely such as use of appropriate personal protective equipment
- Do not pass offering plates; consider a designed area to offer donations or use of online / e-transfer or debit / credit card tap machines
- Encourage hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette with hand sanitizer stations (70% to 90% alcohol concentration); avoid access to hand sanitizer by young children without supervision
- Encourage good respiratory etiquette; cover mouth and nose with elbow when coughing or sneezing or use a tissue then discard tissue in a waste bin; wash or sanitize hands after
- Suspend all social gatherings, including those that occur before or after the service, and all food services at this time

ENHANCED CLEANING AND DISINFECTION

- 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; alternatively, chlorine bleach solutions may be used for disinfection; prepare [fresh bleach solution daily](#)
- Educate staff on 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 (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 (toilets, sinks, door handles, light switches, remote controls) twice a day or more, and when visibly dirty
- Ensure washrooms are always stocked with liquid soap and paper towel; antibacterial soap is not required to prevent the spread of COVID-19
- Wash hands with soap and water immediately after cleaning

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 2 metres apart or more; discourage the idling of engines
- No more than 5 people can conduct the service at one time from outside a vehicle, and they must stay at least 2 metres 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

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 york.ca/covid19 or call York Region Public Health at 1-800-361-5653.

Also visit [Province of Ontario, A Framework for Reopening our Province: Stage 2](#)