



## BRITISH COLUMBIA SYNOD

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada  
80 East 10th Avenue  
New Westminster, B.C. V3L 4R5

May 14, 2020

### Recommendation from the Bishop's Office to BC Synod Congregations

Dear Friends,

Our BC Provincial Government has announced plans to ease restrictions within British Columbia over the coming weeks and months. We currently are in Phase 1. From mid-May onwards, our province will begin Phase 2, “a careful step-by-step process to ensure all of our combined efforts and sacrifices are not squandered.”<sup>1</sup> This comment is a reminder that the COVID-19 pandemic is not over. Our actions together as a province over the last few months have allowed our health care system to provide care without being overwhelmed. Now, the task is to continue to find a balance and avoid new outbreaks.

With respect to places of worship, Provincial Health Officer Dr. Henry stated the following on Wednesday, May 13:

*Starting next week, religious services can be held, with safe physical distancing. So that is a maximum of 50 people still, and that is provided that many people can fit into your facility. That may be way too many for many places of worship. We have seen outbreaks starting from religious gatherings, so be mindful of the room you are in, how long the service may be, and who are your congregants who are there – particularly if they are elders, people who are more likely to have severe illness with this virus. So hold your gathering in the largest room possible. Keep the group small. If you can, the maximum group is 50 but that means you have to maintain that physical distance. You need to make sure that you are continuing to modify those parts of the service that are important, so that you don't have that touching of multiple people with physical contact. We want to as well make sure that there are opportunities for hand hygiene when you are going in and out of the facility. That may mean that you need to have shorter or multiple services, and keep those virtual connections going, especially for the older people of your congregation.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/bc-restart-plan>

Such advice may sound simple and straightforward, but we want to caution you and ask you to be patient and to plan diligently before you even consider beginning worship services in your facilities. We say this out of an abundance of caution. A significant portion of those who worship with us are in higher-risk categories. **We strongly recommend that congregations maintain the current practice of providing congregational worship remotely through Phase 2 and well into Phase 3.** This will provide you with the necessary time to review all the things that need to be attended to before you reopen your doors.

Note also how the Provincial Health Officer mentions modifying parts of the service. This means no physical contact with those outside of our immediate family group or “bubble.” Sharing of the Peace needs to be done by bowing and making the sign of prayer with our hands. Serving Holy Communion needs very careful consideration. According to many infectious disease experts, we also are strongly advised not to engage in congregational singing. A soloist might be able to sing on behalf of the congregation, but even then, the placement of the soloist is crucial so that droplets and aerosol particles are not spread widely. In addition, worship services should be shortened, for we are told that longer exposure, particularly inside a building, increases the risk of infection.

Attached with this letter are resources for you to use in assessing if and when you should reopen your facilities. All appropriate risk mitigation practices must be in place and sustainable before you do so. This includes acquiring the proper supplies, providing adequate training, and establishing a firm disinfecting regimen. Functionally, this may mean many congregations decide to wait until the end of the summer (nearer the end of Phase 3) before beginning to transition to in-person worship. You may decide to take several months or even longer before you meet in-person. You need to determine what is best for your context and your capacity to manage all that needs to be undertaken. You may even decide to wait until the new year. Whatever your decision, listen to one another, respect differences of opinion, keep the focus on maintaining a safe place, focus on the importance of community, and work together for the good of all.

All congregations must follow the public health requirements and ensure their programming and worship services keep everyone safe, especially the most vulnerable. We recommend that you keep abreast of these public health requirements by regularly visiting the BC Centre for Disease Control website <[www.bccdc.ca](http://www.bccdc.ca)>.

We also want to say that the responsibility for reopening is the responsibility of everyone. Maintaining a safe space and practicing proper disinfecting tasks should not rest on the pastor. This needs the whole church community working together.

We remember you in our prayers. We will do what we can to provide assistance, resources, and advice. We know that God journeys with us during these challenging times.

May God's peace be with you all.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Bishop Greg Mohr".

Bishop Greg Mohr

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "K. Martin".

Assistant to the Bishop Rev. Kathy Martin