

How churches are coping during Ontario's Phase 2 reopening, part two



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Last week, The Bancroft Times looked into how churches have been reopening under the Phase 2 restrictions imposed by the Ontario government. These guidelines specifically address places of worship and how they can safely reopen at this time. They point out that faith is a source of comfort and an important aspect in the lives of many Ontarians. The restrictions included physical distancing, frequent hand washing, limiting attendance to 30 per cent of church building capacity. In last week's paper, we looked at how the United Church and the Catholic Church have been approaching this formidable challenge. This week, we'll be taking a look at the Anglican Church, the Bancroft Pentecostal Tabernacle and the Community Fellowship Baptist Church here in Bancroft.

The Anglican Church

Bishop Michael Oulton of the Anglican Diocese of Ontario said in a June 17 statement on their website that they will begin to consider means to implement the phased reopening plan within their diocese by June 19 with a conference call between wardens, treasurers and clergy.

Part of the process leading to the implementation will be the release of a detailed document that will give practical effect to the points raised in the framework. To that end, a task force is now being struck which includes experts in the aspects of health care pertinent to the task at hand. Drawing upon the best available resources, we will have a detailed plan to present at the next Friday call on June 26, which will relate to the first phase of the plan (red). Until that time, the Diocesan guidelines continue in full force and effect," he says.

As of June 29, the church was moving into the red, or first phase of its reopening plan. This means that worship services will continue to livestreamed and made available online, small weddings, funerals and emergency baptisms are permitted, one on one in person essential pastoral care will be permitted, offices will reopen and small meetings will be held where physical distancing is possible, vital food security and community ministries will proceed with diocesan and local public health approval and church buildings will remain closed to the public. The church's task force will continue to work to implement the next phase, amber, by Sept. 1.

Alex Pierson is the Anglican Diocese of Ontario's executive officer, financial officer and the assistant to Bishop Oulton. He says that the overall guiding principle is the safety of their congregations and the communities they live in and serve. To that end, they have

worked extensively with medical professionals to understand the situation, risks, options and to plan their next steps. This explains the cautious approach they have taken.

During the pandemic, many of the Anglican churches have taken to using online worship with a variety of platforms, and that many have adapted their ministry to vulnerable groups in their communities during this time, particularly feeding programs.

“Without question, the last three months have been uncharted waters for everyone, including Anglicans. Our churches have done an amazing job of adapting to these times. The silver lining in this dark cloud is that the movement to online and virtual has always been a direction and some churches have some steps in the past. This time has put that move into “warp drive” and will be something that carries on with us once we get to the “new normal.” One of the other benefits of the increase in online presence is that all of us now have many options in terms of joining and experiencing worship. We will continue to monitor what happens in the larger world, follow government regulations and adopt best practices. Nimbleness and flexibility continue to be key as times change,” he says.

Reverend Darlene Cunliffe is the pastor at St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church in Bancroft.

“We're not able to get back for worship at the church yet and we're not looking to do that until Sept. 1. A lot of the rationale of this is our responsibility for care of God's people, love of God and love of neighbour. The impetus is love. That's the underlying foundation for all the restrictions,” she says.

Despite the church building continuing to be closed for traditional masses, Reverend Cunliffe says their online presence has been well received, and that their work as a church continues to be robust within the community.

“My daughter had COVID, and is a nurse down in southern Ontario. I fully agree with restraint. I think it would be more devastating to our parish to have people come back and two weeks down the line it's shut down again. So, it's not looking at what's good for a few but looking at what's good for all our community. Either we can all come back or none of us will and we continue online until we can all come together,” she says.

The Bancroft Pentecostal Tabernacle

The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada is a fellowship of over 1,100 churches across the country. More than 230,000 people attend services in more than 40 languages and over 3,700 individuals work as pastors and ministry leaders. Each congregation is an autonomous self-governing body, which makes its own decisions on matters like COVID-19, versus some other churches that have a governing body, like the Catholic, United and Anglican churches. While they may get advice from their district churches or the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the decisions ultimately rest with each congregation.

The Bancroft Pentecostal Tabernacle is one such congregation, led by Pastor John Riley. While pastor Riley says that his church is preparing to reopen slowly, they are doing so with an abundance of caution in the face of the ongoing pandemic.

“We've had a good experience with our online services and we were in no rush to reopen. We do have people in our congregation who don't have the means to get online so we have been working with different things like Zoom where they can call in. But as far as reopening, we are taking a cautious step and re-evaluating as we go. And so, we've definitely taken the time to thoroughly clean the whole building and sanitize everything,” he says.

Pastor Riley says that on June 21 they had their first service since the March shutdown. He came in to the church with some volunteers and did a livestream of the service, which he usually does from home. He says they cleaned everything and brought in the volunteers just to see how it would all go. He educated the volunteers on the policies that will be in place when they do reopen, laid out markers on the floors and blocked off 30 per cent of the church seating area.

To make sure everyone stays safe at his church, Pastor Riley says they have put out more hand sanitizer stations, social distancing

signs, arrows on the floors to tell people which direction to go and there's a greeter asking people if they feel sick at the door. Another volunteer will be present taking down people's information if there was an issue later on and the church had to communicate with the Hastings Prince Edward Public Health. All congregants are encouraged to wear a mask and there are masks available for them at the church. There is no entry to the church until 15 minutes before the service, and there is now a separate entrance and exit to reinforce distancing. After each service, the volunteers will be rigorously cleaning the church for the next service.

"As far as reopening, our district had a big conference call where they highlighted what people were suggesting, they went through what they had seen and heard. As far as the opening of each church, that's the call of the congregation's leadership. In the future, we'll do another run through with our congregation that can't get the Internet, and we'll see how we manage that. Our goal is to continue to grow our Internet presence and to continue to grow our small meetings. We will open strategically as we go. We're not rushing anything. Even if we reopen it's going to be limited. One of the suggested restrictions was no communal singing. That means people in the audience can't sing and worship like they're used to. So that's going to be hard for some people. Even when we do fully reopen, we're going to keep the online, because not everybody's going to feel comfortable coming back," he says.

Pastor Riley says they are more concerned with safety than running a service, and that they're trying to do what's best for the community.

"We're not rushing it. We'd love to grow together, we want to pray together, we want to do all that, but we have to do it responsibly for our community. Each stage we'll open it up a little and we'll evaluate and we'll make sure we're doing it right," he says. "We will continue to do that and our leadership team will continue to look at it. That's really where we're at."

Community Fellowship Baptist Church

The Community Fellowship Baptist Church is part of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches, a network of over 500 churches from coast to coast. Like the Pentecostal churches, each Baptist church congregation is an autonomous self-governing body, which makes its own decisions on matters like the current pandemic.

Pastor Wes Hill of the Community Fellowship Baptist Church, says that his church has chosen to take things slowly and cautiously.

"Premier Ford announced that churches could begin to gather again on Sunday, June 14, but we didn't have all the information and so we waited for confirmation of the restrictions and the suggestions. We have now come up with a plan to keep people safe as we begin to gather again, in person, for worship services. We have a plan to begin to gather together with 30 per cent of our building capacity and with physical distancing in place. We also will continue to do an online service for those who are not able or are not yet comfortable participating in person yet. We have been pre-recording our services and this week, June 28, are transitioning to a livestream from the church building," he says.

Pastor Hill says that his congregation has been very supportive during this whole process. When they first started doing online services in mid-March, they were very patient as the church figured out how to actually do an online service.

"It was definitely a learning process but we have figured out a service that works for us and also maintains the family feel of our in-person services. As we move towards reopening, we have three different groups of people; those who have been waiting patiently since March for us to reopen the doors, those who are cautious and want to join us but also want to take some time to make sure they are comfortable, and those who will be unable to join us for the foreseeable future because of underlying health conditions or being more susceptible to illness. People may have a mixture of reactions from excitement and anticipation, to caution or concern, and even some to a sadness that they may not be able to gather in the same way or that we will be doing things in a way that is a "new normal," he says.

Hill appreciates the work that the government has done to keep people safe but he also recognizes the spiritual and emotional needs that are met when his congregation gathers as a church family to learn and grow together.

?We are excited that we can begin to gather together again, but our concern is to do so in a way that honours God and is safe for everyone. We want to have each person be able to participate fully whether online or in person,? he says. ?This has been a challenge and adventure for us all but we are grateful to be able to fellowship together again in these different ways.?