

How churches are coping during Ontario's Phase-2 reopening



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By Mike Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Most of Ontario has now entered phase two reopening status and one of the organizations permitted to open with restrictions are places of worship or churches. The Ontario government guidelines specifically address places of worship and how they can safely reopen. They point out that faith is a source of comfort and an important aspect in the lives of many Ontarians. They've provided this guidance to ensure the safety of worshippers and clergy, including limiting attendance to 30 per cent of building capacity and stressing continued adherence to physical distancing and frequent hand washing. The United church, the Catholic church, the Anglican church and the Pentecostal Tabernacle in Bancroft have all been approaching these challenges in their own way, guided by their own governing bodies and by the province of Ontario.

The United Church

Catherine Rodd is the executive officer of communications with the United Church of Canada, and says that in their system, each congregation can make their own decision on when to reopen, based on what phase the province is in and what their public health unit advises. She says that they are also responsible to the next highest body of the church, the Regional Council. Several regional councils operate in Ontario and they all advise great caution due to the risks to their congregations.

"So, most of them are waiting until Labour Day to open as they have transitioned to online services and summer is usually a very low time for attendance," she says.

Rodd also points out that churches have to consider how to maintain social distancing and to implement accepted practices like having hand sanitizer available and perhaps having people wear masks. A rigorous sanitation schedule is also vital after every service conducted, of the church, the common areas and the washrooms. The United Church of Canada has also been active in creating materials for congregations to make this transition. They held weekly webinars from the end of March until early June on all aspects of online worship and congregational life.

"As well, there won't be any congregational singing, a big loss for many people, as well as no coffee hour after the service, which most people look forward to. So many of the things people look forward to in going to church won't be part of worship for a while. One of my colleagues had an architect in his congregation, which normally sits 200 people, draw out how to maintain social distancing. That church can now seat 20 people. So, it's hard to see an upside of reopening at this point," she says.

Reverend Lynn Watson is the minister with the Bancroft-Carlow Pastoral Charge. She serves four United churches in the area; St. Paul's in Bancroft, Carlow United in Boulter, St. Matthew's in Baptiste Village and St. Andrew's on the old L'Amable Road. She says that knowing they'll be in phase two for a while gives her churches time to get ready for a September 1 reopening.

?With the 30 per cent capacity rule, that means we could get less than 55 people in our church, and that's with every pew that we have including the balcony. Most of my parishioners can no longer go up the stairs to the balcony due to their age. So, we have a whole lot of work to do. We can't have congregational singing due to all the air that's being exhaled, although we can have a soloist or a duet. That means we have to get rid of our hymn books and have a digital presentation because all of your touch stuff has to go. With the age of the church we only have one accessible doorway, so we have to figure out another doorway for an exit, as people can't use the same doorway to enter and exit due to distancing restrictions. So, we have to figure that out. And everybody has to be registered so you have to have a name and contact information, in the event that someone does get it [COVID-19] they have to be able to contact everyone that was there. And after every time the building is used it has to be deep cleaned. Three of my churches are cleaned by volunteers but one has a part time contract custodian. Every touch surface has to be sanitized, it's such a huge job. Also, most of my parishioners are in the high-risk category. In my four churches their average age is 80 years old,? she says.

Watson says they've had a good online presence on Facebook, with some 2700 people interacting with them in one week. They had one virtual service streamed live and within a few days, 1200 people had watched it. She is also grateful to Moose FM here in town, who have given her churches one hour every Sunday morning to use, as most of her congregation don't use the internet.

?The Moose has been great. I've never worked with people that were so easy to work with and so open to allow us that airtime. They have also agreed to let us have that hour until such a time that we can reopen safely,? she says.

While the pandemic has been horrible, Watson has realized with the virtual component of her church services that there's a whole other constituency of people who are now paying attention to her churches but she believes other churches as well.

?At present, we'll continue on the radio and look for new ways to engage our parishioners over the next two months until we can open. We've established an interim leadership team to give some direction because we still have people to engage. So, we're going to try to figure it out. I sent everyone away with homework which was to brainstorm and we're going to meet up again on June 29. There may be a drive-in church, maybe the drive-in church will be held at the public docks at Baptiste village and people are invited to drive up on the roads. We have to be innovative and creative and use the resources we have. COVID-19 was like a kick in the gut, especially for the people doing the finances. On the other hand, there's this percolating possibility that's saying, wow, there's things we can do we've never done before. We're not wed to our pews, we're not wed to our hymn books. We're adapting, we're evolving, and that's kind of exciting,? she says.

The Catholic Church

Dierdre Thomas is the communications and PR officer with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Peterborough, and is the assistant to Bishop Daniel J. Miehm. She says that they are very pleased to restore public masses in the churches of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Peterborough.

?This is a time of great joy! The faithful are extremely happy to be back celebrating in the parishes. It is a different time and the pandemic is still with us so people are aware of precautions and they're looking after one another. Our priests along with volunteers in every parish have implemented the safety measures to allow for responsible and reverent celebration of the Mass,? she says.

She says that guidelines have been developed by the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario on behalf of their member Archdioceses to ensure a safe and successful reopening of their member churches. She mentions the invaluable support of the Miller Thomson law firm, Catholic Mutual Insurers of Canada and Dr. Tim Cook.

The guidelines lay out a timeline for reopening that goes as follows; preparation and cleaning on June 12 and 13, churches opened

for private prayer, confession and the adoration of the blessed sacrament on June 14, opened for private prayer or closed for cleaning and preparation on June 15 and regular masses resumed with restrictions on June 16, at the discretion of each pastor. Regular Sunday masses resumed on June 21. Bishop Miehm has continued the dispensation from the obligation of parishioners to attend Sunday mass if they feel unsafe doing so.

Peter Penlington is the chair of the committee overseeing the reopening of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church in Bancroft.

?They'll be greeted by ushers who'll ask them if they're well, offer hand sanitizer for them to wash their hands and just remind them to keep their masks on while at church at all times. We urge people to bring their own, but we will have masks available as a precaution. We did a practice mass on June 19 at 9 a.m. to make sure of how it will go and that everyone understands the rules. I went through and thoroughly disinfected everything after the mass,? he says.

Reverend Casmir Muobike of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church says things are going well in preparation for the first Sunday mass.

?According to the guidelines [from the Ontario government] we can only have 30 per cent of church capacity. Once we reach that, we will open the hall downstairs and other people can go into the hall. During communion, we will have someone come out and bring the communion to the people in the hall, so that's what we plan to do,? he says.

Reverend Muobike says that in addition to physical distancing and having hand sanitizer handy, they have a stringent cleaning schedule in place after mass every Sunday that will be undertaken by church volunteers and will clean both the church and the hall downstairs. The Holy Water fonts will remain empty at this time and all prayer books, hymnals and parish bulletins will be removed. They are asking for more volunteers at this time, as their needs are more expansive now with the continuing restrictions and the increased sanitation necessary to reopen. They are also asking that all people over the age of three years wear a mask to church to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19. While it isn't mandatory, it is highly recommended.

?We're working everything out, and we look forward to our mass on Sunday,? he says.

*Stay tuned for part two of How churches are coping during Ontario's phase two reopening with the Anglican Church and the Pentecostal Tabernacle in next week's Bancroft Times.