



**SHINING WATERS  
REGIONAL COUNCIL**  
The United Church of Canada

Encouraging and Connecting Communities of Faith

May 21, 2020

via email and regular mail

The Honourable Doug Ford  
Premier of the Province of Ontario  
Legislative Building  
Queen's Park  
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier:

**RE: letter from Rev. Dr. Aaron Rock and Rev. Dr. Joe Boot dated May 11, 2020 discussing the reopening of Ontario churches**

On behalf of Shining Waters Regional Council, I wish to express our concern regarding the recent letter endorsed by 250 congregations from across the province, asking the Ontario Government to lift its restrictions on gatherings for Christian churches. Please be assured that this letter does not speak to the position of The United Church of Canada, nor Shining Waters Regional Council. From the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, our commitment to communities of faith has been that we will follow the directives of local health authorities and reopen our buildings to congregants and the public only when it is deemed safe to do so.

The May 11<sup>th</sup> letter states "*never in 1500 years of Western history has the Church of Jesus Christ not met for Easter or missed months of worship and ministry – even in times of war or plague far more devastating than COVID-19.*" However, during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic (often referred to as the "Spanish Flu"), churches across several civil jurisdictions were asked to suspend worship services to contain the spread of a highly contagious and deadly form of H1N1 influenza. In Europe, during the Second World War, families who were not able to attend worship services were able to utilize communication technology — over the air radio — to listen to sermons and prayers in the relative safety of their home.

In much the same way, communities of faith within the United Church and other denominations have been utilizing video conferencing technology to hold worship services. For congregations whose members are, for a variety of reasons, not able to access these online services, ministers have been connecting by phone, email and other mediums. Many people who are currently not able to leave their homes because of mobility issues have relied on technological connection to their communities of faith for years.

While we deeply miss the opportunity for in-person gathering and lament the loss of physical closeness, we are willing to postpone coming together in flesh and bone (yet still connecting in and with Spirit) until local health authorities indicate it is safe for our congregants to assemble once more. As many of our members are over 70, immunocompromised and in other ways high risk for complications from COVID-19, we are deeply concerned for their safety, as well as the safety the wider community. According to the advice of health professionals, the precautions

Cont'd ...

outlined in the letter of May 11<sup>th</sup> are not currently sufficient to adequately mitigate the risk of spreading infection.


However, coming together as the Body of Christ in alternative ways has not stopped our communities of faith from engaging in outreach and justice work among our Region's most vulnerable populations. Those congregations who can do so safely are still tending to the needs of those experiencing poverty and homelessness, working on the front lines, filling in the gaps where municipal governments have fallen short. Many congregations have stepped up their giving to support those who are most in need within their local communities. In short, the work of seeking justice and attending to the needs of the vulnerable has not ceased on our end simply because we are not able to gather in-person for worship.

It is our understanding that the Church is not a building, nor is it housed within a building. The Church is a community of followers seeking to model their lives after Jesus, whose love for neighbour superseded all tradition and expectation. While we do not presume to speak on behalf of all Christians within Ontario, neither does the collective of signatories from the letter of May 11<sup>th</sup> represent the position of the United Church of Canada. We take exception to the ask of Rev. Rock and Rev. Boot for the Premier to appoint an additional person to the Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee to act as an ongoing voice for faith groups. In a multi-cultural and multi-faith province, no one person can represent the interests and voices of all those who practice many of the diverse expressions of faith found within Ontario.

We will reopen our buildings. We will reopen when we can do so safely and responsibly. Those faith groups who can tend to the needs of vulnerable populations with precautions in place are continuing to do so. Sometimes the ways in which we gather and offer service have been altered to adhere to physical distancing. Our deep and profound need for face-to-face human connection does not suspend the responsibility we have to our faith communities (and our wider communities!) to do everything we can to curb the spread of this virus. South of the border, we have already seen the devastating implications when congregations have continued to gather despite the advice from medical professionals.

These are the ways in which we are choosing to live out our commitment to loving God – because loving God means loving our neighbour, even if it means we must physically stay apart from our neighbour for a little while longer.

In peace,



David Leyton-Brown, President  
Shining Waters Regional Council  
The United Church of Canada

cc: Hon. Rod Phillips, Minister of Finance  
and Chair of the Ontario Jobs and Recover Committee.