

# 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](https://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](#)