

# GUIDANCE FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP

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## Overview

With appropriate controls in place, places of worship may host services and faith-based activities of **no more than 50 people, or 1/3 of building capacity, whichever is less.**

This guidance has been developed to support places of worship that wish to host services and faith-based activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that places of worship understand that the potential for spread of infection during gatherings is very high, and several large super-spreading events globally have taken place in faith-based gatherings. To best prevent the spread of COVID-19, places of worship are encouraged to continue hosting services and faith-based activities online or through creative mechanisms such as drive-in services. While in-person gatherings are permitted, in-person social gatherings that normally occur before and after a service (e.g. communal dinners and lunches) should be avoided at this time.

This guidance must be used in conjunction with the [Workplace Guidance for Business Owners](#), which supports all workplaces (excluding health care settings) in reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 among workers, volunteers, and members of the public.

## Definitions and Scope

The advice in this document pertains to all faith-based activities that involve public gathering and occur on land or in buildings owned or rented by religious orders, societies, or groups. While informal faith-based activities that occur in private dwellings or on private property may not be under the direction of an “organizer”, this advice should be followed wherever applicable.

For the purposes of this document:

- The term “faith-based activities” includes any services, activities, and events such as religious services, prayer services, devotions or study of religious books, ceremonies, charitable activities, etc.
- The “organizer” is the religious leader, director of worship, site resources or operations lead, or other individual who is charged with organizing faith-based activities.

Organizers at all places of worship should follow the public health guidance below and revise their operating and event hosting procedures as necessary to keep everyone, especially the most vulnerable, safe.

## Roles and Responsibilities

The organizer at a place of worship is responsible for preventing the risk of transmission of infection among any staff, volunteers, and members of the public who enter the place of worship to participate in faith-based activities. They are also responsible for protecting those who support day-to-day operations in the place of worship (e.g., administrative staff, cleaning staff, and contractors).

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## COVID-19 Risk Mitigation

<b>Protecting Congregants and Members of the Public</b>	<p>To support physical distancing and reduce the risk of transmission, places of worship are expected to <b>reduce the attendance at faith-based activities and events to no more than 50 people, or 1/3 or the building capacity, whichever is less.</b> For clarity, infants under the age of two-years old do not need to be factored in to the total headcount.</p> <p>Reducing attendance can be facilitated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offering multiple, smaller services or events for segments of the congregation instead of single services or events attended by the entire congregation.</li><li>• Establishing caps on attendance at faith-based activities and events.</li><li>• Establishing a system for congregants to RSVP to attend specific services or events, to minimize overcrowding.</li><li>• Encouraging congregants to access the place of worship outside of peak hours if they are attending for purposes other than worship services.</li><li>• Offering options for remote participation in faith-based activities (e.g. by telephone, closed circuit radio, video conference, video recordings) in conjunction with, or as a replacement for, in-person attendance.</li><li>• Considering ways other than in-person attendance to include/support people who are at greater risk of severe disease, including people over 65 years of age and people with chronic medical conditions.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The event organizer must ensure that extra precautions are available for these higher risk congregants who do choose to attend in person, such as designating times for individual worship or encouraging mask use for anyone who will be near that person.</li></ul></li><li>• Offering “drive-by”, “drive through”, or “drive in” services in which individuals participate in faith-based activities and receive services (e.g. blessings) without leaving their cars.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Vehicles should contain only individuals from the same household or cohort family. Alberta Health defines cohort families on <a href="#">its website</a>.</li><li>○ Discourage people from leaving their vehicles during the service or event, except when using the washroom.</li><li>○ People leaving their vehicles to use the washrooms should be encouraged to maintain a minimum distance of two metres from others at all times.</li><li>○ Discourage vehicle idling.</li><li>○ Religious leaders, staff, and volunteers who approach a vehicle to provide services to its occupants are encouraged to wear a mask if car windows are rolled down and if they are not able to maintain a two metre distance from the occupants.</li></ul></li></ul>
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**Organizers should provide information and guidance to their congregations to help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, such as:**

- Encouraging congregants to use the online [self-screening tool](#) before every visit to the place of worship, and strongly discouraging in-person worship when feeling unwell.
- Reminding congregants that they must not attend in person if they are experiencing the most common symptoms of COVID-19 (cough, fever, shortness of breath, runny nose, or sore throat).
- Notifying congregants at entrance of the place of worship that individuals with symptoms of COVID-19, individuals who have travelled internationally in the last 14 days, and individuals who have had close contact with confirmed COVID-19 cases in the last 14 days are prohibited by law from entering in the place of worship. [Posters](#) for this purpose are available on line.
- Posting facility-specific rules for participating in faith-based activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Directing the flow of people through the place of worship.
- Groups should avoid sitting together unless they are from the same household or cohort families.
- Ask that children younger than the age of two years old be held by their parents or family.
- Giving verbal reminders to observe physical distancing.
- Encouraging hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette while in the place of worship.
- Encouraging attendees to wear [non-medical masks](#).
- Posting risk mitigation signs from the Government of Alberta [website](#) around the place of worship.

To support public health contact tracing efforts in the event that an attendee at the place of worship tests positive, organizers should ask individuals to provide their name and contact information when attending faith-based activities and events onsite. Individuals can access the place of worship even if they choose not to sign in upon entry. Faith-based organizations will have full ownership of their attendance lists, and will only be asked to share attendance lists with Alberta Health Services if a potential exposure occurs onsite.

If there is an on-site exposure, all staff, congregants, and volunteers who were present at the time of the exposure should be notified that an exposure may have occurred and that attendance lists from the time of the exposure will be shared with Alberta Health Services for contact tracing purposes only.

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<p><b>Protecting Staff and Volunteers</b></p>	<p>Organizers at places of worship should implement measures outlined in the <a href="#">Workplace Guidance for Business Owners</a>, and below, to protect staff and volunteers from the spread of COVID-19 onsite:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain up-to-date contact information for staff and volunteers.</li> <li>• Record who is working each day and attending group activities and events.</li> <li>• Provide information and training about appropriate physical distancing, facility-specific risk-reduction measures, and proper respiratory and hygiene practices.</li> <li>• Provide non-medical masks if staff and volunteers are unable to maintain two-metre physical distance from congregants.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Facilities</b></p>	<p>Organizers at places of worship should consider making adjustments in their facilities to support physical distancing amongst staff, volunteers, and attendees. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Controlling and staggering entry into, and exit from, the place of worship before and after group activities or events (e.g. by dismissing individuals by household or section, rather than all at once).</li> <li>• Establishing different points of entry and exit from high-traffic areas, where feasible to do so</li> <li>• Arranging or marking seating to ensure physical distancing between individuals who are not members of the same household.</li> <li>• Identifying areas, such as lobbies, where crowding and bottlenecks are common, and using volunteers, staff, or barriers to redirect people who may gather in these areas.</li> <li>• If congregants are required to line up to receive services, using floor markings to encourage physical distancing.</li> </ul> <p>Organizers should increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting of high traffic areas, common areas, and washrooms in the place of worship.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequently clean and disinfect high-touch/shared surfaces such as doorknobs, light switches, toilet handles, faucets and taps, ceremonial objects, elevator buttons, railings.</li> <li>• Cleaning guidance can be found in Alberta Health Service’s <a href="#">Environmental Cleaning Guidance</a>.</li> <li>• Hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol content is highly recommended at facility entrances and exits, and throughout the place of worship. Caution should be taken to limit access to hand sanitizer by young children without supervision.</li> </ul>

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## Guidance on Higher Risk Activities

Organizers should thoroughly review all faith-based activities, rituals, and practices that occur in their place of worship to determine if they increase the risk of spreading COVID-19 amongst congregants, staff, and/or volunteers.

Any activity or practice that increases the risk of COVID-19 through contact (touching surfaces) or droplet transmission (sneezing, coughing, singing, shouting) should be discontinued or altered to prevent the risk. The following section provides guidance on high-risk activities that commonly occur in places of worship.

### Social Events

- While places of worship are allowed to resume faith-based activities and events specifically for the purpose of worship, social activities such as communal dinners or lunches that would normally occur alongside faith-based activities or events are not permitted at this time.

### Singing, Live Music and Performances

- Infected people can transmit the virus over greater distances through their saliva or respiratory droplets while singing, shouting, when playing certain instruments such as wind instruments or performing (e.g. drama or dance). As such, these activities are considered to be high risk, and require careful consideration at places of worship.
- Congregational singing is discouraged. Consider a soloist or instrumental music instead.
- Gatherings that include singing – ideally soloists or small groups – should take as many of the following precautions as possible:
  - Keep singers completely separate from the audience and each other by livestreaming individuals singing separately.
  - Limit the number of people singing in the same place to the fewest possible.
  - Have people sing facing away from others or otherwise creating separation using a barrier such as Plexiglas.
  - Use pre-prepared audio or video recordings.
  - Have singers wear facemasks while singing.
- If choirs, singing groups, bands, or musical ensembles affiliated with the place of worship wish to practice or perform together, they should explore alternatives to in-person singing such as virtual training or recording sessions.
- Where appropriate, attendees can be encouraged to hum along to instrumental, remote, or recorded performances.

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## Interpersonal Interactions

- Shaking hands, hugging, touching, or passing items between people compromises the two-metre distance between congregants and must not occur, except between members of the same household or cohort family. Alternatives such as waving, nodding, or bowing should be encouraged.
- Religious rituals that involve physical contact between individuals, such as anointing with oils or baptisms increase the likelihood of disease transmission and should be performed in an alternate fashion that minimizes physical contact.
- Individuals can wear clean, properly fitted non-medical masks to further reduce the risk of transmission. However, even when wearing masks, attendees should always try to maintain a two-metre distance from anyone who is not a member of their household.
- Everyone in the place of worship should follow proper respiratory etiquette practices at all times. These practices include coughing and sneezing into the elbow or a tissue, discarding tissues into a lined garbage bin, and washing hands afterwards.

## Food

- Provision of food and beverages before, during, or after faith-based activities or events is strongly discouraged because of the increased the risk of spreading COVID-19.
- If food or drink must be provided as part of a faith-based ritual (e.g. communion), the following precautions must be taken to prevent the risk of infection:
  - Food or drink must be served to congregants in pre-packaged or individual portions by a small number of designated individuals.
  - Food and drink containers or utensils (e.g. chalices or plates) should not be shared or passed between congregants.
  - Physical contact between the designated serving individuals and congregants must not occur while serving food or drink (e.g. placing food in a congregants' mouths). Instead, the server can place the individual food or drink portion in a congregant's outstretched hand, or on a table for the congregant to pick up.
  - The designated serving individuals should wash or sanitize hands immediately before serving and should wear a clean, properly-fitted non-medical mask for the duration of time spent serving.

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- If food is desired before or after faith-based activities or events, staff, volunteers, and congregants should be encouraged to go to a licensed food service establishment where measures have been implemented in line with the latest public health measures to ensure the safe preparation and serving of food.

## Shared Items

- Do not hand out or share items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized before and after each use (e.g., books, hymns, prayer mats, pipes, and programs).
  - Encourage congregants to bring their own items and avoid sharing them with others.
  - Pre-print daily song sheets and discard after services are completed.
  - Consider using projection or audio-visual systems to share information.
- Do not share microphones.
- Do not offer shared receptacles for liquid (e.g. holy water fonts). If washing facilities are required, they should be supplemented by hand hygiene products.
- If it is required for religious or spiritual reasons, touching of ceremonial objects (e.g., statues, religious symbols, rings) may occur if hand hygiene is performed before and after touching the object.
  - Individuals must not kiss, embrace, or press their faces on any shared ceremonial object.
- Do not pass donation collection plates or containers between congregants. Alternatives include:
  - A designated area to place offerings/donations. Touching of offerings/donations collected from patrons should be minimized for the first 24 hours.
  - Online offerings/donations.

## Children's Programs and Other Uses

- Offering infant and child minding during faith-based programs or classes is not permitted at this time. Children should stay with their families during worship.
- Places of worship that freely offer or rent spaces within their facilities to other groups or businesses must ensure that these groups or businesses abide by all orders of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and all applicable public health guidance documents.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The operator is responsible for ensuring that any parties renting or using space in the place of worship have plans and mechanisms in place to prevent infection transmission amongst their staff, volunteers, and patrons.</li></ul>
<b>Other Resources</b>	Government of Alberta <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">COVID-19 Information for Albertans</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Workplace Guidance for Business Owners</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Reducing Transmission in Gatherings</a></li></ul>