

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1A1
Sent via email

May 20, 2021

Dear Premier Ford:

As leaders of faith communities throughout Ontario, we write once again to assure you of our prayers for you and your colleagues during these challenging days. We remain hopeful that the vaccination of Ontarians as well as the restrictions currently in place will continue to significantly reduce the number of Covid-19 cases in our province.

Our places of worship have continued to respect the guidelines and restrictions introduced by the province throughout the pandemic. We also recognize the great spiritual pain and sacrifice this has meant for the faithful, so many of whom have reached out to us with a plea to return to in-person worship. There is tremendous anxiety, stress and suffering in our community; direct ministry and spiritual outreach remains a critical means of comfort and care for those who rely on places of worship to sustain their spiritual and mental health.

We write today aware that the province is discerning next steps, in light of the current stay-at-home order, for early June as well as planning for the eventual easing of other restrictions, when appropriate, over the course of this year. We would respectfully ask you to consider the following requests when crafting these plans:

- 1) As part of the provincial re-opening plan, prioritize the expansion of capacity for places of worship in early June using a percentage as opposed to a hard cap (the province most recently permitted 15% capacity in grey zones, 30% in other areas). As noted in our previous meetings, a hard cap is not an equitable or practical means of operating facilities that, in most cases, can accommodate several hundred or several thousand congregants. Many of our members lack the resources to connect to virtual services and rely on in-person ceremonies to support their spiritual and mental health. We have clearly demonstrated that places of worship can operate safely, employing rigorous health and safety measures to minimize any potential transmission of Covid-19. We also request that faith communities with appropriate outdoor space be permitted to operate with unlimited capacity as long as physical distancing can be maintained, as previously permitted.
- 2) Provide us an opportunity to continue our dialogue regarding physical distancing restrictions for places of worship. As indicated in our previous discussions, six-foot physical distancing requirements significantly limit capacity for places of worship, whether the government permits 30%, 50% or 75% capacity. In the months ahead, if distancing requirements remain in place, the six-foot distance, not the percentage of capacity becomes the deciding factor in determining attendance numbers at places of worship. In recent days, the American Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued recommendations to remove distancing restrictions and masking requirements once an individual receives two vaccinations. At the state level, many jurisdictions have now relaxed restrictions for places of worship. We would welcome discussions regarding these issues.

We fully understand that there are many groups advocating for their respective sectors. It is also important to recognize the essential nature of the ministry offered by places of worship, through both spiritual services as well as countless outreach programs that care for those who are poor and/or marginalized.

We look forward to the opportunity to continue our dialogue and pray that the points raised in this communication will be carefully considered. If we can assist in any way, please know that you may call on any of us at your convenience.

Thank you for your ongoing efforts to keep Ontarians safe in the battle against Covid-19. We know the immense amount of stress and anxiety these days have caused for you and your colleagues. Please be assured of our continued prayerful support.

Sincerely,

(listed alphabetically)

The Right Reverend Andrew J. Asbil, Bishop of Toronto

Rev. John A Bouwers, Pastor, Hope Reformed Church, Brampton

Bruce J. Clemenger, President, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto

Bishop Ronald Fabbro, President, Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario

His Grace Bishop Mina,
Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Mississauga, Vancouver and Western Canada

Imam Refaat Mohamed, President, Canadian Council of Imams

Ray Pennings, Elder, Providence Free Reformed Church St. George, ON

Sukhwinder Singh, National Director – Canada, UNITED SIKHS

His Eminence Archbishop Sotirios, Primate, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler, Shaarei Shomayim Congregation, Toronto

Rev. Timothy Teuscher, President, Lutheran Church-Canada

Karl J. Veldkamp, Elder in the Canadian Reformed Churches in Ontario

cc. Members of Cabinet, Members of Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario Caucus