

Mitchell Grace Lutheran Church

Policy for Re-opening Church after the COVID-19 Pandemic Closing

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Background

On March 17, 2020 the Province of Ontario declared a state of Emergency and ordered all non-essential businesses and venues, including all churches, to close in order to fight the spread of a deadly COVID-19 virus. That original order for a two week period was extended a number of times over the following weeks. On June 8, 2020 the Premier announced that starting on Friday June 12, 2020 the Province would be entering into Stage 2, thus allowing churches to re-open with a number of restrictions and guidelines. Stage 3 of the provincial reopening plan came into effect on July 17, 2020.

The Grace Lutheran Church (GLC) Council met on June 10 and again on June 15 to discuss the variety of restrictions and how we could proceed to open the church for Sunday services. A committee was formed and met the following evening including Pastor Gery, Tammie Santomero, Nancy Ellens, and Rick Vivian. Several items were discussed that would allow Council to open up the church for Sunday services and other approved events (funerals and weddings). The most important factor to keep in mind with the potential re-opening is, and always will be, the health and welfare of the members of the congregation and all staff and volunteers. The local Huron Perth Health unit was consulted as well as reference to a number of prepared guidelines from the province and the local health unit.

This document will serve as a structured procedure for the Mitchell Grace Lutheran Church to re-open its doors for Sunday service on Sunday August 16, 2020. The policies and procedures will serve as a reference for Council members, employees, volunteers, and members of the congregation and guests.

It will be necessary to update this document as the Ontario moves into various new stages of reopening the province while continuing to slow the spread of the COVID-19 Virus.

Occupancy Load and Seating for Church Service

The Ontario Building Code stipulates that rooms with fixed seating must allow 18" for each person in order to determine the number of people allowed for seating. With the current layout of the church, there is a total of 255 feet of pews on the main floor and an additional 110 feet of pews in the balcony. The 31 feet of pews in the choir loft can also be included in the calculations to determine the occupant load.

There is a 396 running feet of pews and an additional 7.5 feet available for accessible seating. Taking 1.5 feet (18") per person, it was determined the occupant load for the church area is 264 persons. This would not include the pastor and organist who have their own chairs at designated areas.

One of the stipulations put forth by the Province of Ontario for churches to open for services included a limit of 30% occupancy of the approved occupant load for the church. Using the above calculations a total of 79 persons could actually attend a service and be within the 30% threshold.

Council reviewed the attendance record of past services and determined an average attendance of around 50 people per service and therefore determined to continue with one 10:00 AM service and then monitor attendance.

The other factor that must be taken into consideration in determining a comfortable seating arrangement is the requirement to stay 2 metres or 6 feet physical distance from persons outside your household or social group. Congregation members will be encouraged to sit with their household or social group in order to obtain a maximum occupancy allotment. Seating will only be allowed on every other pew in order to maintain a physical distance as much as possible. The second pew from the front on each side will be used for seating as well as rows 4, 6, 8, and 10 on the main floor. In the balcony only the front and third row will be used. The other pews will be marked closed with a rope / ribbon marker. Ushers will be instructed to fill the main floor first before sending members of the congregation to the balcony. The choir loft could be used if needed. If numbers attending services grow to a point that the measures put in place prevent some persons from being able to attend, the council will take action to further accommodate those numbers in the future weeks. With some provisions, a TV screen could be used in the church basement for viewing by any overflow crowd but that would be as a last resort in special circumstances. Council may also consider a second service time but that would create some extra challenges that would have to be addressed to ensure proper sanitation of pews and often touched surfaces and washroom.

Helping to stop the spread of COVID-19

The protection of our staff, congregation members, and guests are of the utmost importance to the Council of the Grace Lutheran Church and was the top priority in determining how to gradually open up the church as the province still fights off the COVID-19 virus. Health Units across the province continue to reinforce the practice of properly washing / sanitizing your hands and physical distancing. Avoid touching your mouth nose and eyes. Cover your mouth if you cough or sneeze.

Face Masks

As of July 17, 2020 the Huron Perth Health Unit has mandated the wearing of a non-medical face mask or covering for indoor public spaces. There would be exceptions made for younger children under 2 years of age and those with medical conditions that prevent the wearing of a facial covering. Congregation members are encouraged to bring their own mask (bought or homemade). There will be a limited supply of disposable masks available at the church. Persons are to keep their mask on until they return to their vehicle or have left the church property. Please remember to properly dispose of the masks when finished with them. The pastor is exempt from wearing a mask when conducting the service at a safe distance from the congregation members. The pastor will be wearing a mask when physical distancing is not possible. Further information is available on the Huron Perth Public Health unit website <https://www.hpph.ca>

Hand Sanitizer Stations

Stations will be set up throughout the building for all visitors to use. There will be a hand sanitizer dispenser at each entrance to the church as well as one in the middle aisle to be used at times of Holy Communion. We ask that all persons use hand sanitizer when they enter the church. Signs are posted.

Physical Distancing

Markings will be placed at appropriate high traffic areas to remind people of the 2 metre / 6 feet social physical distancing as recommended by the local Health Unit.

Signage

Signs are to be put up throughout the building with similar or like messages as:

“Do not enter building if you are feeling ill”

“Keep your physical distance from others”

“Please use hand sanitizer”

Protecting the most vulnerable persons

The Health unit is recommending that all persons 70 years of age and older or anyone with a compromised immune system should stay away from gatherings of people. Although GLC is attempting to provide a safe environment to hold services, there is no guarantee that we can be 100% virus free. Those attending a service are doing so on their own free will and should weigh out the risks before doing so. The GLC will be providing other alternatives for those that choose not to attend service. The service sermon will be available to view on the church website. We will also attempt to tape the service and have it for viewing on the website. A copy of the sermon is also available on a CD and can be delivered to those in our area. Please contact the church office for further details.

Greeting others

The Health unit directive to the church is to discourage hand shaking at this time. Please greet others with a friendly hello, wave, or nod and always maintain a 2 metre physical distance when possible. The pastor will also be following this protocol.

Building Preparation before use

The local Health unit has advised that the virus will normally survive on hard surfaces for up to 72 hours. Special attention however should be given to high traffic areas and touched surfaces. With these guidelines in mind the following procedures will occur prior to usage of the facility:

1. Washrooms will be wiped down with a disinfecting soap mixture that kills 99.9% of germs and viruses. The manufacture instructions shall be followed. Care will be taken in the high use areas such as toilets, sinks, garbage containers, towel dispensers, soap dispensers, and door handles.
2. All hand railings, door handles, push bars, aisle pew ends, and other high touch areas will be wiped down with a disinfectant prior to church use.
3. All non essential items will be cleared from the church including hymnals and bibles on the pews as well as Kleenex boxes, toys, and the seat pads. These items can be a point of transfer of the virus from one person to another. Congregation members are welcome to bring their own and take home again with them.
4. The elevator area and the family washroom (for emergency use only) will be open for the service but the remainder of the downstairs will be closed for regular Sunday services. Some exceptions may apply if approved by the Pastor and/ or Church Council.
5. Whenever possible the doors will be propped open and windows will be open in the church to allow for maximum air change.

Changes to the Service

The province has issued some directives for churches to follow on the Stage 2 re-opening of Ontario. The Health Unit has also added to or reinforced some of these directives. With those in mind the GLC Council and the Pastor have approved a number of changes to our standard service as follows.

Entering Church for Services

The congregation members are asked to abide by the direction of the ushers and lay ministers and go directly to their seat. It is mandated that all persons wear a facemask at all times in the church. Every second row of pews will be closed off to help maintain physical distancing. Household members and “social group” members will be asked to sit together and then leave 6 feet of space for a non household member or “social group member”. This will mean sitting at each end of the pews and in most cases leaving the middle of the row empty.

Printed Service Bulletins

Printed bulletins will not be available for the service. The church hymnals and bibles will also not be available. The TV at the front of the church will be used to follow along with the service and will contain the information needed. The pastor will also be making a number of announcements to help the congregation stay informed.

Singing

Studies have shown that singing or even yelling has the potential to spread the virus at a greater distance. The Province of Ontario has banned all singing and live bands from patios and restaurants and highly recommends that congregational singing be stopped for now in churches. With this in mind our organist will still play a verse of the hymn but the congregation will not be singing. Reciting of verse and prayer is still allowed. Consideration will also be given to pre-recorded singing and shown on screen. With proper controls a soloist or small group may also be considered for singing but all guidelines from the local health unit will be followed.

Length of Service

Services will be somewhat shorter with a goal of approximately 40 minutes. This will shorten the time together in the church and also lessen the need for using a washroom. Although the family washroom will be open it is to be used only in case of emergency.

Offering Plates

At the time allotted for the offering the passing of the offering plate will not occur. The Offering Plate will be placed at the back of the church and the congregation members may place their offering on the plate at that time. Congregation members are encouraged to use the other options of giving such as electronic transfer, automatic payment, mail cheque to church, or drop off cheque in the locked box outside the office entrance. Please contact the church or refer to the church website for further details. ([see Appendix A](#))

Departure from Church after the Service

The Pastor will direct each row to file from the church in an orderly fashion while trying to maintain physical distancing from other persons. It is important that persons remain in their seated until the Pastor dismisses you. The main floor area will be dismissed from back to front and then the balcony (if used) will be dismissed in an orderly fashion maintaining six feet of separation between non household members. Persons are asked to continue outside and away from the building and do not congregate on the sidewalk in front of the church. The pastor shall wear a facial mask when physical distancing is not possible.

Holy Communion

Communion will be held at the discretion of the Council. The congregation members will be asked to follow the directions given for the taking of communion. Efforts will be made to maintain physical distancing between persons in line. Care will be taken in the handing of the wafer to the congregation member to minimize handling. A pair of tongs could be used. The pastor will be the only person to use the Common Cup. All others will use individual serving cups. The individual cups will be placed on the trays with a suitable space between cups to prevent accidental touching of other cups when picked up by the congregation member. The individual cups will be placed on a tray on the front pew as per normal procedures and will be disposed of after the service. All persons are asked to keep their protective face mask on while in line and only remove it to take the wafer and wine. Once completed, the protective face mask is to be worn again taking care to not compromise the covering. Persons wishing to participate in communion but not partake in the distribution of the wafer and wine shall follow in line as usual and indicate this wish by crossing their arms in front of their chest while approaching the Pastor.

All those assisting with the communion, including the Pastor shall wear a face mask at all times and they shall also wear a facial shield when physical distancing is not possible.

([See Appendix B](#))

Weddings and Funerals

Under the Stage 2 and 3 guidelines from the province, weddings and funerals are now permitted in the church with the same rules as the regular service including the 30% of capacity rule. More information and additional updates from the Ministry of Health will be available from the Pastor when making arrangements for these types of services.

Baptisms

The parent or guardian will be the only one to hold the infant. All persons involved (over 3 years of age), including the pastor, shall wear a face mask covering both mouth and nose. The pastor shall sanitize his hands before the baptism. In most cases there will be only one baptism during a given service to allow for proper seating arrangements. (Exception would be if baptisms are in the same family). If multiple baptisms are held the water could come from individual containers for each person or by using a sanitized "scoop" from the common font. Efforts shall be made to have the families involved in the baptism to sit in the front most available pew to avoid passing other congregation members while going to and from the front of the church. (Reserve seating will be in the second pew from the front since we are currently not using the first pew).

Volunteers

Ushers, Lay Ministers, Counters, Money handlers, elevator operators, and other volunteer workers are asked to wear face protection at all times when physical distancing is not possible. Frequent washing of hands and the use of hand sanitizer is also important and if necessary, the use of gloves may be required. Before any task is undertaken by the volunteers, the team leader shall go over any procedures necessary to lessen the risk of spreading the virus.

Other events at the church

As restrictions are changed by the provincial government and the local Health Units, the Church Council will review and approve any further opening of the church for other events. As of June 16, 2020, only the services and council meetings are approved. Functions using online tools such as "Zoom" are also approved.

Vacation Bible school will be done on a take home basis. Council will continue to monitor and then make decisions accordingly for restarting of other church functions including Sunday School. Announcements can be found on the church website.

Home Visits by Staff

Under various circumstances, it may be necessary for staff (especially the pastor) or volunteers to conduct church business by making a home visit to one of the congregation members. Staff and volunteers of the church must always follow the protocol of the district Health Unit and make every effort to lessen any potential spread of the virus. It is mandatory that staff and volunteers wear proper personal protection at all times when potential close contact is to be made with other persons. A properly worn mask and hand washing or sanitizing has proven to be a huge defense in preventing the spread of the virus. It is encouraged that those being visited also wear a proper mask covering both

their mouth and nose however not all persons will be able to do this. In cases where persons are not able to wear a face covering then the staff member or volunteer shall keep a distance of at least 2 M and preferably 3 M from the other persons they are visiting. When circumstances do not permit this then a faceshield must also be worn by the staff member along with a mask (eg. giving communion). Immediately following the visit the staff member shall ensure proper hand washing and sanitizing and proper disposal of one time PPE and the proper cleaning and disinfecting of any reusable equipment before visiting the next person or home.

Contact Information

Mailing

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Telephone

(519) 348-9082

www.gracemitchell.ca

<https://www.facebook.com/gracemitchell.ca/>

Also visit Huron Perth Public Health at www.hpph.ca

Appendix A – Handling and Counting Collection Plate Money

Congregation members are encouraged to use the other options of giving such as electronic transfer, automatic payment, mail cheque to church, or drop off cheque in the locked box outside the office entrance. The collection plate will be available at the back of the church for those that still wish to use that method. The collection plate will not be passed during services.

The lead money counter for the service will place all envelopes and money from the collection plate into a plastic ziplock bag and place the labeled bag into the secretary's office for storage in the church safe. The counters will obtain the plastic bag from the previous week and count and record the offerings from that service.

All counters and handlers shall ensure they wash their hands and use sanitizer before and after handling the envelopes and money. These persons shall also use a face covering while working in close proximity to others. The lead counter shall ensure that all members of the group follow the guidelines for use of personal protection.

Appendix B – Preparation for Holy Communion

The team leader will review the procedures with the group of volunteers and ensure all persons follow the guidelines for use of personal protection. All persons involved in preparing the wafers and the wine, as well as those involved in the actual distribution, must wash their hands with soap and water and/or use hand sanitizer before and after their task as well as wear a facial covering over their mouth

and nose. Protective gloves may also be used however extreme care is to be used to avoid contamination during their tasks and the removal and disposal after the wearing of the gloves.

Wafers will be placed on a plate and the Pastor (or designate) will distribute to the congregation member (possibly using a pair of tongs).

The Common Cup will only be used by the Pastor. All congregation members will use the individual cups. Cups will be placed in every second hole of the tray so as to avoid persons touching other cups while securing one off the tray for themselves. The trays for the disposal of used cups will continue to be placed at the end of the first row of pews on each side. All used cups will be properly disposed of after the service, placed in a tied off garbage bag and deposited in the garbage bin in the storage shed outside the office area entrance.