

December 5, 2020

Dear Premier Horgan, Health Minister Dix, and Provincial Health Officer Henry,

We would like to thank you for your daily efforts to serve the communities of British Columbia to ensure the health and well-being of our province.

It is with a spirit of gratefulness but also concern that we send this letter. On Thursday, November 19th, the Provincial Health Office announced that all social gatherings were to be suspended for two weeks, until at least Monday, December 7th. This *Provincial Health Office Order on Social Gatherings and Events* specifically included religious services, aside from a limited provision for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. It was also suggested that the suspension of worship services may be extended for a longer period of time.

We are writing to you today to respectfully request that you rescind this order. We also feel compelled to inform you of our intentions if this order is not rescinded, or if it is extended, and to express the biblical and practical reasons for our actions.

Our Biblical Reasons for Concern

The position of the Christian church concerning civil government is to submit to its lawful authority in all civil matters. Throughout Scripture, but most directly in Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17, God commands Christians to be subject to the civil government as it is appointed by God and exists for the good of all. We are called to submit to civil authority in all civil matters regardless of whether we personally agree or disagree with their directives or judgements.

However, this duty to obey our civil authorities ends when they command that we engage in behavior contrary to God's Word or when they prohibit what God commands us to do. Ultimately, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

We believe that this public health order violates God's Word for two biblical reasons:

First, all Christians are called to assemble, in-person, for regular corporate worship services. Christians not only gather together for worship out of love toward God, but also because it is *essential* to our spiritual health and because we are *commanded* to do so (Psalm 95:1, 2; Psalm 111:1; Psalm 122:1; Acts 2:46; Ephesians 5:19; 1 Timothy 4:13; Hebrews 10:23-25). We are called to worship God in the way that He has commanded in Scripture including, though not limited to, hearing the preaching of the Word, partaking of the sacraments of baptism and communion, singing His praises, praying together, confessing His name, exercising church discipline, and fellowshiping with other Christians (1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:2; Matthew 18:15-18; Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 3:16; 2 Thessalonians 3:1). Many of these aspects of worship cannot be replaced by online services.

Additionally, many churches and congregational members do not have the means to use technology, inhibiting them and isolating them all the more during this crisis. It is unwarranted to assume that every church or church member has the same access to or ability to utilize technology for the spiritual care they need and are rightly afforded by their citizenship.

We are thankful that this government's intentions involve the protection of human life. The protection of life is an essential Christian virtue in every area of society. But one of the many benefits of worship gatherings is the intentional identification of needs within vulnerable populations of our churches and communities. Churches are instrumental in providing critical spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional care as they are made aware of needs. In-person gatherings foster and facilitate the great comfort and help that our society needs, especially in times of trouble. No one would close hospitals as sickness increases, and yet as the fear and stress accompanying COVID-19 rages, the faith community is being asked to limit services.

Second, the Lord Jesus Christ is head over the church.

Government authority is limited concerning the church. All authority belongs to God, and He delegates authority to the civil government, the family, and the church (1 Timothy 6:15; Ephesians 1:21, Colossians 1:18). He has set Christ as head over the church and He is our highest authority.

While we recognize, with gratefulness, that the civil government has a role to play in maintaining the health and order of society, God has given local church governments specific authority over worship under the headship of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 3:1-7).

From March 16th to November 19th, the provincial government ordered that churches take certain precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19, notably by limiting worship service attendance to 50 people. Local churches abided by this order because they considered these restrictions to be reasonable given the novelty of the virus, the uncertainty about the nature and transmission of the virus, and the Christians' high respect for our civil authorities. Churches complied with the order but did so as an exercise of their own authority over worship, not because they believed the government should unilaterally mandate such restrictions. Respectfully, local churches now, as throughout the pandemic, retain the prerogative over worship services. We cannot and may not relinquish that role to the civil government.

Our Practical Reasons for Concern

We also have three practical concerns with this public health order.

First, the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as a part of Canada's constitution, guarantees the freedom of conscience and religion, the freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, and the freedom of peaceful assembly for all Canadians. We stress that the *Charter* does not ultimately grant these freedoms to us. Rather, the Constitution recognizes freedoms that are granted by God and constrains the civil government from violating these

freedoms. The preamble of the *Charter* recognizes this reality using the words “Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God.” By forbidding corporate worship services, this public health order infringes on the constitutional rights of Christians and of churches in a manner that we do not believe is “reasonable in a free and democratic society.”

Second, worship services are arbitrarily limited to a greater degree compared to other activities. Up to 50 people may still attend formal meetings. Virtually all for-profit businesses – grocery stores, retail stores, airlines – may continue to operate, provided that they have a safe plan of operation, while worship services, irrespective of the precautions taken, are prohibited. Throughout the pandemic, while larger businesses have been allowed proportionally greater numbers of people in their facilities at one time, larger churches have been treated with the same limits as smaller churches. This has disproportionately disadvantaged even greater numbers of citizens from attending their places of worship.

Further, although worship services have been regulated and considered to be the same as mass gatherings, events, or social gatherings, the purpose and nature of worship services is distinct from all other activities. Worship services are fundamentally different than birthday parties, social outings with friends, concerts, or sporting events. The current public health order, and every previous health order, save for perhaps the regional orders enacted earlier in November, fails to acknowledge these differences.

Third, instances of COVID-19 transmission at worship services in British Columbia have been infrequent. Local churches could give greater consideration to the government’s order to temporarily halt worship services if the government could demonstrate with data that Christian worship services were major spreaders of COVID-19 over the past 8 months. To date, there is scant evidence – only one or two instances to the best of our knowledge – where COVID-19 has spread at worship services. Without evidence that worship services are significant contributors to the rise in COVID-19 cases province-wide, the current health order is far too broad.

Our Request and Intentions

In light of these biblical and practical issues, we, as local church leadership and local church governments, are writing to inform you of the following items of concern. We sincerely believe that this approach demonstrates our respect for the civil government, our concerns about the transmission of COVID-19, and our duty to continue to worship.

1. **We request that the government immediately rescind this restriction on worship services.** It is our sincere desire to obey the provincial government in all things lawful. We have no desire to contravene the health orders or engage in civil disobedience if it can be avoided.
2. **We will comply with this health order until its original expiry date on December 7th.** If this order is not rescinded, you will put us in a very difficult position in which we will seriously consider resuming in-person worship services after December 7th regardless of the health orders. We have been informed by Constitutional lawyers that the current

orders are not lawful and we believe that any penalties incurred will not be upheld in a court of law. If we do re-open services, we will continue to take numerous reasonable precautions to limit the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission. Be assured that we take both the spiritual *and* physical, emotional, mental, and social health of our members and communities extremely seriously.

3. **If there is an outbreak of COVID-19 originating at our local church, we will work closely with health authorities** to ensure the safety of our members.

We hope this letter clarifies our position and intentions. We wish to express our thankfulness for the many months of restraint in restrictions on corporate worship which allowed us to gather together in a limited way. We hope this respect for religious freedom can be restored, and respectful dialogue maintained between our institutions.

May God bless you and grant you wisdom as you continue to lead our province through these extraordinary times.

Respectfully submitted,

New West Community Church