

May 14, 2020

The Honourable Scott Moe
Premier of Saskatchewan
Room 226, 2405 Legislative Drive
Regina, Saskatchewan
CANADA S4S 0B3

Dear Mr. Moe,

Warm greetings.

Out of concern for our fellow citizens and neighbours, faith groups and houses of worship in Saskatchewan showed initiative and leadership in addressing the COVID-19 situation, suspending their activities and closing their doors before they were required to do so. The current Re-open Saskatchewan plan addresses commerce and recreation but does not address spiritual gatherings. There are increasing tensions within our communities, and pressure on leaders to make decisions about what we can and cannot do at the present. These questions and decisions go beyond permission to gather up to ten people in a worship space. We are concerned that without clear communication and directives there will be well-intentioned but misguided decisions at the local level as well as outright rogue behaviour.

Faith is an important aspect of the Saskatchewan community. Census figures indicate that 75% of Saskatchewan residents consciously affiliate with a religious or spiritual tradition. For many, religious observance is a daily or weekly occurrence, thus necessitating some consideration of religious gatherings within the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan.

With this in mind, Saskatchewan faith leaders recently gathered in consultation. We represent diverse traditions, including the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, and Unitarian communities, and the following Christian churches: Alliance, Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical, Lutheran (ELCIC and LCC), Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Ukrainian Catholic, and the United Church of Canada. We represent communities that are large and small, urban and rural. All told, we represent at least 700,000 Saskatchewan residents.

Mr. Premier, while religious services may not be deemed "essential" services in an official sense, the ministries that we provide are vitally important for the health and well-being of the people of Saskatchewan. Day-by-day and week-by-week the religious communities of our province provide support, encouragement, and hope to people whose circumstances are sometimes very difficult. Through prayer, worship, fellowship, mission, and service we both support our adherents and make valuable contributions to the wider community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not ceased these activities. While we quickly closed our doors to physical gatherings, ensuring that we did not contribute to the spread of the virus, we swiftly moved our activities online and continued to provide spiritual support and encouragement to the people of Saskatchewan in all kinds of safe and creative ways. Still, the health and vitality of our religious communities will be hampered by an extended period of being unable to gather together physically. Some are struggling financially as well and could be in danger of having to close permanently if the period of closure continues for many more months. Many people in our province are also struggling with isolation, loneliness, and even despair. In addition, many of our facilities serve critical areas of need by making their spaces available to groups such as AA and important youth programs. We are limited in the support we can offer them online and through the telephone, so we must not unnecessarily delay the reopening of religious facilities.

The wide range of faith community activities that are currently suspended, and the variance in sizes of our places of worship, lead to a wide range of questions and challenges that we would like to raise. We have asked all of the faith leaders of Saskatchewan to send their questions, requests and proposals to us so that a delegation can bring these into dialogue with you.

With all this in mind:

Will the Government of Saskatchewan work with us to bring faith groups, their work, and gatherings, within the Re-Open Plan? In order to ensure clear and concise communication in the future, would the Government of Saskatchewan provide an appropriate point person with whom we can consult and communicate directly and work jointly as we reengage and resume faith services, or create an ad hoc or standing advisory committee that would include faith leaders to that same end?

Sincerely yours,

Most Rev. Donald Bolen, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina

Rev. Amanda Currie, Synod of Saskatchewan, Presbyterian Church in Canada

Rev. Tricia Gerhard, Living Skies Regional Council Executive, United Church of Canada

Rt. Revd. Michael Hawkins, Anglican Diocese of Saskatchewan

Rabbi Jeremy Parnes, Beth Jacob Synagogue, Regina

Imam Ilyas Sidyot, Islamic Association of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon) Inc.

Rev. Bernie Van De Walle, District Superintendent, Canadian Midwest District of the Christian & Missionary Alliance Church

on behalf of the Consultation of Faith Leaders of Saskatchewan, May 7, 2020

cc. Dr. Ryan Meili, Leader of the Official Opposition
encl. list of Faith Leaders of Saskatchewan