

Greetings NAC family.

Recently – as most of you know - the Ontario government lifted some restrictions on how churches gather. We're finding out it's not quite as straight forward as it sounds, but more on that in a minute. So, let me just cut to the chase

Like many churches in our area, we have not been and are not planning on holding weekend services in our building, nor any other in-person event that can't meet the health and safety guidelines in place during this Covid crisis.

Currently, there are no other churches in Newmarket relative to our size or larger that are preparing to open any time soon. That may change, but you should know we've been in touch with some other pastors in our area and this is a generally shared strategy to opening as well.

Why? Well there are a few guiding principles in play:

From the very beginning, our cooperation with requests from health officials has been about gladly and joyfully loving our neighbor. We are called by God to treat others as we would want to be treated, and to serve and love those around us. Unnecessarily spreading this virus, or putting people at greater risk for contracting it, is simply not a demonstration of the love of Jesus.

Sadly, it feels like the reopening of churches can become partisan, either politically or theologically which is disappointing and very unhelpful. Reopening should not be about left or right leanings. Nor is our decision an exhibition of fear or the lack of faith;

A few of our staff were given a very helpful illustration from a PLAN TO PROTECT reopening training they participated in last week.

Helping to characterize us by the three colours of a stoplight. Some of us are in the red light category. There's no way, no how, that we are going to darken the door of a public indoor service while this danger is still remotely imminent. In fact, we might consider staying apart until a vaccine is ready.

Others of us might be in the "green light" grouping of people. We feel like "let's get this going. When are the doors open. Let's get to worshipping and hugging...come on."

Maybe some of us are in the yellow light category. We're like "OK... I'm open to meeting but what's your plan? How are you ensuring safety? What are the steps we need to take? Convince me that this is a wise decision."

I just want to say that no matter what group you most identify with, I affirm you where you're at. OK? You're not wrong. Each of us have different health issues and family situations and comfort levels. Every region it seems has different threat levels and protocols. York region is very different from southwest Ontario or Halton or Kawartha. Every congregation has a unique demographic makeup (which is why you'll never hear us disparaging another church because they have a different strategy than us).

So we are trying to respect those differences and determine our guiding principles not by what we are ***technically allowed*** to do but rather we are guided by the principles of what is the wisest, safest and most loving thing to do for our NAC family and our community at large.

Now let's just get real for a second. Even if we were bound and determined to reopen this Sunday there's not much to "open" to. Here are some of the regulations and recommendations we would have to adhere to:

- social distancing of at least six feet, beginning in the parking lot
- * a mere 30% maximum of our seating capacity can be used
- we have to forgo all physical contact—no hugs, handshakes, fist bumps or even elbow bumps
- wear face coverings
- no children's ministry (kids must stay with their parents)
- no singing nor being sung to
- no collective recitations or spoken words (e.g., reciting liturgy or praying together out loud)
- no passing of anything, from the elements of the Lord's Supper to the taking up of an offering
- No paperwork in the seats like bulletins or envelopes
- No food or even precious COFFEE is recommend.

So some work needs to be done regarding creatively having a church experience that – quite frankly – isn't a major letdown, which is exactly what some of the churches in the States are reporting.

Another thing - and this is where it can get kind of confusing - while churches are exempt from many size restrictions, people are still encouraged NOT to engage in gatherings. In Ontario that's currently defined as 10 people indoors. So while it seems like a generous concession to the church and people of faith, it's not allowed in any other capacity right now.

I have to say this too. When we use the term "reopen", what does that really mean? Since when did we close? NAC is still robust and active. Ministry is still happening. And God help us if what it means to "be" or "do" church is ever reduced to simply weekend services. I like how Rick Warren put it recently

"Our buildings have been closed, but the church is not a building! We are a living, breathing body. The church is a family, not a fortress! We are a people, not a place! We're an army of servants, not an event of attenders. The church operates 168 hours a week!"

I'm a far cry from Rick Warren, but you have to admit that's a bell I've been ringing for the last 2 1/2 years... "Jesus has LEFT THE BUILDING... Go and BE the church"

NAC has never been "closed" in the past 3 months - far from it. Some ministries have paused, some have started, most have adjusted but good things continue to happen. Lives are being touched. People are being ministered to. NEW folks are discovering Newmarket Alliance and hearing the gospel. Know as well that we are committed to continue weekly online services even AFTER the pandemic. We're far from closed.

And because of your faithfulness and generosity, we are experiencing great stability and even financial strength. Thank you.

So we don't feel the pressure to gather as though that were directly tied to our financial support. I think speaks to the maturity and health of NAC and even a willingness to pivot to digital methods of giving. Thank you church. I'm so proud.

So for now, and for us, we must remember that one of the fruits of the Spirit is patience (Galatians 5:22). And we are going to be patient until the time is truly right and wise to reopen our physical doors to weekend gatherings

OK, this is all well and good but what is the plan? Because regardless of the timeline, every business, every non-profit, every school has to start thinking through steps of what it means to reopen. All the planning, all the purchases all the facility preparation, the protocols and procedures, the teams of volunteers it needs... it's going to take some time.

So our Board of elders and staff met together this week over Zoom and we are AIMING for a first Sunday in September - September 6th - to have in place all the procedures in which we feel confident to safely open for weekend services. All of this of course may change with circumstances as you know.

Right now we are currently assembling a team of people and ministry department leaders and medical and Board liaisons to bring together the policies, procedures and guidelines in which we feel we can safely open.

Supplies will likely need to be ordered. Our insurance company needs to be consulted. There are facility issues. Cleaning issues. Children's issues. There are many spinning plates obviously.

BUT, I want to say this as well... we ALSO see an opportunity though for smaller groups to potentially start using the facility PRIOR to that September re-launch. Smaller groups have infinitely less pragmatic issues to deal with. So, could groups like ROCK, YOUNG ADULTS, some sort of Sunday night prayer meeting, our Spanish Church NACE, begin meeting at our facility sooner? We think they can, assuming proper guidelines and protocols and safety are still met.

This isolation has been difficult on so many of us, but youth have been hit hard by this... especially as a tight knit group. They are a low risk demographic, they know how to social distance and the numbers can be managed much easier. So there is an opportunity perhaps for a group of their size to meet sooner, IF and only IF, all the safety protocols are met. OK, I hope that gives some of you some hope that the "wheels are in motion".

Parents, while the restrictions of Children's ministry is particularly strict, Pastor Kris is working through options right now about how we can serve your kids — and let's be honest, you as parents — in some sort of mid-week capacity, perhaps in family "units" of 3 at a time up to a maximum of 10 kids -that sort of thing. We have not forgotten about kids. Far from it. Kids and their parents are frankly who we are praying for the MOST these days.

Church, I know this has been a really hard time. Some of you NEED people more than ever. It's becoming critical isn't it. So I want you to know we take that seriously and while all these reopening protocols are being worked on over the summer, simultaneously we are looking to create many opportunities for more small group communities — chances perhaps to meet safely at people's homes, so that is very much on our radar as well. Perhaps you even feel a new "calling" to be a small group host in these days. Please let us know.

In the meantime, can I ask that you would pray for us. Pray that we could assemble teams of people to help with the work ahead. Pray that we would continue to actually grow our reach and influence in the middle of a pandemic. Pray that we would stamp out this virus once and for all. Would you pray for our

leadership team? We just feel the burden of serving you well and doing the right thing before God. We would really be grateful for those prayers.

If you have any questions or concerns about this, don't be afraid to reach out... email, call. Someone will get back to you to discuss.

You are a loved people.

Jonathan