

PROVIDENCE

Free Reformed Church

P.O. Box 534, St. George, Ontario N0E 1N0

December 22, 2020

Province of Ontario

Dear Honourable Premier D. Ford,

Each Sunday as Providence Free Reformed Church gathers for worship, we pray for our political and civic leaders. We recognize that their task is from God (Romans 13) and that the church is called to uphold them in prayer (I Timothy 2:2). The challenge of governing is difficult, especially in this pandemic context in which many decisions need to be made with less than complete and conflicting information. We commend you for your public service and commitment to the common good.

Although civic leaders have their sphere of God-given responsibility, so do church leaders. On May 7th, we sent you a letter concerned about the continuing spring lockdowns, highlighting how important public, in-person worship was for the church. Religious services, in our respectful submission, are “essential.” Since then, we have had ongoing dialogue with both provincial and municipal officials responsible for the enforcement of regulations. We have held in-person worship and ministries since June 14th, with Risk Mitigation Protocols in place, and thankfully no Covid issues have arisen in our context.

Our decision-making as church leaders has been informed throughout this process by three principles.

1. Our duty to love our neighbour requires that we take all responsible action to ensure the health and safety of all who gather with us as well as the community at large.
2. We recognize and show deference to the legitimate authority of civic government as it regards matters of public health.
3. The obligation to call the congregation to gather in worship is a biblical imperative and we will maximize the opportunity to gather, preferably in a physical manner.

The occasion for this letter is the provincial lockdown that has been announced to take effect December 26, 2020. It had been our intention to commence four services per Sunday effective January 10, 2021 so as to enable us to better serve the needs of our congregation. We have decided to suspend these plans and to continue our compliance with the government requirements. While doing so, however, we want to bring various matters to your attention.

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As you consider what steps will be required in the new year, we ask you to consider the following.

- 1. The Imperative for Christian worship.** We gather each Sunday for worship not simply out of love toward God but also because it is essential to our spiritual health and in response to God's command 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). Although we are thankful for on-line services for those times we cannot meet in person, it is not the same as in-person worship. Important aspects of our worship including the administration of baptism, celebration of the Lord's Supper, singing with the congregation and fellowshiping with other believers does not occur through on-line worship.
- 2. Health involves more than our bodies.** We recognize the very real threat that Covid represents for our public health and have seriously taken our responsibilities to ensure that our own activities are carried out in a responsible and safe manner. Without minimizing the real health risks, however, we would also point out (as you well know and understand) that the impact of lockdowns is also significant. We are concerned about the mental, social, and spiritual impacts of continued lockdowns, which are evident within the community at large and also in our own congregation. We are also concerned about the impact of lockdowns on the church and her members carrying out their duties to care for aging parents (Mark 7:9-13; I Tim 5:3-8), tend for the sick (James 5:14); to visit and encourage the lonely (Matthew 25:34-40; Hebrews 13:1-3); to comfort the mourning (Proverbs 18:14, Romans 12:15); to rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15); to love the orphan or foster child and their family (James 1:27); feed the hungry (Psalm 112, Matthew 5:42) and assist the addict (I Cor 10:13-14; Titus 2:12-15, Hebrews 4:15-16). We cannot responsibly make decisions looking only at the Covid impacts without considering the other impacts.
- 3. The constitutional protection for freedom of conscience and religion.** We are citizens as well as church leaders and we understand that you are hearing concerns about the economic and other social impacts that lockdowns are having on society. There are many valid concerns for you to weigh. However, we would point out that the importance of worship is protected as a fundamental right in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The bar is higher for a government to restrict the religious rights of Canadians than other rights. The legal advice we have received is that although the courts would likely find that a lockdown is a reasonable infringement of religious liberty in the context of a pandemic, the court (especially as time goes on and more is

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known) may find that lockdown requirements on churches do not meet the “minimal impairment” or “proportionality” tests, especially when other activities (that are not constitutionally protected) are allowed to continue within the same broader context.

As noted, we have a high view of the role of government and will not lightly disregard any provisions that apply to churches out of respect for your office. However, that regard must be balanced with our own responsibilities as church leaders to facilitate the worship and service of the church. All of this must be done with a high regard for the health of all, which includes spiritual, mental, social health and physical health.

We would welcome continued dialogue on this matter and urge that as you consider the transition from our current lock-down provision, we ask that weight be given to these matters. The calling of the church in the midst of society is an important one, not just for believers, but for society as a whole and is one that has historically and constitutionally been acknowledged. We thank you in advance for carefully considering these matters, even as we continue to commit to pray for you that God may grant you wisdom in discharging your important responsibilities.

Respectfully submitted,

Providence Free Reformed Church

St. George Ontario

Ray Pennings

Chair

Hans VanDoodewaard

Clerk