



Before Re-Gathering, Consider...

EMCC pastors and churches may be asking, “Does EMCC have any policy or directives related to re-opening churches for gathering?” Because our church family extends across this beautiful country, first and foremost, ***we encourage all churches to follow provincial guidelines with care.***

Every context will be different, so decisions and details will vary across our constituency. We encourage pastors and boards to take a prayerful and thoughtful approach – prioritizing the welfare of those you serve. We remain focused on “spreading” the Way, Truth and Life of Jesus, not the virus. While the EMCC National Team is not planning to prepare extensive directives, we are available to coach you through your unique context. Contact your Regional Minister.

This crisis is real. One of our pastors, Jay Chowdhury shares his journey. Pastor Jay was hospitalized with Covid-19 for 47 days. He spent 16 of those days on a ventilator. He returned home this week. He believes God spared his life. There was a time when the doctors were giving up but God intervened. He came home with a walker and he prayed that God would heal him. He has started walking again. He is still recovering but is thrilled to be home with his family and can’t stop praising the Lord.

This crisis has birthed some amazing creativity, new and stronger connections between followers of Jesus and those searching for hope, conversations around what matters, and leaders resourcing fellow leaders. One leader has described this season as responding to Jesus’ invitation to “cast the nets on the other side of the boat.”

There is talk of “waves” coming in this pandemic. Each province has developed “phases” to reopening. In the midst of paying attention to these updates, we commend the framework below to help guide discussions about next steps:

Reacting and Debriefing

All of us have had to react to the directives of health officials. We applaud our EMCC leaders for rising to the challenge... pivoting, innovating, shepherding, connecting and broadcasting. This pandemic and our subsequent reactions have had a ripple effect with varied emotions being expressed. Through it all we testify to God’s outpouring of grace, understanding, and daily strength. By now, new rhythms of ministry are in place. *We encourage local church leaders to host a Zoom call to “debrief” your experience so far.* Along with needed encouragement, this conversation may yield valuable insights should we suddenly need to react again, in the future. This exercise will be helpful in building a proactive “organizational/ministry continuity plan” for future emergencies.

Resting and Reflecting

Following the example of Jesus, we must learn rhythms of abiding and fruit bearing... of work and rest. Jesus worked from a place of rest, not to the point of exhaustion. There are dangers in rushing to re-gather. Lack of preparation could prove costly. More importantly, the necessary need for rest and reflection could be bypassed, even trampled over. We should not underestimate the energy that has been drained from us. Frankly, most pastors are exhausted from navigating change and family realities. If our church leaders don't have an opportunity to rest, we are headed for an unintended consequence. Church member expectations are real but so is leader exhaustion. We encourage church boards to pay attention to this matter.

Further, a rush to re-gathering may actually send us "back to Egypt," rather than moving into the new opportunities and new normal the Spirit has for us as a church community. This may be a time for a "virtual retreat" as church leaders - a dedicated opportunity to prayerfully reflect on what Jesus is saying about how to be the church today. It is generally agreed that returning to "the way things were" is not practical or actually preferred. As leaders, we would do well to take some reflection time to consider what we have learned and what new initiatives have served the church well. Perhaps a "hybrid" model will emerge that incorporates some valued existing ways *and* some new ways of being the church. *We encourage church leadership teams to prioritize reflection together before moving on.*

Re-gathering while Remaining Flexible

"Reopening churches" is not the right terminology. "The Church" has remained open all along... serving our neighbours, connecting, caring, and sharing Jesus. This season has reminded us that "Church" is not building-dependent or Sunday-only centric. We are the Church - whether gathered, or scattered. Considering how to safely gather is part of good stewardship. We encourage church leaders to prayerfully consider all scenarios, to be mindful of the vulnerable we serve, to network with nearby churches and review many good resources that are being produced by other leaders about their particular plans and experience - remembering every context is unique. And also remembering, we may have to pivot again to address a new developing reality. *We encourage church boards and pastors to proactively develop an agreed-upon "re-gathering" plan.*

In all of our plans, we rely on the Lord to direct our steps.

John Cressman, on behalf of the EMCC National Team