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Coronavirus in Canada

Total cases: 86,613 | Active: 34,731 | Recovered: 45,245 | Deceased: 6,637

CALGARY

'I would do anything for a do-over': Calgary church hopes others learn from their tragic COVID-19 experience

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Published Sunday, May 10, 2020 8:12PM MDT

Last Updated Monday, May 11, 2020 8:06AM MDT



Church congregation
speaks after COVID-19
outbreak



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CALGARY -- Members of a Calgary church ravaged by COVID-19 in the early days of the pandemic are sharing their stories of grief and healing, after Alberta's chief medical health officer cited them as a cautionary tale.

"I had the opportunity recently to talk to a faith leader whose faith community gathered together in mid-March before many of our public health measures were in place," Dr Deena Hinshaw said Thursday. "The congregation had a worship service and then gathered together for a celebratory social event. There were only 41 people present, and they were careful to observe two meter distancing and good hand hygiene. They followed all the rules and did nothing wrong. "

Despite that, 24 of the 41 people at the party ended up infected. Two of them died.

Rev. Shannon Mang is the minister of Living Spirit United Church.

"One of our most beloved members was having a very important birthday and we wanted to celebrate that," Mang said of the post-service celebration. "Under the circumstances, we thought we were going to be safe. We were very diligent about physical distancing, very diligent about hand hygiene."

Though the church has capacity for 200 people, fewer than 50 were at the event - well within the public health rules of the time.

Food was served but everyone handling it wore gloves.

"We were very careful and then a week later, we learned of the first person who was diagnosed with COVID-19," explained Mang. "A few days later we had the second, and the third and within a week there were about 14. Within two weeks, there were 24 of the 41 people who had been there that day.

"The overwhelming emotion was shock."

Shannon Morey attends the church with her mom and dad and all three were at the party that day. She never got sick, but both of her parents did.

"My mom thought she had a sinus infection, then a day later my dad thought he had a cold."

Her father Dennis was admitted to the hospital on April 3 and the ICU two days later. Three weeks after that, he died.

He was 81 but, according to his family, still very active.

"He was out shoveling the walk just days before he got sick and looking forward to planting his garden," said Shannon.

Other church members organized a vigil in his memory with more than 100 people dropping off candles outside his house, one at a time.

The church also held online wakes for members who died, allowing the community to grieve virtually.

"That was so important because COVID-19 interrupts our traditions," said Mang. "The food at the house, being able to stay and visit and to cry together and tell stories together and laugh and show pictures.

"All that stuff that we want to do, we can't do. So having an online wake helped."

Mang also says she struggles with her decision to proceed with the party.

"It's really tough. Me personally I've had to keep working through this," she said. "We were working with the information that we had at the time, but I would do anything for a do-over. It's very very hard to live with this reality."

Mang says the church has been devastated by the aftermath of the infection spreading among members and she wants others to learn from their experience.

"We don't want another organization or faith community to go through what we've been through," said Mang. "It's really, really hard. There seems to be this huge divide between those who've experienced (COVID-19) and the majority who haven't.

"If you haven't experienced it, you are so lucky. You have no idea how fortunate you are."

Even as public health restrictions start to loosen, Mang is encouraging people not to rush.

"Think about the oldest person that you hang out with and visit and take care of. Are you willing to give them up?"

It still isn't clear how the virus entered the church in the first place since none of the infected had travelled or knowingly encountered an infected person in the days before their last gathering together.

It's suspected the virus may have breached the church a day earlier when a large choir was using the facility.

Health officials say they likely will never know how it was transmitted there - and that's fine with Shannon Morey.

"I don't want to know," said Morey. "When bad things happen people want to be angry and direct anger at something but if I were that person who brought it in, I would feel terrible."

Meanwhile, Reverend Mang says she doesn't know when her congregation will meet inside their church again.

"We are not going back to what we were because we never will be what we were. We lost two really important members. We lost something but hope this experience will help us grow into something new - I hope a new more loving and caring community."

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