



The United Church of Canada

Living Skies Regional Council

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8 September 2020

Dear Clergy, Staff, and Congregants of Living Skies Regional Council,

September greetings to you. The weather is slowly cooling reminding us that the shifting of seasons is once again upon us. The fall is usually a time of energy and activity for the pastoral charges around our region. I say “usually” as this fall presents us with a continued pandemic situation that has many of us evaluating whether or not we will be returning to worship, let alone the start up of programs and events. It’s a challenging time for our churches and for us. The decisions made to re-opening our churches for in person worship and activities have not been taken lightly, and I am proud of the care our pastoral charges are taking in making their decisions.

I know there can be lots (or little) pressure to re-open based on congregational members missing their in-person community, or because most of the other churches in town have opened. It is hard to be the one church amongst many – either in cities or in rural areas – to decide not to re-open until much later or to offer limited in person opportunities when other churches are fully operational. While the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) continues to state in their guidelines that remote worship and events are recommended, there is the acknowledgment that churches are free to make their own decisions based on the SHA guidelines for worship.

As I write this, the COVID cases in Saskatchewan are low, especially when compared to our neighbour provinces. This can lead to a sense of reassurance that has us lowering our vigilance. COVID exhaustion is real, and can be a challenge when making plans for our churches. So I urge you to use caution, and to weigh the potential risks to your congregation.

For the past months, the Region has been recommending the use of remote worship. Following the SHA guidelines, remote worship continues to be the safest way to keep our congregations safe, physically so we continue to recommend this. However, in-person worship may be a source of support for those struggling with their mental health during the pandemic, reminding us that our churches

play many roles in the lives of our members and our communities. Knowing this, re-opening for some form of in-person worship might be the choice your congregation makes. If your congregation/pastoral charge makes the decision to resume in-person worship, the Region recommends meeting or exceeding the SHA's guidelinesⁱ. If you are considering Sunday School re-opening, please refer to the guidelines for Day Caresⁱⁱ and Day Campsⁱⁱⁱ. These last two sets of guidelines will need to be adapted for your congregational context and for the children's program you offer.

Regardless of the decision your pastoral charge and community of faith makes, please hold in mind and heart that the church, our church, is not just the building. The church and the community it builds, and the faith that it holds cannot be restricted by walls or technology. God's presence is evident in each of you, in how you live and love in your daily living, and in your interactions with others.

Yes, we miss seeing and being with our communities of faith. Yes, this "new normal" worship of physical distance, no hugs, no singing, and masks is hard. Yes, church isn't what it used to be. But we are. We are the same – resilient, creative, and faithful. May you remember that as we journey together through this pandemic time – for we might not be on the same boat, but we are all in the same storm.

Blessings and peace,

Rev. Tricia Gerhard

Chair of Living Skies Regional Council Executive

ⁱ <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/re-open-saskatchewan-plan/guidelines/places-of-worship-guidelines>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/re-open-saskatchewan-plan/guidelines/child-care-facilities-guidelines>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/re-open-saskatchewan-plan/guidelines/child-and-youth-day-camp-guidelines>