



The United Church of Canada Living Skies Regional Council

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Moose Jaw, SK S6H 0L2

To the clergy, lay leaders and members of Living Skies Region,

As we mark the first anniversary of the arrival of COVID-19 on the world stage, I write to you on behalf of the Living Skies Regional Council Executive. We are reaching out to you, as members of this Regional Council, in response to some information that has made its way to the Executive.

In late January, during a gathering of the Faith Leaders Task Group (the working group consulting with the Business Response Team of the Provincial Government), a website (www.freedom2c.com) was brought to our attention. The goal of this group is: *“organize churches and other groups in Canada, and also around the world, to exercise their fundamental rights as individuals and organizations to assemble peacefully, and in the cases of churches, to worship. We urge those who stand with us to sign up and begin meeting regularly starting on February 28, 2021 and continue to meet regularly from then on. The purpose of this is to push back against illegal government restrictions that prevent the exercise of this right.”*ⁱ

This group has roots in Saskatchewan and is arguing that the current restrictions for places of worship (gatherings limited to 30 people in particular) contravene the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, particularly the section 2c – the right to gather peacefully. They are calling for churches to protest the restrictions by breaking them, not just on February 28 but every Sunday going forward.

The frustration with the current pandemic situation is clear. We are all dealing with some level of frustration with the restrictions and the seeming unendingness of the pandemic. The Executive hears you and echoes those same frustrations. However, holding Sunday worship services that do not comply with the current health orders is risky and irresponsible. The Executive has reached out with this information so that you can be aware of the current situation and to let you know that we do not condone the call to action that this (and other) groups have issued.

Executive Chairperson, Tricia Gerhard, was on a call with 1300 other clergy and faith leaders across the country with Dr. Teresa Tam last week. This call was to engage faith leaders of all world faiths in information regarding the vaccine and ways that faith communities can help in the fight against COVID-19. During the session, Tricia asked Dr. Tam how faith communities could help making information known in our congregations. Her answer was simple: “make sure you are using trustworthy sources for information.”

Holding this in mind, the Executive would like to share the following information regarding the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and COVID-19 restrictions. Groups like Freedom2c would argue that the current restrictions are illegal according to the Charter. However, the Charter itself says in Section 1: *“The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society”*ⁱⁱ This means that the government can impose whatever laws it can deem as necessary to protect the broader public interest.ⁱⁱⁱ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government is able to legally impose restrictions in order to maintain and protect public health and safety.

In an article in the Edmonton Journal (November 2020), Eric Adams, a professor of Law and a Constitutional expert at the University of Alberta made the following comment in response to arguments in Alberta that the restrictions on communities of faith contravened the Charter of Rights: “a law declaring that you can no longer practice your religion in Alberta is much different than one saying a religious group cannot gather for a ceremony in large numbers.”^{iv}

Here’s what we need you take away from all of this information: compliance to the health mandates is essential. It is our place as a community of faith to uphold and comply to the health mandates as they are law. Yes, it is frustrating. Yes, it is exhausting. But trustworthy and reliable sources tell us time and again that these restrictions are in place to slow the transmission and infection rates of COVID-19. As leaders in our communities, it is essential that we model appropriate responses to the mandates, and to groups like Freedom2c, in order to show that the health of our family, friends and neighbours is at the forefront of what we do. The current restrictions are not unconstitutional, they are not illegal, and they do not keep us from living out our faith. Gathering without compliance to the health mandates risks financial fines from the government (which is a congregation’s responsibility to pay) and COVID-19 exposure which can lead to illness and death.

People of Living Skies Region, we know that this has gone on longer than we ever imagined it would. But there is hope – a vaccine is ready and making its way across the province and country. It will take time until we see a return to what is considered normal. So be strong, do the very best you can to keep safe, and reach out for support if you need it.

It’s been a challenging year. A year of swift change, lots of learning, and moments of great hope. We all have been shaped by our experiences during the pandemic. Throughout the challenges and change, one thing has been consistent: the presence of the Holy. Creator has been living and loving through you in all the decisions and shifts, in the reaching out and the being apart. We are not alone. Thanks be for that.

Sincerely,

Tricia Gerhard, Executive chair

Rob Reed, Regional Council Meeting Convenor,

Brian Maitland Donna Brown

Cameron Fraser Dave Whalley

Linda Gunningham Yugene Oh

Dave Whalley Tim Ellis

Ron Brandow

ⁱ Quote taken from www.freedom2c.com

ⁱⁱ <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/pch/documents/services/download-order-charter-bill/canadian-charter-rights-freedoms-eng.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Avnish Nanda, lawyer and constitutional law professor, University of Alberta.

<https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/stronger-covid-19-restrictions-in-alberta-not-forbidden-by-the-charter-legal-experts>

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