

COVID considerations – September 15, 2021

Checklist for Communities of Faith in Living Skies Regional Council

Communities of Faith within Living Skies Regional Council are responsible for decision-making and policy-development within the particular context of their ministry. While the Regional Council Executive and staff can offer assistance with interpretation, it is the authority of each community of faith to discern appropriately their own recommendations for the safety and comfort of in-person worship and the use of your buildings. These recommendations must be within the requirements of the provincial health authority and the provincial government.

All provincially mandated restrictions have been lifted at this time. Please keep this in mind while discerning the next steps your congregation will be taking. Here is a list of considerations to include in your decision-making:

1. Can we require people coming to worship or into our buildings to wear a mask?

- Although masking is no longer required under the public health order, some people may still wish to wear masks based on their own risk assessment and comfort level depending on the circumstances. The Regional Council recommends masking as a means to lower the risk of transmission in your community of faith and would urge you to make this mandatory for in-person worship and for any groups meeting in your building.

2. Can we require people coming to worship be vaccinated?

- Cynthia Gunn, General Council Office legal counsel, has provided some [guidance](#) to help answer this question. The Regional Council cannot mandate vaccines in local communities of faith – this is an individual decision. You will need to take into consideration many factors, including the demographics of your community of faith (i.e. children are not eligible yet), the rate in the wider community, and how you would monitor this.

3. What is the vaccination rate in your community?

- Experts now suggest that a vaccination rate of 85% is ideal to help contain the spread. We can extrapolate that the number of people who have received both doses of the vaccine in the community will be roughly the same in our communities of faith. Compare the demographics of your community of faith to the statistics to ensure you are reading the right numbers – e.g. if the average age in your community of faith is 50, ensure that 85% of the people over the age of 50 in your community have been vaccinated. Continue to be vaccine enthusiasts.

4. Is there a high number of vulnerable people in your community of faith?

- People with other health issues that might contribute to a higher risk for contracting the virus, as well as those who are unable or have chosen not to be vaccinated, will be reluctant to return to in-person worship. Make a special effort to welcome them.

5. What requirements exist for cleaning or physical distancing?

- Although physical distancing is no longer required, consider spacing and separation for those attending. All washrooms and commonly touched surfaces should continue to receive enhanced cleaning and disinfection. Staff and volunteers should be aware of public health prevention practices, such as proper sanitization, interaction etiquette and emergency response protocol.

6. Are there user groups in your building who may contribute to or be fearful of an increased risk of spread?

- The number of different groups of people using the building will have an impact on your cleaning protocol. Re-visit the re-opening guidelines written last fall to ensure commonly touched surfaces are cleaned properly. Develop or share protocols for user groups/ rentals so that expectations are clear both for user groups and community of faith members.

7. How will we include the people who do not feel safe enough to return to in-person worship at this time?

- Communities of faith have navigated this pandemic in a variety of ways. You will likely want to continue offering an alternative for people who are fearful of the 4th wave, who are unable or choose not to get the vaccine, or who feel uncomfortable returning to a space with other people. Remember that this will add an additional burden on ministry staff and worship leadership so be sure to support one another.

8. How will we include the people who want to return to in-person worship but want to continue to observe the public health guidelines for physical distancing and mask-wearing?

- It will take an abundance of grace and compassion to ensure everyone feels safe. Some communities of faith are creating separate zones in the worship space that are designated for distancing. Consult the people in your community to see how they might feel included.

9. Can we do the things we love, like singing, having communion, passing the peace, sharing a meal?

- Technically, yes. Proceed with caution. There are risks associated with each of these activities and so you may wish to begin slowly. The virus has not been eliminated from our province; the Delta variant is now causing cases to rise exponentially. Pay attention to the current Provincial health guidelines as you make decisions as they continue to shift with the shifting vaccination rates and active case rates. You may want to ease into these rituals and sacraments. Start slowly: give the peace sign during passing the peace; start with coffee time before heading straight into sharing a potluck meal. Take time to reintroduce the things that have been missing and can be a source of anxiety for some.

10. How do we ensure that our ministry personnel, lay staff, and volunteers are safe and supported?

- Your minister and the lay leaders in your community of faith have offered leadership in ways and styles that were un-imaginable 18 months ago. Following [the COVID-19 prevention](#)

[basics](#) will help ensure a safe place for all. Check in with your leaders to see what they might need in order to feel safe and supported. You cannot be held liable if someone contracts COVID while attending an event or worship in your building if you have developed and are following a plan that is consistent with the current provincial health guidelines.

11. What do we do if there is a positive COVID case within the congregation? What do we do about contact tracing?

- If there is a positive case in the congregation, please remember to protect the privacy of the COVID-positive person. Act with compassion. Consider sending a message to the congregation that explains that there was a case, and that all who attended the meeting or worship on that particular day should monitor for symptoms. The guidelines for a close contact of someone who is fully vaccinated and someone who is not are different. Please follow the current Public Health Order.

If you have further questions or concerns, please contact Tricia Gerhard, our representative to the Faith Leaders team at srcexecutive@gmail.com or Tracy Murton, Pastoral Relations Minister tmurton@united-church.ca.