



The United Church of Canada

Living Skies Regional Council

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Dear friends,

Advent greetings. I wish I was just writing a letter with pastoral seasonal greetings and blessings, but alas, I need to update you on some changes in the current Saskatchewan Health Authority's COVID guidelines for places of worship.

It has come to my attention that changes have been made regarding the places of worship exemption to the Proof of Vaccination mandate. Information regarding the change was shared with the Faith Leader's group by Nick Jesson, who works in Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina. Nick writes:

"The existing health orders have been extended to Jan. 31, 2022. The *Mandatory Isolation and Face Covering* public health order has not changed. The change that affects places of worship is found in the *COVID-19 Vaccination or Negative Proof of Test* public health order in 3(a)(ii). Previously, the public health order provided a simple exemption to places of worship. This section has now been revised to allow the exemption in:

(ii) places of worship **when the place is being actively used for activities of worship, worship or spiritual services, and ceremonies**. Activities and events that are included in subsections 2(c)(i) to (vii) that occur in a place of worship are not exempted from the requirements imposed pursuant to subsections 2(a) to (i);

This change affects activities outside of worship. Our government liaison explains: "Places of worship continue to be exempt from proof of vaccination or negative test for anything related to worship services or ceremonies. However, other activities that might take place in a place of worship that would otherwise require proof of vaccination or negative test in another facility are now also required to do so in a place of worship."

The revised public health orders are found at <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/public-health-measures/public-health-orders#current-public-health-orders>

My interpretation: Activities normally occurring in places of worship that will now require proof of vaccination or negative test include:

- wedding receptions, anniversaries, fall suppers, or any other food service;
- conferences, workshops, or other meetings (church governance and committees);
- concerts, pageants, and other performances outside of regular worship;
- sports, exercise, or walking programs;
- 12-step programs.

The official list of activities and events that are included in this requirement is found in subsections 2(c)(i), (ii), and (vii).

Our government liaison offers the following interpretation: "coffee and donuts in the foyer before or after a worship service could be seen as an extension of that service – and the same can be said for church youth groups meeting and having snacks during bible study, etc. It is our opinion that Proof of Vaccination is not a requirement for these or similar activities."

Places of worship are encouraged to continue to offer online options for worship services and meetings. Hybrid options have proven quite effective for many communities.

At a very basic level what is being said is that if you are not gathering for worship or a spiritual ceremony (such as a wedding or a funeral) then anyone who is coming into the building will require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test. This means governing body meetings, committee meetings, concerts, teas, bazaars, regular and special event rentals etc. now all fall under the proof of vaccination mandate. Community of faith choir practice, bible study, prayer groups, coffee after worship, etc. would **not** require proof of vaccination for participation as these activities would be considered an extension of the practice of worship. Many of you will be wondering who then gathers the information regarding the vaccination status. My recommendation would be that who ever is in charge of the meeting or event will need to check participant's vaccination cards or negative tests. While it is important to make sure that the proof is checked, for privacy reasons we ask that you do not record who is or is not vaccinated, or keep a copy of the vaccine record. Simply record the number of people who were at the event and that the mandate was fulfilled. We will be offering an example of a waiver sheet that is used at a church in Saskatoon, where user groups and individuals fill out the waiver at the end of the meeting to indicate that all mandate requirements were met. This waiver is then submitted to the church office.

Our consistent message over the last 20 months is to meet or exceed these guidelines and not to try to find loopholes around them. If implementing the vaccination mandate proves difficult, perhaps pause activities outside of regular worship until the public health order is lifted – it is currently in place until January 31, 2022. If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to Tricia Gerhard, lsrcexecutive@gmail.com or 306-533-6698 or Tracy Murton, tmurton@united-church.ca or 1-800-268-3781 ext 6322.

Advent is a time of waiting and patience, and boy oh boy, have you shown patience over the last 18 months in regards to ever changing mandates and guidelines. Know that you are held in our prayers, and that we are so appreciative of all that you do in order to keep your congregations and communities safe.

Blessings and peace,

Tricia