



The United Church of Canada

Living Skies Regional Council

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January 11, 2022

To the People of Living Skies Regional Council,

It was my hope that we would enter the New Year without having to write yet another letter to you regarding COVID and ways to safely navigate infection waves. Alas, the Omicron variant has come along and has very different plans for the beginning of 2022.

As you well know, the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus is extremely contagious and is very transmissible. In December, in Ontario (where I could find information) the infection rate was such that one COVID-positive individual stood to infect 4 others. Those four individuals would then infect 16 others, those 16 would infect 64, and those 64 stood to infect 256 individuals. This doubling of infections happened every five days. We are seeing similar transmission rates here in Saskatchewan. We've all heard in the news and social media that Omicron is infecting both the unvaccinated and the vaccinated, with the latter group experiencing milder illnesses. The numbers reported each day both here in Saskatchewan and across the country are staggering.

The emergence and spread of this variant means that we, as communities of faith, are needing to once again look at the way we do church. **As you enter into those conversations, I would strongly recommend that you return to offering remote gatherings (worship and meetings included) for the duration of the Omicron wave.**

My recommendation is based on two things that Dr. Shahab has mentioned recently in the press. The first is that we should be avoiding gatherings, to the best of our ability, at this point in time. The second is that Dr. Shahab has indicated that this current wave is estimated to reach its infection peak in four to six weeks, with infection numbers dropping around the 6 to 8-week mark. We are not looking at a prolonged wave like we had with Delta, where we were constantly moving between in-person and remote church life. So there is some hope in that.

This timeline would take us to the beginning of Lent. If the variant follows this timeline then we could see a return to safe in-person worship for the beginning of Lent. I understand that this recommendation isn't feasible for all congregations in the region. Where it is possible to make the change, please do. If remote worship is not achievable for your community, please consider limiting the number of people who come to worship, ensure that you are physically distancing and masking, and consider reducing

the number of hymns sung together. Omicron is spread through the air so the numbers of people gathered, the size of the space, and the activities taking place all play a role in the possibility of transmission. As has been my encouragement since the beginning of the pandemic, we should be doing our best to not only uphold the health mandates but to surpass them in an effort to keep our communities of faith healthy and safe.

Friends in faith, this current wave of COVID has raised a lot of emotions for many people. We are tired, frustrated, grieving, and scared. We are frightened of contracting COVID and what the long-term effects might be. We are nervous for our loved ones. We are frustrated by the fact that we need to pivot once again. We are grieving because our church communities are places of connection and support during a disconnected and isolating time. Most of all, we are just plain done with the pandemic. I hear you. I see you. I am right there with you. But friends, we mustn't lose sight of why we keep making these hard changes in how we do church. Keep in mind the vulnerable we are keeping safe. By moving to remote gatherings, we are enabling and supporting our ministers to continue to visit those who are dying or very ill, to do funerals and visits, without the risk of being a carrier for the virus. It means the pastoral support, even if it looks and sounds different, can happen for those who desperately need it. And it means that we are taking the call of love of neighbour, a call given by the Divine and re-iterated by Jesus, to heart.

I know the recommendation to move to remote gatherings (if your community is able to do that) is not what you want to hear from me. It's not what I want to say to you. But it is something we need to consider and act on, for the safety of our communities, of our ministry staff, and ourselves. You are not alone. Communities across the province are having the same conversations, and wrestling with the same issues. If you have questions or concerns, please do contact either me (lsrcexecutive@gmail.com/ 306-533-6698) or Tracy Murton (TMurton@united-church.com).

More than anything, please remember two things: this will not last forever, and you are not alone. Reach out if you have questions or need a listening ear.

Blessings,

Tricia Gerhard

Chair, Living Skies Regional Council Executive