



The United Church of Canada

Living Skies Regional Council

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Dear Members of Living Skies Regional Council,

Greetings to you on this beautiful February day. I am reaching out to touch base with you as we begin to navigate the change in COVID restrictions for the province of Saskatchewan. Many of you will have heard by now that as of February 14th, the proof of vaccination/proof of negative test mandate for businesses, workplaces, and public venues will no longer be required. This includes places of worship. In the Press Conference on February 8th, the Premier also indicated that the mandate requiring masking in indoor spaces will not be renewed at the end of the month. We will enter into the Lenten season this year with no Saskatchewan Health Authority mandates or restrictions in place.

However, this does not mean the pandemic is over or that communities of faith are not able to discern a pathway that differs from the government. What we see now is a shift to encouraging the people of Saskatchewan to live with COVID as part of our normal routines and patterns. This change, though, raises questions about how communities of faith are to move forward safely and with compassion, as one of the dominant themes of the press conference was that of ending divisiveness and being open to having a difference of opinion around vaccines and masking. In the next few weeks, I imagine (and hope) that all of you will have a conversation as to how to return to or continue worship in a way that keeps your individuals and communities safe from infection while treating one another with respect and love.

A clergy colleague, during a conversation with other clergy about this very issue of compassionate and pastoral care for communities and individuals, drew our attention to this verse:

“All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful’, but not all things build up.” (1 Corinthians 10: 23).

Paul spends a lot of 1 Corinthians talking to the people of the young church about community and the greater good. He encouraged the people to consider the wider community in all that they do, that caring for one another would help create a stable and thriving congregation. In a lot of ways, our conversations in the next few days will be ones about balancing individual freedoms and community care and safety. We will wrestle with whether or not we request that masks be worn for worship, and what we do if someone pushes back against the request. Do we continue to require proof of vaccination even though there is no mandate to support our request?

Wisdom gleaned from our General Council staff suggests that it is possible to continue to require proof of vaccination and masking of existing users and tenants, but that given the lack of mandate from the province, there is a potential for legal challenge. For new users and tenants, it would be possible to include this in the lease agreement, so long as there is a specific mention of accommodation for valid human-rights based exemptions to vaccinations or masking. Ultimately, this is about the community of faith's obligation as an employer to keep the workplace safe for staff, and to protect members of the congregation who will be in the building for church-related activities. As always, you need to consider the demographics of your membership and the community context to determine the best path forward for your particular circumstance.

Our communities of faith will have to find ways of being together knowing that there could be different levels of willingness to interact with each other based on perceived risk. Any decision that we make will need to be for the safety and well-being of not only the individuals who come to worship but also the community as a whole. What can we do to build each other up? How do we navigate this change with compassion and love? How do we care for those who no longer feel safe attending worship when the indoor mask mandate is lifted?

There are no easy or definitive answers to any of this. We are having this very conversation in my own community of faith. What I do know is that for the past two years we have done our best to make sure that our churches have been safe places, shifting and pivoting (still looking for a better word) the life and work of our churches, and being beacons of care – both for the individuals and the community as a whole. Let's be gentle with each other. Let's remember that our actions and our decisions should echo God's compassion, justice, and care. Let's do our best to build things up – our people, our community, our leaders, our connection. Let's discern next steps with integrity, kindness, and openness to diversity of comfort with and tolerance for risk.

Most of all, let's continue to care for one another, as the pandemic is not yet over. Our love, our dedication to our community, our desire to care for one another will outlast the pandemic, and this gives me hope.

If you have questions or want to talk through your thoughts on next steps for your community of faith, please do not hesitate to contact myself at lsrcexecutive@gmail.com or Tracy Murton at tmurton@united-church.ca

Blessings to you,
Tricia Gerhard
Chair, Living Skies Regional Council Executive.