



NORTHERN SPIRIT REGIONAL COUNCIL

The United Church of Canada

September 9, 2020

To: Chairpersons of Official Boards and Ministry Personnel:

Friends in Christ,

Grace and peace to all of you in the name of the One who equips, calls, and guides us.

As we move into September and the start of another school year we are aware that often September is a time of restart for church programming as well. Of course 2020 has a whole new spin on what that may mean. Over the last few weeks discussions have been taking place in many different places around us about how we move into the next phase of life with COVID-19. There are so many questions, so many partial answers, so many concerns out there that it can be hard to know what the best path to take might be.

At our meeting of the Northern Spirit Regional Council Executive last week we talked about how best we could support Communities of Faith as we all try to work out what our particular path forward might be. Some places have already resumed in-person worship, some are looking to resume between now and Thanksgiving, and some are waiting much longer. It is possible there are some places that have yet to start having the conversation about what might be needed to resume in-person gatherings safely.

At the end of the day, the decision about when and how to resume various levels and types of activities within our church buildings is made by the local people. Unless some level of government prohibits some forms of activities the decision is made by the Official Board of a Community of Faith. The Regional Council can not make it for you. This is a great opportunity, because it means you can make a plan that is best suited to your own context. It may also be a bit of a load to bear because the decisions that need to be made may be difficult with pros and cons on either side.

However, you do not need to make the decisions in a vacuum. There are resources to help you. A key one would be any guidelines or rules issued by your provincial or municipal government. The Alberta Guidelines (which I have heard were being used by churches in other provinces as they were very helpful) can be found here: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-guidance-for-places-of-worship>. Information from the BC government can be found here: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/community-settings/faith-based-organizations>. To avoid charges of negligence our plans need to be at least as stringent as any governmental rules and guidelines.

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From the church perspective there are some tools and resources available here: <https://northernspiritrc.ca/covid-19coronavirusnews/>. These resources include some of the questions and things to consider as we develop our plans. We do heavily advise that you take the time to develop a fairly comprehensive plan as you resume various activities. That way we are more likely to make sure all the bases are covered and more likely to remember what needs to be done on a day-to-day basis. We request that once your plan is drawn up you send it to the Regional Council office at northernspirit@united-church.ca. This way another set of eyes can look it over, not to approve or deny it but to see if there are large gaps that may need to be reconsidered.

One of the questions that has come up in various discussions is that of wearing masks. Some municipal governments in Alberta have already made them mandatory, which means churches have to abide by that. Some places have passed bylaws which will make masks mandatory once a certain threshold is reached. But any church can choose to make mask wearing mandatory for some or all activities in the building. We strongly recommend the wearing of masks as a method of caring for each other. We know that often our congregations include many people who are part of a vulnerable population and we want to do our best to ensure church is a safe place.

There are two other helpful resources we would like to highlight at this time. The first is a session Earl Reaburn, Pastoral Relations Minister, is hosting via ZOOM next Wednesday (September 16) at 7:30 (6:30 Pacific Time). This session is a chance for lay leaders to share ideas and ask questions about opening church buildings and re-launching programs and in-person gatherings. Please join using this link: <https://united-church.zoom.us/j/95566292245?pwd=R1FZZERZaE15WjllQ1R5MUlxS0tZZz09>. Meeting ID: 955 6629 2245; Password: 011280. By telephone, dial by your location (please use local numbers when feasible to save costs for the church) +1 587 328 1099 Canada; 1 855 703 8985 Canada Toll-Free.

There are two videos available on the United Church of Canada YouTube channel. To quote from this week's Northern Spirit e-newsletter:

The Rev. Diane Strickland, a certified Community and Workplace Traumatologist, offers a two-part video on "Making Faithful Decisions on Re-entry." Part 1 addresses the questions: How do we change our assumptions and why? How do we deepen individual and collective awareness that will allow us to move forward faithfully with grace? Part 2 addresses the role of leaders in carrying forward a trauma-informed approach to re-entry decision-making and implementation, in order to bring along as many people as possible. How can we work together with individuals and the collective community of faith to find the right angle of approach for re-entering in-person worship together?

The United Church YouTube channel can be found at:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKYjQvHY5ndMCMrBjCu-N5A>.

A final note is about communicating your plan with the members of your Community of Faith. Communication is not something we always do well in the church. But in this case it is very important that we communicate very clearly and openly with each other. We need to share realities about our plan and let people know what to expect. Diane talks about this in the videos

mentioned above. Since it is the Official Board that is making the plan it is the responsibility of the Official Board to decide how it is to be shared. Ministry Personnel should certainly be part of that discussion but it is unfair for all the communication to fall to the Ministry Personnel. As with most things we do in the church we are doing this together and so we all have to share the load.

We do wish you well as we move into what is still a rather indefinite future in the time of COVID-19. Please remember that you can ask for assistance from your neighbours, from your Regional Council staff and from others in the area as you determine what works best for you.

May God's Blessings and Wisdom be with you all,

Gord Waldie
Chairperson, NSRC Executive

Shannon McCarthy
Executive Minister, Northern Spirit Regional Council