The United Church of Canada
L'Eglise Unie du Canada

Regional Council 15
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Covid-19 Update December 14, 2021 (Nova Scotia)

Dear Regional Council 15 Members (Nova Scotia),

As follow up to the December 13, 2021 Covid-19 briefing, we have received the following information from Dr. Robert Strang, Chief Medical Officer of Health, regarding the increased case numbers in Nova Scotia. I know this is difficult to once again be experiencing, especially as we began to get back to some sense of normalcy for our congregations. In the midst of Advent, and now on the heals of Christmas, it feels all the more disheartening. What is not disheartening is the care you have given to keeping our communities, and each other, safe. Thank you for the tremendous efforts that you, our ministry personnel and lay leadership, have provided.

Please see below the new guidelines given to us this morning by Dr. Strang and his office. Please hold each other in love and prayer at this difficult time.

The Guidelines from Dr. Strang are as follows:

…Due to the arrival of the omicron variant and the current epidemiology in Nova Scotia, we are returning to provincewide restrictions. While we don't have an end date, it's intended to be a short-term measure to protect Nova Scotians and our health system while we learn how this new variant behaves and continue to increase our vaccination coverage.

The key restrictions that come into effect at 9:00 am Friday December 17th, and which will affect faith organizations are:

- *Return to physical distance requirement, as in phase 4, of 6 feet between individuals or between groups of no more than 20 people from the same household or pre-established close social group.*
- *Return to gathering limit for gatherings hosted by a recognized business or organization – 50% of an indoor venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors.*
- *Return to people must be seated to remove their masks for eating and drinking.*

Our website will be updated with these restrictions this Friday. In the meantime, you can the news release here: https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20211213007

The following is an updated overview of rules and guidance for faith organizations with the new restrictions included:

- *Starting December 17, faith services, events and other activities need to abide by the physical distance requirement and formal gathering limits – 50% of an indoor room or venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors.*

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This means if your facility normally holds 100 people, then your limit is 50 (because that's 50% of capacity). If your facility normally holds 600, your limit is 150 because that is the maximum. During this time, we strongly recommend that singing only be done by the choir or leader(s) of song, and not by the congregation. Faith organizations with large venues that have a previously approved plan to accommodate multiple, but fully separated groups of up to 150 people, can re-implement this plan.

• Proof of full vaccination is required for any other events and activities hosted by a faith organization, including social time after a service, bible study, youth group, retreats, community meals, fundraisers or meetings, holiday concerts and special events, and activities and events held in rental spaces. It is also required when people rent/use the church's facilities (like a hall or other rooms) for events like a wedding reception or leisure activities/clubs like quilting or book club. Masking is required at such events except when people are actively eating or drinking (starting December 17, they must be seated to eat/drink), when officiants are speaking, or when performers are speaking/singing/playing a wind instrument. In addition, from December 17 to at least the new year, physical distance is required and formal gathering limits are in place for these events and activities – 50% of an indoor venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors.

- *Proof of full vaccination is not required for a regular faith service, such as daily or weekly services. Services that are part of your faith's annual calendar (such as Christmas and Easter services in Christian faiths) are considered the same as regular daily/weekly services – no proof of full vaccination is required. If a singer, organist or choir needs to practice for a regular service and if people need to clean or prepare the place of worship for regular services, proof of full vaccination is not required.*
- *If a faith organization holds multiple regular or special services in a single day, they are encouraged to consider making one or more of the services for vaccinated people only to accommodate people who require or are seeking a greater level of safety and to decrease overall exposure risks.*
- *Masking is required throughout these services, whether people are seated or not, except for officiants or singers when they are speaking or singing. Both you as an organization and the people who attend your services and activities have a responsibility to ensure mask rules are followed. While people with a valid medical reason for not wearing a mask need to be accommodated, these valid medical reasons are infrequent and this should not be a reason for significant numbers of people in a single congregation to be unmasked. Supporting the use of this medical exception is inappropriate.*
- *Home-based activities hosted by a family or individual are considered informal gatherings. Proof of full vaccination, masks and physical distance are not required. However, starting December 17, and until at least the new year, there can be no more than 20 people indoors or outdoors and they must all be from the same household or consistent social group – in other words, they are the same people you do all your socializing with. This may mean that you aren't able to host some of your usual activities at someone's home for a little while.*
- *Proof of full vaccination is not required for officiants or employees of a business or organization (including faith organizations) but it is required for volunteers.*

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It isn't required for business meetings in the workplace when they involve people who regularly work together and where the general public is not present (unless they're held in a rental space). However, from December 17 to at least the new year, physical distance is required and formal gathering limits are in place for meetings hosted by a recognized business or organization – 50% of an indoor venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors.

- *Proof of full vaccination is required for participants (not officiants) at weddings, funerals and other ceremonies – even if they take place in a church or other faith facility. In addition, from December 17 to at least the new year, physical distance is required and formal gathering limits are in place for weddings and funerals hosted by a recognized business or organization – 50% of an indoor venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors.*
- *Proof of full vaccination is not required for indoor and outdoor funeral services with a maximum of 25 participants (not including officiants or funeral home staff). Everyone must wear masks and physical distance is required. For any visitation and receptions, proof of full vaccination is still required, masks are required in indoor public places, and physical distance is required and formal gathering limits are in place – 50% of an indoor venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors.*
- *If a faith organization is offering mental health and addictions support groups, programs, services for vulnerable populations, food bank services, shelters or meal programs for vulnerable populations (including dine-in), or space for any of these activities, proof of full vaccination is not required for people accessing those services or for employees providing them, but it is required for volunteers. From December 17 to at least the new year, physical distance is required and formal gathering limits are in place – 50% of an indoor venue's capacity to a maximum of 150, or 250 outdoors. Masks continue to be required except when people are eating/drinking and they must be seated for this.*
- *Due to the highly infectious nature of the Omicron variant it is strongly recommended that there not be congregational singing at this time. If members of the congregation do sing they are required to remain masked.*

I understand it's a difficult time of year to reintroduce these restrictions. However, our cautious approach has served us very well through the pandemic to date. I ask for your continued support to help keep your faith community and everyone in our province safe.

Dr. Robert Strang
Chief Medical Officer of Health

If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to be in contact at fmaccuish@united-church.ca or at 1-800-268-3781 ext. 6156.

As we prepare for the Christ Child, may we strive to provide safe spaces.

Sincerely,

Faith
Faith March-MacCuish
Executive Minister