

Regional Council 15 – (NS and Bermuda) Relaunching Guidelines - In Person Ministry

The thought of returning to in person worship in our churches, is both exciting and scary. We are all doing our best to navigate these uncharted waters with guidance from our health and government officials. We need to celebrate how resilient we have all been through this pandemic. The slow and gentle reopening of our communities, businesses, and churches will be more difficult than the closing down. We will all need to be very diligent about keeping one another safe. This time can also cause stress, anxiety and conflict, as there will be many voices with many opinions with what needs to happen and what should not happen in our attempts to relaunch our in person ministries. Some will wish to move quickly; others will be cautious. Some are confident in their good health and other are at risk because of age and/or medical conditions. We are tired and these next steps will take much energy. Let us remember to be caring and generous in spirit with one another to hang together and make adaptive decisions for the good of all.

In March, we were called out of our churches to service God's people in a different way. As we begin to wonder about and plan for our return to our spiritual homes, we know that it cannot be church as usual, but must be church in the new normal. As we begin to develop our plans for reopening let us remember, as followers of Christ we called to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. It is in that spirit that we must develop our plan to return to in person worship and opening our buildings once again as symbols of Faith, Hope, Justice and Love.

Trauma Informed

Some churches/families will have had members die during the lockdown phase. Some will have had funerals take place that were far from normal others may have been prevented from attending the funeral. Many will still be waiting for arrangements to be made. Be aware that some people will have become vulnerable during the weeks of physical distancing, because of physical and mental health issues, financial hardships, strained relationships, abuse, and some may have had triggers of past traumatic experiences.

Be cautious about expressing thanksgiving when you can return to your buildings, because some will be acutely aware of loss or may be fearful about returning. Give attention to this and seek healing for all who are hurting, and reconciliation wherever that is possible. Be conscious that different people will need different approaches and take different amounts of time to begin to recover from the trauma they have experienced.

Looking Forward in Faith

In Nova Scotia, Dr. Strang reminded us of the right to worship versus the responsibility to help prevent spread and protect the vulnerable. We are reminded that re-entry into our churches will be a slow process and we all have a responsibility to stay informed, be prepared, and follow the public health advisories. We must follow the regulations from our health care and government authorities as they begin to relax restrictions. To help our churches to put together their plan to help ensure adequate preventative measures are in place, we have provided these guidelines as a tool to prepare for reopening. Each church is asked to have a reopening committee. If you have a small community of faith, your governing body can be your committee. It is likely that this virus will continue to affect our behaviour and activities for a long time to come. Having a committee that can seek guidance, create a plan and make recommendations to the governing body will be a vital part of our reopening. ***Each community of faith will need to make a plan that fits with their needs, taking into consideration the activities you have and the demographic of your community. We offer the following to help you develop a unique plan for your community of faith. Each plan will be different and may need to change depending on the directions from our health care authorities. We may also have to put a plan in place in case we experience a second wave and have to limit activities.***

Faithful Discernment and Suggestion of a Plan

The safety of staff, volunteers, church members, and all those we serve needs to be at the center of our decision-making. Some questions to help you engage in discussion about the faith, principles and values that underlay our decision:

- What is the need we are trying to respond to, if we reopen?
- Does our decision to meet in person serve that need in a way that is faithful? Is a fear of losing members, money or conflict factoring into decision-making?
- Does the risk of illness outweigh the benefit of gathering?
- What is the impact of our decision on vulnerable members? (gathering in a way that leaves our vulnerable members out might be just as harmful as not gathering)
- What will we not be able to have for some time: gatherings with food, coffee hour? Potlucks?
- What shall we do differently, and how shall we live differently as we work through the pandemic and emerge in this new season?
- Where are the signs of hope?

Current - Churches (Government of NS)

Currently, our churches are encouraged to continue holding services virtually (online or through community TV). Churches can also hold:

- Outdoor “drive-in” services, if the social distancing requirements are being followed
- Staff must be present to make sure everyone is following the restrictions
- Vehicles must be parked 2 meters apart in the parking lot, with the engine off
- Only people from one (1) household unit should be in each car
- Everyone must stay in the car through the entire service
- The buildings, including washrooms, must stay closed to the congregation
- Microphones cannot be shared between staff
- Nothing can be passed out to the congregation (like books, programs, food, collection plates)
- People cannot exchange items between cars
- Gatherings can take place with no more than ten (10) people indoors and ten (10) people outside; this includes religious gatherings (*excluding the person conducting the ceremony*)
- In the case of funerals and weddings, permission is given to have fifteen (15) people plus the officiant outside only (*excluding the person conducting the ceremony*).
- For our Camping ministries, overnight camping is cancelled for 2020.

Current - Churches (May 28 to June 30 Government of Bermuda)

- Church services (buildings) are closed
- Private Prayer – members of the clergy shall be permitted to enter the church with appropriate social distancing for private prayer with a maximum of five persons
- In order to broadcast services via electronic means a maximum of ten (10) persons are permitted with strict physical distancing
- Outdoor weddings and funerals may take place to a maximum of twenty (20) people plus the officiant and funeral home staff
- Funerals (indoors and graveside), and viewing of the deceased, are permitted with a maximum of ten (10) indoors plus the officiant and funeral home staff.

- Weddings indoors are permitted with a maximum of ten (10) people indoors, including parties, the Registrar General, marriage officer or domestic partnership offices, witnesses, photographer and others in attendance.
- People must wear masks and must adhere to physical distancing.

Regional Council 15 Recommended Guidelines (NS and Bermuda)

- Worship continue to be held online (or by telephone or by dropping of services in mailboxes) however if you have been conducting services that work for your community of faith, continue with that practice. Where it can be done safely and in accordance with local law/public health directions, a small number of people may go into the church to record or stream services. In those situations, everyone should stay at least two meters apart. Singing is known to be more dangerous than talking, and therefore you will need to ensure that any soloist needs to be a very safe distance apart (the science varies and the minimum distance should be at least 15ft). Aerosol droplets can remain in the air for some hours and may be dangerous. If you are using microphones, only one person per mic and each mic must be disinfected after use.
- Once the service is recorded, all areas used by the recording team needs to be cleaned. (for example, the church's pulpit, lectern, musical equipment used, door handles)
- Bible study, small groups, and other activities should continue to be online.
- Community ministries must operate within local guidelines and as safely as possible, adapting the services provided as necessary, recognizing that their inherent risks involved in providing these frontline services.
- Burials and weddings need to adhere to the public health directives (10) people plus the officiant inside and fifteen (15) people plus the officiant outside. Others brought into the service with online technology. At all times physical distancing needs to be in place. (*Bermuda Please see above*)
- For any service inside, disinfectant cleaning must happen after each event.
- Baptisms need to be postponed until it is safe to do so.
- Reminder: as Ministry Personnel, you will need to make sure you protect yourself and not cross contaminate when part of the liturgy. (For example wedding: blessings of the rings and signing of the documents, do not pass the rings back and forth, and make sure you use your own pen for signing documents. Funerals: no hugging or touching the hand of family members)
- ***It is within a Ministry Personnel's authority (and responsibility) to refuse to participate in these small gatherings where numbers go over the limits.***
- Members of the same family may sit together but others must physical distance.
- Pastoral care is provided by phone or videoconference, or if (rarely) in person, respecting social distancing requirements as well as the institutions regulations, and with all appropriate precautions.
- Maintenance and cleaning activities in the church building are limited to what can be done safely and within local restrictions.
- Administration, if you can work from home you should continue working from home.

LOOKING AHEAD

While we do not have the directive for after this current stage for either NS or Bermuda, we must remember that we are far away from a business as usual and back to "Normal" way of life and church.

Our Health care authorities have advised us that we are in a place of the New Normal: Living with COVID-19 and will be for the next one (1) to two (2) years.

We can assume that in the next stage places of worship will begin to be permitted to resume operations with restrictions (we do not currently have the restrictions). The Department/Ministry of Health will provide guidance when it is safe to move into the next stage/phase. Remember, just because we can does not mean we should. The following are guidelines to help you manage a slow and careful return.

Regional Council - First Steps (Take the re-entry slowly)

- Your ability to resume activities will depend on the size of your congregation and your ability to physically distance. Churches could continue offering online worship services, along with bible studies and other groups.
- Funerals need to adhere to public health directives keeping the restricted number of people with attendees maintaining physical distancing. You could consider asking people to wear masks (Bermuda masks are required). It is within a Ministry Personnel's authority (and responsibility) to refuse to participate in funerals where numbers go over the limits, or participants are refusing to social distance.
- If weddings are planned during this time, they need to adhere to public health directives, keeping the restricted number of people with attendees maintaining physical distancing. You could consider asking people to wear masks (Bermuda masks are required). It is within a Ministry Personnel's authority (and responsibility) to refuse to participate in weddings where numbers go over the limits.
- Church offices may consider opening, especially where there are small staff components.
- Church boards, committees, or staff groups may meet in person in small numbers, respecting local restrictions, and with physical distancing. You may also consider asking people to wear masks

Regional Council 15 - Second Steps

(When you feel ready, you are encouraged to move at your own pace)

- Your ability to resume activities will depend on the size of your congregation and your ability to physically distance. Churches could continue offering online worship services, along with bible studies and other groups. In person worship could resume in the church buildings where space allows for physical distancing, adhering to public health directives and allowable numbers. You may ask attendants to wear masks.
- ***Singing by the congregation and the choir must be avoided.***
Communal singing poses serious risks! Scientific evidence shows that the forceful breathing action of singing disperses the plume of aerosolized droplets from a singer's mouth much further than six feet. Public health officials have said that masks cannot completely contain such forcefully expelled mist. Tests have proven that microscopic 'droplet nuclei' that can contain the virus remain suspended in the air for up to 3 hours.
- Small funerals, weddings, and baptisms may be held within local restrictions about numbers, with physical distancing.
- Even with the resumption of in person worship, online versions could continue to be available especially if numbers do not allow your full congregations to gather or for those in high risk categories who need to continue to avoid group activities.
- Maintenance and administration functions resume more fully, with provisions for physical distancing which might include such measures as alternating times for staff to be present in the office (if necessary)
- Tenant/Rental use of church buildings may be back in operation depending on the types of activities and the ability to implement appropriate safety/cleaning protocols.
- Cleaning with a disinfectant will need to be done after every gathering.

Regional Council 15 – (NS and Bermuda)

(The New Normal)

- Full “return” to in person worship, in person groups, in person gatherings of all kinds may not be possible until a vaccine is developed and generally available. The health authorities will confirm if/when we are able to have full return.
- Ability to participate online may continue to be important for persons in vulnerable categories. Many church members and regular participants may be from vulnerable categories.
- Gatherings/fundraisers with food preparation will need to consider all of the health and safety regulations for the Province/Country and the demographic of the event needs to be considered in this time of COVID-19 recovery.

Tools to Assist with Re-Entry

As you begin to make your plan, please make sure your minister is included in your planning committee. Their input is very important to the process of reentering our church buildings.

Staffing and the Ministry & Personnel Committee

Ministry and Personnel Committees have a vital role in the reopening of the churches. It is important to have a conversation with each employee. For some of your staff there will be a level of mental fatigue, especially for those who have worked to keep the Pastoral Charge operational, through worship and pastoral care.

With that in mind:

- Meet with all staff – virtually right now
- Ask how they are doing and how their family is doing
- Ask how this time has been for them
- Ask how they are feeling about returning to the office (if applicable) and in-person worship
- What learnings have they gained, what went well and what was difficult
- Ministry Personnel and Lay Employees who are vulnerable (over 60 or have compromised health) should work with their Ministry and Personnel Committee to develop an alternate option to limit exposure to groups and high-risk activities
- Ministry and Personnel Committees should contact the Regional Minister to come up with a plan for return in-person ministry.

Caring for the Church Building and Hall

- You should, in your announcement and in you plan, advise any staff or congregants who are symptomatic or have been advised by public health 8-1-1 to report their symptoms, to self-isolate and stay at home.
- It would be wise to post the symptoms so people can see what they are and know how to assess when to stay home. (Fever above 38C, a new cough, or worsening cough, headache, sore throat, runny nose, fatigue, muscle pain, diarrhea, loss of sense of taste, loss of smell and in children, purple markings on the fingers and toes)
- 2 meters will need to be observed where people sit. Churches may need to measure and rope off areas where people cannot sit to maintain physical distancing

For contact tracing (if/when required) for each use of the building, there needs to be a record of:

- Name and phone number of the people who were in the building
- Date and time that the gathering took place
- Purpose for the gathering

After each use of the building cleaning with a disinfectant (like Lysol) will need to happen. Churches are encouraged to make a checklist of the places and items to clean for your worship and meeting space. Some things to consider:

- Public washrooms need to be equipped with hot and cold running water under pressure, liquid soap, paper towels, and garbage containers. Handwashing signs must be posted.
- Thoroughly clean bathrooms with disinfectant – toilets (inside, outside and around the basin) – counters - sinks – taps – paper towel dispensers - door handles. (Have Lysol wipes available in the washrooms and a sign asking people to wipe the taps and door handles as they leave) Make sure the washrooms are cleaned frequently.
- Hymnbooks – pew Bibles
- Backs of pews
- Microphones
- Musical instruments
- Chairs
- Tables
- All door handles
- All other highly used areas
- Light switches
- People need to be aware of the hand sanitizer stations and places where they can wash their hands.
- You may wish to ask staff and congregants to wear a mask when coming to church for any activity.

Worship Guidelines

Communion

If communion is offered:

- The officiant and servers must use hand sanitizer before offering communion
- Individual pieces of bread and individual cups are offered
- Servers offer the bread and cup to each person rather than each person taking them from a communal plate or tray
- Each communicant places their empty cup into a separate receptacle
- Disposable cups should be used

Passing the Peace and the Offering Plate

- Physical distancing must be maintained.
- Offering a phrase or pressing hands together in a prayerful bow, a wave, a nod or some non-contact gesture can convey the message of peace
- Encourage people to contribute through online giving, PAR, E-Transfer or posted dated cheques. Passing the offering plate should be avoided. Place the plate in the church for people to drop their offering into, and have gloves available for volunteers handling cash or cheques

Singing

- There should be no congregational or choir singing.
- Soloists must be at safe distances from each other and from the congregation.
***Communal singing poses serious risks!** Scientific evidence shows that the forceful breathing action of singing disperses the plume of aerosolized droplets from a singer's mouth much further than six feet. Public health officials have said that masks cannot completely contain such forcefully expelled mist. Tests have proven that microscopic 'droplet nuclei' that can contain the virus remain suspended in the air for up to 3 hours.*

Special Services

Baptisms

- For infant baptism, the parents should be the only ones to hold the baby. The officiant will sanitize hands before the baptism. For infant, child and adult baptism, Water should come from individual cups or a bottle for each person, not the common font. If possible, have a separate bowl that sits in the font for each individual who will be baptized.

Weddings and Funerals

- We will need to follow our government restrictions and if they happen in the church physical distancing will need to be maintained and thorough cleaning right after will need to be followed.

Bishop Karen P. Oliveto of the United Methodist Church:

"I do not want one single case of COVID-19 traced to one of our churches because we did not care for those whom Jesus loves."

Remember that this is a tool to help you with your plan to reenter your church buildings; your Regional Council staff are available for consultation and support.

*Resources from the following are gratefully acknowledged:
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