



COVID-19 SAFETY PROTOCOLS FOR COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN THE PMRC

UPDATED MAY 26, 2021

HOW TO WORK TOWARD RE-OPENING: ASSESSMENTS, PLANS & RESOURCES

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GUIDELINES

Over the year+ of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learned so much about what it means to be church, and how many ways there are to be church without gathering in person or making full use of our church buildings. Even as we do these things, we yearn for the time when we will be back together in community.

The following Guidelines are intended to assist Communities of Faith to assess their risk and to make a plan for the reopening of their building and in-person continuation of their ministries. Communities of Faith each face unique circumstances – number of people, size of building, capacity for maintenance, demographics, as well as the nature and scope of ministry in their community.

Each Regional Council of The United Church of Canada is responsible for making recommendations about reopening for its areas of responsibility. The governing board of each community of faith should make decisions based on the direction provided by their local public health unit, provincial health ministry, and regional council as they prepare their plans.

This is an important decision must be made by the governing board, not just the minister. In order to demonstrate due diligence, please make sure your decision, plans for maintaining all public health orders are recorded in detail in the board minutes.

The safety of staff, volunteers, church members, and all those we serve must be the core value at the center of our decisions about reopening for in-person activities. What are the other values and principles that will form the foundation for your decisions?

TRAUMA INFORMED

Some churches/ families will have had members die during the lockdown phase – from Coronavirus or other causes. Some will have had funerals take place that were far from normal or will have been prevented from attending the funeral. Others will still be waiting for arrangements to be made. Be aware that some will have become vulnerable during the weeks of lockdown, for reason of poorer mental health, finance, strained relationships, and abuse. and still others may have been reminded of past experiences, such as Residential School trauma.

Be cautious about expressing thanksgiving when we can return to our 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 move on from the trauma they have experienced.

FAITHFUL DISCERNERS

The safety of staff, volunteers, church members and all those we serve needs to be at the center of our decisions about reopening for in-person worship. Other questions to engage the faith, principles and values that inform our decision to meet in person may be:

- What is the need that we are trying to respond to? Does our decision to meet serve that need in a way that is a faithful decision?
- 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? (ie gathering in a way that leaves out vulnerable members can be just as harmful as not gathering)
- Where are the signs of hope? Where might we find the green shoots of new life
- What shall we do differently, and how shall we live differently as we work through the pandemic, and emerge into this new season?

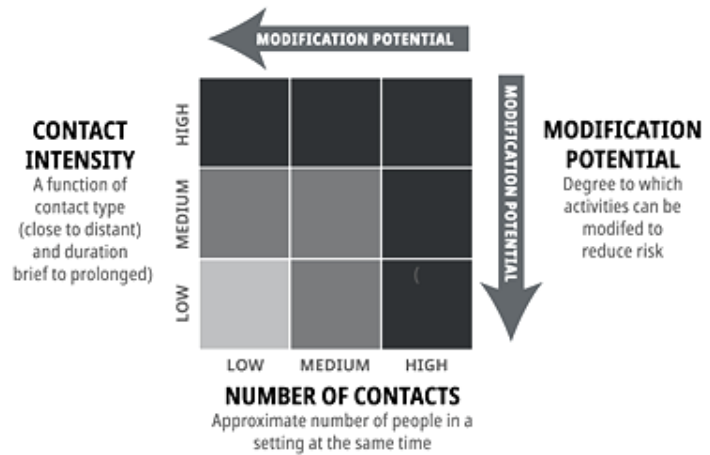
1. ASSESS THE RISK

CONSIDER THE RISK OF TRANSMISSION IN YOUR SETTING:

Use the BC's Restart Plan Risk Matrix (right) to assess the risk of transmission from social interaction in your setting:

- What is the contact intensity? -- the type of contact (close/distant) and the duration of contact (brief/prolonged)
- What are the number of contacts in your setting? - the number of people present at the same time.
- Can the space provide adequate social distancing space?

By doing the ratios (1) and (2), you can position your Community of Faith on the risk matrix below:



Source: BC's Restart Plan.

Consider your buildings and maintenance capacities:

- How many people can your building accommodate while maintaining social distancing at all times? Consider all spaces: offices, sanctuary, bathrooms, kitchens, entrances and exits.
- Calculate maximum occupancy limits for your building.
- How will you ensure high touch surfaces are cleaned and disinfected on a regular basis (especially washrooms)?
- Are there additional physical space changes, or rules and guidelines needed to help participants reduce the risk of transmission that you need to implement? How will you support good hand hygiene?
- What protocols are needed for rental groups, and how will you work or communicate with them on these protocols? How will you ensure that rental groups will follow through on their commitment to ensuring your space remains safe?
- Will your practices be acceptable to your insurer to provide coverage in the case of an outbreak at a gathering?

Public Health has developed guidance for the retail food and grocery store sector that requires at least 5 square metres of unencumbered floor space per person (workers and customers) and may be a sensible approach for determining maximum capacity in your building.

Source: WorkSafe BC

CONTINUED...

ASSESS THE RISK

Consider your staff, volunteer and participants capacity:

- How will you communicate new practices and expectations to your participants?
- How will you discourage hand-shaking or other physical contact?
- What changes will you make in worship practices?
- If you moved study groups or daily devotionals online, is there an expectation that this will continue in addition to other in- person work? Is it sustainable in terms of ministry personnel time?

Consider the demographics of your participants:

- What extra precautions should you consider if participants are at increased risk of a more severe illness because of age, or if they have compromised immune systems or underlying chronic medical conditions?

2. MAKE A PLAN

WORKSAFEBC
REQUIRES THAT
ALL WORKPLACES
COMPLETE AND
POST A COVID-19
SAFETY PLAN AND
TO TRAIN AND
EDUCATE
EVERYONE AT THE
WORKPLACE OF
THE CONTENTS OF
THAT PLAN.

Given the inherently social nature of Community of Faith events, the prolonged exposure to participants attending events, the demographics of our communities of faith as higher risk, and the safety protocols required to ensure reduced risk, the PMRC recommends that Communities of Faith remain at Stage 1 at this time.

Stage 1 - WORSHIP IS STILL ONLINE ONLY, WITH SOME EXCEPTIONS FOR OUTDOOR WORSHIP OR SMALL GROUP GATHERINGS. See June 2020 Version 3 (V3) Pacific Mountain Regional Council Pandemic Recovery & In-Person Ministry (Re) Launch Guidelines for details of Stage 1.

In-person worship could resume in church buildings where space allows social distancing, adhering to public health directives and allowable numbers.

In order to ensure compliance with the BC Workers Compensation Act as well as the orders and recommendations from the BC Ministry of Health, all communities of faith who are opening their building to staff, small groups, outreach or worship (or any other form of church operations) or who are holding outdoor gatherings must have a COVID-19 Safety Plan in place.

Before re-opening, the safety plan must be posted at the church or event as well as on your website if you have one.

CONTINUED...

MAKE A PLAN

Information and Assistance As You Make Your Plan

Communities of Faith can find information and assistance on developing a safety plan on the WorkSafeBC website:

- <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/covid-19-updates/covid-19-returning-safe-operation>.

In addition to the guide, WorkSafe BC also has a template that outlines the policies, guidelines, and procedures they have put in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and that can be used for developing a safety plan:

- <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/checklist/covid-19-safety-plan?lang=en>.

Note:

- Tenants or renters need to provide their safety plan before being allowed to use the building.
- Use the risk assessment tool and identify and implement modifications or controls to further reduce risk of transmission,
- Develop an explicit plan that for the measures you will implement over the coming 12-18 month.
- Must consider provincial health guidelines, as well as national and regional denominational recommendations

Your Regional Ministers are available for consultation and support for this process.

Your Plan Must Include:

- Building occupancy and social distancing protocols,
- Maintenance, cleaning and safety protocols
- Protective measures and supplies to reduce transmission risk (i.e. masks, barriers, hand-washing stations etc)
- Clear policy, practices and signage to ensure that individuals who are ill do not enter the premises
- A training plan to ensure everyone is trained in the policies and procedures and an outline of how you will communicate your reopening protocols and practices to your community of faith, and tenants or renters.

Note:

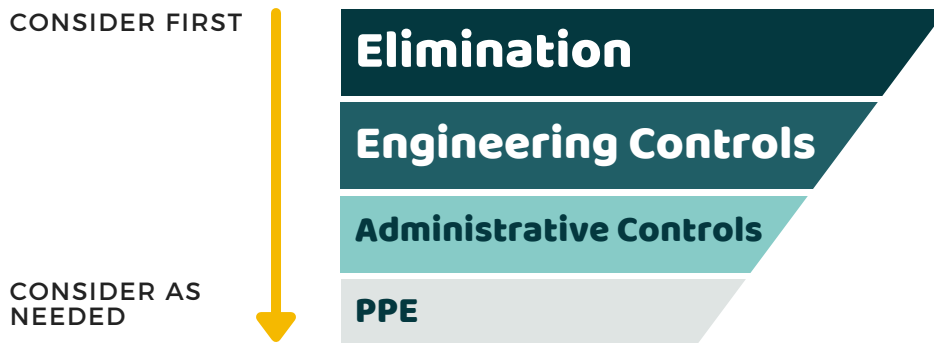
- It is the responsibility of the governing body to ensure a plan for maintaining all public health orders is in place.
- Please forward a copy of your plan to your regional minister for consultation before implementing.

CONTINUED...

MAKE A PLAN

The Hierarchy of Controls:

Wherever possible, congregations should use the protocol that offers the highest level of protection, and can consider controls from additional levels if the first level isn't practicable or does not completely control the risk. They may need to incorporate controls from various levels to address the risk.



First Level of Protection - Elimination

Use policies and procedures to limit the number of people in your workplace at any one time. Rearrange work spaces or reschedule work tasks to ensure that workers are at least 2m (6ft.) from co-workers, customers and others.

Second Level of Protection - Engineering Controls

If you can't always maintain physical distancing, install barriers such as plexiglass to separate people.

Third Level of Protection - Administrative Controls

Establish rules and guidelines, such as posted occupancy limits for shared spaces, designated delivery areas, and one-way doors or walkways to keep people physically separated.

Fourth Level of Protection - Personal Protection Equipment

If the first three levels of protection aren't enough to control the risk, consider the use of non-medical masks. Be aware of the limitations of non-medical masks to protect the wearer from respiratory droplets. Ensure workers are using masks appropriately.

CONTINUED...

ASSESS THE RISK

Posters and Signage

WorksafeBC has poster and signage templates:

- Occupancy limit poster: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/posters/help-prevent-spread-covid-19-occupancy-limit?lang=en>
- Handwashing signage: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/posters/help-prevent-spread-covid-19-handwashing?lang=en>
- For visitors: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/posters/help-prevent-spread-covid-19-entry-check-visitors?lang=en>
-

Contact Tracing

It is recommended that each group gathering in the building keep a list of all participants should it be needed for contact tracing purposes. User groups would keep their own list, they are not required to submit lists to the church, and can destroy the list after 30 days

For More Information

The information in this document is based on current recommendations and may change. For the latest guidance, please see the health information from:

- the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/covid-19>
- WorkSafeBC: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/covid-19>
- and the latest news from the government of British Columbia.

Communities of Faith with questions or concerns about COVID-19 safety protocols can call WorkSafeBC's Prevention Information Line at 604-276-3100 in the Lower Mainland or 1-888-621 SAFE within BC. You'll be able to speak to a prevention officer to get answers to your questions, and if required, a prevention officer will be assigned to assess the health and safety risk at your workplace.

You can also contact your local Health Authority for additional information and answers to questions regarding your COVID-19 safety protocols for opening.

For support and examples of Thrift Store Safety Plans please contact your regional minister.

3. CONTINUE TO BE INFORMED: RESOURCES

The United Church of Canada has developed guidelines for church spaces. The Pacific Mountain Regional Council will continue to be in consultation with public health officials, and the National Church as we support PMRC communities of faith and staff in making faithful decisions for opening within public health guidelines.

May 2021 Province of BC Guidelines and Variances

- COVID-19 Guidance for Faith Based Organizations – May 26 2021 final.pdf
- Indoor Worship Services Variance May 26 final.pdf
- Outdoor Worship Services Variance May 26 final.pdf

Province of BC COVID-19 Response:

- <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/info>

United Church of Canada Reopening Churches During COVID-19:

- <https://united-church.ca/community-faith/being-community/faith-communities-and-covid-19/reopening-churches-during-covid-19-0>



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3. MOVING THROUGH THE STAGES OF REOPENING

BASED ON PROVINCIAL GUIDELINES, THE PACIFIC MOUNTAIN REGIONAL COUNCIL IS CURRENTLY IN STAGE 1 OF THE RE-OPENING STRATEGY.

The United Church of Canada has developed guidelines for a three-stage plan to re-open church spaces. Based on provincial guidelines, the Pacific Mountain Regional Council is currently in Stage 1 of the re-opening strategy.

Given the inherently social nature of Community of Faith events, the prolonged exposure to participants attending events, the demographics of our communities of faith as higher risk, and the safety protocols required to ensure reduced risk, **the Pacific Mountain Regional Council not recommending expansion to Stage 2 at this time.** We do this even though Dr Bonnie Henry, Provincial Health Officer, has indicated that religious gatherings of up to 50 people are allowed. It is our assessment that the risk outweighs the benefit of in-person gatherings at this time.

The Region will continue to be in consultation with public health officials. and the National Church. A move to stage 2 will be considered in keeping with Public Health and Safety Guidelines. While a more aggressive return may be legally possible, we believe it is not a faithful response.

STAGE 1

WORSHIP IS STILL ONLINE ONLY, WITH SOME EXCEPTIONS FOR OUTDOOR WORSHIP OR SMALL GROUP WORSHIP.

It is recommended that each group gathering in the building keep a list of all participants should it be needed for contact tracing purposes. User groups would keep their own list, they are not required to submit lists to the church, and can destroy the list after 30 days

Continue to follow the

- [BC Ministry of Health Guidelines to Faith-Based Organizations](#)

and

- [United Church of Canada Phase 1: Reopening the Building during the Pandemic Guidelines](#)

CONTINUED...



MOVING THROUGH THE STAGES OF REOPENING

STAGE 1

CONTINUED

- Wherever possible, use online tools to connect with others virtually for services, meetings and events.
- Remind everyone to stay at home if they or any of their direct family members (or people they have regular contact with) are unwell.
- Provide COVID-19 prevention supplies during services or events, such as soap, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, hand-washing stations, tissues, and waste baskets.
- After each gathering clean and disinfect high touch surfaces such as doorknobs, countertops, bathrooms, backs of pews, microphones, musical instruments, and all other highly used areas.
- There should be no congregational or choir singing.
- Soloists must be distanced from each other and from other participants.
- Communion Elements must be individual servings.
- No Passing of the Peace.
- Use donation boxes or online giving and do not pass the offering Plate.
- Minimize all unnecessary contact whenever possible.
- Tenant use of the building is allowed if provincial guidelines can be met

Over 60 or Otherwise Vulnerable?

People over 60, those with underlying medical conditions that have weakened immune systems, and those who have family members at home who are vulnerable are encouraged to participate only in online activities.

Ministry Personnel who are in one of these categories, or who have family members who are at risk should have a conversation with their Ministry and Personnel Committee and their Regional Minister to develop an alternate option where exposure to groups of people is limited and high-risk activities are avoided.

MOVING THROUGH THE STAGES OF REOPENING

STAGE 2

WORSHIP AND OTHER ACTIVITIES RESUME IN CHURCH BUILDINGS ALLOWING UP TO 50 PARTICIPANTS, WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING AND OTHER MEASURES.

Use the

- [BC Management Strategy Checklist KEY STEPS TO SAFELY OPERATING YOUR BUSINESS OR ORGANIZATION AND REDUCING COVID-19 TRANSMISSION](#)

and

- [United Church of Canada Phase 2: Reopening In-Person Worship during the Pandemic Guidelines](#)

as guidelines for creating your plan.

- In-person worship could resume in church buildings **where space allows social distancing**, adhering to public health directives and allowable numbers. Masks may be worn.
- Only soloists can sing, appropriately distant from congregants. Singing by congregants is considered a higher risk activity.
- Continue to follow best practices as outlined by the BC Ministry of Health Guidelines to Faith-Based Organizations and United Church of Canada for Communion, Passing of the Peace and Offering.
- Even after resuming in-person worship, where possible, online versions should continue to be available for those in high-risk categories who need to continue to avoid group activities.
- Maintenance and administration functions can resume more fully, but with provisions for social distancing. These might include such measures as alternating times for staff to be present in the office. Where possible encourage working from home part of the time to reduce “contact intensity” and “number of contacts”.
- Tenant use of church buildings is allowed providing they are meeting Provincial health guidelines.
- Cleaning needs to be done after every gathering. Maintain high levels and frequent cleaning of “high touch” areas throughout the day and availability of hand sanitizer stands at entrances and around the facility.
- Clear policies and practices must be in place to enable and ensure that individuals who have the symptoms of a cold, flu, or COVID-19 including any coughing or sneezing do not come into the building.

Protocols should be communicated to all participants so that they can make decisions about their participation.

MOVING THROUGH THE STAGES OF REOPENING

Full return will be considered in keeping with BC Public Health and Safety Guidelines, conditional on wide vaccination, “community” immunity, or broad successful treatments for COVID-19 being available.

Even once public health directives say worship can resume fully, people may still want the option of distancing in the sanctuary and wearing masks.

STAGE 3

FULL RETURN DURING THE PANDEMIC

For gatherings including coffee hour and congregational dinners as well as fundraisers with food preparation, you will need to consider all health and safety regulations for the province in this time of COVID-19 recovery.

The ability to participate online may continue to be important for people in vulnerable categories. Many church members and regular participants may be from vulnerable categories.

Resources:

<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/covid-19-updates/covid-19-returning-safe-operation>

<https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/being-community/reopening-churches-during-covid-19>

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/bc-restart-plan#employers>

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/covid-19/covid-19-pho-guidance-faith-based-organizations.pdf>

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/emergency-preparedness-recovery/gdx/go_forward_strategy_checklist_web.pdf