



1/13/2022

Dear friends,

As COVID numbers began to wane this winter, many of us were hoping that we were soon moving out of the pandemic period. However, the omicron variant has arrived as a most unwelcome guest, spiking COVID numbers sharply and presenting itself differently than previous variants. With a changing pandemic landscape, I put out a call for synod leadership (congregational chairs and rostered ministers) to gather in a virtual Town Hall on January 12th. 97 leaders signed into the call. Rev. Dr. Ali Tote and I facilitated a conversation. We gathered in Word and prayer, listened to Pastor Ali's presentation on the emerging omicron variant in our province, and engaged in a conversation about how we might navigate this wave of the pandemic in our faith communities.

The consultation raised a number of factors at play:

- Provincial Health Directives: There is no current plan for any change in the Health Orders during this wave. Organizations are obliged to manage COVID protocols for their own communities.
- Omicron: The omicron variant of COVID is rising very rapidly in our synod. Transmissibility is very high. It appears at this point, that the omicron infection is somewhat less severe.
- Vaccination levels: Saskatchewan's vaccination level is high, although a significant portion of the population is not vaccinated. As faith communities, we believe we have a high percentage of fully vaccinated members. Most of our faith communities will also have a small number of individuals who are not vaccinated for various reasons. Children under 5 of course are not eligible for vaccination.
- Vaccination effectiveness: The un-vaccinated are particularly in danger from COVID, and omicron is no exception. But with omicron, infection of the fully vaccinated is also taking place--although vaccination even when infection happens, appears to provide a sort of 'body armour' to significantly reduce harm.
- Virtual options that have developed during the pandemic: Our faith communities have done well in sustaining community through virtual worship and education, phone care, etc. Synod also has faith communities where access to the internet is complicated by low band width and by varied amounts of skill among community members in navigating the internet. No question, the need to be in person in community—particularly after nearly 2 years of restrictions—is also powerful.

Pastor Ali and I informed the consultation that we would meet to consider the presentation on the state of the pandemic and the conversation of the synod leadership and present synod recommendations to our synod faith communities.

Primary guidelines

1. **Synod strongly encourages faith communities to move to virtual group gatherings as soon as possible and until the end of January at which time synod will review the state of the pandemic in our synod.** This recommendation includes worship services as well as small group gatherings (council meetings, Bible study, confirmation, etc.).
2. Encourage members of the faith community to access vaccination, within the limits of age eligibility and any medical limits advised by a family doctor.
3. Adopt a work at home policy for multiple staff offices.

By Feb 1, we hope to have a clearer view of how the omicron variant is moving at which point synod will communicate with faith leaders.

Secondary recommendations

Synod recognizes that our church polity places the privilege and responsibility of deciding how community life is conducted on the local congregational leadership—lay leaders and rostered ministers in consultation. On the one hand that requires local leaders engage in difficult discussion and decision. On the other, it allows local leaders to shape community guidelines for very different contexts across the synod. During the pandemic we have often discovered that the context in the two major cities, for example, may be quite different than in small cities or in town and country parishes.

Given the nature of church polity, synod recognizes that there may be congregations who will survey the context of their parish (COVID numbers in the area, vaccination level of the congregation, size of a gathering as a percentage of building capacity, ability of congregation to access virtual worship, etc.) and make the decision to continue with in person worship and gathering during the omicron wave. Should that be the decision of a congregation's leadership, synod presents the following recommendations for in person worship during the omicron wave.

1. **Follow current Health Orders rigorously.** Follow current Health Orders: masking, frequent hand-washing, signage, etc. Note that masking is particularly important in the case of omicron. In congregational gatherings encourage the use of three-layer masks. Provide them at the door in case there are those who may not come equipped.
2. **Synod guidelines for in-person worship remain unchanged** (given no change in the Health Order) synod guidelines for in person worship remain as stated in bishop's letters from September 2021.
3. **In-person Communion:** Communion, with some un-masking required, is not recommended (or at the very least, should be administrated with increased attention to potential transmission).

Closing

As this latest 'round' of the pandemic is upon us, I'm drawn to the Apostle Paul's description of his own particular life struggles in his second letter to the church in Corinth:

But we hold this treasure in pots of earthenware, so that the immensity of the power is God's and not our own. We are subjected to every kind of hardship, but never distressed; we see no way out,

but we never despair we are pursued but never cut off; knocked down, but still have some life in us. . . (2 Cor. 4.7-9)

This pandemic time has been a long road with no clear ending as yet. Like Paul, know that God is still at work, and we will walk through this together.

Please make contact with me or with Pastor Ali if you have any questions on Synod guidelines for your context at this time.

Peace,

Bishop Sid

Saskatchewan Synod ELCIC