



2/2/2022

To the faith communities of the Saskatchewan Synod,

Opening

Back in January, we met in a Town Hall of Synod leadership to discuss how our faith communities would handle the Omicron wave of the pandemic. Following the meeting a Bishop's letter on Synod Guidelines was sent out to the faith communities and the faith leaders providing synod guidelines to be in place until February 1, hoping that, by then, we might have a 'clearer view' of how the Omicron variant was moving and how our faith communities were managing.

What have we learned? Pastor Ali and I met and discussed both the state of the pandemic and what we are hearing about how faith communities are managing. Briefly, the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is quite clearly still among us, though there are hopeful signs in recent days. Faith communities have been vigilant in following Health Orders while making quite different decisions based on their own context.

For synod guidelines, at this time, we present two basic principles and commend three options for moving forward. **We will review these recommendations again following Family Day (Feb 21).**

Two principles

1. Follow current Health Directives rigorously (masking indoors, hand-washing, physical distancing, signage encouraging people to stay home when sick, 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.

Three options for moving forward

Congregational councils and rostered ministers have made decisions during the last month balancing the challenge of providing a safe place to meet during the pandemic, and the challenge of nurturing the health of their faith communities. We commend to the synod three broad approaches that have been taken by our faith communities.

Virtual gatherings

Many of our urban congregations have gathered virtually for worship services as well as for small group gatherings (council meetings, Bible study, confirmation, etc.) This approach is the safest way forward for congregations. This approach, though, depends both on the capacity of a congregation to produce virtual services and the capacity of congregational

members to receive them. The safety of virtual gatherings does of course come at a cost to the community that does thrive on meeting in-person.

Hybrid gatherings

Many of our congregations have provided hybrid gatherings especially for times of worship. Hybrid gatherings provide an expected small gathering with in-person worship while also providing a virtual option for those not gathered in person. This approach does provide the benefit of gathering in person for the community, while providing virtual access for those who do not feel safe or comfortable to meet in person.

Small in-person gatherings

Many of our congregations, particularly in small city and town and country parishes, have gathered in small in-person gatherings for worship while following current Health Orders. Their decision is based on a number of factors:

- Faith communities need to meet together: to hear the word, receive the sacrament, meet in community. Faith communities thrive when they can meet together.
- On the safety side, there is a level of risk. As Health Orders do not require of proof of vaccination for worship spaces there is a greater level of risk involved in gathering for worship than in gathering at a hockey arena or a restaurant.
- The risk is seen by many of our communities to be diminished in a number of ways:
 - Our attendance, due in large part to pandemic caution, is quite low in these pandemic times so that faith communities meeting as small gatherings in large buildings limits the impact of the virus.
 - Our level of vaccination is also high which limits the spread and significantly limits the impact of the Omicron variant.

Provincial Health Orders do not provide capacity limits. Synod, following suit, does not recommend a set capacity limit in these guidelines. For regular worship at this time, pandemic caution very likely handles a limit to capacity. Local church leadership concerned about a 'full house' gathering (a funeral or wedding for example) may choose to limit capacity by requiring pre-registration. Note that food events are not recommended at this time.

Closing

After Family Day, Pastor Ali and I will make contact with faith community leaders again about synod guidelines. Please make contact with me or with Pastor Ali if you have any questions on Synod guidelines for your particular context during this time.

Peace,



Bishop Sid

Sid Haugen
Saskatchewan Synod ELCIC