

Covid-19 Update - Nova Scotia

Dr. Robert Strang, Chief Medical Officer for NS, held a Zoom meeting with Faith Leaders last Friday and the following is edited slightly from his follow-up email for ease of reading. There is updated information in the following areas

Musicians and Singing for Faith-Based Gatherings

In collaboration with the NS Choral Federation we have revised our guidance for musicians and for faith-based gatherings to be somewhat more flexible for singing and musicians. We will continue to review the Public Health guidance in these areas as our epidemiology evolves. The current documents can be found at

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/COVID-19-Guidance-for-Vocalists-and-Instrumentalists.pdf>

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/Faith-based-gatherings-guidelines.pdf>

In addition, some of our clergy and musicians attended an online meeting organized by the NS Choral Federation last Saturday. A few key points to note:

Congregational singing is no longer being “discouraged.” That word has been removed from the provincial guidelines. The focus is on how to allow singing to happen safely. The science indicates that the chief means of transmission of Covid-19 is aerosols (tiny particles suspended in air). Distance, masks, washing hands and ventilation are the key protective steps. Every space is different, so keep that in mind and act accordingly. Thirty minutes of continuous singing is the maximum. After that you need a full replacement of the air in the room. This is an issue particularly for choir practices, if they are held in person. Also, the NS Choral Federation is stringent about the wearing of masks at all times when singing. The government guidelines allow for masks to be removed for choirs (not for the congregation) but recommend maintaining physical distancing. We are asked to use common sense – if there are members of a family bubble they can be closer together when singing. Plexiglass shields impede ventilation and are discouraged when singing. See final comments about basic principles with respect to risk, as they also apply to the issue of congregational singing as well.

Gathering Limits

On Feb. 5th we announced an opening up of a variety of other gatherings with allowed numbers the same as faith gatherings have been at since Dec. 21st. The new restrictions are in place until 11:59 pm March 7th and we will be reviewing the ability to loosen things some more the week prior to that. Given recent experience in New Brunswick and Newfoundland, I anticipate keeping gathering sizes low will need to be maintained for a while yet. Current gathering limits are outlined at <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/restrictions-and-guidance/>

If faith groups are allowing their facilities to be used by other groups and organizations for meetings and events, then it is important that it be clarified who the “recognized business or organization” responsible for meeting Public Health requirements is.

Serving Food and Beverages in Church or Parish Buildings

I have received a number of inquiries regarding serving food and beverages for the congregation after services, at special events or for groups using the facility. Such food service can happen under the following general guidance:

- Gathering limits must be maintained - the people involved in on-site preparing and serving are included in the overall gathering numbers
- eating and drinking should only be done while people are seated; there can be no more than 10 people seated together and tables need to be separated by at least 2 metres
- avoid self-serve and buffets except if it is pre-packaged, single serving food/beverages; have food/beverages served by the minimum number of people possible
- while serving food and beverages, physical distancing, masking and [hand washing guidelines](#) are followed
- all requirements for food service permits and food safety training need to be met

Childcare programs/Sunday School in Church/Parish Buildings

Child care programs that are part of faith gatherings should follow the provincial before and after school program guidance

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/COVID-19-Public-Health-Guidance-for-Before-and-After-School-Programs-2020-21.pdf>

If the children and staff in the child care program do not attend portions of the faith service and are in a separate room then their numbers are not included in the allowed number of people in the faith service.

Sharing of Holy Communion

While the sharing of Holy Communion (during home visits or during visits to nursing homes) is allowed (and Dr. Strang confirmed this), we should be doing this in the safest way possible – following handwashing/sanitizing and mask-wearing protocols, gathering people 2 metres apart in nursing homes rather than going from room to room (if gatherings of residents are allowable by the facility at all), and limiting the number of visits we make per day or even week. There is still no sharing of a common cup permitted. Communion vessels need to be properly cleansed between visits.

Overall Guidance/Application of Principles

One of the things Dr. Strang stressed is that we should expect that many of our public health protocols will be in place for some time yet. That means we need to start applying the basic principles we've adopted rather than asking for permission every time we want to do something that isn't specifically addressed in the published guidelines. As an example, someone asked if the offering could be collected again during the worship service if one person only was touching the offering plate. The answer was "yes," if that person had sanitized their hands and could ensure that others wouldn't be touching the offering plate and sanitized their hands afterwards. Can we hand out paper copies of bulletins? Yes, if the person

handing them out has sanitized their hands and avoids touching their face and sanitizes their hands afterwards. Dr. Strang stressed that the real work going forward is for our parishes to consider what level of risk they are comfortable with as we make our decisions. We need to be mindful of those who are vulnerable in our communities and make thoughtful and smart decisions that will protect our parishioners without introducing a high level of risk and compromising their health and safety. It's clear that some of the changes we are making now should be considered long-term changes. We don't need to go back to doing things the way we were before if what we're doing now is working well. We are adapting to - and adopting - new practices. That can be a blessing. It's important that we integrate what we're learning about how to keep ourselves, and one another, as safe as possible.

Covid-19 Update - Prince Edward Island (as of February 16th, 2021)*

I'm not aware of a briefing for faith leaders on PEI so this information comes directly from the provincial government website:

<https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/health-and-wellness/updated-covid-19-measures-as-of-february-16>

Gathering Limits

Organized gathering limit of 50 for activities including concerts and worship services, with an operational plan

- Three additional multiples of 50 permitted with a prior approval of the operational plan (up to 200 total); updated multiple gatherings guidance around shared facilities. If you have a multi-use facility, please reach out to the envhealth@ihis.org (link sends e-mail) to discuss.
- Facilities who are able to demonstrate separate entrances/exits/bathrooms for additional cohorts can be considered on an individual basis
- Weddings (both ceremonies and receptions) and funerals up to 50 individuals plus officiants; not eligible for multiple gatherings
- Organized gatherings cannot occur in personal dwellings

Food Service on Premises (not specific to church buildings)

Please see <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/health-and-wellness/food-premises-guidance>

These protocols apply specifically to food premises like restaurants, so please check to determine whether food can be served in your church buildings or as a takeout option.

Some questions that may pertain to faith gatherings

Can I do a drive-in or drive-thru event?

Yes, drive-in and drive-thru events are permitted with the following precautions in place:

- An [operational plan](#) outlining measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 is in place and followed
- Vehicles are separated by a minimum of 2m/6ft
- Individuals remain in their vehicles (except for washroom breaks)
- For drive-thru events involving more than 50 people, there is minimal interaction between individuals outside of vehicles and those inside of vehicles

If organizers must gather outside to provide the services, the organized gathering limit applies. The organized gathering limit does not apply to individuals in cars.