



## Diocese of Nova Scotia & Prince Edward Island

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### **Diocesan Protocols in Response to COVID-19: Loving God, Loving Neighbour as Self**

*'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'*

*- Mark 12:28b-31*

### **Introduction**

The guidelines in this document are predicated on our understanding as Christians of the Great Commandment outlined above, and are intended to support us as we strive to balance our call to love God with the call to love our neighbour as ourselves. The Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island recognizes that gathering for worship, fellowship, prayer, praise, and mutual support are fundamental to our spiritual health and wellbeing, and opportunities to do so must continue to be offered by our parishes in some form. Our provincial governments of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island understand this as well, acknowledging faith gatherings as "essential" services. However, in the midst of a global pandemic, we are called to exercise those fundamental spiritual needs with an abundance of care and concern for those among us who are vulnerable, namely children and those with health conditions that compromise their immune systems.

Moving forward, it is assumed that we will be a hybrid church, offering opportunities for in-person worship and other gatherings, as well as opportunities to connect online. It is assumed that parishes, to the best of their ability and where possible, will offer (or continue to offer) for those who are unable to gather in-person or those who feel unsafe to do so, opportunities to attend worship and other gatherings virtually, either in real-time or via recorded services made available at a later time. There are diocesan supports for those parishes needing assistance in offering these options.

These guidelines become effective **October 4th**, unless one or both of our provincial governments establishes protocols and restrictions that are stricter than those outlined here. These guidelines are meant to offer a minimum standard across the Diocese. Parishes may choose to enforce stricter guidelines based on an assessment of the vulnerability of those they serve and the physical limitations or opportunities that their buildings impose. Some may think these guidelines go too far, while others may think they do not go far enough. We continue to monitor the situation and will adapt these guidelines accordingly.



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### **What Constitutes a Faith Gathering?**

This is a question our Diocese has posed to provincial health authorities, but we have not yet received an answer. We recognize that regular Sunday or weekday worship is a faith gathering but so, we would argue, is a funeral, a wedding, a Bible Study, a prayer gathering, a book study, or a meeting of one of our church or parish organizations. There are elements of worship, fellowship, prayer, study, mutual support and care in each of these and we understand why they could be considered “essential.” The Province of Nova Scotia, at least, does not agree (see below). We will continue to seek clarity on this and keep you informed.

### **Contact-tracing**

The Diocese requires all parishes/churches to maintain contact-tracing in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak, regardless of whether provincial health authorities require this or not. Contact-tracing information should be kept in a confidential location for one full month once personal details have been recorded. This has proven to be an important resource and parishes/churches are to continue this practice until advised otherwise by the Diocese.

### **Sanitizing**

The Diocese continues to require that parishes make hand sanitizer available to those entering or exiting parish or church buildings and encouraging its use.

### **Masks/Face coverings**

The Diocese continues to require all attending indoor events in our parishes or church buildings to wear a mask or face covering, regardless of whether provincial health authorities lift this requirement or not. Provincial governments who had earlier removed this requirement have since re-instated it. This practice will be required at least until we move through the fourth wave of COVID-19. It will be re-assessed at that time based on the best scientific information and advice available. Earlier protocols about removal of masks when leading worship or offering a reading or the prayers still apply.

### **Physical Distancing**

While our provincial health authorities are considering lifting physical distancing requirements, we anticipate that some parishioners and others attending gatherings in our buildings will be reluctant, at least initially, to sit close to someone who is not a member of their “bubble.” We ask you to exercise care and patience with one another as we navigate these changes in requirements in other public places. The Diocese recommends (unless required by provincial public health authorities) that parishes/churches continue to maintain 6’/2m of physical distancing between those who are not part of a “bubble” at this time. This will be monitored and re-assessed on an ongoing basis.



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### **Vaccination**

The Diocese encourages all people who are medically able to do so to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The Diocese will not require proof of vaccination for those who attend worship or other faith gatherings unless required by one of our provincial governments for the people of that province. Our insurer requires us to follow all health and safety protocols established by our civil authorities, in this and other matters. While we can challenge the appropriateness of these protocols with government officials, the Diocese has no authority to allow parishes to follow practices that are not in keeping with them.

The Diocese expects all clergy, diocesan and parish/church employees and all volunteers who are medically able to do so to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. At this time, we will not require proof of vaccination. This will be re-assessed based on the best scientific information and advice available, as well as direction from our provincial health authorities. Anyone who is unable to be vaccinated and whose ministry or work puts them in contact with vulnerable people (e.g. those working with children or vulnerable adults, greeters, Eucharistic Assistants, those assisting with meal preparation) must determine in consultation with their parish priest or other designated leader (or, if a member of the clergy, with their Archdeacon), whether additional health and safety measures can be put in place or whether ministry/work tasks must be re-assigned to others. We encourage parish leaders to have this conversation to consider how best to mitigate the risks associated with COVID-19. Please remember that ministry in places such as schools or nursing homes will require proof of vaccination from all entering their premises as part of their COVID-19 protocols.

### **Singing**

Congregational singing and choirs/choir practices are permitted in each of our civil provinces. Please follow the guidelines noted below for your province:

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

Prince Edward Island: <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/health-and-wellness/worship-services-guidance>

Masks must be worn by members of the congregation while singing. While masks are not required for choir members in Nova Scotia while singing (if appropriate physical distancing is maintained between those not in the same family or “bubble”) it is strongly recommended — in light of recent epidemiological advice provided to the House of Bishops — that masks be worn for this activity. PEI continues to require masks for this and any other “vigorous vocal activities.” Given the variety of sizes and configurations of our church buildings, careful consideration should be given as to where choir members are seated. For instance, sitting across from one another and singing while facing one another in a small chancel is discouraged.



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### Funerals and Weddings

We are currently questioning the requirements for funerals and weddings, which the Province of Nova Scotia has determined are “non-essential.” \*It is not clear whether funerals or weddings held by a faith group are exempt from this classification. Therefore, at this time, everyone attending a funeral or wedding in Nova Scotia must show proof that they have been fully-vaccinated. As we understand it, this includes all worship leaders. In addition to contact-tracing and masking (as noted above), parishes must ask for proof of vaccination to all attending a funeral or wedding. We realize that this has serious implications for those who not medically able to be vaccinated (i.e. those who are immune-compromised) who are, by virtue of their vaccination status, not allowed to attend non-essential activities, and we have questioned that with health authorities. While children under 12 are not vaccinated, they may attend functions providing they are accompanied by a fully-vaccinated adult. Please be aware that the Diocese has no authority to grant exceptions and we continue to seek clarity and changes from provincial health authorities. Masking and physical distancing requirements apply to all funerals and weddings held in our buildings. We will continue to monitor this situation and keep you informed. We realize these requirements add an additional layer of grief and stress to what is often already a difficult pastoral situation.

\* This is not a requirement at this time in Prince Edward Island.

### Receptions

At this time, receptions are considered “non-essential” activities and those attending must be fully-vaccinated. Parishes are permitted to offer receptions, but all current provincial food-handling and health and safety protocols must be followed. In addition to contact-tracing, parishes must ask for proof of vaccination from all attending a reception. The Diocese encourages those parishes offering receptions to hold them in a separate room or space if they follow a liturgy such as a funeral or wedding, to allow the air to be refreshed while the reception is being held.

### Meetings

At this time, meetings are considered “non-essential” activities. This means that all attending meetings that are open to the public must be fully-vaccinated and show proof of vaccination. Masks/face coverings must be worn and physical distancing must continue to be observed until we move through the fourth wave of COVID-19. Requirements will be re-assessed at that time. Parishes/churches should continue to offer alternatives for those who feel it is unsafe to attend meetings in-person or are unable to do so due to vaccination status. Many have found Zoom, telephone or other electronic means very effective in enabling all to participate in meetings. We encourage parishes/churches to continue to hold meetings in a hybrid format (both in-person and online) until we move through the fourth wave of COVID-19, and perhaps beyond.

In Nova Scotia, if the meeting is not open to the public, proof of vaccination is not required but all other safeguarding measures should be observed. PEI does not make this distinction and divides between personal gatherings (in the home, up to 50 people, no proof of vaccination required) or organizational gatherings (cohorts of up to 200 people outdoors or 100 people indoors, proof of vaccination required).