



Diocese of Nova Scotia & Prince Edward Island

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Navigating the “New Normal” — The Lifting of Public Health Protocols Best Practices for Parishes and Clergy in the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island

This month includes two significant anniversaries for Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia with respect to Covid-19: March 16th marked the second anniversary of the declaration of a State of Emergency in PEI, while March 22nd marks the second anniversary of that milestone for NS.

Over the past few weeks, each of our civil provinces has announced plans to lift the State of Emergency and the Public Health protocols that began after Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. For some, these announcements are a cause for celebration, while for others the lifting of protocols and restrictions is a cause for anxiety and concern. With this in mind, we ask all parishes to take time for Clergy and Parish Leaders to have open conversations and dialogue with parishioners before deciding how to proceed and at what pace. Just because Public Health restrictions are lifting — admittedly, even at different paces between provinces (see [here for Prince Edward Island](#) and [here for Nova Scotia](#)) — does not mean we have to remove all protocols we have put in place at one time, or even at all. Covid has taught us that some of the practices we have adopted make a lot of sense — frequent handwashing, the cleaning of common spaces, and masking, to name a few. The pandemic has also taught us the importance of navigating boundaries with one another — to check in to determine comfort levels about many things we had previously taken for granted. These are learnings we can carry with us as we consider how and when to proceed with changing protocols in our respective parishes. In this time of rapid change, when protocols are being lifted in almost all public spaces, I encourage you to be especially compassionate and kind to one another. We do not know what another person has suffered during the pandemic, and we do not always know what underlying health conditions or other stresses may contribute to heightened anxiety in the midst of these changes. Let’s look out for each other and offer support wherever we can.

Guidance for Removing Restrictions and Public Health Protocols

In general, parishes are free to make their own decisions about whether to lift most restrictions (with a few exceptions). I have heard repeatedly during the pandemic that each parish context is different, each church building is different, and the level of what has been referred to as “risk tolerance” is also different. Some congregations are small, and parishioners socialize frequently beyond attending worship together. Some church buildings allow lots of space for people to spread out if they wish to maintain some distance from others out of concern for their health. Please take the time to assess your congregations, your buildings and your comfort level with reduced restrictions. Even if you have already done this work, it is important to review it again in advance of loosening or removing restrictions. Talk with parishioners about how they can continue to feel safe while sharing in worship and other Parish events and programs. I strongly recommend a phased-in approach, much like our provincial governments had been advocating over the course of the pandemic. Consider lifting restrictions in stages, rather than all at once, to allow you and your parishioners time to adjust and adapt.

Gathering Limits — All restrictions on gathering limits may be lifted as per dates established by provincial government Public Health authorities. Limits must still adhere to public safety guidance offered by the Fire Marshall.

Physical Distancing and Movement Within Church Buildings – All requirements to maintain a 6’ distance from those not in your family or close social group may be lifted. I strongly encourage parishes to maintain some distancing during processions and to allow spaces in church buildings to accommodate those who would prefer to continue with some degree of distancing while seated. As movement within our buildings is no longer limited, particular attention should be given to the receiving of Holy Communion. It is recommended that parishes encourage communicants to observe some degree of distancing between themselves and others while at the communion rail. This is wise in light of the continuing risk or airborne infection posed by Covid-19.

Wearing of Masks – While our provincial governments are lifting the **requirement** to wear masks in most public spaces, they continue to **strongly recommend** that they be worn. It is important to note that distinction. This guidance has been reinforced by epidemiologists across the country and beyond. It has been clearly demonstrated that wearing 3-ply masks significantly limits the spread of Covid-19 and other viruses. I strongly recommend that parishes continue to require the wearing of masks in church buildings, to be removed when individuals are in a speaking/leadership role or to receive communion, or when eating while seated, but not while singing. If the parish is determined to lift this restriction, I would recommend it be the last step in the process of removing restrictions in the parish.

Singing – Public Health authorities in both Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have already lifted restrictions concerning congregational singing. As noted above, it is strongly recommended that masks be worn for congregational singing as well as by choir members when singing. This is based on advice from epidemiologists, including the Rev’d Dr. Michael Garner, an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Ottawa who has a 14-year background in infectious diseases epidemiology (see an article in *The Anglican Journal* where he speaks about this here and urges caution: <https://anglicanjournal.com/behind-the-curve/>)

Contact Tracing – This is no longer required but may prove helpful, especially for large gatherings while the risk of contracting Covid-19 remains moderate or high. Parishes should use their discretion about whether to continue this practice or not.

Proof of Vaccination – As our Public Health authorities have lifted the requirement to show Proof of Vaccination or Vaccine Passports upon entry to public spaces, this is no longer a requirement for receptions or other parish gatherings.

Washing of Hands and Use of Hand Sanitizer – Parishes should continue to make hand sanitizer available at entry and exit points and expect presiders and those assisting with communion to sanitize their hands regularly.

Sharing of the Peace – While Public Health restrictions don’t specifically address the shaking of hands, it is advisable that we continue to extend the Peace in ways that do not encourage handshakes at this time.

Use of the Common Cup – At this time the Diocese is not prepared to lift the restriction on the use of the Common Cup. Options for the administration of communion wine to members of the congregation have been shared here and continue to be in effect: *Liturgical Guidelines & Best Practices*

Receptions, Social Times and other Events Where Food and/or Drink is Served – All provincial government Food and Safety guidelines and protocols must be followed for events involving food. Please exercise caution as you re-introduce gatherings involving food. It’s wise to begin with smaller gatherings and expand to larger gatherings as people get comfortable being around one another while eating and drinking. It is strongly recommended that anyone preparing or serving food continue to be masked and that self-serve options be limited to avoid multiple people touching food items.

I realize that many parishes will have already begun this work to prepare for the lifting of Public Health protocols and that you have all worked very hard over the past two years to try to ensure that people could worship and gather safely.

Thank you for your diligence and care for one another. As we move forward, we do so with cautious hope, grateful for the privilege of being and serving the body of Christ in these anxious times.

If you have any questions or concerns about these Best Practices, please don't hesitate to reach out to our Diocesan Executive Director, the Reverend Ann Turner, at executivedirector@nspeidiocese.ca or 902-420-0717, ext. 1167.

May the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, sustain us now and always.

+Sandra
Diocesan Bishop

Questions and Conversation: Establishing Parish Guidelines

*The following questions are conversation starters for parish groups meeting to discuss the lifting of Covid-19 Public Health restrictions. These are only suggestions intended to spark discussion and are offered as a tool to accompany the best practices document, "**Navigating A New Normal.**"*

1. What restrictions or constraints face us with regards to our worship space? Our hall or reception area(s)? Our education, Sunday School, or Nursery areas?
 - a. What is ventilation like in these areas? Do we have any sense of what the recirculation rate might be for different areas of the physical plant?
 - i. Do we need to allow for a set amount of time between gatherings in the same area?
 - ii. Do we wish to put gathering limits on any of these areas?
 - iii. Do we need special considerations to be added or continued in any of these areas (i.e. hand sanitizing at entry, social distancing, masking?)
 - b. What are the gathering limits for each area (according to the Fire Marshall and/or insurance restrictions)?
 - i. Are we comfortable with these limits (or does it feel too crowded, maybe just for now)?
 - ii. Do we wish to assign "staged" gathering limits, starting smaller and allowing for larger crowds as time passes?
 - iii. Again, do these limits indicate that we need special considerations to be added or continued in any of these areas (i.e. hand sanitizing at entry, social distancing, masking?)
 - iv. Can we reserve an area for those who might not be comfortable with ending distancing restrictions? Or a mask-only area?
2. Who is our community? This is a big question and may end up dictating many different levels of restrictions in different areas or for different times?
 - a. Worship: who is attending worship? Will we continue to have online options? What special considerations do the people attending require? Are we mostly an older congregation? Do we have many unvaccinated? Do we have many too young or too vulnerable to be vaccinated? What "vulnerabilities" are present in our community: autoimmune, age, cognitive abilities to follow detailed instructions?
 - b. Church programs (ministries, study groups, administration committees): who participates in each of these areas and what considerations may be needed to accommodate those who attend? Or to accommodate those we would like to invite or encourage to attend?
 - c. Receptions, Shared Meals: Are we ready for catered events? Church-prepared meals (food prepared on site)? Pot-luck (food prepared in others' homes)?
 - i. What guidelines would be helpful? When might we require masks (servers, diners when moving between tables)? When might we require distancing (buffet tables, lining up to be served)? Will we allow buffets or will we have single serving points? Will we have open food or individually packaged treats or meals?
 - d. Rentals: are we comfortable with allowing our shared space to be used by outside groups (yet)? What guidelines would help to make us feel more secure about entertaining outside groups?
3. Liturgical Practice:
 - a. How will we navigate receiving communion? Who moves? What kind of distancing or grouping (pods, families) will influence this?
 - b. What are our comfort levels singing and what restrictions should we continue? For how long?