

Discerning “re-opening”: A conversation and planning process for Prairie to Pine Regional Council

Two things to know before discerning:

1) **It is strongly recommended you not re-open the building to worship at this time, and be very cautious about other building uses.** This has been a consistent message from both your Regional Council Executive and the national church. [Click here for the letter from your Regional Council.](#)

This may feel like a mixed message, as we see provinces and territories “re-opening”. But we must take into account the vulnerability of many of our community of faith members, and the proven role of faith communities in inadvertently spreading the virus within the wider community. Together, these two factors alone need to make us very cautious.

2) **You must research and be aware of all current provincial rules in all phases, have written plans in place for respecting those, and you must be able to produce these plans for provincial authorities as well as for the Regional Council.** This is your responsibility; while your Regional Council can assist, in the end the onus is on your ministry.

Why discern? Why go through a lengthy process? Why not just get on with it?

As noted in Step 3, below, any decisions and plans you make about “re-opening” must be made formally by your governing body. Decisions made impact the whole community of faith, and could impact your wider community. Making decisions in a transparent, inclusive, and prayerful way is vital to community wellbeing.

The suggested steps below will take time to work through, but will also allow space for hard questions and careful reflection. In turn, this will assist you with the very detailed plans that you will need to make should you choose to resume any aspect of in-person ministry.

Please be as inclusive as possible in who you discern with. Take your time! We have spent months with the reality of closed buildings. And we may again. There is no rush to open them again, and good discernment and planning take time. Time spent on listening and discerning now will help you make better, inclusive re-opening plans in the future, whenever that happens. What follows is a sample process to guide these conversations.

Step 1: Discerning opening for worship and regular programming, part 1: Why re-open?

Time needed: about 60-90 minutes depending on group size. (This is about the maximum effective time for an online meeting, so break this section in to two parts if needed.)

Whether you are meeting online or (distanced) in person, please appoint a recorder. If online, screen share a Word document while typing (use the blank template provided if you like). If in person, use a Powerpoint slide, white board or flip chart and BIG writing so people can see from a distance. Use an invitation process: as each person finishes their thoughts, they should invite someone else specific to go next.

To reflect on together:

Do you feel your community of faith is currently "closed"? In what ways?
In what ways is it "open" even though the building is closed? *(Write these down in point form if you feel it is helpful to see the responses.)*

Is it important to you to re-open the building? If so, what are your top ten (or fewer) reasons for re-opening? What needs do these reasons meet? Ask your recorder to create a list of these on a separate sheet or template. (Use the one provided if you wish.)

What are your top ten (or fewer) reasons for NOT re-opening? (be that for worship, tenants, etc.) Create a list of these.

Compare the two lists. Clarify any questions; if there are very similar points see if you can put them together. Hold space for disagreements and concerns. Do a go-around using the invitation process described above.

If you are doing Step 2 at your next session, please note that someone will need to enter the building and have the numbers outlined under Risk Considerations.

Huge thanks to Pacific Mountain Regional Council, Tressa Brotsky, Kathy Davies, and Treena Duncan for the risk assessment questions you'll see in Step 3 (pages 4 and 5)! We've linked to their full resource on the last page.

Step 2: Discerning by Assessing the Risk

Time needed: up to 90 minutes

This step is still a discernment step. Creating a workable plan for the many aspects of “re-opening” will take work, and implementing it will take even more work, so at this stage, you are still discerning whether you “re-open” and what that might look like.

Review your reasons for re-opening your physical spaces by asking someone to read them aloud. Do the same for your “don’t re-open” reasons.

Then read through the “Considerations” below, to help start a discussion of the many, many practical details you must consider. Again, read these aloud and post them on a screen if possible. Take about 20-30 minutes for this. Bring in relevant details about your building and context; you can note these down on the worksheet mentioned in the next step.

Then move to the *Risks* worksheet. Note risks that are particular to your space and context, keeping in mind the general considerations listed below. This should take about 30 minutes or longer, because it’s key to making your plan should you decide to create one.

When you are done, do a go-around to make sure everyone has been heard.

If there are doubts, uncertainties, or mixed opinions, you could ask:

Are there ways other than re-opening in which the needs you name can be met?

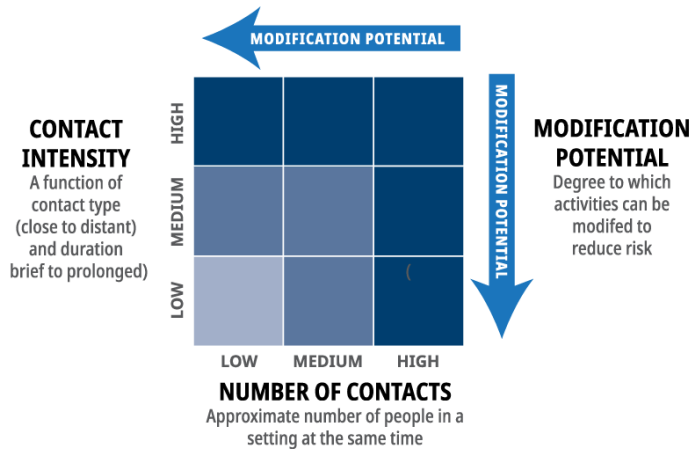
If you are leaning towards re-starting worship or other gatherings:

If you did re-open, how will you meet the worship needs of those who might not be comfortable with, or able to attend, in-person worship?

How will you include people who would not feel safe at in-person church gatherings and worship?

How will you plan for and respect the extra work this will demand?

Risk Considerations



- *What is the contact intensity - the type of contact (close/ distant) and the duration of contact (brief/ prolonged)?*
- *What are the number of contacts in your setting - the number of people present at the same time?*

(Graphic credit: BC Restart)

Consider your buildings and maintenance capacities:

- How many people can your building accommodate while maintaining social distancing at all times? Consider all spaces: offices, sanctuary, bathrooms, kitchens, entrances and exits. *Have one person take a tape measure to calculate 2 metres of space in all directions in the sanctuary. How many people can your sanctuary actually accommodate socially distanced?*
- How will you ensure high touch surfaces are cleaned and disinfected on a regular basis (especially washrooms)?
- Are there additional physical space changes, or rules and guidelines needed to help participants reduce the risk of transmission that you need to implement? How will you support good hand hygiene?
- What protocols are needed for rental groups, and how will you work or communicate with them on these protocols? How will you ensure that rental groups will follow through on their commitment to ensuring your space remains safe?
- Will your practices be acceptable to your insurer to provide coverage in the case of an outbreak at a gathering?
- What additional considerations are required for outdoor gatherings?

Consider the capacity of your staff, volunteers, and participants:

- How will you communicate new practices and expectations to your participants (including pre-screening and attendance list protocols)?
- How will you discourage hand-shaking or other physical contact?
- What changes will you make in worship practices (*including not singing, as singing is a significant source of transmission*)?

- If you have moved study groups or daily devotionals online, is there an expectation that this will continue in addition to other in-person work? Is it sustainable in terms of ministry personnel time?

Consider the demographics of your participants:

- What extra precautions should you consider if participants are at increased risk of a more severe illness because of age, or if they have compromised immune systems or underlying chronic medical conditions?
- What extra precautions should you consider for children and/ or youth programmes?
- How can we expand our level of inclusion and engagement in virtual congregational life?

Consider online capacity while in-person worship is suspended:

- What additional equipment or training or assistance do our staff and volunteers need for continuing online-only worship?
- What do we need to invest in, with technology, equipment, or people-power, to keep this going until it is safe for **everyone** to return to in-person worship/programs?
- How can we imagine broader and more inclusive ministries, worship, and programming in a *post*-COVID-19 world given what we've been learning and implementing?

If you want to go further along the path of re-opening your building/ in-person aspects of your ministry, move on to step 3: Creating a plan. You may wish to create a small task group to develop the process on behalf of your community of faith. On the next page you'll find a very short resource for discerning temporary, one-time or specific-tenant opening.

Discerning a one-time or specific tenant request for opening your building

(These questions do NOT cover resumption of in-person, indoor worship or other regular in-person programming or meetings. Please use the rest of this resource to help you discern those needs.)

Do current provincial regulations permit the request or activity, and do you have the means to ensure that the law is enforced?

Do your space, current resources, and staffing or volunteer capacity permit the request or activity? (Eg: do you have sufficient physical space, masks and cleaning supplies, and people to offer cleaning or monitoring?)

Is the request or activity coming from an organization that might have its own protocols? (eg. daycare regulations, A.A.)

If you say yes to this request, what risks might result for your community of faith, its staff, and your community, taking into account that our communities of faith have an exceptionally high number of at-risk people? (For help with this step, please see the risk assessment resource).

If you proceed, write a detailed plan, and require a written detailed plan of your tenants. This needs Board approval and minutes.

Step 3: Making a plan

You should likely do this step in two separate meetings:

- 1) Draft an initial plan (*90 minutes minimum*)
- 2) Then take it away for consulting with the people needed to carry it out; get feedback; and then meet again to bring in the feedback and refine the plan. (*Likely an hour minimum*)

Materials:

A lot of strong coffee.

Your provincial re-opening plan, with the relevant Phase you are working under clearly identified and agreed upon.

[General Council re-opening overview](#): choose the relevant Phase, but it is worth reviewing the whole thing.

(optional) Plan Worksheet, for notes

Getting started: Read through your “must have” list below.

You must have:

- An explicit plan for the measures you will implement over the coming 12-18 months.
- A plan that complies with provincial health guidelines, and respects denominational recommendations. (This really means multiple plans, as phases/ steps will continue to change.)
- A plan that is easily readable, clear, and practical;
- And, shareable with the many groups and people who will share in its implementation.
- NOTE: Tenants or renters need to provide their own safety plan before being allowed to use the building. How will you engage them in this?

Your plan must include:

- Social distancing protocols
- Maintenance, cleaning and safety protocols
- Budget considerations for extra staffing
- Protective measures and supplies to reduce transition risk (i.e. masks, barriers, hand-washing stations, attendance list, etc.)
- Clear policy and practices to ensure that individuals who are ill do not enter the premises..... (*continued on next page*)

- Clear practices on how you will ensure the maximum permitted numbers of people is enforced.
- An outline of how you will communicate your reopening protocols and practices to your community of faith, and tenants or renters.

Circling back: When you have finished drafting this plan, go back to your “Reasons for re-opening/ reasons for not” lists from Step 1 of the discernment process.

Discuss: Given the logistics of your plan, are your reasons for re-opening still viable? Do its benefits still outweigh its costs? Do your available resources of energy, time, skills, and funds match your plan?

Remember: The decision to reopen is collective. It must be made by the governing body, not the minister. In order to demonstrate due diligence, please make sure your decision and plans for maintaining all public health orders are recorded in detail in your board minutes.

Other resources

Please note: these refer to different jurisdictions. It is expected that you will continue to consult the key government documents:

[Manitoba: Restoring Safe Services](#)

[Ontario Framework for Re-opening](#)

[General Council of the United Church resources](#)

[Pacific Mountain resource, including risk assessment and more](#)

[Unitarian Universalists: Guidance](#)

A [hard and important reflection](#) on what church might feel like if you resume in-person worship.

[Eight questions to ask before re-opening](#)