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Building Nunavut Together
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Guidance for Places of Worship

Overview

This guidance has been developed to support places of worship that wish to host services and faith-based activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to underline that the potential for spread of infection during gatherings remains high, and several large super-spreading events globally have been associated with faith-based gatherings. As much as possible, places of worship are therefore encouraged to continue hosting their services and other faith-based activities online or through creative approaches such as drive-in services. The advice in this document pertains to all faith-based activities that involve public gathering and occur on land or in buildings owned or rented by religious orders, societies, or groups. However, informal faith-based activities that occur in private dwellings or on private property should also follow the same guidance wherever applicable. Please note also that this guidance must be used in conjunction with other documents that support workplaces (excluding health care settings) in reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 among workers, volunteers, and members of the public.

With appropriate controls in place, places of worship may host services and faith-based activities of no more than 1/3 of the normal seating capacity in the building or hall. However, in-person social gatherings that often occur before and after a service (e.g. communal dinners and lunches) should continue to be avoided until further notice. All places of worship are expected to follow the public health guidance below and revise their operating and event hosting procedures as necessary to keep everyone, especially the most vulnerable, safe.

Definitions and Scope

For the purposes of this document:

- The term “faith-based activities” includes any services, activities, and events such as religious services, prayer services, devotions or study of religious books, ceremonies, charitable activities, etc.
- The “organizer” is the religious leader, director of worship, site resources or operations lead, or other individual who is charged with organizing the activities.

Roles and Responsibilities

The organizer at a place of worship is responsible for preventing the risk of transmission of infection among any staff, volunteers, and members of the public who enter the place of worship to participate in faith-based activities. They are also responsible for protecting those who support day-to-day operations in the place of worship (e.g., administrative staff, cleaning staff, and contractors).

Risk Mitigation to Protect Congregants and Members of the Public

Places of worship are expected to reduce the attendance at faith-based activities and events to no more than 1/3 or the normal seating capacity (excluding infants under the age of two-years old from the total headcount).

Reducing attendance can be facilitated by:

- Offering multiple, smaller services or events for segments of the congregation instead of single services or events attended by the entire congregation.
- Establishing and requiring prior registration (online or by phone) to ensure that caps on attendance will not be exceeded.
- Encouraging congregants to access the place of worship outside of peak hours if they are attending for purposes other than communal worship services.
- Offering options for remote participation in faith-based activities (e.g. by telephone, closed circuit radio, video conference, video recordings) in conjunction with, or as a replacement for, in-person attendance.
- Considering or continuing alternate ways of participation for people who are at greater risk of severe disease, including the elderly and people with chronic medical conditions.

The event organizer must ensure that extra precautions are available for higher risk congregants who do choose to attend in person, such as designating times for individual worship or encouraging mask use for anyone who will be near that person.

If offering “drive-by”, “drive through”, or “drive in” services, in which individuals participate in faith-based activities and receive services (e.g. blessings) without leaving their cars:

- Vehicles should contain only individuals from the same household.
- Discourage people from leaving their vehicles during the service or event, except when using the washroom.
- Discourage vehicle idling.
- Religious leaders, staff, and volunteers who approach a vehicle to provide services to its occupants are encouraged to wear a mask if car windows are rolled down and if they are not able to maintain a two metre distance from the occupants.

Organizers should ensure that information and guidance is made available to members of their congregations to help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, such as:

- Encouraging congregants to use the online self-screening tool before every visit to the place of worship, and strongly discouraging in-person worship when feeling unwell.

- Reminding congregants that they must not attend in person if they are experiencing any symptoms associated with COVID-19 (cough, fever, shortness of breath, runny nose, or sore throat).
- Notifying congregants at entrance of the place of worship that individuals with symptoms of COVID-19, individuals who have travelled outside of Nunavut within the last 14 days, and/or individuals who have had close contact with confirmed COVID-19 cases in the last 14 days are prohibited by law from entering.
- Posting facility-specific rules for participating in faith-based activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Directing the flow of people through the place of worship.
- Ask that children younger than the age of two years old be held by their parents or family.
- Giving verbal reminders to observe physical distancing.
- Encouraging hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette while in the place of worship.
- Encouraging attendees to wear non-medical masks or other face covers.

To support public health contact tracing efforts in case an attendee at the place of worship later test positive, organizers should maintain an attendance list including contact information for each event. However, faith-based organizations will have full ownership of their attendance lists and will only be asked to share such lists with the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO) if a potential exposure occurs onsite. If there is an on-site exposure, all staff, congregants, and volunteers who were present at the time of the exposure should be notified that an exposure may have occurred and that attendance lists from the time of the exposure will be shared with the Office of the CPHO for contact tracing purposes only.

Protecting Staff and Volunteers

Organizers at places of worship should:

- Maintain up-to-date contact information for staff and volunteers.
- Record who is working each day and attending group activities and events.
- Provide information and training about appropriate physical distancing, facility-specific risk-reduction measures, and proper respiratory and hygiene practices.
- Provide non-medical masks if staff and volunteers are unable to maintain two-metre physical distance from congregants.

Organizers at places of worship should plan and prepare their facilities ahead of time to support physical distancing amongst staff, volunteers, and attendees. This could include:

- Controlling and staggering entry into, and exit from, the place of worship before and after group activities or events (e.g. by dismissing individuals by household or section, rather than all at once).
- Establishing different points of entry and exit from high-traffic areas, where feasible to do so.
- Arranging or marking seating to ensure a 2-meter physical distancing between individuals who are not members of the same household (e.g.: no more than 1 household in a bench).
- Identifying areas, such as lobbies, where crowding and bottlenecks are common, and using volunteers, staff, or barriers to redirect people who may gather in these areas.
- If congregants are required to line up to receive communion or blessings, using floor markings to encourage physical distancing.

Organizers should increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting of high traffic areas, common areas, and washrooms in the place of worship.

- Frequently clean and disinfect high touch/shared surfaces such as doorknobs, light switches, toilet handles, faucets and taps, ceremonial objects, elevator buttons, railings.
- Cleaning guidance can be found and other health resources can be found at https://www.gov.nu.ca/health/information/covid-19-novel-coronavirus
- Hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol content is highly recommended at facility entrances and exits, and throughout the place of worship (although caution should be exercised to prevent access to hand sanitizer by young children without supervision.

Guidance on Higher Risk Activities

Organizers should thoroughly review all faith-based activities, rituals, and practices that occur in their place of worship to determine if they increase the risk of spreading COVID-19 amongst congregants, staff, and/or volunteers. Any activity or practice that increases the risk of COVID-19 through contact (touching surfaces) or droplet transmission (sneezing, coughing, singing, shouting) or sharing a liquid (e.g. communion wine) should be discontinued or altered to prevent the risk.

Social Events: While places of worship are allowed to resume faith-based activities and events specifically for the purpose of worship, social activities such as communal dinners, lunches or any post event gatherings for snacks and tea/coffee remain prohibited at this time.

Singing, Live Music and Performances: Infected people can transmit the virus over greater distances through their saliva or respiratory droplets while singing, shouting, when playing certain instruments such as wind instruments or performing (e.g. drama or dance). Therefore, these activities are high risk, and require careful consideration at places of worship. Congregational singing should thus be discouraged. Consider using a soloist who is completely separated (e.g. with use of plexiglass) from the congregation, or recorded music instead.

Interpersonal Interactions: Shaking hands, hugging, touching, or passing items between people compromises the two-metre distance between congregants and must not occur, except between members of the same household or cohort family. Alternatives such as waving, nodding, or bowing should be encouraged. Religious rituals that involve physical contact between individuals, such as anointing with oils or baptisms increase the likelihood of disease transmission and should be postponed or performed in an alternate fashion that minimizes physical contact.

Everyone in the place of worship should always follow proper respiratory etiquette practices . These practices include coughing and sneezing into the elbow or a tissue, discarding tissues into a lined garbage bin, and washing hands afterwards.

If food or drink must be provided as part of a faith-based ritual (e.g. communion), the following precautions must be taken to prevent the risk of infection:

- Food or drink should best be served to congregants in pre-packaged or individual portions by a small number of designated individuals and not shared or passed between congregants.
- Physical contact between the designated serving individuals and congregants must not occur while serving food or drink (e.g. placing food in a congregants' mouths). Instead, the server can place the individual food or drink portion in a congregant's outstretched hand, or on a table for the congregant to pick up.
- The designated serving individuals should wash or sanitize hands immediately before serving and should wear a clean, properly fitted non-medical mask for the duration of time spent serving.

Do not hand out or share items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized before and after each use (e.g., books, hymns, prayer mats, pipes, and programs).

- Encourage congregants to bring their own items and avoid sharing them with others. o Pre-print daily song sheets and discard after services are completed.
- Consider using projection or audio-visual systems to share information.
- Do not share microphones.

- Remove any shared receptacles for liquid (e.g. holy water fonts). If washing facilities are required, they should be supplemented by hand hygiene products.
- If it is required for religious or spiritual reasons, touching of ceremonial objects (e.g., statues, religious symbols, rings) may occur if hand hygiene is performed before and after touching the object. Individuals must not kiss, embrace, or press their faces on any shared ceremonial object.
- Do not pass donation collection plates or containers between congregants. A designated area can be used to place offerings/donations or online options made available to receive them. As much as possible, touching of offerings/donations collected from patrons should be avoided for the first 24 hours.

Children's Programs and Other Building Uses

- If infant and/or child-minding support is offered during a faith-based activity, guidance developed for Day Cares should be followed https://gov.nu.ca/education/information/child-care-facility-guidelines-re-opening-june-1-2020
- Places of worship that freely offer or rent spaces within their facilities to other groups or businesses must ensure that these groups or businesses abide by all orders of the CPHO and all applicable public health guidance documents.
- The operator is responsible for ensuring that any parties renting or using space in the place of worship have plans and mechanisms in place to prevent infection transmission amongst their staff, volunteers, and patrons.

Guidelines can be found at: https://www.gov.nu.ca/health/information/nunavuts-path

References

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