

# The New Normal

Carman United Church Covid-19 Recovery Plan  
Prepared by Rev. Nick Phillips for the Church Council, July 2020  
(amended July 31, 2020)

On March 16, 2020 Carman United Church (1 Clyde Avenue, Sydney Mines, NS) a meeting was held by the Church Council where it was decided to immediately close the church building to the public in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

As part of the reopening of our building to the public we are examining what this may look like for our church and community while knowing we will likely never return to the way things once were. As we've worshiped with the theme of "What is Normal?" for the month of July, we as a church have been preparing for the new "normal" we will find ourselves living once the threat of pandemic has passed within the next year or two.

This document is separated into several key sections, which we have been using as discussion guidelines for our Church Council meetings over the last 4 months:

- 1. The Current Situation**
- 2. The Short Term Vision**
- 3. The Long Term Vision**

Part 1 is reviewing how things are functioning currently within the church and what is happening around us. It is a reminder of where we are, and how quickly we were able to transition when the pandemic hit.

Part 2 is the short term vision of how the church will potentially function over the next 12 months as we ride the waves of infection within our province which are predicted to happen, as we watch restrictions be relaxed and tightened as necessary as per Nova Scotia Public Health recommendations.

Part 3 is the long term vision of how we will function in the new reality of life once the pandemic is deemed past. We realize this is an opportunity to reevaluate our ministry on the Northside, and also realize some of the ways we have done things in the past may not be even permissible or recommended

any longer.

## **Part 1 – The Current Situation**

### **Where Are We?**

As of this writing, we are 4 months into the Covid-19 pandemic. One third of 2020 has been impacted significantly by the threat of the virus around us. We are particularly aware that many members of our church are at significant risk to developing complications should they contract the virus, so we are being as safe as possible.

**We have no idea how much longer Covid-19 will be a threat.** What we do know is that the province remains in a state of emergency with strong recommendations for our own safety. We know 4 months have gone by, but we don't know how much longer the threat will exist.

We have been relatively lucky in Nova Scotia during the first wave of the pandemic. We did have 2 of the first 3 deaths in Cape Breton, but overall infection rates have been very low.

- Nova Scotia reports 1067 known cases (0.1% of the total population)
- The Eastern Division of the Nova Scotia Health Authority reports 53 known cases (0.03% of the total population of the Eastern Division).
- There were only 63 deaths province-wide, 84% of which were at a single long-term health care facility in Halifax.

**These stats show we have much to be thankful for so far.**

But the overall impact has been much more widely felt:

- Businesses were forced to adapt their business model, and many will not reopen
- As a result, we are in a recession, likely one that will be long and deep
- Schools were closed for 3 months. Many families struggled with online learning for a variety of reasons and we have no idea what school will look like in September, causing further stress on families and even workplaces as they seek to respond to the needs of their employees
- People are more isolated than they have been in 100 years, putting a strain on many individuals, particularly those with mental health illnesses

- Treatments and surgeries are postponed or cancelled
- Many churches remain closed for the safety of their membership
- Funerals are postponed or are very limited in attendance

### **We also have much to grieve in this time of crisis**

#### **What have we done at Carman?**

After our last in-person worship service on March 15, 2020 (which Rev. Nick was on study leave) we immediately moved our worship online. Our services have been well received and watched from friends and strangers from across Canada and beyond. Statistics show an average of 50-60 viewers watch the entire service every week. Many of these viewers watch them with family members, meaning our worship “attendance” is up over our regular “in person” worship.

Donations as of the end of June are up 6% (+\$2800) over the same period of 2019, and our expenses are down 3% (-\$1800). And as our worship reach has expanded, so has our support, we have received financial donations from across the country, some of which are donating every week.

Pastoral Care is tricky in a pandemic. In home, in hospital, and in long-term care facility visits are unable to happen. Wherever possible, Rev. Nick has attempted to provide pastoral care by phone or, more recently, social distance visits in people's yards. While this is not ideal, this is the reality we are in at this time. **We must continue to protect one another from the threat of Covid-19**, and Rev. Nick is committed to do what is needed for as long as needed. Unfortunately we have had a number of members who required hospitalizations during the pandemic, to which Rev. Nick is very sorry he is unable to provide in-person care. We have not experienced many deaths, which is somewhat fortunate, but those who have passed, we mourn with the families that we are unable to gather to celebrate the lives of loved ones lost.

In the meantime, public health restrictions continue to evolve and change as the virus activity changes in our province and country. So we watch carefully and consider how each change impacts our ability to worship together. Masks are now highly recommended, particularly in situations where social

distancing may be difficult and larger groupings are now permitted.

**We must be aware of public health regulations.**

**We are required to follow them, we might even consider trying to exceed them!**

Figuring out what the “**New Normal**” will probably be the hardest thing we will ever have to figure out in the history of our church. Covid-19 is going to be a reality in the world for quite some time. There will not be a day when the switch is flipped and everything is normal again. We will need to learn to adapt and evolve as the world continues to change around us.

We have seen over the last 4 months that Carman United Church is more than it's building. Worship is still taking place weekly, even though the building is closed to the public. Even if the building itself were inaccessible, there are contingency plans in place with the music and preaching to make sure worship continues. We have even had other churches tuning in as well, in particular the Boularderie Pastoral Charge, but also other churches have joined when their ministry personnel has been away (most recently the Clyde-Carleton Pastoral Charge from the other end of the province).

As we turn our eyes towards reopening our building for worship, we put our trust in God, and make sure we are seeking to keep the most vulnerable around us as safe as possible. Each decision we make must take into consideration the safety of those most at risk. Ultimately, the decisions around the process forward will be made by our Church Council, who has been meeting monthly to explore what is happening in the church and around us. The Council seeks advice from it's members, the members of our church, the various committees, as well as Public Health regulations both nationally and provincially. We also are receiving reports from the United Church of Canada head offices and from Region 15.

## **Part 2 – The Short Term Vision**

### **Where Are We Going?**

This is probably the trickiest part of reopening we are going to face. What will church look like? When will we open? Who can attend? How many can attend? Will we be able to sing?

A few things are clear from the outset. Church will not look the same for quite some time.

As we consider in-person worship once again, we know attendance will be very limited by design. The need for social distancing means 6 feet of spacing is required from each “bubble” of worshippers, which essentially means each family group is 6 feet from every other family group. Depending on the sizes of the family groups (10 is the maximum allowed by the province at this time), we are limited to approximately 35 people per Sunday in the sanctuary. That only puts us at about 25% of our full capacity (see section on Seating below).

There is much for us to consider for holding in-person worship once again.

#### **Music and Speakers**

One major change to worship will be around singing. Experts have strongly discouraged singing in groups because of the aerosols that are emitted while one sings or speaks loudly. These aerosols can linger in the air and infect others who are around us. Organ playing will be allowed, but singing is out of the question, which also means no choir. There may be ways in which we can have a soloist, but that will need to be explored further. We will want to remove hymn books and other items from the pews which could also be transmission sites, since we will not be using them.

The officiant will be the primary speaker for every service. If other speakers are required, they will use a separate microphone for their use alone. It is recommended by Public Health that there be no sharing of microphones, and that each microphone be cleaned after use.

## **Masks**

Public Health strongly recommends that everyone wears masks when inside public buildings. Because Carman does not have a ventilation system, **Carman United will require everyone to wear a non-medical mask** while they are in the building. We may want to source a supplier to have masks on hand to provide for those who do not carry their own.

The officiant of the service may be masked if he/she chooses while speaking, but will not be required if being heard or understood could be a challenge. The officiant should be masked while approaching and leaving the pulpit. There are hearing impaired people in our congregation who rely on lip-reading in order to fully understand what is being said. The officiant will be speaking solely from the pulpit and sufficient distancing will be in place (see section on Seating below).

## **Entering/Exiting the Church**

Entrance to the church will be through one doorway. **It is recommended that everyone enter through the main doors on Clyde Avenue and exit through the Parking Lot door.** Upon approaching the church, people will be greeted by masked ushers who will take their names and contact information should the need for contact tracing arise. They will also be screened by an usher before they enter the building. The usher will ask the following questions before anyone is allowed to enter the building:

- Are you feeling well today? Do you have any of the common Covid-19 symptoms (fever, chills, new or worsening cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, etc)?
- Do you have reason to believe you've been in contact with someone who has Covid-19?
- Have you travelled outside of the province within the last two weeks which requires a 14 day quarantine period?
- Have you been advised by a medical professional to self-isolate?

After being screened and signed in, people will be required to clean their hands with hand sanitizer. Once hands are clean, they will be directed to their seats by an usher, primarily working from the front of the church to the back.

To leave the church, people will remain seated until directed by an usher to make their way to the parking lot door, beginning with those who are closest to the door, working towards the front of the church, section by section, where they will immediately leave the building as directed and clear the exit to make room for the next group to leave behind them. It is recommended that there be no mingling in the parking lot, but that people make their way to their cars.

### **Ushers**

Ushers will be masked and possibly gloved. They will attempt to enforce social distancing rules. They will collect personal information from and screen attendees. They will track how many people are in the church, and turn away those who arrive after the attendance limit has been reached. Anyone who reports feeling ill, refuses to mask or sanitize their hands will be asked to leave. Ushers will have a crucial role in reopening the church, so must be chosen and trained carefully.

Ushers will be placed strategically around the back of church during the service in order to maintain social distancing and for monitoring of the assembled congregation.

### **Doors**

Because of above mentioned lack of ventilation, all doors assigned for entering and exiting the church will be propped open as weather permits to allow for greater air flow and protect people from another high contact surface. In the event the doors cannot be propped open, the ushers will secure the doors during entry and exit times around the service.

### **Seating Capacity**

As mentioned above, seating capacity at Carman will be extremely limited by design. In order to maintain social distancing, only every 3<sup>rd</sup> pew can be utilized for seating to create suitable spacing between family bubbles. We need to be aware that people may need to use the aisles, so worshipers are to be seated 6 feet from the aisle. This means approximately 35 people can sit inside the sanctuary. If we were to utilize the hall, we could potentially seat a maximum of another 30 people by placing chairs in groups 6 feet apart. All worshippers will be guided to their seats by ushers.

It is recommended that those seeking to attend worship arrive early in order to give ample time to

facilitate seating so the service may start as scheduled. Doors will be open with ushers present 1 hour before the scheduled start of the service.

In order to protect those attending worship, the first two rows of pews in the centre section of the sanctuary will not be used in order to provide sufficient spacing from the pulpit as it is recommended that there be 12 feet of spacing between the speaker (who speaks more loudly, thus more aerosols are released, thus potentially more spread of the virus from a higher vantage point). Closing the first two rows of pews will exceed this guideline.

### **Bulletins**

Bulletins will not be used for the foreseeable future. All announcements will be given verbally and projected on screen. People may choose to bring paper and pen to record anything they wish to remember.

### **Offering**

The passing of plates will not be used for the offering. An enclosed box can be placed at the entrance where people can drop in their offering as they enter the church for those who wish to do so. Counters must wear masks and gloves while handling the offering. PAR and E-transfers are the recommended methods of donating to the church at this time and will be strongly encouraged.

### **Post-worship**

There will be no lingering after the service, people will remain seated until directed by an usher to make their way to the exit where they will immediately leave the building and clear the exit to make room for the next group to leave behind them.

### **After-Event Sanitation**

After every service within the church, we will be required to sanitize the sanctuary. This is a lot of work to ask of our custodian, so we will recruit and train a team of volunteers who will take turns cleaning the sanctuary after every service on a rotational basis. All common touch surfaces must be wiped clean as well as all pews (whether sat in or not, the virus can spread beyond just where people sit). Volunteers will wear non-medical masks and will use gloves and cleaning supplies provided.

## **Bathrooms**

While it is recommended that people use the bathroom at home before they come to church, the accessible bathroom will be available for “emergencies” should someone require it. All other bathrooms will be closed. Guidelines for hand washing and safe use will be posted on the door and on the mirror. It is recommended that one washes their hands upon entering the bathroom and before leaving, and flush the toilet after every use. They will leave the door open as they exit. Bathrooms must be cleaned and sanitized at the end of every service.

## **Communion**

Communion will be a challenge for us. We cannot serve in the pews, because that will require the passing of plates. Coming forward is an option, although still not ideal, at which point the officiant will be required to mask and wear gloves. There are also products available which are “prepackaged communion” with the juice and cracker held in a sealed container to be opened by the one receiving communion. We may want to explore this option further.

## **Baptisms**

Similarly baptisms will be a challenge. If a baptism is requested, masks will be required, social distancing will be maintained as much as possible, the officiant will use hand sanitizer before and after the baptism, there will be no laying on of hands, nor will there be a “showing” of the child by walking around the church. Families will be seated as close to the baptismal font as possible.

## **Sunday School and Nursery**

There will be no Sunday School or Nursery available at Carman for the foreseeable future. Children are still welcome to attend with their family, but we are unable to accommodate a learning environment for them. Likewise, “Children's Time” will also be discontinued during the pandemic.

## **Funerals and Weddings**

Funerals and weddings will be required to follow the same guidelines as for public worship. Masks are required, seating capacity will remain limited, the officiant will be the primary speaker for the entire service. The church will provide ushers to act as per our public worship guidelines above.

The officiant has the power and responsibility to enforce all guidelines and, if he/she does not feel safe, has the right to postpone or cancel the event. If a deposit was received for an event which is cancelled because the officiant does not feel safe, the deposit is forfeited and will not be refunded.

Funerals and weddings located at other venues will follow guidelines put in place by the venue.

**What if someone is infected?**

If we are made aware that someone infected with Covid-19 has been in our building, we will work with Public Health openly and provide them with all contact tracing information as well as any other information they may require.

**What about those who cannot come?**

For community members who do not feel safe coming into a church building, we will explore the possibility of live streaming the service. This will require somewhat of a significant investment in camera(s), computer(s), internet and other equipment required to broadcast the service to those who do not feel they can join us. There has also been requests from those who are worshipping with us from afar to keep doing so as they have been enjoying our services and wish to continue. Some are even willing to help donate towards the costs of taking our services online.

We also hope to engage with other local United Churches who do not currently have ministry personnel to partner with them in worship leadership. There is an example of a number of United Churches in Northern Ontario who participate in a “connected” service where portions of each service are shared via technology. The Church Council is investigating this option and is starting to engage with other local churches to see if there is interest. This will require significant upgrades to our technology with the maximum costs of around \$30,000 (loans and grants are available).

## **Part 3 – The Long Term Vision**

### **Where Are We Really Going?**

This is the portion of the document that is the most challenging to write, as the understanding of public gatherings for the foreseeable future continue to evolve. It is very likely that we will not see a return to what we would consider close to “normal” for several years.

This is a chance for the wider church to reevaluate ministry. As a vaccine and proven treatments are still off somewhere in the future, churches need to consider what is most important. Buildings are no longer the focal point of a church, but rather it's outreach. We have seen success with our online worship and our Bible Studies. Services are watched from across Canada and beyond. Our online Bible Studies also include people from Halifax, Alberta and Vancouver, and they have expressed a deep desire to keep meeting and learning together beyond our current study.

Worship may return to something comparable to what we are comfortable with eventually. It will never be the same, but it will feel familiar at some point. But we may need to rethink how we do any fundraising, how we do social events, and how we gather in general at the church. At the same time, these changes will limit how we bring people into our church and help them get to know us. This means, for true outreach to happen, for teaching, discipleship, and evangelism which we normally expect to happen inside our church building, we need to find ways to connect with people outside of our walls.

There are a number of Biblical examples of this, one of which is small groups meeting in homes. This is helpful for family groups and “social bubbles” to gather and learn together, there are a number of resources available which could easily provide lessons for groups to study. There is also the continued online options which are available to us, our online studies and worship.

There may also be other organizations we can partner with in order to provide outreach. Community CARES, the Food Bank, 511 Youth and Family Centre, schools, other churches, the possibilities are unlimited, and we need to trust God to lead us in these explorations.

**In short, we need to be open to what the Holy Spirit of God has for us as we seek to be faithful followers of the One who has shown us the way to live in this world, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.**

Please continue to pray and seek God's divine wisdom as we wander forward in an ever-changing world.