

Step 3 Guidance for Holding Low Risk Worship Services

Last updated: [August 24, 2021](#)

Update: Worship services are exempt from both the [provincial mask mandate](#) that requires mask use in indoor public spaces and the requirement to provide [proof of immunization against COVID-19](#) to access in-person worship services. However, faith leaders are supported to implement these additional measures in their in-person services should they desire to do so.

Introduction

As COVID-19 vaccinations are administered throughout the province, we can gather in-person again to share hope, healing, restoration and recovery. As pillars of strength, religious organizations and faith-based worship services play a critical role in connecting the community by supporting beneficial and safe social interactions. These guidelines were developed in close collaboration with a diverse spectrum of spiritual and faith leaders and communities from across the province through a process led by Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. The Office of the Provincial Health Officer and the Province are deeply grateful to these leaders.

The Province is in Step 3 of its of [BC's Restart Plan](#). Through this time of transition, there will be different approaches to resuming activities and operations, including in-person worship services. This guidance document outlines what faith leaders, members, volunteers, and others can do to hold worship services safely during Step 3, and how to prepare for the upcoming fall respiratory season. Additional optional prevention measures for consideration are outlined in [WorkSafeBC's communicable disease prevention plan resources](#).

Local or regional [Public Health Orders](#) that apply to worship services may be placed during times of increased community spread of COVID-19, and/or within communities with low vaccination uptake. These orders take precedence over the guidance provided here.

Positive Prevention Measures

Implementing positive prevention measures can keep worship services a low risk for COVID-19 transmission. Faith leaders, their staff and volunteers are encouraged to facilitate open conversations about positive prevention measures people can take to show that they are mindful of the health and wellbeing of others in their community and decide which ones will be in place during their worship services. These measures are outlined below.

Everyone should stay home if they are sick or not feeling well. Encourage anyone with symptoms of illness to use the [BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#) or the BCCDC [When to Get Tested for COVID-19](#) resource to know if they should seek testing for COVID-19. Include reminders in written communications (e.g., newsletters, bulletins, etc.) and hang posters at entrances to ensure everyone checks if they're feeling sick before attending in-person services.





Everyone should clean their hands frequently, especially before touching faces. Washing with regular soap and water reduces the spread of illness. If soap and water aren't available, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol content can be used on hands that are not visibly dirty.

Everyone eligible should be encouraged to be fully vaccinated (i.e., have received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine more than 14 days have passed since their second dose) against COVID-19. COVID-19 is now a vaccine-preventable disease, like the flu, measles, and whooping cough. Faith leaders play an important role in encouraging those eligible to get vaccinated, including through sharing trusted information sources (included below) and having open and respectful dialogue with those who are hesitant. Vaccinations are the best prevention measure against COVID-19, and proof of full immunization against COVID-19 will be [required to access certain discretionary services as of October 24, 2021](#). Worship services are exempt from this requirement; however, faith leaders may choose to implement the requirement of proof of vaccination status for in-person services should they choose to do so.

Everyone 12 and older is recommended to wear a mask during indoor worship services. As of August 25, 2021, those aged 12 and older are [required to wear a mask in indoor public settings, regardless of vaccination status](#). Worship services are exempt from this mandate; however, faith leaders may choose to implement mask use for those 12 and older – regardless of vaccination status – for in-person services.

Give others space. Not everyone will feel comfortable being close to others, including sitting, standing shoulder-to-shoulder or shaking hands. While there are no size limits on worship services (indoor or outdoor), faith leaders should encourage everyone to spread out in the available space before, during, and after services. This can be relaxed to enable specific cultural practices when needed. Faith leaders can also continue to use barriers and space markers.

Keep things clean. Regular cleaning and disinfecting can help prevent the spread of illnesses, including COVID-19. Frequently touched surfaces such as toilets, sink tap handles, doorknobs, light switches and tables should be cleaned and disinfected at least daily. Other surfaces should be cleaned regularly and when visibly dirty. More information on cleaning and disinfecting is available from the B.C. Centre for Disease Control's (BCCDC) website [here](#).

Children and Youth

Children under 12: Children under 12 are less likely to get and spread COVID-19 and have a low risk of serious outcomes if they do get COVID-19. Activities for children under 12 can resume as normal. Parents should be reminded to assess their child for symptoms of illness before attending in-person worship services or other activities. Remind and help children to clean their hands regularly (especially before eating and after using the washroom), and to respect the personal space of others.

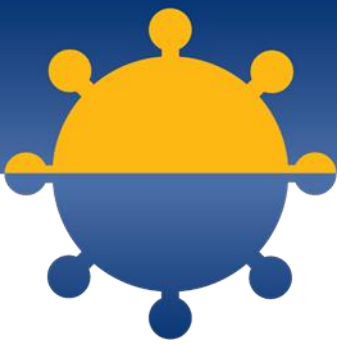
Youth 12 and older: Youth should be encouraged to follow the same prevention measures as adults.

Additional information on holding child activities is available from the [BCCDC](#).

Additional Prevention Measures

Faith leaders can implement additional prevention measures above and beyond what is in this guidance document,





such as encouraging or requiring mask use for everyone, promoting physical distancing, or restricting activities such as singing or sharing food.

Compliance with Prevention Measures

Faith leaders, their staff and volunteers should monitor compliance with prevention measures. While education should be the first step, those unwilling to follow the prevention measures in-place should be offered virtual services on an ongoing basis and restricted from attending in-person services. This allows the needs of the individual to be met while protecting the health of the community.

Those unable to follow prevention measures (for health, cognitive or behavioural reasons) should still be welcome to attend. Work with them or their caregiver (if applicable) to determine what measures they can follow.

Religious organizations can set their own policies on whether unvaccinated and not fully vaccinated people can attend in-person services. While having all eligible people fully vaccinated is the best way to keep everyone safe, unvaccinated people can attend in-person services without significant risk to others if most of the other attendees are fully vaccinated and the unvaccinated person wears a mask and keeps space from others. During times of increased COVID-19 cases in the local community and/or in communities with low vaccination uptake, faith leaders may consider recommending or asking those who are unvaccinated to attend virtual services to further help protect community safety.

It is important to have open and ongoing conversations with those who are vaccine hesitant. Consider offering information and education from a trusted source and continue to encourage them to consider getting vaccinated. Links to accurate information on vaccines is included in the FAQs below.

Singing and Musical Instruments

Activities such as singing and playing musical instruments are not restricted for worship services, though they are known to have some risk of transmission. To lower the risk, these activities should take place outdoors, or indoors in a well-ventilated space. The continued use of barriers and physical distancing can also be considered to further lower the risk and/or if it brings additional comfort to those participating. For the next six months, participants can be limited to those who are fully vaccinated. All participants should consider their own health and the health of those in the group when deciding whether or not to participate.

Serving Food and Beverages

COVID-19 doesn't appear to be transmitted by eating food contaminated with the virus, however, it is important that basic food safety practices continue to be implemented when preparing and serving food and beverages.

Preparing: Practice can return to what was in place before the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensure those preparing food clean their hands often and are not sick. Additional food safety information is available from [BCCDC](#). [FOODSAFE Level 1](#) covers important food safety and worker safety information. It is a helpful resource for those seeking education and training on basic food safety practices.

Serving: Practice can return to what was in place before the COVID-19 pandemic, including allowing buffets and large





groups at a single table. Ensure those serving food clean their hands often and are not sick. Continue to ensure those being served clean their hands before using common touch items (like tongs or serving spoons at a buffet) and before eating, and that high-touch surfaces (like tongs or serving spoons) are cleaned and disinfected regularly. Encourage participants to not share food and to continue giving others space.

Communion Cups: Many faith leaders implemented innovative ways to provide communion and/or the use of shared or common cups while reducing COVID-19 risk, such as using single-use cups or offering pre-packaged beverages. It is encouraged that faith leaders continue with these approaches (in consultation with their congregation, staff, and volunteers). Not everyone will feel ready to return to communion without prevention measures yet, so consider offering a mix of options to meet the needs of members.

Respiratory Season

While COVID-19 will continue to spread, people who are fully vaccinated can still transmit the virus and experience mild illness. By implementing basic prevention measures, faith leaders can provide low-risk in-person worship services. While we expect there to be an increase in spreadable respiratory illnesses in the fall and winter (respiratory seasons) as seen in previous years, the prevention measures recommended in this guidance reduce the risk of all spreadable respiratory illnesses including COVID-19, colds, and the flu. Public health continues to closely monitor cases of COVID-19 and other spreadable illnesses. Updated guidance will be issued if needed to address any recommended changes to prevention measures during the respiratory season.

Vaccination Against COVID-19: FAQs for Faith Leaders

Almost everyone 12 and older is eligible for vaccination to protect against COVID-19. Vaccination is safe, effective, and free.

Question	Answer
Can I ask members, staff, and volunteers who want to attend in-person services about their vaccination status or require proof of vaccination?	<p>While attendees can be asked to voluntarily provide their vaccine status or proof, nobody is required to provide this information to attend in-person services.</p> <p>Rather than requesting this information, consider recommending those who are not vaccinated to continue accessing services on-line or through other means. Alternatively, recommend those who are not yet vaccinated to continue to wear a mask indoors and keep space from others.</p> <p>While having all eligible people fully vaccinated is the best way to keep everyone safe, people who are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated can attend in-person services without significant risk to others if most others attending are fully vaccinated.</p>
Should I create separation between those who are vaccinated and those who are not?	<p>You do not need to create separate spaces for those who are vaccinated and those who are not. Those who are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated are recommended to wear a mask indoors and keep space from others.</p>





Question	Answer
What information can I give members who are feeling hesitant about getting vaccinated?	<p>As a trusted source of information, faith leaders play a critical role in providing accurate messaging to congregation members about COVID-19 vaccination. The following links provide reliable information, including about vaccine safety, effectiveness, and more:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ImmunizeBC COVID-19 FAQs• ImmunizeBC COVID-19 Vaccine Basics• ImmunizeBC COVID-19 Vaccine Safety and Side Effects• BCCDC information on COVID-19 vaccines, including how they are approved in Canada• BC Government “Get Vaccinated” website for registration
Can a person who is allergic to the vaccine still attend my in-person service if I am limiting attendance to only fully vaccinated people?	<p>Yes. People who are allergic to components of the COVID-19 vaccines can safely attend in-person services, especially if most others attending who are eligible are fully vaccinated. This is because of herd immunity: when most people who are eligible are vaccinated, we protect those who cannot be vaccinated.</p>
What if a member has been vaccinated with a product not used in Canada?	<p>In Canada, a person is considered fully vaccinated when at least two weeks have elapsed after they received the final dose of a vaccine product series approved by the World Health Organization.</p>

