



1 April 2020

**This is an updated letter from that sent on 27 March 2020.  
The updates are printed in *italics* in the introductory comments; points 1; 3; 5; 9; and  
new points 15; 16; 17.**

**This letter has been sent to: All Church Council Secretaries, Presbytery office bearers,  
Presbytery Ministers, people in placements and retired ministers.  
Please feel free to distribute this letter further.**

Dear friends,

**Re: COVID-19 response: practical implications – UPDATED (1 April 2020)**

**‘Above all, maintain constant love for one another’ (1 Peter 4: 8)**

These are challenging times for everyone, and many of us are feeling pushed to our limits. We are all experiencing challenges we have never faced before and it takes time to find our way through things. In your expectations of others, be gentle with each other. We’re all learning. We’re all in this together. Let us uphold one another in Christian love and accept the love of others in their care for us – as we strive to worship, witness, and serve in new and emerging ways.

Further government and public health *directions were issued on 30 March 2020* regarding responses to the impact of COVID-19 *including restricted activities and ‘social distancing’ measures*. Information regarding responding to COVID-19 impacts changes regularly. As information changes the Synod will inform the wider Church.

The information below reflects advice provided by the Australian and state governments along with the two key principles of:

- follow the advice of relevant civic authorities; and
- the health and safety of Church and wider community members is the highest priority.

This advice will apply until the temporary closure arrangements for places of worship and restriction of gatherings are relaxed by governments, or until further announcements are made.

### **1. Opening of places of worship**

Places of worship are not to be opened or used for worship services with any congregations, except for weddings and funerals – as indicated below.

*It is permissible for a maximum number of two (2) people to use church premises, including the worship centre, to video/live stream elements of, or a whole service, of worship. No other people may be present. Appropriate social distancing and hygiene practices apply.*

### **2. Weddings**

Weddings may be held in places of worship, with the maximum number of five (5) people present, using appropriate social distancing and hygiene practices. Each state or territory government has discretion to alter the numbers at a wedding. If further advice from a state government is received, the Synod will provide information to the Church regarding any changes.

### **3. Funerals**

Funerals may be held in places of worship, with the maximum number of ten (10) people present, using appropriate social distancing and hygiene practices. Each state or territory government has discretion to alter the numbers at a funeral. If further advice from a state government is received, the Synod will provide information to the Church regarding any changes.

*The announcement that public gatherings are now restricted to two (2) people does not apply to funerals, which continue to have a limit of ten (10) people.*

*The Victorian government has determined that a funeral may involve not more than ten (10) people, excluding those persons necessary for the conduct of the funeral.*

### **4. Funerals and weddings held outdoors**

The maximum number for weddings and funerals as indicated in points 2 and 3 above must be adhered to, using appropriate social distancing and hygiene practices.

### **5. Use of Church halls and public facilities**

Community halls or similar are not to be used by any groups, Church-related or other.

If halls or other facilities are *intended to be used for Essential Public Services* such as food banks or homeless services, they can remain open for the delivery of these services only (*applying all other health and safety measures*). *If you are in doubt about whether the service is an Essential Public Service, please seek advice either via your Presbytery or contact [UCA.Legal@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:UCA.Legal@victas.uca.org.au)*

### **6. Congregation-related gatherings away from church buildings**

No face-to-face congregation-related gatherings such as prayer groups, study groups or social groups, are to take place in people's homes or similar, or outdoors.

### **7. Church Council and congregation committee meetings**

Church Council and congregation committee meetings may only be held via teleconference and/or videoconference.

### **8. Congregations staying connected**

Congregations are encouraged to find ways for members to stay connected with each other for both worship and pastoral care, and with the wider Church. Opportunities including emails, website links, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, letter writing, phone-trees, are available for congregations to use to maintain connections between their community of faith. This is an opportunity for innovation.

Help, resources and coordination are available from your presbytery. The Synod's equipping Leadership for Mission Unit (eLM) has developed a resources webpage. The link for this is: <https://victas.uca.org.au/resources/covid-19-worship-resources/> Contact Rev Nigel Hanscamp ([Nigel.Hanscamp@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:Nigel.Hanscamp@victas.uca.org.au)) for more information about these resources. The online resources continue to evolve and are updated regularly.

Church Councils and ministers, where there are ministers in placement or supply, are encouraged to ensure that effective contact and pastoral and worship arrangements are in place for all members, along with opportunities for all members to experience being connected with each other – whether regular attenders or otherwise.

### **9. Addressing congregations' strengths and challenges**

There may be specific challenges according to the context of various congregations or communities of faith, whether these challenges relate to the use of electronic media, or to language, or cultural contexts. Where communities are blessed with gifts and skills in those areas, you are encouraged to look to who else you can share them with. To enhance coordination opportunities, ask your Presbytery which congregations might need and value your support. You don't need to be in the same region to partner up.

SBS Radio has launched a Multilingual Coronavirus Portal, for news and information about COVID-19. The portal has 63 community languages. This may be very helpful for a number of congregations across the Synod. The link is: <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/coronavirus> Please share this information and link as widely as possible and as soon as possible with congregations and faith communities that may find this resource helpful.

*Also, the Victorian Government's **Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)** website has 49 in-language web pages with information on how to 'Reduce your risk of coronavirus' and other resources.*

Please share this information and links as widely as possible and as soon as possible with congregations and faith communities that may find this resource helpful.

### **10. Being at mission**

Congregations are encouraged to look beyond themselves to encourage mission in the wider Church and community. Reflect with each other about how your congregation may express mission at this time, eg, pray for the world, send notes of support to the local Uniting and/or Uniting AgeWell centres, send cards to staff of local community services, schools or supermarket staff, drop off shopping for isolated neighbours, continue supporting wider Church activities such as UnitingWorld, etc.

### **11. Continue stewardship opportunities**

Explore ways to assist expressing discipleship and support the ministry and mission of the wider Church through continuing the practice of making offerings, e.g., provide information for congregation members to transfer funds into the Congregation's bank account, arrange for pick-ups of offering envelopes, etc.

Also, be sensitive to the needs of people who may be experiencing significant financial hardship in this period and who may need to alter their financial contribution in this period.

### **12. Congregation financial hardship**

If a congregation is experiencing financial hardship through unexpected income reduction, contact your presbytery. If needed, the Presbytery will contact the Synod for possible financial assistance.

### **13. Potential eligibility for government grants**

The synods are working with the Assembly to gain advice and, if appropriate, to approach the Australian government for access to government grants to assist various parts of the Church that are experiencing financial hardship. Further information will be distributed if the Church is eligible to seek grant relief.

### **14. Government websites**

Keep accessing relevant government websites for COVID-19 response updates. These sites provide the most reliable information for application in local contexts:

- Australia: <https://www.australia.gov.au>
- Victoria: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>
- Tasmania: [https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable\\_diseases\\_prevention\\_unit/infectious\\_diseases/coronavirus](https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable_diseases_prevention_unit/infectious_diseases/coronavirus)
- New South Wales: <https://preview.nsw.gov.au/covid-19>

**15. Age and other specific announcements**

*Ministers, including retired ministers, and other Church members, are strongly urged to self-isolate if they are over 70, or if they are over 60 with existing health conditions, or if they are Indigenous people over 50 with existing health conditions.*

**16. Potential fines**

*Victorian police are now authorised to issue on-the-spot fines for those persons and business/organisations found to be not complying with social distancing and isolation directives of the Federal and State Government. It is anticipated that similar arrangements will also be in place for Tasmania and New South Wales.*

*Fines in Victoria are:*

- *individuals up to \$1,600;*
- *businesses/organisations up to \$10,000.*

**17. Synod Units**

*Staff in all Synod Units (Secretariat, equipping Leadership for Mission [eLM], Mission Resourcing Unit [MRU]) are continuing to work. Most staff are working from home and can be contacted via phone (landlines have been redirected) or email.*

As congregations continue connecting with, and supporting, each other, and staying in contact with presbyteries, we will continue to share in Christ's ministry and uphold each other thoughtfully and prayerfully in faith, hope and love.

In this unprecedented time, with issues that are broad-ranging, rapidly changing, and with no simple fixes, ministers, congregation leaders, and all Church members are encouraged to recognise their own personal needs. Each person is encouraged to self-care and support each other, as we navigate our way in ministry as communities in these challenging times.

Let us continue to be the Church, in whichever way we are connected: living in Easter hope that emerges from God's suffering with the world through Christ. May the God of life uphold you.

Grace and peace,



**Rev Denise Liersch**  
**Moderator**



**Rev Dr Mark Lawrence**  
**General Secretary**

PS If you would like to reply to this letter, please send the reply to: [synod@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:synod@victas.uca.org.au)