



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.

18 March 2020

Dear friends,

**Re: Coronavirus response – size of gatherings and related material**

I write in light of the recent government announcement to ban all non-essential indoor gatherings of 100 or more people. As we share in navigating these challenging times, here is some advice regarding practical matters that we need to address as the wider Church (note: the Moderator will send a pastoral letter to the Church prior to the weekend).

The Church is obligated to follow the requirement to refrain from indoor gatherings of 100 or more people for the time being. Therefore, any worship, gatherings, meetings, that will involve more than 100 people are not to proceed. This includes any Easter related services. This requirement does not mean that communal worship must cease.

It is not appropriate for the Synod to provide blanket direction as to when a congregation may decide to conclude gathering for the time being. It is ultimately up to the Church Council to determine worship service arrangements, in keeping with prevailing legislative requirements. In all decisions remember that we are not only planning for physical safety, but also people's spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing.

To assist with Church Council and Congregation planning, some guidance for congregational discernment on this matter is:

- All congregational activities must be in keeping with direction given by civic authorities.
- The safety of Congregation members and activity attendees must be paramount in any Congregation/Church Council discernment.
- If a Congregation is typically more than 100 people, consider offering two or more worship/devotion opportunities through the week where people may gather, with appropriate 'social distancing' arrangements and practices.
- If a Congregation determines to discontinue a gathering for the time being, it is appropriate for the Church Council to give consideration to the following points:
  - Ensure that pastoral contact lists are up to date, and that arrangements are made to maintain regular, frequent contact with and between Congregation members.
  - Ensure Congregation members to continue to have regular, frequent contact with each other e.g. share a virtual cup of coffee following an online worship service.
  - Provide worship/devotional/prayer resources to congregation members to assist in sharing as a congregation with community (some presbyteries are developing resources to assist with this). Ministers and Church Councils are also encouraged to connect with other Church Councils and Congregations to share resources with one another.
  - Many members will still want to continue contributing financially to the congregation and wider Church. Church Councils and Treasurers may need to consider arrangements for members to continue providing their offering e.g. direct debit.

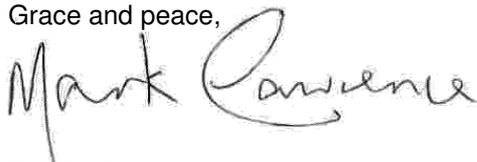
- If worship arrangements change, it is appropriate to display a notice in a prominent location, including information about arrangements and/or contact details to access Congregation activities/resources.
- If Congregations need technical assistance for setting up video-conferencing for worship, devotional resources, pastoral arrangements, etc, assistance over the phone is available through the Synod's Information Technology Services Unit Help Desk. Phone 03 9251 5440 for advice and assistance.
- Funerals will require particular sensitivity, working with the family and funeral director. Consider if separate spaces (e.g. detached hall) and/or outdoors, can be equipped with audio to allow for appropriate 'social distancing'. Discussion about 'priority attendance' and other ways of conveying respect and care will be needed.

If financial difficulties result for congregations through worship and/or activities not continuing for a period of time, Church Councils are encouraged to discuss these concerns with their Presbytery initially, and, as appropriate to then engage with the Synod (through the General Secretary) regarding arrangements for possible financial assistance.

In this challenging time for us all, I am reminded of Jesus' commitment to his followers in the storm on the Sea of Galilee: "Why are you afraid... I am in this boat with you", Jesus says (Mark 4:35-41). May we all continue to support and care for one another, in the faith that Christ journeys in this stormy time with us, as we navigate these 'rough seas' together.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments regarding this correspondence.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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

Attached:            Coronavirus information letter sent to all Congregations and Presbyteries in VicTas on 13 March 2020