

Belmont Uniting Church

Response to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) – recommendations for Church Council

COVID-19 is a virus that is known to cause respiratory infections. It is most likely spread from person to person through close contact with an infectious person or in the 24 hours before symptoms appear, through close contact with a person with a confirmed infection who coughs or sneezes, and through touching objects or surfaces that have been contaminated from a cough or sneeze by an infectious person and then touching your mouth or face.

People infected with COVID-19 can experience of symptoms, with the effects ranging from mild to fatal. There is no specific treatment for COVID-19, and no vaccine available.

As a world-wide pandemic, governments have acted to put in place a range of strategies aimed at containing the spread of the virus. The speed and impact of these strategies is unprecedented, with significant measures being taken almost daily to contain the spread of the virus.

On 13 March we received advice from Synod about measures congregations should consider taking. The Executive met on 14 March and developed an immediate response which included suspending food handling (including morning tea and Holy Communion) until safer procedures could be developed, and asking groups to suspend activities for a week to allow a risk assessment to be done .

On 15 March a meeting was held with convenors of groups to discuss these arrangements and consider forward planning. It was determined that funeral catering would cease immediately, and other groups planned to meet in the coming week to consider whether they should suspend activities or hold them differently. A planned working bee and Crazy Whist night were postponed.

During the past week a restriction on indoor gatherings of more than 100 people were now prohibited.

Advice was received from the Synod that this prohibition applied to worship services and other church activities.

The Executive has reviewed how this prohibition affects our congregation, taking into account:

- most of our congregation are considered as high risk of infection due to their age
- many of our congregation have health conditions that place them at high risk of infection
- many of our congregation live in group residential settings or aged care settings
- the 10.00am service routinely has around 100 people attending
- the length of time normally taken to hold a worship service
- achieving the recommended distance of 150cm between persons to minimise infection
- issues involved in providing hand washing resources, and in an ongoing sanitising of surfaces in the church and halls
- issues involved in providing and maintaining a rigorous regime of sanitising of surfaces in the church and halls using aging volunteers
- our obligations to provide a safe and healthy work environment for our minister
- information received from the Synod, the Assembly, and State and Commonwealth health departments

Options considered included changing the way in which worship services are conducted and limiting the numbers able to attend, postponing a range of fellowship and other activities, changing pastoral care and visiting arrangements, and providing alternatives for members to continue their financial contribution to the ministry of the congregation.

Other issues considered in forming the recommendations include the need for rapid responses to changing circumstances, the undesirability to bring people together unless vital to do so, and the need for ongoing governance of the affairs of the congregation.

The management of the pandemic by the Australian government develops almost daily as more is learned about how to contain the spread of the virus. Social distancing and isolation appear to be the most effective methods, with current reports from China suggesting a significant slow-down in infection rates due to the isolation restrictions imposed.

The Executive presents the follow recommendations to assist our congregation navigate through the next few months.

The purpose of these recommendations is to:

- ensure the immediate safety of the members of the congregation
- ensure that any use of our buildings complies with government recommendations and prohibitions
- empower the Executive to exercise certain of Council's responsibilities during a period when holding Council meetings will prove difficult
- plan for addressing immediate financial issues that will impact on the congregation's finances
- respond to several immediate pastoral needs

Pastoral care arrangements will be a priority over the coming months. The Pastoral Care Committee met on 17 March to review visiting and other arrangements. Maintaining contact with our members will be critically important.

It is not possible to present recommendations for all concerns that may be held by Council members. For situations such as funerals, the new government directive limiting the number of people that can gather together indoors is still being processed by the funeral industry, and we expect that ways to address this matter will emerge soon. Many congregations are also exploring alternative ways of providing worship services, including using videos, the internet and other methods. Ways of maintaining regular communications with members will also be a priority.

Many groups have already cancelled their planned meetings. Some members have advised that they will not be taking part in any church activities or duties until it is considered safety for them to do so.

The Executive wishes to acknowledge that there are no simple or clear solutions that meet the desire to continue our worship, witness and pastoral care in the way we have been able to do. We are also aware of the proximity of Easter and of the significance of the Easter events to our faith.

The health and well-being of our members must be given first priority, and the following recommendations are therefore made:

1. That worship services for March and April be suspended immediately.
2. That all study and fellowship activities and groups be suspended immediately.
3. That no further bookings be taken for the use of the Halls.
4. That the Property Committee and the Booking Officer contact those with Hall bookings to determine
 - a. whether or not they plan to continue using the Halls

- b. what strategies they have in place to meet the requirements for social distance and infection control
- c. what plans they have for ensuring the Halls are sanitised after use

and report to the Executive as soon as possible on their findings

5. That the Finance Committee assess options for members to continue their planned giving, including the feasibility of electronic funds transfer
6. That the Church Council meeting planned for 14 April be postponed.
7. That in accordance with Regulation 3.7.1(c) specific power to act be granted to the Executive to exercise the following responsibilities of Church Council:
 - sharing with the Minister(s) in mission and in the pastoral care and spiritual oversight of the Congregation
 - making decisions in accordance with the Regulations concerning baptism, confirmation and membership, and the keeping and reviewing of the rolls of the Congregation
 - determining the time and place of services of public worship
8. That Council give permission for the baptism of Leilani Una Nean Tamani to be conducted at her parent's home on 22 March
9. That Council request the Executive to prepare recommendations for the conduct of funerals