



## LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA VICTORIA/TASMANIA DISTRICT

*where love comes to life*

13 October 2021

Dear friends

We thank you all for the many ways in which you continue to support one another through the ongoing restrictions across Victoria. In almost all the enquiries we receive about restrictions the emphasis has been on how you can continue to care for members and for the community.

The next phase of the [Roadmap to the National Plan](#) is fast approaching. As you consider what this means for your congregational context we remind you of the words Bishop John Henderson wrote in May of 2020

*'From the day we closed our worship and activity centres we knew that in opening them again we would need to proceed thoughtfully and gradually. We must now patiently work through that, steadily and with mutual love.'*

*Our advice, therefore, is to proceed with care and caution, at a pace within government regulations and within which participants feel safe. Don't rush back as though it's all over and you can do things the way you did them before. You and your congregation might have learned new ways of connecting during this time. Are there now some things you could do differently?*

*Reopening worship is not one person's decision, not even that of the pastor. You must work together, consult with each other, and, to paraphrase the education sector, 'leave no-one behind'. Talk, listen, and pay special attention to those who are most vulnerable to this virus, or who live, care for or work with others who are. We will show true strength in the way we have compassion for others.'*

A contributing factor to achieving Phase B of the Roadmap with some relative freedoms is dependent on factors such as the vaccine rates. We know now that proof of vaccination will be a standard measure for gathering across most industries. This presents some concerns for our community which emphasizes welcoming as a core value. The Lutheran Church of Australia tagline 'where love comes to life' is no less true whether we are open for gathering or providing care in lockdown, but the stage in between presents certain challenges.

Since the Chief Health Officer announcement that all authorised workers must be vaccinated by 15 October if working outside the home (or have an appointment for first dose by 22<sup>nd</sup> October), the staff of District Office have been investigating the ramifications for those classified as "religious workers".

Bishop Lester and members of the Ecumenical Advisory Committee have met with local politicians about the vaccine issue and Bishop Lester has also been working with the Victorian Council of Churches on a letter to the government about the impact of the vaccine passport. In addition he has been in conversations with National Bishop John Henderson and also the Church Worker Support department manager Dr Christine Materne.

On Friday 08 October Bishop Lester led a facilitated listening exercise with pastors and lay workers to listen and discuss implications of the Health Order. Shortly before the forum commenced the news came through that a new [Health Order](#)\* specified religious workers and had provided an exemption for a for the religious worker who 'conducts services of public worship....{and} provide advice and religious comfort for the purpose of end of life faith reasons; (ie Pastors). Another forum took place last night (Tuesday) with Chairpersons of congregations led by District Church Council Chairman Dr David Bergmann. In all the discussions and also

those that have taken place one to one by phone it is clear that the desire is to 'leave no one behind'.

We still don't have a complete picture of the next phases for the church context and anticipate there may be tweaking of the Roadmap along the way. We can let you know the following actions will be taking place.

On Thursday 14 October the Churchwide Office are holding a meeting of Bishops, District Administrators and Mission Directors to discuss the implications of the National Roadmap.

District Church Council are meeting on Friday the 22nd October to formulate a position statement.

At District Office we continue to assist people with individual enquiries as well as formulating an FAQ on the Roadmap issues that will be distributed this week. The two most commonly asked questions are below

### **Who needs to be vaccinated under the current health order?**

For the purpose of the Acting Chief Health Officer directions COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination (Workers) [Directions](#) a religious worker means a person who works at or in connection with a place of worship. Broadly speaking in the congregational context it is those people, staff and volunteers, who must have a WWCC and Professional Standards training, who would require vaccination to carry out duties outside of their home.

The recent exemption\* applies to a person who:

- conducts services of public worship and acknowledgments of faith;
- performs marriages, funerals and special memorial services according to tradition and ecclesiastical and civil law; or
- visits members of the community in their homes, hospitals and other institutions to provide advice and religious comfort for the purpose of end of life faith reasons;

### **How do we manage checking vaccination status at church**

This is a vexed question. The [Vaccinated Economy Trial](#) has commenced in some regional areas this week. One objective of the trial is to obtain an understanding of what training and support may be needed in this space. For Lutheran faith communities the idea of turning anyone away is in opposition to our values. We hope the outcomes of the trials will be informative and helpful.

While we continue to investigate resources and distribute more complete information we would ask that congregational leaders continue to work together to care for their members by reviewing and adjusting COVIDsafe plans, and by communicating early and often on the Roadmap. It is suggested you might utilize those people in the congregation who support the sense of community such as elders, welcomers or pastoral care assistants. Be ready to talk one on one with those who will need reassurance.

Please don't hesitate to contact District Office with your questions or call the Coronavirus hotline directly on 1800 675 398



Rev Lester Priebbenow, District Bishop on behalf of the Office of the Bishop team

*\*This health order **COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination (Workers)** expires on the 21 October so there is no certainty that this exemption will continue indefinitely.*