

15<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ,

This Sunday's psalm (Psalm 66:8-20) reflects on God's protection of his people through a time of 'burden' (v.11). The Psalmist praises God for using this burden to 'refine' his people (v.10) and for bringing them back to 'a place of abundance' (v.12). It is obvious that the psalmist has more than physical 'abundance' in mind because he immediately looks forward to returning to the temple for worship (v.13-15). He rejoices in the time when he can celebrate with others, all the things the Lord has done through his steadfast love, including 'attending to his voice in prayer' (v.16-20).

Understandably, this week as the Federal Government relaxes some of the restrictions concerning places of worship, people are feeling some of the psalmist's excitement. There is news of the easing of 'burdens' that sometimes made us feel like we were in 'prison' or trapped' (v.11). Like the psalmist, we are reassured that, 'God has not rejected our prayer or withheld his love from us' (v.20). All the Lord's deeds, culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, assure us that God will make all things, even our hardships, work out for our ultimate good.

As the Federal Government announced the first stage in the easing of restrictions, the Victorian Government subsequently announced:

*Under new arrangements to come into effect at 11.59pm on Tuesday 12 May, all places of worship, of all denominations can now open for re-arranged worship or small religious ceremonies of up to 10 people as well as the minimum number of people reasonably required for the service. This includes baptisms.*

## Bishops' Updates

Last Wednesday, the College of Bishops discussed the implications of these announcements for our churches. Yesterday, Bishop Henderson released LCA/NZ COVID-19 update No.9- 14 May 2020, which encapsulated the main conclusions from the bishops' discussions.

In recognition of the particular restrictions in each state, we decided that each of the Bishops should also communicate things specific to our Districts. So my intention here is not to repeat what Bishop John has said, but highlight a few things and add anything that may apply more to our local situation and answer some of the questions that some of you have asked this week.

## District Advice

Since our District includes both Victoria and Tasmania, it is necessary for us to be aware of approaches that each state government has taken in the easing of restrictions for worship. Rather than repeat information available from the relevant authorities, I refer you to some web links and other documents.

Earlier this week, our District eNews contained links to two key documents, the 11 May 20, Victorian Government's advice concerning Religious services and places of worship (see attachment to this email) and the Tasmanian Premier's update 8/5/20: <https://www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au/media-releases/tasmanias-roadmap-to-recovery>.

Besides that, here is a further link to the latest Vic Government general advice in relation to stage three restrictions: <https://www.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-restrictions-victoria>, and one containing Restricted Activity Directions (No 7) from the Victorian Deputy Chief Health Officer: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202005/direction-restricted-activity-no-7-signed-2020-05-11.pdf>. Please familiarize yourself with the relevant parts of these documents.

If you are not already receiving the Victorian Tasmanian District eNews you can [Sign up to Vic Tas District eNews here](#)

## What does this mean?

All this leaves us asking a good Lutheran question: "What does this mean?" While it is obvious that we are nowhere near a resumption of worship services as we previously known them, what can we safely do in relation to offering Holy Communion to small groups, or to the homebound, under the current level of eased restrictions? What can we safely do when people request a baptism?

We could well be forgiven, in our excitement to return to worship, for reading more into the easing of restrictions than is intended. In reality, Victoria has only added one more 'reason to be out' in addition to the previous four, namely, 'visiting friends and family - if you really need to.'

Of course, there is a slight easing of restrictions relating to "religious services and places of worship," however all the government advice concurs with the LCA/NZ Bishop's advice that we "*proceed thoughtfully and gradually... patiently... steadily and with mutual love... with care and caution, at a pace within government regulations and within which participants feel safe.*"

The Victorian Premier's media release of 11<sup>th</sup> May (attached) makes the government's position very clear, using phrases such as:

- This is about seeing those you need to – if you need to.
- I want to be clear: just because you can, doesn't mean you should.
- As hard as that is, no visit is worth putting ... safety at risk.
- with more freedom comes more responsibility
- you should only be undertaking these activities if you really need to. If it's integral to your health and wellbeing
- none of us want to be responsible for the loss of someone we love – or someone we've never met
- our message has not changed: if you can stay at home – you must stay at home.

## Possible Vs Responsible

We must bear in mind that there is a big difference between what may be legally or logically possible and what is responsible or helpful under the circumstances. We must bear in mind the purpose of restrictions as described by Victoria's Deputy Chief Health Officer, "The purpose of these restrictions is to ... limit the spread of Novel Coronavirus 2019 (2019-nCoV)."

The Bishops spoke of a rule of thumb or guiding principle to apply: "If there is any possibility that I, or any other person present, could be an asymptomatic carrier of COVID-19 (i.e. infected but showing no symptoms), what precautions would we put in place to limit the possibility of infecting others?"

The LCA/NZ Bishop's update highlighted some of the things that we must do and some things that remain prohibited by state authorities. As important as these things are, he also highlighted that the most important thing is not what we can or cannot do, so much as, "What are the important considerations in the way we do things?"

## Considerations

When it comes to **worship services** or ceremonies, the reality is that for most of us, little can change from current practice unless regular congregation sizes are small enough come within guidelines; and as long as careful thought is given to the considerations outlined by the Premier (quoted above) and those listed in the LCA/NZ Bishop's update 14 May 2020.

The 11 May Victorian guidelines draw attention to considerations like:

- a. strict limits on the number of people who can attend

- b. maintaining physical distancing by keeping at least 1.5 metres between each other at all times
- c. Thorough cleaning between services or ceremonies (e.g. disinfecting of any touched spaces).
- d. Allowing an hour between the services to reduce the risk of crowds at entrances and exits.
- e. The four square metre rule, which limits the number of people who can be in a building

When it comes specifically to **Holy Communion**, please be aware of the considerations mentioned in the LCA/NZ Bishop's statement before proceeding. The Advice of the Health Officer also highlights the necessity, for any religious service or ceremony, to keep records of attendees, including names and contact details, to assist with contact tracing if required, and to implement signage to support compliance with current restrictions and advice.

When it comes to administering **Communion to the homebound**, while it is theoretically possible now to do that, there are further things to consider, like:

- a. Whether the visit is absolutely necessary
- b. The current public and local institution's advice about visiting, especially aged care centres
- c. The vulnerable age-bracket of the person being visited
- d. Whether the visitor or pastor are in a vulnerable age-bracket
- e. Seeking permission, where possible, from the person's family
- f. Consideration for all essential hygiene and distancing measures.

When it comes to **baptism services**, it is possible to hold these within current guidelines for the number of people present. To maintain the consideration of distancing during the ceremony, it would be possible for the pastor to speak the words while parents apply the water. To connect the baptism to the broader family of the congregation, the pastor could arrange a rite of public recognition of the baptism once the entire congregation is allowed to gather.

## One size fits all

Unlike some other states (e.g. Queensland) which have somewhat more relaxed restrictions for rural and remote areas, Victoria and Tasmania's directions apply right across the state. It can be difficult to see the need for some of the restrictions if you live in an area that has recorded few or no cases of infection. However, our new life in Christ calls us to be responsible citizens in abiding by government directions and caring for our neighbours. Remember that the Health Officer's directions also indicate a one size fits all approach to penalties for non-compliance.

## Conclusion

So, in your haste to return to worship, please be patient and responsible. Make sure that what you do provides optimum safety for everyone concerned and reflects the purpose of restrictions, as difficult as they are. Read the LCA/NZ bishop's update closely. With the psalmist, rest assured and assure your people that, 'God has not rejected our prayer or withheld his love from us' (Psalm 66:20).

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Lester Priebbenow.