

2 June 2020

Dear Church,

Presbytery and Synod leaders have been working together to support the church through COVID-19. Together we have reconfirmed our commitment to prioritize the health and well-being of all people – both in the church and the wider community. This means all our decisions are weighed against the potential harm that could come from second wave infection.

These guidelines have been shaped by the Biblical imperatives commanding us to love one another.

*“You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18, quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:31)*

*Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Romans 13:10*

Part of our research has been looking at other countries and the consequences for returning to face to face worship. In many cases, outbreaks have occurred, leaving the faith communities grieving for those who died as a consequence and lamenting their decisions. Even when social distancing was observed, there was loss of life.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian warned of this in a media release dated 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020. “It is crucial that worshippers remember to follow health advice. This is particularly important for people with co-morbidities aged over 50 and people aged over 70.”<sup>1</sup>

Health Minister Brad Hazzard said extensive COVID-19 outbreaks in places of worship and amongst choirs’ overseas highlights why the NSW Government has been cautious in easing restrictions. ‘Sadly, we have seen many congregations of different faiths and denominations affected by COVID-19 overseas’.

NSW Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant said “Places of worship will be asked to find alternatives to practices that might spread the virus like singing, sharing books and even passing around the collection plate to reduce infection risks. Communal singing and chanting should not occur because of the high risk of transmission of the virus.’

In seeking to return to face to face gatherings, the Public Health Order states that churches (a) may be open to the public only for a wedding, funeral, memorial or religious service or for private worship (b) for a wedding, funeral, memorial or religious service.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/changes-for-worship-weddings-and-funerals?utm\\_source=miragenews&utm\\_medium=miragenews&utm\\_campaign=news](https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/changes-for-worship-weddings-and-funerals?utm_source=miragenews&utm_medium=miragenews&utm_campaign=news)

<sup>2</sup> Clause 18, Schedule 1 of the Public Health Order 3 2020 NSW - Places as per clause 11(2)

Even though restrictions are easing, it does not make returning to face to face worship an automatically safe or wise option. A lot of careful planning and thought needs to accompany every group that wishes to meet. Who will record the name and contact details of every person, who steps on to church property – no matter what the reason. For you to meet in person, who will disinfect every surface after it has been touched – doorknobs, light switches, toys, colouring in pencils/crayons, Bibles, hymn books, microphones, lecterns, phones, laptops, seats/pews.... Who will clean the toilets after each use and how will that person be protected from infection? Who will clean/disinfect the kitchen after each use? In many of these cases the usual people would be our members – many of whom are in the high-risk category and require specific COVID-19 risk management plans.

The Government has said a risk management plan for any gathering is essential. Failure to comply brings heavy penalties. The initial fine is \$11,000.00 and/or six months imprisonment, with possible further fines of \$5,500.00 for each day the offence continues. The NSW Police may also issue on-the-spot fines of \$1,000.00 for any infringement. Any fines or legal costs will not be paid by Synod or Presbytery, so we urge you to be thorough.

#### The Next Steps:

The Synod has set up a webpage [www.nswact.uca.org.au/COVID19SafeRoadmap](http://www.nswact.uca.org.au/COVID19SafeRoadmap) that contains Government checklists, safety and hygiene guidelines for returning to worship and many other Church activities. In order to fulfil Government requirements, we ask that you download the relevant checklists for your activities, discuss your ability to fulfil these requirements and develop a COVID-19 Safety Plan with your Church Councils.

Once the relevant COVID-19 Safety Plan has been approved by Church Council, please email a copy to the Covid Mailbox [Covid19@nswact.uca.org.au](mailto:Covid19@nswact.uca.org.au), and also to your Presbytery PRC. While Presbytery and Synod will note your intention to re-gather, the safety plan will remain the responsibility of the Church Council. We cannot stress enough the need to be careful and cautious. Life is precious and any resulting harm caused to the people around us would be unbearable.

We commend these guidelines to you, asking you carefully consider your decisions and wherever you are unsure, or unable to fully meet the criteria, please refrain from meeting.

We pray for all people in this time, but particularly for our congregations and faith communities – men, women and children who have been ever faithful and for whom we thank God.

Yours sincerely,



Rev. Bronwyn Murphy  
Associate Secretary