

A pastoral letter about COVID-19

When it comes to handling COVID-19 in the context of church leadership, recent days have seen their fair share of thinking hard, praying hard and talking it all out. It's complicated, isn't it? Everyone wants to do the right thing.

As the Church, we have strong feelings about gathering together; the Sunday rhythms, the practices of faith-building, and even the church spaces themselves are all familiar and life-giving.

But as the pandemic situation rapidly changes around us, wise courses of action must be taken to avoid viral spread. Wellspring has already adopted some minor measures by altering current Sunday practices.

And now we take it one step further: **if we love one another, and if we know that sacrificing face-to-face gatherings could ultimately save lives (inside and outside our church), then that's ultimately Christlike.** This is not so much about self-protection, but protection for those most at risk. And preferring another's need above our own is profoundly Christlike, as well as profoundly emotional. This is about avoiding spread of coronavirus, but it is also about preventing an unnecessary burden placed a health system that needs to prioritise the vulnerable.

The way ahead

Medical advice tells us this isolation from public gatherings is what works: it 'flattens the curve', it is an approach adopted by a significant number of Wellspring members already, and the example of other countries worldwide has proven what can happen when this is implemented too late.

So: **from Sunday 22nd March, Wellspring will suspend all Sunday services until further notice.** This is a directive from our Bishop Richard Condie for all Anglican churches in Tasmania, and it was where I had been praying and leaning.

We will also be **postponing or cancelling all ministries/groups/meetings/events that are Wellspring-official, which have more than 10 people congregating.** In a statement released by Bp Richard today, it reads: "The church will actively avoid groups of greater than 10 people meeting together... Our Church has listened carefully to concerns within our community about the need for social distancing to reduce the spread of the COVID 19 virus. We understand that we need to act quickly and early in order to slow the spread of the virus."

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What does this mean?

All parties are trying to be responsive to the best medical advice and wisest courses of action, as the landscape changes. At the least, the following implications will be felt in the season ahead:

- Alternatives to Sunday and medium-sized gatherings are being considered by the staff team now, eg. livestreamed or recorded services posted online; sermon resources/podcasts; etc.
 - *We will be communicating further in the coming days about what is planned for each congregation for Sunday 22nd March.*
- Ministry for children & young people, whether on Sunday or weekdays, will cease until further notice. This is hard.
- Small/bible study groups, as long as they follow current health recommendations and have willing members, will continue. These groups will certainly become the centre of belonging, pastoral care, praying and teaching in the coming weeks.
- Easter events and services will not proceed.
- Staff will be mainly working from home and remain contactable for ordinary and emergency matters.
- Non-Wellspring groups or meetings will be advised of our changed arrangements, and will be free to follow their own policy.
- Updates will be posted to our Facebook page and provided through regular emails, as well as communicated through staff members so that our Wellspring community is in the loop. You will be supported and checked up upon, as we all make this transition.
- Staff will continue to receive advice and updates from our Diocesan leadership, which will be communicated and implemented.
- We'll be using the video-conferencing tool Zoom to 'gather' and have fellowship in various ways in the coming season: please download it at www.zoom.us for your computer/phone/device soon.

It is a big deal to suspend Sundays and other groups/events, I know. This is a short-term measure and we look forward to regathering when able. Some will feel this is an overreaction, and it's tempting to respond, 'Better to be safe than sorry!'

But instead, I stress again that this change is not about self-protection; it's about protection of the vulnerable. In that sense, can I encourage in us an attitude that asks, '**How can we do the best job at loving people as we want to be loved?**', and that's the question that's been driving the decision-making here.

A final word

To be honest, as leaders we hope we are wrong, but being afraid of being wrong can also lead to inaction, which is the bigger error.

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Can I conclude by saying something important about who we are as Wellspring – this is an extraordinarily good time to be a church that is about *life with Jesus, like Jesus, and for Jesus*. I read something great the other day: **“God often disrupts the liturgies of the world as a means of spiritual awakening.”** A liturgy is a basically the combination of human habits, patterns and behaviours that give society meaning (so the church is not the only maker of liturgy). At present, amidst coronavirus, the accepted liturgy, ie. the norms of believing and behaving, are being upended, so perhaps now is the time that God wants His people to arise with a counter-liturgy. One that is based on faith, hope and love.

Could it be that in the absence of programmed events, we have a unique opportunity to get back to the stuff that matters? Intimacy with God, caring for another in creative ways, and witnessing to the difference faith makes: what an opportunity, indeed.

Your brother in Christ,



Rob Imberger
Senior Pastor