



ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF MELBOURNE

AD CLERUM March 2020 (3)

Dear Friends,

Important notice

I am writing to you to ask that you advise members of your parish or other ministries that effective from Monday, 23 March 2020, regular public services and parish organised group activities are suspended within the Diocese of Melbourne. That means you should not hold regular public services of worship from that date or facilitate gatherings for parish activities that are not on the church premises. Baptisms, weddings and funerals can proceed with immediate family members for the time being so long as they comply with the government imposed restrictions.

It is important to say, at the same time, that this is not a closure of ministry. The need for Christian ministry is only likely to be heightened over the new weeks and months but it will need to happen in new forms. I hope that our churches can remain open for prayer and contemplation within the current restrictions but can imagine that further tightening of these restrictions may also close that option off. We are fortunate to have a range of digital opportunities open to us and more will be said in coming days about opportunities for you to be trained in their use.

Background

On Wednesday evening I was present in Canberra to consecrate the Rev'd Grant Dibden as the Anglican Bishop to the Defence Force in the Chapel of the Royal Military College, Duntroon. Planning proceeded normally until Monday when we learned that the Australian Military was about to impose a limit of 100 people for any assembly connected with the Military. This was about a day before this rule was announced by the Prime Minister as being generally in effect. As you can imagine this necessitated many people who had accepted the invitation to be present being told that they could not come. As it happened the service of consecration was able to proceed and observed all of the social distancing and hygiene requirements that were in place two days ago.

I mention this because we are in rapidly changing times. Things are moving quickly and we need to be responsive to these changes.

The Victorian bishops met electronically at 12.30 pm on Friday to discuss the COVID19 response of each diocese. It was clear in some places in Victoria that have survived the bushfire crisis in January that the Church is an essential community resource in this recovery period and its activities vital to community welfare. The Melbourne bishops reported how, on the basis of risk assessment, some parishes have moved to an exclusively online presence, others have developed a mixed mode of operation and all are complying

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with the government guidelines that we have received. We also discussed the responses of other denominations in our State and the responses of other Anglican dioceses throughout the country. Just as we concluded our meeting the Prime Minister announced that for any gatherings within a building there needs to be four square metres of space available for each person. This has a direct impact on the risk assessment that many of you have made about what worship ministry is possible in your parishes and other ministries. It will have a direct impact on the use of office space and how many people can operate out of there at any one time. Even a large area like a tennis court on this calculation could only contain 60 people. The four square metre requirement and its likely further tightening made the continuation of Sunday worship impossible for many of our congregations that were previously able to comply with the earlier 100 attendance limit.

The public reports of the number of COVID-19 infections show that we are at the beginning of an exponential rate of infection. It is to be hoped that this can be stopped but the restricted availability of testing means that the reports of infection we are seeing are unlikely to account for all cases of infection.

This afternoon I called an emergency meeting of Archbishop in Council to seek their advice on the diocesan response I am advising you about. They were strongly in agreement with this decision.

The way forward

It is important that we hold together at this time the importance of local context and the advice we are receiving from health and government authorities. There will be many situations where questions that arise in one place cannot be answered with the same response that arises from another context. I am very conscious of the responsibility that we have to elderly, disabled and other vulnerable groups. Many vulnerable people will be self-isolating and you will need to be conscious of this in your pastoral ministry. For some a home visit will not be welcome at this time, for others it may be welcomed as a lifeline. It will be important to check these things out and be conscious of your responsibilities to minimise the likelihood of you being a carrier of the infection to others. Some evidence is emerging that many people, whilst being infected themselves, do not display any symptoms and have no awareness that they are at risk of infecting others. Your careful attention to the now well known requirements of hand hygiene, refraining from touch and keeping distance are all important. We are entering a very difficult phase where the necessary measures to prevent the pandemic exploding in the Australian population will push some people to more isolation and despair.

I appreciate the careful response to the current risks that you are making as leaders within our faith communities and with your Church Wardens and Parish Councils. I won't reiterate the things that have been said before in previous communications but want to stress the importance of you keeping in contact with your episcopate bishop. They have each written to you earlier in the week and have briefed me on the current responses that you have made in curtailing normal activities and developing alternative ministry pathways. It is certain that there will be profound disappointment that services of worship during Holy Week and Easter will not be able to proceed with the usual expectations. Please share your plans and creative ideas with your episcopate bishop so that they can be shared more widely as an encouragement to others. It is important that we encourage each other and pray for each other at this time.

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It is not possible to be exhaustive here with all of the possible questions any of us may have and you will need to exercise your own discretion on some matters that are particular to your circumstance.

More information around the implementation of this decision will come to you from your episcopate bishop. I will be in regular contact with the bishops on our further response as things develop. Please keep in contact with Bishops Kate, Genieve, Paul and Brad so they can respond to your enquiries and know your suggestions and creative ideas. I intend that we consolidate resources and guidance on the diocesan website so there is a single point of reference.

Self care, physically, emotionally and spiritually

Please be aware of the opportunities you and your family have to access our diocesan Employee Assistance Scheme run by Relationship Matters (formerly known as Lifeworks). This is a 24 hour service and can be provided by telephone or other digital means if you are feeling isolated, overwhelmed or anxious. You can access this service by phoning 03 8650 6262.

This is a time when we can ponder deeply the Lord's mercy and providence. We are likely to encounter personal sadness in the days ahead and this will feel magnified by the general mood of anxiety and powerlessness that we can see emerging around us. You know this scripture verse well I'm sure, but I offer it to you for your contemplation and reflection:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

Grace and peace in Christ Jesus
Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Philip Melbourne". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'P'.

The Most Reverend Dr Philip Freier
Archbishop of Melbourne

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