



Information for Uniting Church in South Australia Presbyteries and Congregations regarding Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The Synod office is receiving increasing numbers of calls from congregations seeking advice on how to manage services and pastoral care during the global outbreak of COVID-19. We are also aware of congregations who are already taking positive steps to reduce anxiety amongst members and to help prevent the spread of the virus. We thank presbyteries and congregations for their work in this area and encourage you to continue to work together in support of each other. To assist, the Synod has put together some guidance that we hope will help.

Staying up to date

For those who may already be following Department of Health information, you will aware that information about the virus, including its spread and actions that should be taken, is currently being updated daily. Given this, at this stage the Synod will not be providing reproduced information to help avoid information overload and the potential for outdated information to be followed. The Department for Health is also providing specific information and resources in other languages that may be useful to many of you as well.

We recommend that presbytery and congregation leaders stay up-to-date and only seek to share advice with your communities with relevant information provided by reliable government sources; [Department of Health](#), [Smartraveller](#) (DFAT) and in SA – [SA Health](#).

The Synod will be following this information in its ongoing management and continuity planning and will provide further information to presbyteries and congregations as necessary over the coming months. We encourage congregations to stay in contact with their presbytery if they require support and/or would like to share ideas, good practice and resources.

Synod services

The Synod office will continue to be available for specific advice, however please be aware that the virus has significantly impacted the workload of a number ministry centres and therefore response times may be affected.

Executive officers and Managers are currently working to ensure that we can continue to provide ongoing service to you including enabling key personnel to work from home as needed.

If you have not already done so, we encourage you to consider a plan with your leadership for how you will continue your service if your presbytery or congregation is affected by extended absenteeism, isolation, work from home, and other related circumstances.



Work related travel

Given the current number of countries with confirmed cases and the Travel Insurance Policy Response provided by our insurers, in the interests of the health and safety of all:

All Uniting Church in SA work related international travel is suspended until further notice.

At this stage, domestic work related travel between states may still be undertaken, however we advise you to consider the need to undertake any non-essential work travel at this time.

Congregation employees

Church councils that employ personnel need to ensure that they continue to consult with them about the situation, the actions being taken and their personal leave plans. We are currently working to provide clear personal leave information and policy to all Synod personnel and will provide a further update to presbyteries and congregations as soon as we are able.

Personnel who are required to isolate but who are not symptomatic, may be able to work from home providing suitable arrangements, equipment and tasks can be made available. We would encourage presbyteries and church councils to discuss this as soon as possible with their personnel to identify if working from home is an option and to identify critical tasks that need to be performed.



Guidance on Church practices to help prevent the spread of Novel Coronavirus

Whilst the situation regarding the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) is concerning, there are some simple and sensible actions that can be taken to help reduce the spread and to help allay fears in our community. This is also an opportunity to take a fresh look at some of our practices and consider if there are more suitable alternatives that will help to maintain a safe church.

Passing the Peace

Consider facing the person with hands pressed together (as in prayer) or over the heart and acknowledge each other with a slight bow of the head. You can still use the same words 'Peace be with you; and also with you.' Another alternate is to simply use eye contact with a slight bow of the head without any touch.

Holy Communion

For the sake of allaying fear, we recommend:

- not using intincture until the virus transmission has been halted thanks to vaccination and herd immunity. Small glasses and pre-torn or cut bread may help some people feel safer. Please ensure those preparing use the appropriate gloves and hygienic food handling procedures.
- Should you continue with your usual celebration of Communion, perhaps station a couple of hand sanitizer dispensers so that people can sanitize their own hands before they receive the elements. This could be announced in such a way as to demonstrate care for one another.
- Some members of the congregation may refrain from Communion. Another option is to use the **Communion of the Empty Hands**. There are many versions of the origin of the practice— one can be found via this link: <http://www.yucaipamethodist.org/sermon%20--%20August%2019%202012.pdf>
- By standing in solidarity with those who live with real fear, deprivation, war, poverty, famine – we also witness that Jesus Christ is also present. While we have no formal church liturgy, a simple service could be crafted from the story above. Should any of you know of a liturgy, please share it with your presbytery for distribution to others.

Pastoral Care

A general request for people not to shake hands can be offered as a form of pastoral care for everyone. Having a conversation with the congregation or at Church Council might help prepare the people for 'what happens if...?'

If someone within the congregation gets the virus (and this is more likely than not) or is required to isolate, letting people know sooner rather than later that the Minister or Pastoral Care team will not visit face to face, but will phone or skype if appropriate, can maintain a sense of community.

Additionally, checking with your local hospital, retirement/aged care facilities, setting up this arrangement before it is required, will also ensure less frustration and hurt by someone wanting a visit but unable to see the potential risk.



Creating your process and then clearly communicating it to your people will help everyone respond calmly and wisely in the face of unprecedented events.

Social events/ Morning Tea

While there is no need to cancel all events, seek to limit risk for those who may be vulnerable to the virus. Weigh up what would best serve the congregation and wider community. Should food be shared, extra vigilance should be given to all food preparation and handling. Please ensure hand sanitizer is clearly available at multiple locations where possible.

Hygiene

Practising and promoting good hand and sneeze/cough hygiene and limiting opportunities for direct physical contact between people is the best defence against most viruses.

We recommend:

- ensuring hand washing facilities are kept well stocked with good quality soap and hygienic drying facilities, in toilets and kitchen areas
- frequently touched areas such as counter surfaces, door handles (particularly in toilet areas), shared office equipment and microphones are cleaned more regularly.
- hand washing is promoted with reminder posters about how and when (before/after eating, using the toilet), along with a gentle and possibly fun reminder at the beginning of services and meetings.
- reminders to cover coughs and sneezes, dispose of tissues, and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser
- discouraging direct contact with others (hand-shaking, touching, kissing, hugging, and other intimate contact). It could be fun and interesting to see just how imaginative you can be with greeting one another. Politely nodding, bowing and curtseying were all social norms in the past.

Children's ministries

The effects of the virus on children and young people appears at this stage to be much lower than with more vulnerable age groups. However, children are also less likely to understand the risks and are therefore more prone to inadvertently helping to spread viruses. Please ensure that children's and youth ministry teams are also acting accordingly.

Offering

We recommend the practice of passing the offering plate between members is discontinued at this time in favour of a collection box being placed in a suitable location instead. Whilst we understand that giving in this way is important to many members, it may be another opportunity to inform members of the benefits that regular e-giving brings.

Those counting the offering should ensure they take reasonable precautions by washing or sanitising their hands afterwards and should be reminded not to touch their face until after they have done so.



Staying at home

Whilst our general mission is to encourage people to attend church, it is acceptable to give them permission not to in the interests of their own health and in compassion for others. It can be difficult for some members who are relied upon regularly to make things run smoothly, or those for whom services are their main or only spiritual and social interaction during the week, to make such decisions not to attend. Where they are feeling unwell, please provide them with peace and reassurance in this.

Congregations who record or who can provide access to services in other ways, are encouraged to share this information with their presbytery so that this may be communicated and offered to others as an alternative.

Closure of Worship

This would only happen should the authorities advise or a congregation determines prior to this that it is appropriate to do so.

Ensuring you have up to date email addresses and phone numbers can still help people feel connected even if they can't be physically in the same location. Should a service not go ahead, the liturgy could still be shared in other ways.

In all things, please follow the directives of SA Health www.sahealth.sa.gov.au and the Department of Health www.health.gov.au

Keep Calm but don't soldier on

Please take every sensible precaution to care for yourself at this time. Remember to also self-isolate as needed.

Prayer

The Synod leadership is praying for presbyteries and congregations and we encourage you to pray for each other as we journey through this together.

If you missed the letter and prayer provided by Uniting Church in Australia Assembly President regarding the coronavirus, you can access this [here](#).

WHS Coordinator - Synod SA

Acknowledgement: Information sourced from the NSW/ACT Synod