

18 March 2020

COVID-19 Update

Dear Church leaders and pastors,

Greetings to you from the team here at Unley!

So how are you doing? It is important that we recognise these are indeed ‘unprecedented times’ and ‘uncharted waters’ and that with this comes a whole lot of uncertainty, change and stress. As Christian leaders we will often find ourselves sitting with a number of tensions: having convictions about gathering and having to cancel gatherings; upholding the hope of Christ and taking appropriate precautions; being a non-anxious presence and dealing with the reactions of our inner selves; being present to those most vulnerable and being concerned for the wellbeing of our own loved ones. These are but a few of the tensions that can rise up within us so that letting “the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” can feel like work. It is important that we all pay attention to our own wellbeing in seasons like this and simply naming some of these realities can be helpful.

This week I’ve been encouraging church leaders to look for powerful opportunities such as:

- **Bringing peace and hope:** as followers of Jesus we have a peace that passes understanding and hope that has been guaranteed. As we go about our lives, in our conversations with others and as we are observed what will others experience and see in us.
- **Strengthening the church:** as we care for one another and demonstrate our love for one another in practical and sacrificial ways so we display evidence of our being God’s people
- **Loving our Neighbour:** seeking out and caring for those around us and demonstrating God’s heart for them

So I encourage you to think creatively about how we might embrace these opportunities in this strange time. I firmly believe that this is a season in which what makes us Baptist can actually shine as a strength – our emphasis on Jesus as Lord, our autonomy of the local, our flexibility and agility, and our framework of contextualisation. This might well be our moment!

The landscape and governmental recommendations are constantly changing so that we need to keep informed and monitor appropriate updates (<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au> and <https://www.health.gov.au>). Even this morning new recommendations have been released which directly impact our gathered church. In the interest of assisting you in your leadership roles I offer the following:

Gathering

Today's announcement is that we must abstain from gathering indoors in groups of greater than 100. It would be easy to crunch the numbers and make a call but surely there is more to this than a hard number, the intent. If you are a gathered community of 90 do you still meet? What about 60? What about 30? There is an intent here that we need to pay good attention to; social distancing and personal hygiene – let us all make sure we take this intent seriously; it is not just the numbers.

As a guideline perhaps we should be asking questions like

- Can we ensure appropriate social distancing?
- Can we ensure all present practice good personal hygiene, providing adequate resources?
- Can we do what we intend to do in an appropriately safe manner?

Going Online

The use of technology to connect is a wonderful blessing but it is not the solution to everything. In considering developing church life around an online presence we need to identify the gaps. Much online activity is a 'broadcast' mode so how do we ensure we facilitate engagement? Many amongst our movement are not tech-savvy, what other means can we use to stay in touch? One of the great dangers is that those who are already somewhat isolated or have limited social interaction will find themselves even further cut off. It may be time to pick up the phone again – to make a call and not just send text! Ultimately the challenge will be to encourage people to stay connected, to communicate well one with another. And to our small communities – play to your strengths, don't try to reproduce what another church does. Don't be afraid to point people to resources and broadcasts done by churches who do it is well.

Baptist Churches of SA Activities

We too are reviewing all gatherings and planned meetings. We will seek to provide timely and appropriately expressed advice concerning our planned events in coming days and weeks.

In the midst of this all I encourage us with the words of God himself:

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

[Psa 46:10]



Mike Mills

State Executive Minister