



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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Dear Friends,

Greetings to you all in these times of change.

As a Church and in our wider communities, we're all facing different challenges, and responding in different ways, with all the ups and downs that come along the way. That's partly to do with where we are: in Tasmania, or metro Melbourne, or rural or regional Victoria, or in border communities. I know I'm not alone in going through phases in how I'm feeling. Tiredness. Energy. Frustration. Disappointment. Hopefulness. Grief. Anticipation. At times, motivation and creativity are harder to find. Our boundaries are being pushed and our resilience is being tested.

Over these last weeks, I've had the chance to talk with a lot of people about how they and their communities are experiencing and responding to the ongoing changes. We have a deep hunger for all sorts of things at present: being able to see people we love, getting back to work, being able to travel outside our restricted zone or across state borders, being able to gather as communities again. We also have a deep hunger for certainty. Though if we are certain of anything, it is that uncertainty is part of the reality we are living with. When things keep changing so fast, firm plans and clarity are beyond our reach, no matter how much we might want this.

Questions about vaccination are a more recent focus for a whole raft of additional uncertainties we are living with. Living with ambiguity and uncertainty are a part of being human, and I suspect we'll be living with these particular questions for a while yet.

All the same, while questions about vaccination seem to be raising new concerns and uncertainties for some, most are expressing a huge sense of relief that so many in our community are responding to the calls to become vaccinated out of a concern to protect others, especially those most vulnerable. Many describe themselves as pragmatic, focussed simply on how we can make things work the best we can, as we respond to the new requirements as they unfold. There seems to be an acknowledgement of the uncertainty that is inevitable, as things take time for the details to be worked out. And most also express feeling really encouraged that our communities of faith are pulling together in the way we are, with eyes and hearts directed to finding ways to make our communities safer, to protect those who are most vulnerable amongst us.

A big question before us all is: how can we be a part of this? There's no doubt that when we look to loving our neighbour, serving our community in compassion, and living out our calling in following Jesus in care for those on the margins and most in need of care, it costs us. It may indeed cost us very deeply.

There are new requirements this week for all authorised workers to be vaccinated, in order to protect the lives and health of others in the community whom we serve. These requirements apply to Ministers and ministry agents, and all those who serve the Church, whether in leading worship, filming, property management or community service. We are still missing some of the details to help us know how to manage things. In a fast-paced changing environment, it takes time for details to be formed and glitches to be ironed out. I'm aware there are many people working long hours to bring guidance to our communities and to answer their questions. But there are some things that we are certain about.

If we want to be there for those God loves, caring for those who are sick or grieving or in need of companionship and love, serving each other and our community as followers of Jesus, then we want to do this in ways that protect *them* and keep *them* safe the best way we can. We want to have *their* interests at heart. And the question then is: how do we discern how best to do this? To whom do we listen to guide our way?

Core to our Christian faith is that we are called into the communal life of God. Core to a Uniting Church understanding, and a long history of Christian faith and life, is that we decide things communally rather than individually or in isolation.

When we discern and make decisions as people of faith, we do it communally. We need to hear each other to understand the implications of any course of action upon others. We listen and attend to the wisdom of others gathered in community, praying together, in light of the scriptures and guided by the light of Christ, seeking to discern the Spirit of God, for the sake of the world God so loves. And we listen to those who are widely recognised experts in medical science, epidemiology and public health to inform our responses in faith (as the Basis of Union clearly guides us).

There is no individual discernment regarding vaccination which does not have a deep and far-reaching effect upon the lives of others in our closer and wider community. We are not our own.

For those of us in a covenantal relationship with the Church and local communities of faith (e.g. ministry agents and leaders of congregations), decisions about how we respond to vaccination requirements are not private decisions to be made in isolation. These are decisions to be made prayerfully and communally. It may cost us to attend to the commitments we have to those with whom we are in a covenantal relationship. It may cost us deeply. How can we live into this commitment in ways that ensure safety for others as well as ourselves?

Jesus calls us into community, to live with and for each other, deeply in tune with the life of God.

In these times, we are aware of the need to delve deep into spiritual practices that connect us with the source of life and peace, deepening our connections into our wider communities. We might be alone or in communities of faith; online, on the couch or outdoors; speaking out loud in conversation, in chat rooms or in praying in silence; through daily prayer, worship, bible reading, working together with others in ministry and mission; or in contemplation. In all these ways we are finding hope and being sustained in our lives by the God of life, who comes to us, walks with us in Jesus and calls us to follow.

One of the strange gifts of these times, is being brought back to basics: remembering who and whose we are, and who we are for. We are seeking out how we can be in tune with the God who is our life. We are constantly being 'begged to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we are being called.' (Eph 4:1)

May the God of life be with you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Denise Liersch". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "May the God of life be with you."

Rev Denise Liersch
Moderator