



Reformed Church BOX HILL

Grace Alone • Christ Alone • Faith Alone • Scripture Alone • Glory to God Alone

9 October 2020

Dear Member of the Victorian Parliament,

We write to you as a community church in Box Hill, with members from many parts of the Melbourne metropolitan area.

Thank you for serving as our representatives in the Victorian State Parliament. We truly appreciate the demands and difficulty that come with your role, and pray regularly in our church that you, our representatives, would receive the wisdom you need to govern wisely, especially in these difficult times.

Because all authority comes from God, we desire to live peacefully and in submission to the civil authorities. Nevertheless, we are increasingly concerned with decisions that the state government is taking. Please consider and respond to us with your positions on these issues.

We object to the most recently updated lockdown measures. Early this year, when we knew little about this virus and the nature of the threat, a temporary lockdown seemed understandable. Federal and state governments at that time indicated that the lockdown would enable our medical system to prepare, and would “flatten the curve” in our nation. Since that time, particularly in Victoria, the policy objective has seemingly shifted from flattening the curve to eliminating the virus. Our first questions for you are: Do you believe that it is feasible – medically, socially or economically – to eliminate this virus from Victoria? If you do, are you convinced that lockdown is a sustainable long-term policy for achieving that outcome?

We are concerned that the cost of such an approach, which seems to have been adopted by the Andrews Government, is far too high. One particular cost for our community has been that we have not been permitted to gather for worship and fellowship with fellow believers. We do not object to taking reasonable precautions for worship services in the current environment, but the longer the lockdown period has lasted, the greater our concern has grown with being kept from worship. There is nothing more important than worshipping and loving our Creator, and sharing the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ with all people. Our corporate worship is central to both of those things. Civil Government is a God-given gift for maintaining order in a nation, but it cannot transform people’s hearts – only God can do that through the gospel of Jesus Christ. To prohibit corporate worship, gospel-ministry, and faith-based community service is therefore no small thing. The tightness of the restrictions, and the length of time they have been imposed, is unprecedented and unreasonable.

There is a real personal cost for this policy. We have seen first hand the terrible spiritual, mental, emotional, economic, and physical price that has been paid by citizens of this state. We have seen old folk separated from their families, unable to see them, and some who have died with a bare semblance of pastoral and family care. We have seen other family members in anguish, helpless as their loved ones lived and died under those conditions. We have not been able to mourn together as communities, nor celebrate. That comes at huge personal cost. Current Victorian government policy is not therefore not only illogical, but it feels heartless, as it continues to destroy the community of our state.

We reject the premise underlying this policy. Every death is a tragedy, there's no question about that, and while we must do all that is reasonable to prevent injury and death, we cannot eliminate the consequences of living in a fallen world. Part of the human condition at this time is accepting this common curse of our existence, that people die. The measure of our society is not that we succeed in eliminating death – we are not in the place of God, and governments cannot conquer death – but in how compassionately we care for the vulnerable, sick and dying and support those who care and grieve.

With all these things in mind, the most recently-announced easing of lockdown measures seems far too paltry a response in light of the great damage being done. We note that the government's website says: "Religious gatherings can also take place outdoors with five people plus a faith leader. You can only travel up to 5km from your home to attend a gathering and only for 2 hours". This is a totally-inadequate provision, even in the short term. What alternate medium-term approach do you support as a reasonable response to the health risk while not destroying the freedoms and values on which our society is based ?

At the very least, please seriously consider the attached letter from 295 pastors right across Melbourne. This letter represents a shared concern across many of Melbourne's churches. In particular, we urge you to at least consider and advocate for classifying churches as an essential service. In the Health Care and Social Assistance Sector, there are various permitted workplaces, one of which is "Mental Health Services" (<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-care-and-social-assistance-restrictions-covid-19>). The spiritual health of many Christians is inseparably part of their mental health, and that's something churches have seen very clearly in the lives of our members (again, please note the letter at Attachment 1 for confirmation of this). We therefore urge you to at least permit church workers to meet with people one-on-one and provide spiritual counselling to them, just as Mental Health workers are able to do. For the sake of many, many citizens in Melbourne, are you willing to advocate for and make this change?

In closing, we wish to note with great relief that the government's *COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Powers) and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2020* has been rightly withdrawn from consideration by the parliament in its proposed form. Thank you to those of you who played a key part in that. As a letter from leading legal figures noted, the measures contained in the bill were "unprecedented, excessive, and open to abuse." We urge you to be vigilant and active against any future iterations of this bill that may compromise the civil liberties and freedom that we presently enjoy in our state and nation.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Yours sincerely,

Rev. Isaac Overton
(on behalf of the Church Leadership of the Reformed Church of Box Hill).

ATTACHMENT 1

8 October 2020

The Premier of Victoria, The Hon Daniel Andrews

Dear Premier,

RE: Church Services are essential for the wellbeing of our community in this pandemic

We, the evangelical church leaders in various denominations, are grateful for the efforts and commitment of the government to contain the second wave of the COVID19 outbreak, and we are pleased the number of new cases is now low.

However, we are also writing to express our deep concerns about the impact this prolonged closure of churches has had on our congregations and community in the last few months.

- We find many elderly struggling with technology and unable to join live-stream services, adversely affecting their mental wellbeing in isolation.
- We see a sharp rise in mental health problems among young children and teenagers; some are even suicidal or are intending to self-harm.
- We hear stories of parents concerned about their finances and career futures while coping with their children's remote learning under high stress levels and without support.
- We, as church leaders and pastors, observe an increase in frustration, confusion and disappointment among ourselves as we are not able to help those in need due to the COVID19 restrictions, as we normally would.

As evangelical churches we proclaim the eternal hope of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). Because of this, through Christ's church, unparalleled spiritual, emotional, mental, psychological, and social benefits flow to His people and to the community at large.

We, therefore, are urging you to consider church services as an essential service for the hope and wellbeing of our community in this pandemic.

Historically, with the assistance of the local community and the vital input from the local church, people pull through difficulties and crises. It is where individuals find hope, reprieve, support, and strength to go on with various life circumstances. People need personal human contact as a form of support. With an approved COVIDSafe Plan and contact tracing in place, we believe that a local church service is a safer place for people to gather than in public places.

In view of this, we cordially call on the government:

1. To list church services as an essential service
2. To allow churches to open for indoor worship in compliance with a COVIDSafe Plan and social distancing guidelines.
3. To rectify the disparity in number allowed for outdoor religious gatherings and outdoor dining in regional Victoria in the current Third Step restrictions.
4. To ensure consistency and fairness be applied to churches and other sectors in each of the subsequent steps on the roadmap to re-opening both regional and metro Victoria.

The Christian communities and churches have been working cooperatively with the government since the beginning of this pandemic to ensure all COVIDSafe and social

distancing measures are exercised. We now urge the government to consider our request outlined above in view of the wellbeing of the church and the wider community.

If you would like to have further discussion on the matters we raised in this letter, we are more than happy to meet with you. You are in our prayers, and we look forward to hearing from you to work out the best solution to help restore the wellbeing of our community.

Yours Sincerely,

The undersigned church leaders.

https://www.acl.org.au/mr_vic_churchleaders