



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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Vaccination and Reopening: face-to-face worship and COVID requirements

Dear Friends,

Over past weeks, questions around vaccination and reopening have been on the hearts and minds of many in our communities.

In Victoria, new public health directions include responsibilities for ministry agents, authorised workers and Church Councils. In planning for reopening of worship and use of congregational buildings, Church Council responsibilities include compliance with requirements relating to vaccination. Authorised workers, both paid and volunteer, must also provide evidence of their vaccination status to their workplace. The number of people who may attend religious gatherings in any part of Victoria depends on whether everyone present is fully vaccinated, and churches are responsible for how this is implemented.

What do we need to consider, as we plan toward reopening, in light of our legal obligations and other responsibilities? How does our faith inform our questions and decisions?

There have been many opportunities to explore these questions over the last few weeks, along with resources to answer or open up our questions along the way. The COVID FAQs help keep us up-to-date with the requirements: [All you need to know: answers to your frequently asked questions - Uniting Church in Australia. Synod of Victoria and Tasmania \(uca.org.au\)](#)

The Assembly has gathered together resources from across our Church, including from VicTas, to guide us theologically and biblically: <https://uniting.church/the-question-of-reopening/>

I would like to offer another opportunity to share insights, to learn from each other and with each other – in light of our faith. I have included with this letter an invitation to join with me in exploring these questions, with biblical and theological insights to help resource us in making decisions consistent with our faith.

The story of the Good Samaritan and Jesus' call to love God and neighbour, is one guide that runs deep to our faith. It's a call to focus on the welfare of others, and to give special consideration to those most vulnerable to risk of harm — beyond our usual circles of interest or personal preferences.

Throughout history, Christians have gathered together to hear scripture, break bread and pray, to be formed and shaped as a community, as the body of Christ. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be bodily present to each other in our worship and life, reflected in the deep desire of so many to return to physical gatherings. As open, welcoming and respectful communities, we have a responsibility for the safety and dignity of all especially the most vulnerable amongst us. As Paul reminds us in several of his letters, we are called to attend to the implications of our actions and choices upon others, and to be courageous in calling each other to account for this. In various ways, this means placing conditions on how we gather and relate to one another, and to consider the impact of our actions on those beyond ourselves. As Christians, we are also called to respect and uphold the law — for the sake of the integrity and well-being of our local and wider communities.

Sometimes we find ourselves trying to choose between two good things that don't easily align. Many Church Councils are discerning the need to decide now, even though decisions are difficult, rather than waiting in hope of simpler answers which may not emerge. One aspect for Christian communities to consider, is how we might be asking others to bear certain costs on our behalf. These could include health, financial or other costs in relation to unmet legal responsibilities. And in all things, we seek a prayerful generosity of spirit as we sift and sort our way ahead together.

In the midst of this pandemic, the most vulnerable to serious illness include indigenous communities, those who are older or live with disability, have underlying health conditions or are immunocompromised. Where there are a significant number of vulnerable people in the congregation, including a Minister or other worship leaders, Church Councils may decide their safety needs to be prioritised.

This might mean providing services for those who are fully vaccinated, which also allows larger congregations to gather together, and assists toward the responsibility to provide safe workplaces for Ministers or others who lead worship. Consideration will need to be given to how to care for and support COVID Marshalls in these situations, including where an unvaccinated person wishes to be included in a service. Clearly communicating worship arrangements ahead of time will help with this. It will assist people to make more considered decisions about attending worship, rather than finding themselves 'put on the spot'.

Church Councils need to consider how to find ways to provide worship opportunities for those who are unvaccinated. Where there are known members of the congregation who are unvaccinated, pastoral conversations ahead of time will assist in finding ways of welcome and inclusion. These might be through specific pastoral care, or invitations to other ways of being included in community life and worship, including online. It might include a decision to have smaller worship services for those of unknown vaccination status, taking into account how to provide safe environments for those leading or assisting in worship and for all those present.

Church Councils and authorised workers also need to consider their significant legal obligations in complying with the directions related to vaccination, and the significant impact of not complying upon the safety and wellbeing of others, the reputation and witness of the Church in the wider community, and the financial implications of fines — not just for themselves but for others.

Over past months, we have been managing many new requirements which place conditions on how we can gather. Many of these have been challenging, yet we have found ways over time to adapt creatively and in astounding ways. And in the process, we have gained a renewed sense of what matters most in our life together.

As we continue on this journey together,
may we notice the small gifts and blessings around us each day,
share our thanks with God and with others,
rest in prayer often,
and know ourselves loved of God and called to life in Christ.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Denise Liersch".

Rev Denise Liersch
Moderator