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20 October 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Over the last 20 months, the Session has met many times to consider our congregational response to the circumstances brought upon us by the Covid-19 pandemic, and particularly by the frequently-changing government regulations over travel and gatherings in Victoria. Throughout this time we have sought to be led by sound biblical principles in the decisions we have made, and we are greatly thankful for your prayers in this. We have aimed to use every available option to meet both for formal worship in the Word and sacraments, and for informal worship, study, prayer and fellowship. We are thankful for the technology available to us today which has enabled much of our 'normal' program to continue during periods of lockdown, albeit in ways that we find trying, often exhausting and never fully satisfactory.

Charting our way through this time has meant recognising the clear injunctions of Scripture, including to worship, to gather together, and to honour and submit to the lawful authorities which God has established for the good ordering of society. At times, we have found ourselves hard-pressed to wisely discern how we ought to apply these principles, and it has been a humbling experience. We have sought to act prudently, and please the Lord, although we know that godly folk have differed in judgment on a number of these issues. No doubt some of you may disagree with some decisions we have made, we ourselves at times on Session have disagreed in judgment as we've sought to biblically navigate the situation. Nevertheless, it is our united and sincere desire in all to honour God and bless the Church, and we ask that you continue to pray that God would help us to do just that – for the glory of His name!

The most recent change of Victorian government Emergency Decrees has raised what we consider to be the most difficult and troubling issue to date – that of vaccination passports. We have advocated and lobbied governments against this step, with limited success.

Our great concern about the rules now in place is their inevitable division of the population of the state into 'vaccinated' and 'unvaccinated' classes, attracting very different rights of access and of association. That is undesirable and potentially damaging in society at large, but totally unacceptable in the church. Our calling is not only to regard all our brothers and sisters in Christ as equals in status and as preferred before ourselves in importance, but also to hold out before the world, without distinction or reservation, the good news of the gospel of Christ, outside of which there is no salvation from sin. It would be a denial of our gospel calling to refuse entry of anyone to the preaching of the Word.

### **Our Unity**

As you know, we are currently focussing our morning worship services on the Bible's teaching about the unity of the church. We are doing that very deliberately because we recognise the potential in our current environment for our unity in Christ to be fractured by both these divisive rules and by society's response to them. Christian unity is a foundational doctrine, and we strongly urge you to make diligent use of the sermons and bible studies on it. Please use the archives on our web site to keep these truths fresh in your mind and to deepen them in your heart.

## **Our Church Roadmap**

From its earliest days, Christianity has been described as *'the Way'* (Acts 9:2). The gospel must transform the way Christians live. Our faith is not merely a matter of the heart and mind, but of practice. Not in words only, but in deed. The way we conduct ourselves as Christians, and as a Christian church, is a crucial part of our witness to Christ before a watching and increasingly critical and sceptical world.

Session sets out the following as our response to the Victorian Government's Covid-19 recovery roadmap'. Please pray with and for us as we work together to implement these steps. We also understand that the Victorian Government's Roadmap is subject to change at any point, and we will seek to consider and respond accordingly. We will be in touch further about this if and as the situation changes.

## **Lord's Day Worship**

Under the regulations, physical attendance at worship gatherings will be limited to outdoor gatherings of 20 people unless unvaccinated people are prevented from attending. We don't think a limit of 20 people is satisfactory, but prohibiting any class of people from attending services would be worse. So, from this Sunday 24 October, we will schedule multiple outdoor services, with the aim of giving everyone the opportunity to attend at least one service. This will require us to use a reservation booking system as we have done in the past so that we neither have more than 20 people present, nor leave any available seats unfilled. We will send out an email with logistical details for this later in the week, as well as an encouragement to use the new freedom we will have to invite people into our homes to watch services online together. At this point, the Roadmap indicates that from the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, these 20 person gatherings can move indoors, so at this point we only expect to be outdoors for two Sundays.

We recognise that for medical reasons some people cannot mix in a congregation where some people are vaccinated and others are not. So we will continue to live-stream at least one morning and evening service (probably at the 'normal' times of 10:00 am and 5.00 pm). We earnestly encourage everyone else to personally attend at least one service each Lord's Day. In the event of severe weather on outdoor service days, we will notify the congregation, and revert the services to being broadcast services only.

So long as the 'vaccine passport' regime is enforced by the government, and we are meeting under the conditions of these minimalist gatherings, our Sunday worship will remain difficult, and still leaves much to be desired. We would urge you to continue and increase in prayer, asking the Lord that these restrictions would soon be eased. Our current daily morning prayer times are a good opportunity to do this together, and we would sincerely encourage you to join in online.

As we have made plain already, we do not agree to implement a process to exclude any class of people from public worship. We maintain that vaccination is a matter for individual decision, and that no-one should be coerced or pressured into being vaccinated if they choose not to. There are many reasons people have given either for being or not being vaccinated. We do not believe that either decision is sinful, and we would be happy to talk with anyone who wants to explore this further. And we encourage anyone who has concerns over the medical safety or efficacy of particular vaccines to obtain advice from trusted, qualified medical practitioners.

Naturally our decision not to exclude unvaccinated people from worship, may also be a cause of fear to some. With this in mind, we will lead the congregation so as to act responsibly and safely in the conduct of our services following the current covid-safe guidelines – as we have sought to do to this point. Having said that, however, we believe that it is important to remember that God does not call any of us to eradicate all risks or control all possible sources of harm. We live in a fallen world, and sickness and death are a reality. Certainly we should do what we can to avoid and alleviate that, but we ought not to think that we can somehow gain total control of this

situation. Rather, we should pause and consider this sickness as an opportunity for repentance when we suffer under the common curse of sin, and trust that, regardless of whether we live or die, we belong to our faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ, who loves us and takes care of us (Rom 8:28; Ps 116:15). Rather than being governed by the fear that so grips the world around us, let us instead walk by faith and trust in God, walking obediently and responsibly, and leaving in His hands the things we cannot control.

### **The Sacraments**

A particularly important part of our worship is the observance of the sacraments – the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. They have been instituted by Christ as means of grace for His people, and so are a source of great comfort, teaching and sanctifying to all who view them biblically.

We plan, Lord willing, to schedule the Lord’s Supper to be observed at some services even while we have limited attendances, using the Covid-Safe methods we employed early in 2021. We will, as usual, announce this and prepare our hearts for it at the previous week’s services. On days where we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we will celebrate it across all services of the day, so that all members have the opportunity to participate, and the symbolic unity of the Body of Christ is represented.

As soon as possible we will also administer the sacrament of baptism. We have already been approached concerning several candidates for baptism, and we don’t want to delay that any longer than necessary.

### **Profession of Faith**

We have also been blessed to receive applications for membership of the congregation, and we plan to proceed to admit new members by public profession of faith as soon as we resume meetings, notwithstanding that only a sub-set of the congregation will be physically present. We will ensure that this happens at a live-streamed service so that our whole congregation can at least witness it, and join in praise to God at this blessing.

### **Meetings for Prayer and Bible Study**

At least until the end of 2021, we expect most, if not all, our midweek meetings to continue to be conducted on line. We are encouraged by the number of people joining in these meetings, notwithstanding that the technology sometimes makes them a bit awkward. They are a precious gift, and we thank God that they have enabled greater participation by more people, and provided a means of fellowship that we would otherwise have lacked. We want even more to get back to personal meetings, especially for Bible study, and will review the program for doing so early in the new year.

Brethren, please bear with us in these far-from-ideal arrangements, and earnestly continue in prayer for the Lord’s blessing of everyone in the congregation – from the youngest to the oldest – as we seek faithfully to serve Him and one another.

And – again – continue to pray that the restrictions which so grieve us now will soon be fully removed, so that we will without limit be able to worship, edify one another and give witness to our faith.

With love in Christ,

*RCBH Session*