

COVID-19 virus: update

This is an update following the document issued on 09 March 2020 by the Council of Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand for communication with PCANZ staff, ministers, chaplains, parishes, and presbyteries regarding the COVID-19 virus in New Zealand. (View the 9 March document [here](#).)

The update is intended as helpful guidance on how at this difficult time we can manage the life of our Church, stop coronavirus from spreading, and help those in our communities who are most at risk. The intention is for each person/group reading this information to be empowered to make sensible and suitable decisions for their immediate context based on the best information available at the time of making any particular decision.

Further updates can be expected as new information comes to hand.

Issue date: 19 March 2020

Developments that have occurred since the previous document:

The government announced this afternoon that indoor gatherings of over 100 people are no longer allowed, which affects many of our congregations. Following overseas trends, advice could be received that all Church services and other public activities may need to be postponed, changed or delivered differently in your area. Some churches are choosing to make that call before the government issues a directive. We encourage all Councils/Sessions to have a contingency plan in place that can be activated at short notice. See also: <https://covid19.govt.nz/help-and-advice/for-community-groups/community-groups/>).

The national office is working towards making suitable online resources available on the PCANZ website. This will be available at <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/coronavirus-information> in due course.

The advice has changed from standing at least one metre away from a person to standing at least two metres apart from anyone with cold or flu symptoms. Anyone who is sick should be advised to stay home (or told to go home if they are present in a gathering). Additional “physical distancing” advice can be found at <https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/media-releases/new-cases-covid-19-confirmed-no-community-transmission>.

Many retirement villages and rest homes have closed their doors to non-essential visits, including church/chapel services. Phone the reception first if intending to visit, and consider telephoning the person as an alternative to visiting them in person.

It is now clear that there will be a significant financial impact felt in New Zealand as a result of the measures being taken to curb the spread of the virus. The Government has announced a support package (see <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/121-billion-support-new-zealanders-and-business>). Parishes may be able to access the employee subsidies offered, however you will need to have evidence of reduced income. Parishes may also be able to access support for employees who are ill, caring for others or in self-isolation once their sick leave is exhausted.

Updates to advice being offered:

If public gatherings do continue, “social distancing” is being encouraged, therefore by way of greeting or passing the peace an elbow bump or a friendly nod is advised rather than a handshake or hug.

All activities that are run by or from a church are affected by the pandemic. Councils/Sessions should be providing advice/instruction to those under their care. For advice for youth ministries, see the Youth Group Guidelines resource: <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/coronavirus-information#All>

Activities using frequently handled equipment/toys should practice increased sanitation protocols during and after each event.

The previous document contained information around practicing communion safely. We are currently strongly suggesting that Councils consider deferring communion until the pandemic has passed.

Should Councils wish to proceed with communion, heightened caution should be exercised. Great care should be taken when preparing the elements for communion, with those preparing the elements washing their hands thoroughly and regularly. Regarding distribution, use of individual cups is advised, however this does not fully eliminate the possibility of cross-contamination as several hands may touch the cups in the process. Pre-cut bread pieces are advised, and the use of tongs by one person to individually distribute the bread is suggested. Passing the peace should be observed in accordance with the note on social distancing above.

In closing we repeat the words of the Psalmist quoted in the previous document: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear...” (Ps. 46: 1-2).

Richard McLean
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19 March 2020