



# THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF GRAFTON

Chris Nelson Registrar

PO Box 4  
GRAFTON  
NSW 2460  
02 6642 4122

[registrar@graftondiocese.org.au](mailto:registrar@graftondiocese.org.au)

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## A message to Incumbents, Churchwardens and Treasurers regarding COVID-19

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

By this stage you will no doubt be tired of words such as 'unprecedented' and glib phrases such as 'challenging times' while you struggle with the unfolding reality of dealing with the impact of the measures used to control the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.

It is clear that all parishes will suffer greatly in loss of offertory, Op Shop, hall hire, and event income and this reality was certainly on the minds of members of Bishop-in-Council as they met in videoconference yesterday.

I would like to inform you of some of the decisions that Bishop-in-Council made at this time. The words of Bishop-in-Council resolutions are in "*blue italics and quotes*". My comments on each resolution are in plain text.

Two strong themes in the Bishop-in-Council resolutions are striving to maintain parish financial viability and striving to keep on paid church workers including clergy.

The Bishop-in-Council wanted to ease the burden on parishes with regard to some of the regular payments that parishes make through the Registry. "*That Bishop-in-Council approves that during the period during in which the Diocese of Grafton has suspended public worship the Parish Pledge, Clergy Removal contributions and the Cathedral Maintenance Fund contributions be waived.*"

The Bishop-in-Council recognises that some parishes are better placed than others in having savings accounts, term deposits and trust funds and recognises that those funds may need to be used in this time of crisis.

"*That Bishop-in-Council directs Churchwardens to give priority to continued remuneration of paid church workers and to consider to what extent this can be maintained through a combination of leave and parish financial reserves.*"

"*That Bishop-in-Council requests that the Corporate Trustees give favourable consideration to any Parish request for general purpose trust funds to assist with the running costs of the Parish during the period in which public worship is suspended.*"

The above resolutions shouldn't stop parishes from trying to maximise other income sources such as asking members to use Parish Provider, requesting increased giving or special donations from those who can (some who will receive the special \$750 payment may be able to donate some of that special payment), and making on-line sales of higher value Op Shop items through Gumtree or Ebay.

There may also be opportunities to further reduce expenses. Some examples are requesting rent relief for unused rental premises (e.g. Op Shops) and minimising power usage in unused buildings by switching off appliances and over-riding air-conditioner timers.

Anglican Funds Grafton Diocese (AFGD) will seek to work closely with parishes so please share with AFGD your plans for drawing down on your parish accounts. This advanced notice will help AFGD to make sure that funds are available as needed.

The Bishop-in-Council realises that dipping into parish resources, waiving some Diocesan contributions and adjusting income and expenses will not be enough for some parishes. For those parishes, the new special fund being established will be important.

*"That Bishop-in-Council establishes a fund for the purposes of assisting parishes with their payroll costs during the current COVID-19 crisis and invites individuals and organisations to contribute to the fund. The need for the existence of this fund to be reviewed in 6 months."*

Details of how that fund is to work are being developed but it is hoped that those individuals and parishes who are stronger financially will contribute to the fund to assist to maintain paid roles in parishes that are not so blessed. It was discussed at Bishop-in-Council that some parishes may not need relief from the Parish Pledge, Clergy Removal and Cathedral Maintenance contributions and may be willing to pay those amounts into the special fund.

It seems most likely that the government's payment to small business and not for profit employers will go to the Diocese of Grafton instead of each parish because the Diocese of Grafton is recognised by the Australian Taxation Office as the employer. The Bishop-in-Council has determined that those payments should also go into the special fund so that the government payment can be used as intended to maintain employment.

*"That Bishop-in-Council directs that any special funds received by the Diocese from the government for employment cost relief shall be allocated to a special fund for the purposes of assisting parishes with their payroll costs."*

As you could imagine, we are in a situation which needs to be monitored regularly and good information is vital. This is especially vital for those who need to make decisions about special assistance and people's livelihoods and to consider what options are available.

*"That Bishop-in-Council directs Churchwardens to closely monitor Parish finances and make a report to the Registrar in circumstances whenever projections show that financial reserves are insufficient to meet payroll and other financial obligations in the following 6 weeks."*

The Registry is developing a template to help parishes to make the reports.

Some may be wondering why the Bishop-in-Council's resolution directs Churchwardens instead of Treasurers. That is because although Treasurers help Churchwardens and the Parish Council, with financial information and recommendations, the responsibility and key financial decisions rest with the Churchwardens.

It is recognised that despite all of the efforts at the diocesan and parish level, remunerated clergy and lay positions may be affected, and some roles may be suspended, 'stood down' or terminated.



Although these are unusual circumstances and urgent action may be required, those types of actions should not be made without proper authority and with a full examination of the situation. The Fair Work Act, workers' rights and moral standards still apply.

*"That Bishop-in-Council reminds Churchwardens that prior to any plan to suspend or finish the paid church worker from the payroll must be reported to the Registrar so that legal advice may be obtained prior to any commitment to such a course of action. This shall also apply where, without coercion, the person concerned volunteers to suspend their paid duties."*

There is insurance to help where there is a complaint to the Fair Work Commission of unfair treatment or harsh or unjust dismissal but intemperate action may lead to a situation where the insurance is voided or more likely, where an increased excess of \$25,000 applies.

Finally, the Bishop-in-Council discussed the Restructuring consultation process that is currently underway and how that may be affected by COVID-19. In recognition that parishes and area steering groups are generally well advanced in preparing their submissions, there will be no change to the response deadlines.

The special purpose meeting of Synod that was planned for 27 June 2020 will now not happen. Bishop-in-Council considered it impractical (and may be unlawful) to have that meeting.

Currently, the plan is to include the restructuring discussion in the Synod planned for 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020. In coming months, it will become clearer whether the September Synod can take place.

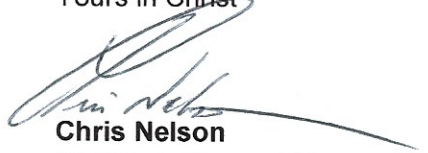
*"That Bishop-in-Council, considering the disruptions due to the COVID-19 outbreak, recommends to the Bishop that plans for the special synod of 27 June 2020 be cancelled and the business of the special synod included in the September 2020 Synod."*

As the September session of Synod will start a new 3 year cycle, those synod representatives who were elected in your 2020 parish AGM will be those who will attend on behalf of parishes with the Incumbent.

I trust that there is something in this communication that will be of help to you and your parish. As this is an evolving situation, you can be assured that the Bishop, Bishop-in-Council, Corporate Trustees, AFGD Board, and I will be continuing to work on this situation to constructively intervene where possible.

May Jesus who calmed the storm provide us stability despite the turmoil.

Yours in Christ

  
**Chris Nelson**  
**Registrar/General Manager**  
**Anglican Diocese of Grafton**

