
Tuesday, 17 August 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Pastoral Letter – COVID-19 and Regional NSW

As NSW edges more deeply into the current outbreak of the Delta variant in our State, we are each subject to Stay at Home Orders, and our Churches, Op Shops and many other ministries are closed in order to comply with the current restrictions. Our schools are offering online learning. Since the beginning of COVID-19 early last year, the Diocese of Grafton has had very low case numbers, with most of our LGAs having had no cases at all. However, it is quite understandable that we are asked to participate in the current lockdown in order to reduce the likelihood of further spread across Regional NSW.

It's clear that the Delta variant is dangerous and seems to be well ahead of contact tracing efforts. The case numbers in Sydney continue to rise despite an extended lockdown there. There seems to be no end in sight, and many, including the experts, are placing their hopes in vaccination rates reaching desired levels, rather than simply aiming to bring local transmission to zero. Effectively we are now looking at weeks of lockdowns, reduced movement and other restrictions.

All this brings uncertainty and ongoing anxiety. I am reminded of 1 Peter 1:21, "*Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.*" The author of the First Letter of Peter is writing to followers of Jesus who are exiles, dispersed in the foreign lands of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. In uncertain and difficult times, the writer calls these early Christians to trust in the truth of the Resurrection, to put their faith and hope in God, and work to restore, support and strengthen those who are suffering (1 Peter 5:9-10).

Please know of my prayers for you during this continuing uncertainty. We have a number of events planned for the second half of the year, such as the Lay Ministry Conference, Ministry School, Clergy Retreat, the Diocesan Conference and of course Synod. In times of uncertainty it's good to get together but of course it's not always possible in our current circumstances. While we have already converted some gatherings to Zoom events (LLM Conference, Ministry School), for the others we are waiting to see how things develop and we'll notify you closer to the time.

In the midst of the ever changing COVID-19 pandemic, we are reminded to put our faith, hope and trust in God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory. We are called to participate in God's mission – in all that God wants and needs us to be at this time for our communities and for each other. I know that you are already drawing on insights and learnings from the 2020 lockdown and that you are able to be present and connected with your people in creative ways, for which I give thanks to God.



Mrs Maree Collett has attached a Pastoral Letter from the President and Vice Presidents of the NSW Ecumenical Council for your information, prayer and reflection.

I would like to thank the Regional Archdeacons Zoe Everingham and Judy Edwards as well as Archdeacon Tiffany Sparks for keeping in contact with Ministry Units over the past couple of weeks as the situation has developed. The Registrar has communicated separately about financial matters and will provide further advice once it is clearer what Government assistance, if any, is available. Please be in touch with the Archdeacons, the Registrar or myself if you require advice or assistance.

Below is a prayer from the Diocese of Durham in the UK which has been slightly adapted for our use.

Yours in Christ



Dr Murray Harvey
Bishop of Grafton

Loving God,
guiding the people of Grafton Diocese
faithfully through the years:
We thank you for saints who have marked our path,
young and old, known and unknown,
from all places and in all walks of life.
Help us to find your way through these uncertain times:
Guide us how to hold on to the best of both old and new
that we might be transformed by your truth,
share your life and bless our communities;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord who both wept and rejoiced.
Amen.





NSW Ecumenical Council Inc.

Rev'd Dr Ray Williamson OAM
President

Very Rev'd Fr Dr Shenouda Mansour
General Secretary

Member Churches:

Anglican Church (NSW
Dioceses)

Antiochian Orthodox
Church

Armenian Apostolic
Church

Assyrian Church of the
East

Bruderhof Australia

Church of South India

Congregational
Federation of NSW

Coptic Orthodox Church

Ethiopian Orthodox
Tewahdo Church

Greek Orthodox Church

Indian Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church of
Australia (NSW
District)

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society of
Friends

Roman Catholic Church
(Dioceses of Bathurst,
Parramatta and Wagga
Wagga)

Syrian Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church
(NSW/ACT Synod)

Associated with the
National Council of
Churches in Australia
(NCCA)

PASTORAL LETTER

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*

Ps. 46.1

Dear friends,

We write to you at a precarious moment as the virus spreads more quickly and broadly throughout NSW and the ACT. Indeed, it is a moment when our country and the world are in the grip of a public health emergency that has the potential to sap the health, vitality and economic vibrancy of Australia and the world.

At such a time, we write to you on behalf of the NSW Ecumenical Council to assure you and your people of our prayer support as you minister and care for each other and for local communities throughout NSW and the ACT. We share the pain experienced by your people, who are sick and struggle with the virus. We pray with hope that God's love, mercy and peace will uphold and strengthen you and those who struggle for healing.

We write also to say how greatly encouraged we are to hear of local churches serving their communities in many ways. A number have opened their churches and/or halls as places where people can be vaccinated. Many have shown great kindness and compassion to people in need due to the pandemic. Such acts not only assist the broader community in very practical ways, they also give tangible endorsement to our words emphasising the necessity of vaccination for the well-being and protection of all.

Such endorsement is of paramount importance at this time. It is of deep concern to us that misinformation on social media is misleading too many in our communities. It needs to be countered. As faith leaders and communities, we can do a great deal to guide, reassure and comfort those in need, encouraging people to listen carefully to reliable public health advice and to follow it by being vaccinated and taking other responsible measures, such as social distancing and lockdown restrictions, to limit the effects of this pandemic. These are the means by which this emergency can be met responsibly.

The human population has embraced vaccination in the past as being critical for survival, as it is now. We have faced many diseases which have required vaccination, including polio, smallpox, measles and others. God has gifted doctors and medical scientists with the intelligence and creativity to develop these so that quality of life for all is a reality. Again, we have witnessed this in the amazing development of vaccines in the past twelve months.

However, it is tragic that, to date, the world has not shared vaccines equitably. As faith leaders, we can call on our government to ensure that Australia plays its part in international distribution of vaccines that is fair and values each life. Vaccination is also necessary across the world in order to prevent mutation of the virus.

There is much that each of us can do in our communities to ensure that we are equipping ourselves well to meet this challenge.

We pray that we all may be guided by Christ's light and so help light the way for others, that Christians may be a blessing to our communities at this challenging time.

Blessings and good wishes to you all.

Ray Williamson

Wies Schuiringa

James Collins

Rev'd Dr Ray Williamson OAM
President

Wies Schuiringa
Vice-President

Rev'd Dr James Collins OAM
Vice-President

16th August 2021