

17 September 2020

Dear Representative,

Re: A Message from the Churches Regarding Covid-19 Lockdown

As Reverends, Ministers and Pastors of churches in the South Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, we are deeply concerned about the impact of actions being undertaken by the Victorian State government.

We speak to many hundreds of people within our communities each week and our communication with you is intended as advocacy on their behalf. This is also a means to express our concerns as community leaders.

In caring and serving the people within our communities, your constituents, we, as Christian leaders feel a deep sense of responsibility for their safety, welfare, and well-being. While we come from many different theological backgrounds, we stand united in our concerns and in our determinations.

We have noticed a marked increase in the levels of anxiety, anger, frustration, fear, uncertainty, confusion and disappointment with the position we now find ourselves in due to the decision-making processes of the government.

While the COVID-19 virus is a serious disease capable of great harm to the community, we also consider the current lockdown regulations imposed on the Victorian people to be inflicting a greater harm. The current regulations are confusing, restrictive, and in-humane and will likely result in the loss of life given the passage of time.

We note with concern the following facts:

- 40% expected decline in breast cancer diagnosis ⁽¹⁾
- 31% decline melanoma diagnosis by Cancer Council ⁽²⁾
- 33% increase in children presenting to ER from self-harm ⁽³⁾
- 25% expected increase in suicide rate in rural areas ⁽⁴⁾
- 20% increase in mental health service requests for help ⁽⁵⁾
- 25% increase in calls to Lifeline ⁽⁶⁾
- 10% of women report domestic violence in lockdown ⁽⁷⁾

We are additionally concerned with the government's handling of the public messaging regarding the virus which has resulted in an atmosphere of fear and panic within the community.

The daily parade of figures regarding infections and deaths is problematic in that it is devoid of any context - we have no idea of co-morbidities, pre-existing conditions, whether the deaths were caused 'from' COVID or 'with' COVID. We note that numbers related to recoveries of those infected are conspicuous by their absence.

The messaging is devoid of hope and is unbalanced and harmful.

For some balance we note the following facts:

- 723 Total COVID related deaths in Victoria to Sep 13 ⁽¹²⁾
- 76% of Victorian deaths were in aged care ⁽¹³⁾
- 574 deaths occurred in aged care, while 1007 recovered ⁽¹⁰⁾
- The normal average life expectancy of aged care residents is 2-3 years ⁽¹¹⁾
- 60,000 deaths occur in age care each year in Australia ⁽¹¹⁾
- Average age of all COVID related deaths is greater than 80 years ⁽¹¹⁾
- People under 60 are more likely to die in a car wreck than from COVID ⁽¹¹⁾
- Flu season was expected to claim 4000 lives in 2019 ⁽¹⁴⁾

Each death is a sad reminder that this virus is a serious disease. To form a simplistic narrative around the death count lacks objectivity, is unbalanced and unhelpful and increases fear and apprehension.

The determination by Premier Daniel Andrews, that the government '*had no choice*' but to impose its regulations upon the Victorian people is patently false and misleading given the many alternatives being embraced, enacted and on full display in other nations around the world.

The overheated rhetoric of the government has stoked a climate of fear, mistrust and tension and it must stop. A simple example of messaging that is creating mistrust, is denoting anyone not wearing a mask as 'selfish', when in fact many exemptions exist for those unable to wear them from psychological to health-related reasons. The government should be uniting people not setting them against each other. We also note with concern the increased levels of surveillance by drones, helicopters, and mobile cameras which is fuelling heightened anxiety and worry.

Recently we learned that the imposition of a curfew, imposed by the Premier on all Victorians had no connection to health requirements, nor was it requested by police. It was simply a decision made by the Premier. There is no justifiable reason for a curfew.

A growing chorus of voices from experts in our scientific, medical, business and civic communities are urging the government to rethink its roadmap, to provide a more balanced and positive message to the community, and provide hope by immediately lifting restrictions on homes, businesses, schools, and churches. We also note the recent publication of an open letter from highly regarded health experts (now 500+⁽¹⁵⁾ strong) stating their deep concern related to the course the government has embarked upon.

Like you, we as leaders in our communities are very aware of the privilege and responsibility, we all have to serve those in our communities. We also remember and are committed to our responsibility as Christian believers to pray for you, our leaders, for Godly wisdom, righteousness, and justice (1 Timothy 2:1-3). We continue to offer our ongoing help, care and support for you and your teams.

We believe that there are many things aside from physical health that make people well. We believe in personal freedom and autonomy, and in relational, emotional, and spiritual connection. Our communities are being deprived of these key elements.

We ask that the government rethink its position and enact change urgently.

On behalf of the churches in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne and surrounding areas we ask for the following actions:

- Provide adequate funding to protect our most vulnerable in aged care centres
- Give older and vulnerable citizens the right to self-isolate if they desire
- Open the economy, businesses, institutions, schools, churches
- Establish adequate contact tracing measures to manage outbreaks
- Calm and encourage the population, bringing balance and truth back into communications

We note that increasing infections in European nations are no longer resulting in corresponding and expected death rates¹⁶. This seems to imply on the advice of experts an increase in herd immunity. A growing body of experts are also adding their voices to the consensus that lockdowns will ultimately fail. They are not the solution.

We must learn to live with and manage this disease as we have done for millennia with other diseases. A continual policy of lockdowns cannot be the answer. It is destroying our city and its communities.

Our heart is for our communities and to serve them well. We are committed to working with you to achieve that end knowing that you have been put in your position by God himself (Romans 13:1).

If you would like to discuss any matters we have raised in this letter, we are more than happy to meet with you.

We leave you with this thought from scripture, “***Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.***” (Ephesians 3:20).

Faithfully,

the undersigned church leaders,

Pas. Peter Jackel		Carnegie Church of Christ
Name	Signature	Church
Rev. Brad Rumble		Oakleigh Baptists Community
Name	Signature	Church
Rev, Min Huh		Melbourne Bangjoo Church (Baptist)
Name	Signature	Church
Ass. Pas. Joseph Kim		Oakleigh Baptist Community
Name	Signature	Church
Pas. Jonathon Miller		Eastleigh Community Church
Name	Signature	Church
Pas. Phil Brake		Compass Church
Name	Signature	Church
Ps. Lew Celle		Clarinda Baptist Church
Name	Signature	Church

Footnotes

1. <https://sydneybreastclinic.com.au/clinical-research-will-the-covid-19-lockdown-delay-diagnosis-of-breast-cancers/>
2. <https://www.cancervic.org.au/about/media-releases/2020-media-releases/august-2020/campaign-urges-people-to-see-their-doctor-as-new-data-raises-alarm-on-declining-cancer-not.html>
3. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-08/young-people-self-harming-end-up-in-hospital-emergency-rooms/12532040>
4. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-04/coronavirus-lockdown-fatigue-mental-health-depression/12519698>
5. <https://www.afr.com/policy/health-and-education/covid-19-lockdown-fuels-mental-health-crisis-20200805-p55irg>
6. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-08/young-people-self-harming-end-up-in-hospital-emergency-rooms/12532040>
7. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/domestic-violence-on-the-rise-during-pandemic-20200712-p55b8q.html>
10. <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/covid-19-cases-in-aged-care-services-residential-care>
11. <https://www.afr.com/policy/health-and-education/new-virus-facts-ignored-by-politicians-too-stubborn-to-change-20200908-p55tp9>
12. <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-update-victoria-13-september-2020>
13. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-12/st-basils-chair-stands-down-federal-aged-care-coronavirus-deaths/12657134>
14. <https://www.agedcareguide.com.au/talking-aged-care/flu-season-expected-to-claim-4-000-lives>
15. https://600230e9-a39b-48cd-8ff1-3b49ca999143.filesusr.com/ugd/886b40_76e8e8aa2bf8497a8420940bb6e9d909.pdf
16. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8730147/Coronavirus-second-wave-not-lead-surge-deaths.html>