**Statement to Grange Baptist Church re COVID vaccinations November 2021**

Dear Church Family,

What a remarkable 18 months we have experienced navigating the global pandemic. I thank God for His faithfulness and presence with us and for you and your response in the midst of this dynamic situation. How you have continued to trust God, love one another, stay connected as a Church and love and serve our community, throughout the journey so far has been an encouragement and inspiration.

We praise God for many things He has done over this season:

* There has been continued unity within the church, a shared commitment to our mission and a growth in faith in many
* You have continued to be generous in your giving to the Church and God’s work in the wider world
* Our ministries have continued with many experiencing great blessing because of them
* And our GrangeLife ministry now has a Lead with many people wanting to get on board as we care for the isolated and hurting of this community

As a Nation and State we are about to face a new season. Many of you will be aware of the wider conversation around COVID vaccinations and the need for proof prior to participation in a variety of events. At this stage we are unsure what the government will require of us as a Church, however we wanted to let you know that we are giving the situation significant attention.

Throughout this season, we have been proactive in responding to the changing situation in a number of ways: Using our online presence we have given opportunity to connect regularly together and when necessary provided a life streamed sermon on Sunday mornings; We have reflected our commitment to the vulnerable and less connected by committing to only meeting on Sunday morning when we can **all** meet on Sunday morning; At the same time we have provided alternative opportunities to gather and encourage one another, to pray and worship together, as we are able. These have reflected values we hold deeply and which will continue to guide us as we move forward.

It is with this in mind, alongside the national conversation regarding vaccinations and potential future of vaccination passports in our state, I want to share a few thoughts.

Firstly, vaccination is a personal choice. I am aware that many people, actually the majority of people I know, have been vaccinated or are in the process of being vaccinated. I am aware that some people cannot be vaccinated for health reasons, but Robyn and I along with all our family have been double vaccinated because of our commitment to caring for the vulnerable and serving the other. Our Joshua has caused us to be acutely aware of how important this is. I know getting vaccinated is a very personal decision which is why I haven’t spoken publicly about it, but I believe now is the time to action if you haven’t already. If you are concerned, can I encourage you to consult your normal medical practitioner for advice. See also this website for more information <https://www.covidvaccine.sa.gov.au/home/>

Secondly, Grange Baptist is and always will be, a place for everyone. We are committed to being a community where all are welcome and the vulnerable and marginalized are safe (its why we have commenced GrangeLife). Depending on what the State Government requires and especially as borders open and COVID comes into SA what this means for us may cause some challenges. We are committed to ensuring that Grange Baptist is a place all can come without fear and will respond in a way that makes this possible. As a result. this may mean we need to consider alternative ways for those who are not vaccinated to be able to participate in the life of the church. However, I am confident that we will be able to navigate this next season in the same way we have so far.

Finally, as a valued member of our church family, allow me to encourage you in the following ways:

1. Pray for wisdom for the church leadership – these are not easy times to lead, so please pray for wisdom and grace for the church leadership as we navigate this season.
2. Seek unity and work for peace with one another at all times. For many people this is a complex and fearful time. Forbearance and love are valuable now more than ever. Remember Paul’s words to the Ephesians: *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”* Ephesians 4: 3
3. Continue to pray for and be mindful of those who do not yet know Jesus. They will be closely watching how we treat one another and respond to what is required.
4. Be filled and live with hope and confidence. The Gospel declares that God is a loving God who is still in charge and this God is at work. As a result we can expect Him to be at work in our lives and in the lives of those we interact with and through our Church.

I find Paul’s words from Philippians 2:1-4 helpful when he says, *“if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”*

Please be assured of my prayers for you and desire for you to flourish and thrive in life and faith so if I or any of the staff or leadership can serve you or walk with you in any way, please let me know by calling me on 0414431956 or emailing me at revmrfoley@gmail.com

Love and blessings,

Mark Foley

Senior Pastor

PS. I attach a document from the Ministry team of the Baptist Churches of South Australia. I have personally found this helpful as I consider how to respond in a Christlike and Biblical way to the many challenges we face at the moment.

**BCSA REFLECTIONS ON COVID RESTRICTIONS AND MANDATES AS THEY IMPACT CHURCHES**

The Baptist Churches SA Ministry Team recognises the current complexity in conversations and decision making around Covid-19 restrictions and potential mandates, and a number of our pastors and leaders have asked us to speak into this complexity. We recognise that a foundational value of our movement is the freedom and responsibility of each local congregation to discover the purpose of Christ for its own life. The following reflection therefore seeks to provide some perspectives that may help our pastors, leaders, and churches in their decision-making and responses. Our desire is to respond thoughtfully, graciously, compassionately, and faithfully, with our ultimate goal always being Jesus might be seen in and through us, including in how we discern together. In preparing the following thoughts, we have utilised our Framework for Discernment and Conversation (adopted by Assembly Board in 2019), which we encourage our churches to spend time working through as well.

The people of God throughout the Scriptures sought to live in community in ways that look after one another and contribute to the common good (Lev 19:15-18; Mark 12:31). The Christian faith especially prioritises the needs of the marginalised and vulnerable (Ex 22:21-27; Matt 25:34-40), and we believe a King Jesus ethic is one that is willing to sacrifice our own needs and rights for the sake of others (Php 2:3-5). Putting this in to practice in the current situation means taking precautions to look after the health of our whole community, finding ways to protect those who are most at risk from the pandemic, and being creative in how we include and care for those for whom this might mean short term restrictions in order to protect others.

The New Testament encourages us to respect and submit to the governing authorities as those God works through to bring order to society (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). However, there is a time for Christians to participate in civil disobedience: when government policies are in opposition to following Jesus (Acts 5:29). In South Australia today, we are privileged to live in a democracy, and one where we have good reasons for confidence and trust that our leaders are seeking to make decisions for the good of our whole community. We all have opportunities to participate in elections, advocacy, and policy making. As part of the South Australian Council of Churches, we continue to dialogue with the government about the impact of their decisions on our churches. During this pandemic, we believe our civil leaders have made decisions that are based on public health concerns, implementing temporary restrictions and applying them broadly across the whole community, and not discriminating against particular groups. We want to listen carefully to any future policies proposed and hope that they continue to maintain these perspectives.

We believe in freedom of conscience and understand that different members of our own church community will hold different views (Gal 5:1, 13). However, we seek to maintain relationship, showing grace and respect to one another, at all times working for unity in Christ (Eph 4:1-13). We are committed to listening well to one another and to the Holy Spirit (Prov 2:2; Rev 2:29). As we seek consensus, we will make space for conversation and continue to journey together even when we disagree. We value the need for nuance and patience as we wrestle with theological perspectives on complex issues. In all things, we recognise the importance of our witness to Jesus, seeking to model his character in how we engage with one another, and with our wider community. We seek to value each person as one made in the image of God, treating one another with dignity, grace and respect.

We seek to be hopeful and not fearful in our decision making (Rom 15:13). We aim to show generosity and hospitality to all, and particularly to those with whom we disagree (1 Pet 4:9). Whatever decisions we make as church leaders, we want to implement them pastorally and generously, being willing to go the extra mile to care for those who may be disadvantaged by our decisions. We acknowledge the potential for division as we make difficult decisions, but we seek not to be divisive in the tone and posture we take towards one another. We are committed to avoiding depersonalising or battleground language. We hope to articulate our perspective persuasively without seeking to impose it. And in all things, we live out a love for one another and our neighbour.

We believe the church is a community of people, not a service, a building or an institution (1 Cor 1:2; Col 1:18). The public gathering of this people is highly important to us, but it is not the only way to live out what it means to be church. We have learned over the last two years to be creative in how we connect with one another and commune with Jesus together. We continue to encourage innovation in making sure all can participate in genuine community, even if there are temporary limitations on particular activities, whether required by law or chosen by churches as the best means of protecting the vulnerable amongst them.

We believe that God is the source of all wisdom, and we acknowledge God’s gift to us in and through medical practitioners, scientists, researchers and other experts (Prov 2:6; Isa 28:29). In every area of life, we rely on the often-unseen work of experts. We seek to humbly honour the expertise of those who know more than us. We are grateful for the incredible work that has been done to develop vaccines in order to protect our world with the best available options. All the members of our Ministry Team have been vaccinated for Covid-19 and we encourage others to join us in respecting the wisdom of immunologists and seeking advice from their GP if they have underlying health conditions or concerns.

We also acknowledge our privilege as global citizens, as those who have ease of access to healthcare when many others do not. We are called to generously share what we have with our global neighbours. We have been encouraged by the generosity we have already witnessed from South Australian Baptists. We also challenge our movement to speak up to our civil leaders about our national generosity to the global poor and those who are have limited access to vaccinations and appropriate medical care.

As Baptists, we do not seek to make once-for-all declarations, nor do we seek to speak on behalf of others. The role of our BCSA Ministry Team is to support, advise, influence, and encourage, but not to make determinations. Each local church is called to wrestle with its own decisions and actions in its context. We hope this is a helpful contribution and we look forward to continuing the conversation. As always, the Ministry Team is here to journey with our Pastors and churches as we serve Jesus together.