**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.