

Steps toward New Gatherings



ST PAUL'S | ST THOMAS' | ST STEPHEN'S
LITHGOW | WALLERAWANG | PORTLAND

Our good desire & the latest Government

God calls us to be His 'people', not simply His 'person'. God calls us to not give up meeting together, but to encourage each other all the more as we see the final Day coming (Hebrews 10). He also calls us to love each other. Because of COVID-19, we've had to obey those calls differently. We've met online as church, not in our buildings. We've rung, zoomed & (lately) visited – rather than regular Growth Groups.

As of June 1, the government is allowing Public worship services of up to 50 people. This is naturally exciting. Our good desire to meet around Christ's Word as He's present by His Spirit, means many are excited about meeting again ASAP. Our good desire to love each other in times of a pandemic, means many are worried about gathering too quickly & want caution. Both are good desires. We must not condemn or judge others for taking a different stance. Holding together these desires, the Wardens, Parish Council & I have put steps together to gradually see us meeting again.

New gatherings, not 'returning'.

With the excitement of the '50' announcement, some of the finer details may have been lost. When we gather again, it will not be what we are used to. I'm calling them 'new gatherings', rather than 'returning' for that reason. When we meet again:

- **The Word & prayer will be central as we encourage.** When we gather, it will be to hear God speak, speak to Him - & speak to each other. That final part is what online chat can never match!
- **50 doesn't necessarily mean 50.** The current restriction is the maximum, holding to the social distancing rules. With social distancing in our church buildings, Lithgow could hold 58, Wang 20, Portland 25.
- **It won't be our casual 'come & go'.** Every single person will have to register their name & contact number (or parent's number for a child). They will be kept for 28 days, in case you need to be contacted of an outbreak. The numbers allowed are fixed (currently 50, for the whole site – that means in the hall & church added together). Parents will have to register their children at the church entrance, take them straight over to the hall for their programmes, then return to the main entrance to be taken to their seat.
- **We'll need to keep distance.** Seat placings will be marked so everyone sits 1.5 metres apart. You will be ushered to your place. In busier services, we'll fill from the front, so we maximise spaces & don't overlook any. Whilst law allows households together – logistically it throws spacing out &, more unhelpfully, it could highlight the isolation of some who live alone. In the spirit of love & submission, we'll all comply with the 1.5m spacing. Even when we stand, we'll chat 1.5m from each other.
- **The service will feel different.** Communal singing is a particularly dangerous activity – spreading germs more broadly than speaking. There will be no communal singing. If we have a clip or soloist, we can't join in. Given the core role singing plays in church-life – teaching truth & expressing joy – services will feel very different. At this stage, we won't eat together either. Down the track, there may be possibilities. Currently, our new gatherings will not have food – either provided or BYO.

As you can see, we are looking at new gatherings, not 'returning' to our old ways. There is great hope in this: the joy seeing each other again, the chance to love in visible ways & re-gathering those who've not been able to join online. There are also great fears: disappointment that it 'isn't church' as we loved it, the cutting off of those who've only joined online. Our greatest danger is becoming a 'closed church' – with fixed numbers, it's hard to invite more to come! If we are only meeting out of comfort & for each other to the EXCLUSION of new members, we would be better not to meet.

The next steps

We are committed to meeting exclusively online (with the paper printouts available in boxes on the church doors) at least all of June. Before we set a date for new gatherings to begin, we need to take certain steps:

Creating teams: We need registration people at every service. 2 people, every week at every service. We need ushering teams at every service. 3 at Wang & Portland, 4 at Lithgow every week who will guide people to their places. We need cleaning teams. People who will clean before & after every service. 6 at Lithgow working for 10 minutes before & after, 4 at Wang & Portland every service. Mindful that the government highlights those aged 70 & over as most at risk, we'd love those younger to step into these teams in love for others.

Training teams: We are preparing clips explaining what's required in the roles & how to do it. This means you will see what you have to do before you commit.

Until those teams are in place, we will remain exclusively online.

Prayer: Prayer is our first & last resort as Christians. Prayer is our focus for 2020 as a church. Our first attempt at regathering will be to hold Sunday prayer meetings. When we get our cleaning, registration & ushering teams trained, we will set dates for some prayer meetings. They will be at times that still allow you to attend your regular 'online' service. Portland prayer meetings will be 9:30am, Wang at 11am, Lithgow 4pm. This will be simple meetings mixing 'common prayer liturgy' with open prayer. In terms of timing, we'd like to launch these Sunday prayer meetings concurrent with online services in July.

Your response

Knowing all this we need to hear from you. We've already heard some responses of both enthusiasm to meet & caution to not rush. Thank you. 2 key questions that I would welcome a simple answer on:

- 1) Is your intention/desire to stay online for church, or come to meeting live?
- 2) If you intend to come for 'live meeting', what are the ways you're willing to serve (cleaning, registering, ushering)?

If you could email a response to mark.smith@lpachurch.org.au or text to 0430 393 414 would be great. If you'd like to discuss further all the thinking behind it & the system in detail, phone me (or a warden).

As ever, this is complex times & we are dealing with new challenges. But in the midst, we lean on our God. He is good & his love endures forever (1 Chronicles 16v34).

In Him,

Mark Smith (on behalf of the wardens & Parish Council)