

CHURCHES RESPOND TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC- 2020

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Introduction

These are extraordinary times. Daily routines of the human family have been disrupted. Global and local events related to the spread of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic are rapidly unfolding. As the global community grapples with the pandemic, the Christian community in the southern African sub-region has not been left behind. Being 'in the world,' (but probably 'not of this world'), both big and small, individually and ecumenically, mainline and charismatic, churches have been forced to address this new reality which has a direct impact on how they do church. Furthermore, churches are high-risk communities given that they attract thousands of members every Sunday and other days throughout the week. Thus, they have to play a major role in preventing the spread of the virus. Virtually every denomination or part thereof, has been responding in some way or the other: issuing media statements, providing information on the virus (symptoms, basic hygiene, testing centres, etc.), providing spiritual resources (liturgies, daily reflections, prayer points, etc.), encouraging churches to embrace modern ways of communication, etc. While charismatic and Pentecostal churches have traditionally shied away from issues of a social nature, the impact of the virus on their denominations has forced them to react. Given the different, and at times conflicting, ideo-theological standpoints on social issues, most denominations have urged cooperation with governmental directives. However, one South African church has refused to comply with government directive of banning large church gatherings. But, by-and-large, the Christian community has been unanimous in following directives from government and health authorities on containing the spread of the virus.

World Council of Churches (WCC)

In a message on 14 February, WCC urged people to share accurate information, noting that fake news has been distracting people from responding effectively. On 18 March, WCC urged churches to "give highest priority to doing whatever we can do to protect life." The Council said we must break the line of transmission of the virus by strictly observing measures, restrictions and advice provided through the World Health Organisation (WHO). The global body urged against large gatherings, touching or embracing each other, thus avoiding the risk of becoming sources of transmission rather than means of grace.

On World Water Day (22 March), the WCC and ACT Alliance reaffirmed the responsibility of Christians to ensure that people have access to clean and sufficient water to meet their needs, including that of hand-washing. The two bodies said the "silver bullet" of preventing infection is a simple "hand-washing" with soap and water along with physical distancing from one another. They, however, lamented that most people in the developing world do not have access to adequate, safe and clean water for drinking, let alone for hand washing. WCC General Secretary Rev Olav

Fykse Tveit invited all member churches for a joint prayer, saying the Lord's Prayer together on Wednesday 25 March at noon, as an "opportunity to unite our voices in praying to God with the words that Christ taught us."

South African Council of Churches (SACC)

When the first case of the corona virus was announced in SA, SACC called for calm, and for society not to panic. The SACC expressed concern about the possibility of the virus spreading to poor communities in townships and rural areas, where water and sanitation are a big problem. In response to threats from a few rogue pastors, SACC General Secretary, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana said churches which refuse to listen to government advice on the corona virus could face charges of life endangerment. He urged South Africans to abide by the laws and regulations that have been instituted, for their own good and for the greater good, adding that the corona virus is not something that can be "prayed away." The SACC in Limpopo Province also said they would comply with the government's plan in the interest of saving lives. They, however, ruled out the use of technology to replace their gatherings because not many in their constituency have access to it.

On the eve of the 21-day lock down (26 March), the SACC commended the leadership shown by President Cyril Ramaphosa "during this unprecedented time." The national Christian body called for a moment of prayer between 18:00 and 18:30 that evening and appealed to Christians to commit to prayer each week day at noon. The SACC announced the establishment of a Lockdown Pastoral Plan and the setting up of a digital platform for communication and information sharing. An SACC central Joint Operation Centre (JOC) was set up for distributing credible information and religious messaging to communities.

KZN COVID-19 Church Response

In light of the national lockdown, the KZN COVID-19 Church response, a network of faith-based organisations involved in disaster management and response work, was mobilising resources to purchase "Hope Packs" to be donated to needy families in the Province. The packs would include sanitation items, food stuffs and educational materials on COVID-19. The network was in discussion with government on how to distribute the packs during the lockdown.

Anglican Church of Southern Africa

Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town Thabo Makgoba, sent out daily updates to the Anglicans in the Province via his blog. Following the SA government's announcement of the first set of measures to curb the spread of the virus, he urged adherence to these measures. He informed his Province to limit the number of people at services to 100, have more services on Sundays, practise social distancing, avail sanitisers to congregants at services, not to shake hands or embrace, among other measures. As events moved very fast, the Diocese of Johannesburg decided to suspend all services, with Bishop Steve Moreo, saying the Church faces a *Kairos* moment and that "it is incumbent upon the church to be part

of the movement to limit the spread of the virus.” The Province, however, decided against closing churches or suspending services.

Makgoba and his predecessors Njongonkulu Ndungane and Desmond Tutu, issued an unprecedented joint statement appealing to people across southern Africa to beat COVID-19 by working together. “Only mutual love and care for one another will get us through the crisis,” they wrote. They appealed to the people of the sub-region to take the opportunity to respond by choosing life over death; by choosing knowledge over ignorance; by sharing that knowledge and by caring about others through taking care of themselves.

On the eve of the national lockdown, Makgoba urged Anglicans to ring church bells around Southern Africa for 10 or 15 seconds at midday, as a signal to those who are ill, in fear, despair and perhaps anger, assuring them that God loves them and that this too shall pass.

Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC)

In the wake of government declaration of COVID-19 as a national disaster, the SACBC announced measures to prevent the spread of the virus including: suspending reception of the Blood by the congregation, receiving Holy Communion on the hand, suspending the sign of peace during Mass, draining Holy Water fonts and limiting attendance of Mass to 100. The Archdiocese of Durban issued additional measures for the Archdiocese, including lifting the Sunday obligation to attend mass, encouraging parishioners to meet in Small Christian Communities, suspending penitential services, and encouraging the use of social media to reach and interact with parishioners

Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA)

After government declaration of a state of national disaster in SA, the MCSA issued a statement applauding the decisive government stance. The following day (16 March), the Bishops of the MCSA resolved to adhere to government and WHO recommendations and restrictions and adopted measures for their church. Some of these are: limiting attendance of services to 100, encouraging e-worship as alternative to physical gatherings, disinfecting communion rails, pews/chairs and all other surfaces, and postponing all conventions and youth synods. The Natal Coastal Synod Women’s Manyano postponed their convention indefinitely. The MCSA also sent out helpful information about the pandemic. During the 21-day lockdown, the MCSA sent out daily guided prayer and reflections to the Connexion, encouraging Methodists to be resolute in the midst of the pandemic.

Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)

The National Leadership Forum (NLF) of AFM of South Africa applauded government’s drastic measures to curb the spread of the virus and instructed all AFM structures to comply with them. Attendance of services was to be limited to 100 people. Churches were urged to explore innovative ways such as multiple services, small group meetings and streaming of services. Water baptism and Communion were suspended. On 24 March, the National Office Bearers (NOB) threw their weight

behind the national lockdown saying government was “putting the people of South Africa first, and before profit.” They urged all members of AFM to adhere strictly and without exception to government regulations and to the nationwide lockdown. This meant that all meetings of whatever format, were suspended. The NOB encouraged AFM structures to explore innovative ways for continuous communication with members, including the use of social media. The NOB urged their people not to be the channels of the virus transmission, but channels of hope.

United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA)

The SA Synod of UCCSA announced drastic measures in order to augment government efforts to contain the outbreak. All SA Synod meetings including inductions, recognition and ordination services and conferences were suspended. Each local church was asked to have hand sanitisers at the entrance for all members to sanitise their hands before entering the church sanctuary. All church members who suspected that they may have flu were urged to practice caution by self-isolating themselves and seek medical attention.

Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG)

Charismatic churches also came out in support of the measures taken by government to contain the spread of the virus. The ECG, led by controversial prophet Shepherd Bushiri, said it was postponing all services including midweek, diplomatic, home cells and Sunday services until further notice. Bushiri said the people’s safety was his top priority and so he would televise and live-stream his messages to members of his ministry.

Rhema Bible Church

The Rhema Bible Church North also responded by suspending its services. Pastor Ray McCauley said they would be live-streaming their Sunday services because “it is vitally important to maintain connection and community as a church during this crisis” and to “maintain our spiritual health, and not only our physical health.”

South African Zionist Churches Association in KwaZulu-Natal

Bishop Bheki Timothy Ngcobo of the Nkanyezi Church of Christ, claiming to speak on behalf of the South African Zionist Churches Association in KwaZulu-Natal, said he would not abide by any law and would happily be arrested for gathering more than 100 people. “This COVID-19 is Satan who is attempting to stop Christians from going to praise God as we wish. We are God's army, so we are going to the Easter pilgrimages to fight this virus together. We will use the pilgrimages to pray to God to end this virus,” he said. However, Bishop Thulani Gwala of United Members of the Zion Church of South Africa (Ukuhlangana KwaMazayoni Church) said his church would comply with government directives and condemned Ngcobo's statements saying he made his statements in his individual capacity and not on behalf of the South African Zionist Churches Association in KwaZulu-Natal.

Lord God, in this season of fear and uncertainty,

as we face the threat of the corona virus,

Grant us the wisdom and determination to walk in one another's shoes,

The confidence and the humility to draw closer to you and to those affected,

Empower us to pastor those who are ill, to weep for the dead, to support the healers and to care for and love one another.

And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and always.

Amen