

SACC Statement on Churches in COVID Christmas

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Media Release

Issued by the office of the SACC General Secretary, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana.

“Let us confront the new Coronavirus variant with a state of war!”

We are well into COVID Christmas! The news of the passing away of eight nuns within two weeks in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is as saddening as it is shocking. It illustrates the huge societal challenge that COVID-19 is, with multiple numbers of persons in a single family being wiped out in a short space of time. We extend our condolences to the convent of the Daughters of Saint Francis at Port Shepstone.

It is clear that the second wave is upon us with a vengeance. As was announced on Friday, December 11, scientists have identified a new fast-acting variant of the Coronavirus. We join the rest of South African society in congratulating the South African scientific community for their dedicated research, tracking and studying the virus performance and vigilantly observing any emerging changes. From their report we note with concern, two worrisome developments:

- The observation by the scientists that there is an observable increase in the number of young people infected and getting sick – potentially a feature of the new variant of the virus; and the pace at which the virus spreads across the country.
- And that each person who gets this new variant of the virus, infects many more people than was the case before. This in part accounts for the fast rate of the virus spread.

The SACC receives this news with concern over whether the country will have the emotional energy to fight this new powerful variant of the virus. This is a grim warning to redouble our efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. As leader of the convent nuns, Sister Nkhensani Shibambu, commented on the sad demise of the eight nuns: “In the absence of a vaccine, we remain our own best defence against the virus and the least we can do is to continue adhering to the safety protocols of COVID-19 prevention and containment especially as most people and communities gather for the celebration of the festive season and beyond.”

South Africa managed to contain the first wave that had a slower pace, through our collective compliance to lockdown and restrictive regulations. We now have to face a fast-paced variant; with less restrictions; an exhausted and skeptical population; with a customarily carefree December mindset – a recipe for disaster in the midst of Disaster Management! Jesus tells of a demon that has been banished out of a person, and which wanders with nowhere to go to cause mischief.

“Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.” (Matthew 12:45).

We defeated the virus in the first wave, and opened our economy for production. This virus, like the demon it is, has gone and fetched the second variant, “... more evil than itself”, to make our last state worse than the first. This one may be like the one that Jesus said can only be defeated through prayer and fasting. Let us, therefore, pray ceaselessly; and let our fast include giving up certain customary practices of the Christmas festive time. In the face of this situation – with so many more people likely to get sick, with possibly greater numbers of lives lost, our Christmas should not only be less social, it has to be a less festive one. In the days when apartheid government soldiers and police used to shoot and kill young people, with funerals held every week across the country, we adopted the concept of ‘Black Christmas’, which of course involved not buying for Christmas. This time many do not have the means to buy and celebrate, and many are mourning their dead; while others, in anxious prayers, await the recovery of their loved ones.

For Christians this is one Christmas when the real meaning of the birth of Christ must take on a greater meaning, to assume the human condition in all its complexities of joys and pains. Christ joining into a society held captive by anxieties, pain and despair. People are in a state of hopelessness, which can manifest as anger, fear, or a total disregard for the respect of human life. We appeal to churches to engender hope; to establish prayer chains, families linking with each other in set times of prayer for intercessions for God’s grace, praying for those sick from COVID-19, and supporting each other, as the bible instructs, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Many have lost multiple family members, and Christmas will be bleak and sorrowful. Churches will need to be the Christ presence to support these families within the safety provisions of COVID-19 caution. In addition to the prayer chains of intercession and mutual support, churches are urged to hold down the numbers of people attending Christmas services. The report of a 2 000-strong church service KwaSizabantu (save people) in KZN, that resulted in some 48 persons infected with COVID-19 is a scandal for churches. The place became Kwabulal’abantu! (kill people); should those 48 people die, who should bear responsibility for their demise? Can we, as the Church, justify the loss of life, all in the name of fellowship?

We urge churches to do all they can to preserve life, as Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). At this time, the way to do that in fulfilment of that mandate of Christ is to work within the national regulations that prevent the virus spread. Christ is the Christmas gift that brings hope, strengthening us to a greater resolve in each community, for us to play our part in the Drive to Drive Down the Virus Spread. In this situation we must appeal, beg and persuade each other, our friends, family, colleagues, pastors and fellow worshippers, to please wear the mask covering mouth and nose, keep



distances apart, soap-wash or sanitise hands, plus, a new feature – ventilation, keep doors and windows opened, or sit with guests outside the house. The virus lingers in the air for a long while indoors!

“Where’s your mask?” we should thus challenge each other everywhere we go; “Please stand back for distance!”, let us demand of each other. Our conversations, our “How are you?” our “Ninjani?” must be on how well we are fighting to drive down the rate of the virus spread. If our country were faced with war, and bombs flying and hitting homes and industry, we would not be up and about, having mass parties, mega church celebrations, or demanding to swim in our beaches. We are in a state of war! Just over 11 000 South Africans died in World War Two (WW2); we now have already lost over 24 000 lives in a much shorter space of time, more than double the WW2 fatalities, and still counting. Let us not be lulled into a false sense of security by the absence a visible threat. When we are mask-less, and when we ignore the rules of social distancing and gather in large numbers, we become the threat.

We are in COVID Christmas; the next two weeks will determine whether the people we lead in worship will live or die – with Moses we say, “Choose life!” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Let us meet the fast pace of this new Coronavirus variant, with a more efficient virus reduction church approach and neighbourhood lifestyle. Let us confront the variant with a state of war mindset. For our social gatherings, our matric pass celebrations, our cultural activities, our Christmas and New Year celebrations, let us assume a state of war, and restrain ourselves to save lives. As Nelson Mandela said, “It’s in your hands!”

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About SACC

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) is an ecumenical association of affiliated Christian Churches, and blocks of churches such as The Evangelical Alliance and the Council of African Independent Churches, with a mandate to lead common Christian action that works for moral witness in South Africa. SACC does not exist for the propagation and the advancement of its doctrinal position, but is the place where our diverse interpretations of our faith come together in action for **social justice**. It therefore seeks to achieve a visible, just socio-economic and ecological impact, enabled through engaged churches-in-community for a reconciled South Africa and our sub-continent.