

## A General Pastoral Letter

### From the Leaders of SACC Member Churches in COVID Time

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God....Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. (Isaiah 40:1,4)*

Dear people of God,

We write as leaders of diverse churches in South Africa in the midst of the Coronavirus attack on our homes; on the lives and livelihoods of our people; and on the production systems of our economy. We write to say, God is with us even in these times of perplexing national pain. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze”, says the Lord (Isaiah 43:2). Indeed we write this general pastoral letter to the People and Government of South Africa.

**Government:** In the first instance we wish to thank the Government for its prudent management of the national COVID response. We have observed in the experience of other countries, how devastating this can be if not wisely managed by government. We applaud the President and the Minister of Health for the manner of their communication, keeping the country fully apprised of developments and the necessary adjustments every step of the way. We appreciate the various Cabinet Ministers who have addressed the nation on their various aspects of the Disaster Management Plan. We applaud the scientific community, both here and at the World Health Organisation for the work they do in the face of a virus that is totally new to humanity; and we call on the nations of the world to support the WHO for the sake of all human society.

**The Difficult Context of our Time:** We write at a time when our people are in lockdown fatigue, and our congregations still deprived of assembling for public worship by the demands for caution from the Coronavirus. We write when the numbers of those infected by this virus are rising relentlessly and seem set to reach 10,000 soon, and when the number of people who have sadly lost their lives is growing, and set to rise up with the onset of the winter, and with the inevitable spread of the virus as people move around more in Level 4.

We address ourselves to the anxieties of our people, the hunger, the desperation, the frustrations, and the depression that is setting in. We write to the victims of domestic violence and abuse and we write to the those who cause the pain of their loved ones in their homes. We write to the victims of the cases of brutality that has been experienced at the hands of soldiers and police in some of our communities. We write to the families of frontline workers - in the health services, the police and the military, families of people who wake up every morning to go and serve to



fight the impact of the virus, leaving families perpetually anxious about the possible infection that their loved ones may bring home.

We write to a nation boxed in by the double whammy of COVID-19 and the junk status of our economy. We say, together we can and shall rebuild our economy, but that the resolve must be for an inclusive economy, making our reality of two separate economies - “formal” (mainly white and rich) and “informal” (mainly black and poor), the matter of a pre-COVID past. We must now plan and work for a restructured post-COVID inclusive economy with validated contributions from all, and benefits for all.

**The Impact on Worship Life:** The lockdown regulations that prohibit our meeting in public worship feel very hard on us and our churches. With the shift to Level 4 of Lockdown, many are asking why we cannot now have the churches open for worship. We have supported suspending public worship for very practical pastoral reasons, and it is necessary to remind ourselves of that context today. We have learned from science and observing the trends in other countries that, while everyone may be infected, some 80 - 85% of the infected will not be seriously affected; and that it is in the 15 - 20% that the most danger to life will be. And these are the following categories of people:

- Those with weak immunity - mainly with underlying health conditions like TB, diabetes, cancer, and HIV, especially those not taking anti-retroviral treatment.
- Those who are in a state of extreme poverty and tend to survive on diets that do not help boost immune systems. National statistics suggest that this could be more than half of South Africans, and the majority of them daily cry out to God in our pastoral space.
- The elderly, over the age of 60. Not only do they often have the underlying conditions already mentioned; but by virtue of their age they are more likely to have compromised immunity. This elderly population is most concentrated in our congregations. And this makes religious gatherings that much more likely to result in deadly illness for members.

These realities require of leaders to think carefully and prudently about the conditions under which we can encourage a return of the faithful to congregation worship. The SACC National Church Leaders Forum has established a Task Team to focus on this, chaired by Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, and it includes leaders of the various traditions of our churches, including the Evangelicals and the African Independent Churches. Recognising that COVID is not a passing visitor, and that it will be with us for as long as we do not have a vaccine; this Task Team of church leaders will address the question of what will be the new normal for churches, and how we can continue to worship while containing the spread of the virus and protecting our the most vulnerable - the old and the poorer members of society, both most prevalent in our churches. Arising from this work, after discussions by all leaders, submissions will be made to Government on the proposed way forward for church worship.



**Church by Distant Communication:** Some churches, mainly urban based, have been quite creative in using technology to sustain a form of worship communication that reaches people in their homes. Even this has been quite heavy in data costs. Churches will continue to try and use these means to stay in touch and keep the gospel message alive; and buzzing through social medium where the *laos*, the people of God, access the messaging. Church leaders are agonising about the high costs of data that people have to use to access these. To accommodate the majority of Christ's disciples who cannot access through electronics, the SACC is exploring with the Public Broadcaster, a way to have various Christian traditions and other faith traditions in our multi-faith society, to each have a day when a slot can be afforded for a moment of worship that allows the faithful to hear a familiar approach to worship on their radio and television. If this succeeds it will be announced.

**Schools Opening - To be or Not To be:** In recent weeks we have all been seized with the question of whether our children should be brought back to the schoolroom, or not at this time - literally: to be or not to be! We could not resist the temptation to compare the the schools return with the churches non-return. We asked ourselves why it would make sense to have children back at school with the virus as virulent as it is. We have however been tempered by two things which we want to share. The first tempering factor for us is the fact that there is a firm agreement between the teacher unions and the Dept. of Basic Education on the safety pre-conditions, without which schools cannot open. This we can trust will satisfy our concerns. The second point is not as comforting, it is the scientific revelation that children under 18 years may get infected, but they are unlikely to get seriously sick beyond slight flu-like symptoms. Whereas, as we have noted, the elderly who have their familiar seats on our church pews, are the most vulnerable. We have to think a little more before we press to bring them back to their favourite spots in their churches. But when the schools do open, we will be quite vigilant, and watch that nothing amounts to despising the children and their best interests, as Christ says about "these little ones", for "their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven". (Matthew 18:10)

**Social & Economic Relief & Vegetable Gardens:** We appreciate the government response of a wide-ranging menu of social and economic relief measures. COVID has laid bare the effect of poverty and inequality in South Africa. Please look out for who will use this as opportunity for corruption and personal gain. Identify and *mpimpa* them through the **SACC Mpimpaline 0800 11 1114**.

The big question is whether inequality can ever be addressed without measures to slow down the rate of wealth growth for the extreme wealthy while building up the capacity for wealth creation by those in the dungeons of poverty. We repeat here what the SACC led Civil Society Manifesto says, the imperative of economic transformation that "must deliberately and systematically enhance human dignity and the quality of life, by preserving not only the environmental sustainability of our planet, but also by enabling the participation in the productive economy, of



poor citizens and the disadvantaged majority, with a process that progressively engenders wealth redistribution...to reverse poverty, inequality and low growth, through inclusivity.”

The South African Council of Churches has in the past advocated for a basic income grant. In this COVID time we thank Government for the small allowance given to the unemployed. We call on our people to now, more than ever before, get into the practice of growing their own food as much as is possible. Spinach, with nutrient-rich vegetable leaves, takes about 60 days to harvest, and once you have it, it keeps feeding endlessly! As people get the limited support from government grants, they should grow vegetables in their small household spaces, even as pot plants.

**Brutality Against Communities:** There have been several cases of reported brutality and excessive force used by members of the security forces on people in the context of the managing and enforcing lockdown regulations. It has been observed that such brutality seems directed against poor communities of mainly black people. We take a very dim view of this, and call on the political and operational leaders of these forces to not be inordinately defensive, but to look seriously into this tendency, investigate every reported case and act decisively and transparently. This is important for the continued support of the work of the security forces in their necessary role through this difficult episode of human history.

**Domestic Violence:** South Africa has earned the unwelcome notoriety as the home of gender based violence, gruesome rape, and killing of women in what has been dubbed the Republic of Sexual Abuse (RSA). Such domestic abuse has increased frighteningly now with victims trapped in lockdown with abusers. We recognise that often our Scriptures are interpreted in favour of the patriarchal attitude that violates women and children. God in Christ made women the primary channels of his saving incarnation, both at his birth by Mary of Nazareth, and at the proclamation of his resurrection by Mary of Magdala. We say to those who bully women at home, “in the name of Jesus, stop it!” The SACC is urging all our member churches to work together with all other communities of faith in the neighbourhoods of their congregations to have Local Ecumenical Action Networks (LEANs). These are church organs of the love of the Risen Christ through which we should demonstrate the pastoral care that we are called to extend to those in need. The special SACC website dedicated to our intervention to fight the Corona virus has the helpful information to guide on forming the LEANs; see [www.churchinaction.org.za](http://www.churchinaction.org.za). Most important for gender based violence is the request for each LEAN to form a Family Support Unit of trusted people in the community, to whom WhatsApp messages can be sent by victims of violence who are not able to call the normal government toll free numbers, and call for urgent help. The members of the LEAN’s Family Support Unit will call the government toll-free number to escalate the problem; **0800 428 428**; or the police number **086 00 10111**. Otherwise the SACC reporting number of **0800 11 1114**.



**Frontline Workers:** People of God, there is a category of people who wake up everyday and go to the frontlines fighting the spread of the Corona virus amongst our people. These are the health workers - nurses, doctors, and a whole diverse group of workers that make the health system function for us; these are the men and women in uniform, either in the Police Services or in the Defence Force. We ask you to pray for them as they risk getting infection for the sake of our collective health. Let us find ways to support their families as they live in our midst. Call them up, send them supportive messages, pray with them and strengthen their faith. Each day that their loved ones return home they do not know if this is the day that they may have been infected through their work.

South Africa owes a debt of gratitude to all these people and their families; and the South African Council of Churches plans to hold a National Day of Prayer, with the participation of all people of faith, in the diversity of our country's faith traditions and affiliations. This is so that we all can take a moment to thank God that infections have remained relatively low. It is a time for us to remember those who have lost their lives, and to thank God for the hard work of those whose job is to save lives and protect the nation from the worst, the frontline workers.

**Cuban Doctors:** We wish to extend our appreciation to the Cuban Government through the Cuban Embassy in South Africa, for their act of solidarity and allowing a group of specialist doctors to come and support the South African health system in fighting COVID. At the same time we call on our government to bring in all qualified doctors who may for any reason, be unemployed at this time. We cannot afford to have any pair of trained medical hands to remain idle during this time.

**The Place of Science in our COVID Combat:** Often, people of faith tend to see science as opposed to faith or vice versa. It is all in the grace of God. By God's grace we have the creative capacity of science to understand such things as how viruses spread and what it takes to mitigate the same. This in the same way that by God's grace we have the creative capacity to design and create trains, as well as the knowledge of how they will most certainly kill a person who stands on the rail tracks as they come. It is a matter of good faith to believe that the technology to build trains is by God's grace; as much as it is of good faith to believe that the life giving science of medicine is by God's grace. Likewise it is a matter of good faith to act and propagate in society, ways of living that not only complement good scientific observations and discoveries, but also that promote good scientific measures to promoting and advancing life and the wellbeing of society, and thus be the "light of the world", as we discern "the signs of the times" in the hurly burly of human living.

**The Church as "Light of the World" in the Coronavirus Situation:** Given how easy it is for some church leaders to propagate against the necessary measures against the spread of the virus, including necessary suspension of public worship, it is appropriate to end with a statement on our faith obedience to be a source of light, for society to see what makes for life, both spiritual and



physical. Jesus calls on his followers to read “the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3); and to be “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

The “signs of the times” are no mysterious happenings, they are public developments that are before all to see, like the signs of the inclement weather. But to discern their significance beyond the visible, requires eyes of faith. To be the light of the world, likewise, requires a living consciousness of developments and goings on in the world and society, in which we discern the “signs of the times”, so that we can be a visible and helpful “light of the world”. We do this by being both fully conscious of what is going on in the world, its implications and impacts on society, and be the light in the way that God’s love would instruct for them to “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10)

Above everything, we have a cardinal responsibility to use our reading the signs of the times, and our commission to be light of the world, with the divine bias for the weakest in our society. This is the social justice engagement approach of the SACC. We must adopt a public ministry that best serves and protects the weakest among us; in this case the most at risk from the Coronavirus, for God’s sake: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40 NRSV)

We are in a new day, requiring new ways of thinking, of doing, and yet the most primitive and old way of being church for the world we live in - in our homes and with our neighbours; a sacrificial and non-ostentatious church, a self giving church in the character of Christ, for God in Christ died for the world in whose midst the church is called to be both salt and light in moments of darkness. In this spirit, as salt and light that Christ expects of us all, we encourage you to soak the nation in prayer at home and in any other spaces - at work, in the shops, as we plant our vegetables, at the long queues for food relief - let us be one big pool and reservoir of prayer to soak the nation and its leadership for wisdom and compassion during this COVID onslaught.

**Message of hope:** Finally, we are the children of hope! If ever there was a time for us to come together as one family of hope in Christ, it is now! With Apostle Paul we say, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called.” (Ephesians 4:4) Hope is our second name as people of faith. This is not idle hope, it is informed hope; hope informed by what God is already doing in our country as we all rally together to reduce the pace of infection; as we do the right thing in minimising physical contact and helping those without the facilities to sustain proper hygiene. It is hope informed by the ever present Holy Spirit given to us in Christ, to keep a good conscience and exercise charity amongst our people.

With the writer of 2 Thessalonians we say today: “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.” Amen! (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)