

UNITED CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Att. The UCCSA Leadership and Membership:

- All Synods
- All Regional Councils
- All Local Churches

RE: IMPACT OF COVID 19 VIRUS ON CHURCH GATHERINGS

Dear Fellow Congregationalists,

We bring you greetings in Lent at a time when the world is facing a serious pandemic – coronavirus.

13 "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, 14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7: 13-14"

The Global Developments

The World Health Organisation has declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, over 121 countries have been affected globally. A number of Southern African countries have prohibited large gatherings of more than 100 people. Given the scale and the speed at which the virus is spreading, it is clear that no country is immune from the disease. Consequently, in Southern Africa we are now dealing with both imported and internal transmission of the virus. This situation calls for extraordinary response from us as church.

The Church Response

As one church in five Southern Africa countries (Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe), we have consulted extensively with our synods and we can categorically state that we are in full support of all measures by the national governments and the international efforts to contain the outbreak. We have a responsibility to protecting the sanctity of human life and ensuring that public health remains a paramount responsibility to us as church. We are aware that for many Christians, the idea of not physically gathering for worship as the people of God is not only unacceptable but also very difficult situation to bear with. We love gathering in person, but on the other hand it is our moral duty as church to take all steps necessary to safeguard ourselves and others around us from this pandemic.

The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa thus gives directive on the following:

Conferences and Meetings

- i) That with immediate effect, all conferences, ordinations, inductions, big gatherings of any kind in the UCCSA are hereby suspended until further notice.
- ii) That all calendar events of the UCCSA activities for March and April 2020 are all deferred until further notice.

Sunday Worship Services

- iii) That Sunday worship services should be held under very strict adherence to the clinical hygiene and health awareness campaign against the spread of Coronavirus.
- iv) Local Churches that have more than 100 congregants are asked to come up with different mechanisms of conducting services. We suggest that such congregations be divided into groups of less than 100 if the size of the church building allows. In addition to this, such big churches are urged to conduct more than one service per Sunday. We seriously take cognisance that it is not only the number of people in attendance that should be considered, but the space should provide minimal contact as well.

- v) Ministers and church members are encouraged to access the latest information on the Covid-19 so that they may update their communities on the state of the pandemic.
- vi) We encourage local churches to provide hygienic products, so that it is available for members when they come to church and also available at all essential amenities.
- vii) Washing of hands with disinfectants before and after services must be adhered to. Keep a social distance of at least 1 metre to 1.8 metres from one another.
- viii) Disinfect pews, chairs and door handles and all other surfaces before and or between services.
- ix) We encourage all christians to continue praying for all those who have been affected by coronavirus and also pray for nations across the globe to be able to contain the pandemic.

Easter

- x) All Joint Easter mass gatherings are cancelled with an option of holding local church Easter services provided there is controlled members' attendance of not more than 100 at a given service.
- xi) Services should not be too long and where possible catering should be avoided.
- xii) Encourage all Congregationalists to observe all precautionary and control measures towards fighting the spread of the coronavirus through observance of highest adherence to all promulgated measures.
- xiii) We urge ministers in their preparations for the Easter services to capture the crisis created by this virus in their liturgies, prayers and sermons.

Funerals and Weddings

- xiv) We note that while attendance to funerals is unavoidable we strongly call for extra diligence in adhering to health and hygienic requirements aimed at minimizing the risks of the spread of the pandemic.
- xv) Ministers are advised to inform families about the necessity of reduced numbers at funerals. Families should try by all means not to exceed 100 at both weddings and funerals.

For many ministers; this situation is difficult, because religious rituals are meant to be enacted, such as Holy Communion and the washing of the feet, especially during Easter. We advise that Holy Communion be served the congregational way (use of individual small cups only) and sterilizing cups after use, washing of hands before, during and after serving the communion by the celebrant (minister) and servers must be observed. Servers at communion services should put on gloves and medical mask when distributing communion. Those preparing the table of the Lord should also put on gloves and wear medical mask. In the event that the situation does not allow, the communion can be postponed. Baptismal service be held under very strict respiratory hygienic conditions. Minister to put on gloves, wear medical mask and use running or pouring water. In sharing the peace, please wave and avoid contact through handshakes, hugs, handholding and chalice sharing.

National and Global disasters require common and united action from all. Let us therefore all work together and defeat the Coronavirus pandemic. As new cases of the Coronavirus are reported across the world, Church members are urged to share educational information through professional health personnel, exercise caution and use common sense in respecting and cooperating with the government advise. Where possible we encourage individual members to take vaccine to boost their immune system. We will continuously communicate the new developments in this regard through our delegated courts i.e. synods and regions.

We close by reminding us all the words of the great Shepherd of the church St Peter (1 Peter 3: 15,16) where he exhorts us in the words: "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." It is precisely in time like this that our hope in God and the ability of god to change situations beyond our means should be at its highest.

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Kudzani SBM Ndebele
General Secretary



Rev Sikhalo Cele
President