

Coronavirus – Updated guidelines from the Archbishop – As at Thursday March 19

| By [Bishopscourt Media](#)

LATEST UPDATE BELOW POSTED MARCH 19, 2020



Dear Parishioners, Clergy and Bishops

I greet you all in Christ's name.

In view of the South African President's announcement of regulations to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus in South Africa, I have consulted with as many Bishops of the Province as possible in the time available and am issuing these revised guidelines to the Province.

While it is recognised that elements of the guidelines will reflect South African regulations, they are aimed at best church practice – drawn also from the Church of England – for Dioceses in all countries of our Province. In humility we also offer them to other Provinces on the continent who may be affected by the pandemic, for use and adaptation as appropriate.

As we go forward, updates will be reflected on this page, and dates and times of each update published. *(If you are not sure an update has loaded, "break the cache" on your computer by pressing Cntrl/F5 to reload the page.)*

UPDATE: MARCH 19, 05:10

In the worst days of the struggle against apartheid, we cried together, we sang together and we prayed together, and God brought us through our tribulations. In places such as Edendale, Empangeni and Table Mountain in KwaZulu-Natal, and in Kagiso, Katlehong and Sebokeng in Gauteng, faithful priests were present with their people in their townships even when threatened nightly with violence and petrol-bombings.

Our current crisis is different. In Mozambique, the President has decreed that no more than 200 people should gather at a time. In South Africa, the limit is 100. In Swaziland, it is even lower: only

50. Even when we gather, the medical experts say we must practise “social distancing”, meaning that we must stay a metre apart from one another.

But common to both situations is the fact that at no time is ministry – and the presence of those who minister – more critical than at times like these. We mustn’t be negligent with people’s lives, but neither is panic and fear the way forward.

That is why I say “Alleluia” when I hear of a parish which has a comprehensive plan for how they are going to connect people and give them a sense of community during this crisis. And it is why I am distressed when the main focus of debates in the church is shutting doors and keeping people away.

Then I have to ask: are you copping out, or do you have a pastoral plan with a positive message for your congregation? Is there not a way of making your church available for private prayer or prayer groups? Do you actually have practical, implementable ideas for using modern media to connect people who can’t or who prefer not to attend services?

As [I said with my predecessors](#), Archbishops Emeriti Desmond and Njongo, earlier this week: “Only mutual love and care for one another will get us through the crisis... Let us 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 ourselves.”

Of course, we don’t need to congregate to pray. No stigma should be attached to parishioners, lay ministers or servers who choose not to attend services we hold. If parishioners are ill, elderly or otherwise vulnerable, they should be encouraged to pray at home on Sunday, with appropriate ministry extended to them at other times in the week. Whether we worship at church or at home, we have to be one in solidarity.

A special word to young people, drawn from our joint Archbishops’ appeal:

We know you are not scared for yourselves, and some of you may feel that coronavirus is not an African problem. But you might be carriers of the virus without even knowing it. So we appeal to you not to put at risk the lives of those who cared for you when you were children. We know that you are being asked to sacrifice the most for your old people. But please protect those of your parents’ and grandparents’ generation.

Numbers of you have come up with practical suggestions in emails to me, in comments on our Provincial website and via social media. One of them is to hold days of prayer, during which we don’t necessarily need to congregate. On March 22, the Diocese of Swaziland will hold a day of prayer. Tomorrow, Friday March 20, the clergy of the Diocese of Cape Town will meet at St Thomas’ Church, Rondebosch, to devote the hours of 10:00 to 11:30 to prayer.

I encourage other similar initiatives, and I have resolved to establish a Provincial COVID-19 Team to come up with a pastoral plan to look at the practicalities of bringing us together, recognising that there is no “one-size-fits-all” plan.

Now to elaborate on some of the guidelines we have published earlier – and which you can see below on earlier posts:

- Confirmations and weddings – Try to postpone them, but if you can’t, limit the participants to families or other small groups;

- Ordinations – Postpone them, or if you can't, limit them to families, a small parish delegation and Chapter;
- Funerals – We just have to encourage families to do their best to limit numbers;
- Sunday School – Consider drawing circles on the floor to keep children at least a metre apart, and build social distancing into your arrivals and lesson plans;
- If a child has been where an infection is suspected, they should not come to church;
- Baptisms and anointing with oil should be performed either with the appropriate implements or using hand sanitiser, or soap and water, before and after the act; parents rather than clergy should hold babies being baptised and there should be no baptism by immersion;
- There should be no foot-washing;
- Clergy are human beings too! If you show signs of contracting the virus, you must test and self-isolate yourself if need be.

If you have not read these guidelines before, please continue to read the earlier updates; they are meant to be read as a whole.

UPDATE: MARCH 18, 06:00

Since the updated guidelines on our Province's response to the coronavirus were published yesterday, a debate has arisen over whether we should suspend our services and close our churches. Parishioners have made useful contributions on social media and Diocesan Chapters have had creative discussions. The Diocese of Johannesburg decided to suspend all services until Easter, and the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have issued advice that public worship is suspended until further notice.

My own ecclesiology goes back to the Early Church as recounted in the Acts of Apostles, where Christians always met for fellowship, even in house groups. The issue of numbers is not that important: what is important is creating opportunities for Christians to worship in the way they wish to worship, insofar as that is practically possible.

We will not as a Province be advising the closing of churches nor the suspension of services. My own preference is that we keep our churches open and continue to hold services.

However, we recognise that there are local challenges, and my advice, in order of preference, is the following:

- That we keep our churches open and hold as many services of no more than 100 as we can within our parishes' resources; and that we follow strictly the guidance on social distancing – keeping at least a metre apart, and for example, occupying every second row of pews. If you can't find hand sanitizer, use soap and water. (See also yesterday's guidelines further down this document.)
- That if you do suspend services, you arrange to have churches opened for times of prayer for those who want to attend.
- That as well as allowing for times of prayer for individuals within your churches, parishes organise house groups for worship and prayer, fulfilling our Lord's promise that "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20)

The key is not to forget the Lord of the Church as we do the work of the Church. We need to proclaim the Gospel, we need to teach, we need to heal and we need to feed the multitude. As we look at the practicalities, we need to return to our Anglican heritage of seeking guidance from scripture, experience, reason and tradition.

The Season of Lent leading up to Holy Week is about moving towards breaking through the cloud of darkness, dispelling fear and birthing light; it is about bringing hope to a seemingly hopeless situation. Let us seek to do that at this challenging time in our history.

PS: This fascinating study on the spread of viruses illustrates [Why outbreaks like coronavirus spread exponentially, and how to “flatten the curve”](#)

UPDATE: MARCH 17, 06:45

This version of the guidelines replaces all previous guidelines.

In Parishes

- Services should be limited to 100 people. This will mean that many clergy will have to spend longer hours, presiding at more services, on Sundays and popular weekday services – and especially on Good Friday and Easter. We rely on the ingenuity of clergy and Parish Councils as to how you work with regular worshippers on deciding who attends what service (whether by signing up to rosters or some other method).
- Hand sanitizers should be made available for congregants arriving at and departing from services.
- Since churches will be emptier, spread yourselves out to keep distances of at least metre between you and your neighbour. I realise that “social distancing” seems a drastic, even unChristian way of behaving towards one another. But the best advice we have from coronavirus experts is that people who are infected but do not show symptoms – including young people who may never have symptoms – may be among those who spread the virus the most. Therefore, keeping physical distance from others – whether or not they have symptoms – is one of the surest ways to slowdown rates of infection.
- Suspend physical contact with one another at the Peace – don’t shake hands or embrace – instead wave hands to acknowledge the other instead.
- Develop ways of making the collection without passing around a collection plate.
- Keep your distance from others while waiting in line to receive the host.
- Do not touch the Communion rail with your hands. Where possible, stand when receiving Communion.
- Clergy must use hand sanitizer before they distribute the host/ wafers.
- Only the priest should consume the wine. This is theologically sound practice and does not invalidate the Eucharist for those who receive it.
- As you leave, wave to your clergy instead of shaking hands.
- Parishioners who are ill should stay at home to recover and request home communion or a pastoral visit.
- No pastoral visits should be undertaken to people who are self-isolating or in quarantine. However, do offer phone support.

- Ensure good regular cleaning of surfaces which people touch regularly including such things as door handles, light switches, etc.
- Ensure a good supply of soap or sanitizer in cloakrooms, kitchens etc.
- Suspend catering (tea/coffee, etc) where multiple people touch mugs, utensils and foodstuffs.

Clergy, Pastoral Workers and Lay representatives

- No meetings of more than 100 people will be held (in South Africa – in other countries, numbers differ).
- Avoid travel unless there are exceptional circumstances. Hold audio or video meetings on Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom and other devices.
- Clergy should not make direct physical contact with congregants when they bless or lay hands on them. Bishops should not make physical contact when confirming or ordaining congregants.
- When visiting parishioners at home, wash hands before and after giving the sacraments.
- If you are making pastoral visits to hospitals or homes for the aged, be strict about disinfecting yourself, washing hands etc before and after your visits. Follow the advice of staff on infection control.
- Educate yourselves and your congregations on your Government's guidelines on hygiene and follow them when not dealt with in these guidelines. For example, wash your hands frequently and don't touch your face unless you've washed your hands.
- Matters such as clergy becoming ill and needing leave or sick leave to be handled at Diocesan level under the authority of the Bishop.

These guidelines do not cover every imaginable situation. I rely on you and your Parish Council's wisdom to develop detailed steps as you face new situations — and do listen to your national and local health authorities. Shortly, I will make available for the clergy appropriate guidance which the Southern African Anglican Theological Commission is helping us develop.

I know these measures sound drastic, and they are, for good reason. We face an emergency. The world is so interconnected that we cannot avoid the virus, so we must do everything we can to educate ourselves to minimise its spread. The prospect of it spreading among the aged, people with TB and other vulnerable groups is too awful to contemplate.

Please take care of yourselves, your loved ones and everyone in your community. We can minimise the spread, but we have to take it seriously to succeed.

I pray that our common life in worship and pastoral care will be rooted in the compassion of Christ and appropriate care for one another in a time of uncertainty.

God bless you.

The Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba

Archbishop and Metropolitan

Anglican Church of Southern Africa