



Responding Pastorally to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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In response to the dramatic effects which the coronavirus is having on our economy and normal way of life, the Australian government has considered that now is a time to act with financial stimulus. We are now facing the banning of public indoor gatherings of over 100 people as well as the banning of public outdoor gatherings of over 500 people.

For many people, those in our neighbourhoods, on the train, in our work places and schools, it is a time of great concern, even anxiety. People are asking “Am I prepared for this crisis?” “Will I be infected?” “Am I doing enough to protect myself and my family?” For leaders, there is an added sense of responsibility as they ask, “Am I leading in a way that helps people or am I adding to their anxiety?”

Christians today have questions concerning what our response ought to be as we seek to respond to the COVID-19 virus. Some of us are seeing it as a time to boldly declare our trust in God, while others find it much harder than we had thought to remain calm and full of faith.

How can we respond, as Christlike followers, to this crisis?

1. **Remember that God is with us.** God has promised, “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5b). Jesus declared that he is with us even to the end of the age. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter. In the midst of the social media storm that tends to either make light of the situation or spread unbridled fear, it is good to remember that God is with us. Even in self-isolation when we can feel

alone, God is still with us. There is nowhere that we can be where God is not. Slow down, take a few deep breaths and acknowledge God's presence.

2. **Don't be too surprised when things don't go as planned.** Jesus said "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Trouble is something we should expect. Suffering and setbacks are part of this world and we will face them as we live in such a way that we are looking forward with hope to the new heaven and new earth. Each day though, God is with us through each challenge to help us become more and more like him.
3. **Be a non-anxious presence.** For so many people there is a growing sense of anxiety, concern and fear. It's not helpful for us to shout, "Do not panic!" Even urging people to forget their troubles and just trust God can seem trite and unhelpful. But when you engage in a calm, emotionally present and anxiety-free way, you engender trust which will be received as caring in any environment. We do this best by managing our feelings in such a way that we are neither distant and detached, nor flooding the situation with our unchecked emotions. This calmness, which comes from knowing that God is with us, will have an effect on those we care for and assist them in reducing their own anxieties.
4. **Go the extra mile to be there (even if we're not physically there).** Physical distance does not have to mean social distance. We are the Body of Christ, whether we are physically present or not. The church is more than the building. The reality of Covid-19 means we must do all that we can to be there for people. Just like the Good Samaritan who saw the beaten man on the road and stopped to help him, we can intentionally stop and help those who are fearful and feeling alone. This doesn't have to be in person and, in fact, it may be the more loving thing not to do this in person. A simple phone call, a text message, email or even a video call can make a world of difference to someone who is feeling alone at this time. We can build community by letting others know when we will be praying, so we can pray at the same time. If your church is currently not meeting together on the weekend, we have a wonderful opportunity to invite our small group, if all are well, to meet together in our homes and watch the service or listen to a podcast on-line. By remembering to check in on our neighbours to see how they are coping, we help connect and care. We can visit people we know might be feeling overwhelmed. Let's ask God to lead us as we connect with people.
5. **Be a loving listener.** It is a great gift in the midst of an overwhelming situation to have someone listen to and seek to understand us. By listening attentively, we demonstrate that the other person is important to us, to God and to the wider

community. To be heard in the midst of the uncontrollable circumstances of a crisis, is received as an act of love.

6. **Be a bringer of hope.** During this time there is real danger. People have died and will continue to die. We need to respond wisely. We don't know how long this pandemic will last. However it is important for us to keep the big picture in mind. We are followers of Christ and through faith in Jesus we are new creations, forgiven, filled with the Spirit of God, gifted and called to live for God and there is nothing that can separate us from his love. Not Covid-19, not death, not anything. So we can say with Paul, "if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord" (Rom 14:8). In Christ we have great hope. God is with us and will be with us forever.
7. **Pray together.** Prayers spoken aloud with people in anxious situations can help the situation to be seen differently. It's not the number of words that is important. Often fewer words are better. When we express our honest concerns to God, reflect in prayerful silence on the promises in the Bible, and are still together before our living and loving God, we can know that we are not alone and God is with us. Be real, be honest and pray together.

This is a unique time for us, to love and care for one another and for those around us. We can do this together, sharing the load. If you feel exhausted, step back and take a breath. Ask someone else to share the load with you. Seek wise counsel. As the Body of Christ, we have this opportunity to provide care, love and hope to others in our community, and we can do this together for God's glory.