

# Faith in a time of COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

18 March 2020



Every part of the Communion is now responding at some level to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. Some provinces have been dealing with the situation for longer and there are important lessons to learn from their pastoral and practical responses that promote public health, sustain a sense of community and build hope. Above all, it is time to recognise ourselves as the Body of Christ, to support one another and to reflect God's concern for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

The Church of England, in response to government advice, has now put public worship on hold to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. In a message to the Church of England, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York said: "Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday, and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day.... We urge you sisters and brothers to become a different sort of church in these coming months: hopeful and rooted in the offering of

prayer and praise and overflowing in service to the world....Then by our service, and by our love, Jesus Christ will be made known, and the hope of the gospel – a hope that can counter fear and isolation – will spread across our land.” The Archbishops are also calling for a Day of Prayer and Action on Mothering Sunday (22 March).

The Anglican Alliance is working intensively across the Communion to learn from effective church responses and share guidelines and resources on COVID-19. At the same time we remain working on other issues – disease, conflict, climate change and poverty – which continue to afflict many communities, who will be rendered even more vulnerable by this pandemic. This is the first of our COVID-19 updates, with links to some key resources and examples from different provinces. Each country situation is different and churches need to follow their own government’s guidelines. The examples and resources that we share from around the Communion must therefore be adapted to each context.

### **Global consultation**

On Monday March 16th the Anglican Alliance convened an online global consultation to draw together the lessons learned so far from how Anglicans are responding to COVID-19 across the Communion. Participants included church leaders, representatives of Anglican development agencies, health and legal experts and came from almost every region of the Communion. Here we share the key learnings and some examples of best practice from the call. We are also building up a repository of resources, bible studies, etc. that can be adapted for different contexts, so that we can learn from one another. We will post a link shortly.

Revd. Canon Rachel Carnegie, Executive Director of the Anglican Alliance, started the call by reminding everyone that whilst we are in a very difficult time, the world and the Church have faced very difficult times in the past – and come through them. It is therefore important that we face this current situation with hope, that we encourage one another, learn from one another and, especially, that we have special care for those

already most at risk in our communities. God is with us, for “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39)

### **What can the Church do?**

From the Church’s experience of responding to other emergency and epidemic situations, we know that there are three key roles the Church can play in such times to promote preparedness and resilience:

- To give hope and combat fear with accurate information and encouragement through our faith.
- To keep the worshipping and wider community connected, if necessary via messages, phone and online, in case of quarantine and disruption.
- To show God’s compassion and care to those affected in our communities, remembering that those already most vulnerable will be most affected.

As the Church, we are called to be a voice of calm and reassurance, affirming that God is with us.

### **Prevention and Care in and through Churches**

Through case studies from the Church of England, the Diocese of Singapore and the Anglican Health Network some key learnings were identified for churches to support prevention of infection and care of the vulnerable in and through churches. These inputs came from Revd Gina Radford, a priest and adviser on COVID-19 to the Church of England and formerly UK government deputy chief medical officer, from Ven. Wong Tak Meng, chair of the COVID-19 Diocesan Task Force in Singapore, and from Bishop Michael Beasley, Chair of the Anglican Health Network and formerly an epidemiologist. With further contributions by other participants from around the Communion, the following lessons were highlighted:

## General response:

- **Build hope and sustain the connections of community.**
- **Follow government and provincial / diocesan guidelines** in each context.  
(See [here](#) an example from the Church of England)
- **Create a COVID-19 Task Force** at provincial and diocesan levels. It can include church leaders (ordained and lay, male and female), public health, legal and communication experts, youth leaders, etc. so it brings together a range of skills and perspectives.
- **Communicate factual information** in line with the government's public health messages and counter misinformation.

## Response within the Church:


- **Put in clear hygiene and behavioural measures** for prevention of infection within services.
- **Maintain worship life and parish connections virtually**, through different means, when congregations are not able to gather.
- **Live-stream or record services for parishioners** who are self-isolating and if services are suspended.
- **Coordinate pastoral and spiritual care** to those church members **self-isolating** and support for those self-isolating in the wider community, by keeping in touch online, via phone, local radio, through messages, etc. We can maintain 'physical distance' while being socially and spiritually close.
- Support all parishes to develop an **Action Plan** for their preparedness and response.
- **Develop Ministry Continuity Plans**, in case any clergy or key church officers are unwell.

- **Create public information resources: letters, news-sheets, videos, web pages** and other resources – e.g. on precautions in worship, a spiritual message from church leaders, etc.
- **Build hope and address people’s fears and emotions** at this time, using biblical and spiritual resources. (Examples of Bible studies and prayers will be uploaded shortly on this website.)
- **Send out service & prayer sheets** so that parishioners can join in at home at the same time each day.

#### **Response within the wider community:**

- **Maintain practical care**, through safe measures, for the **most vulnerable**, e.g. the homeless, for whom meals can be served instead as ‘take-aways’ available outside the church.
- **Remember those made more vulnerable** through the situation, including those losing income and social support.
- **Support government initiatives on ‘circuit breaking’**, closing down all or specific parts of society to slow new infection rates.
- **Encourage health workers** who are carrying the greatest strain in this pandemic. Offer prayer, pastoral care and strong public appreciation.
- **Build community preparedness and resilience**, identifying the people, skills, assets and resources in a community to prepare for the situation potentially becoming more serious – and to build community resilience for a swift and effective recovery once the pandemic has passed.

Below are more details and examples on these key points as discussed in the Anglican Alliance global consultation. The prayer for this time of COVID-19 is from the Mothers’ Union.



Loving Lord

We pray for your love and compassion to abound  
as we walk through this challenging season.

We ask for wisdom for those who bear the load  
of making decisions with widespread consequences.

We pray for those who are suffering with sickness  
and all who are caring for them.

We ask for protection for the elderly and vulnerable  
to not succumb to the risks of the virus.

We pray for misinformation to be curbed  
that fear may take no hold in hearts and minds.

As we exercise the good sense that you in your mercy provide,  
may we also approach each day in faith and peace,  
trusting in the truth of your goodness towards us.

Amen

Prayer: Mothers' Union

Image: Elizabeth Perry

**Building hope and sustaining a sense of community:** This was seen as a key role for the Church. Revd Gina Radford said: “We are in uncharted territory. As church we must have a voice of peace and reassurance, as the one certainty we can hold onto is that God is with us and we must not lose sight of this amongst the panic.” This time is an important opportunity for the Church to connect with God’s holistic mission in the world.

**Communicating factual information:** The Church needs to be a trusted and reliable source of information. Church leaders need to provide accurate information with a pastoral perspective. Being rational and factual is very important in the face of uncertainty. It is important that the Church follows official advice and issues guidance that is in line with national government information, as a lack of consistency in the messages people hear leads to confusion. For global information, here is a link to

COVID-19 [facts](#) update and the [Coronavirus webpage](#) from the World Health Organisation.

**Following official guidance:** For example, Archdeacon Wong Tak Meng shared how, in Singapore, the Church has assisted with ‘circuit breaking’, that is, slowing the spread of the virus by temporarily suspending activities for certain parts of society, so the health system can cope. For example, in Singapore all churches were asked to inform their elderly members not to attend church for 14 days and senior citizen activities have been suspended, while all efforts are made to keep in touch virtually.

**Meeting for worship safely:** Guidance on whether people can congregate, and in what numbers, differs from country to country and is changing rapidly. Where people are still allowed to gather, churches are implementing a range of hygiene measures and physical distancing. In places where church membership is high, more services are being introduced at different times of the week in order to reduce numbers per service and provide scope for more physical distance between worshippers. Provinces are issuing specific guidance about practices such as providing hand cleaning supplies, sharing the peace without physical contact, distributing only the bread at the Eucharist, and, in some cases, pre-screening before entering the church, etc.

**Maintaining worshipping life when we can’t meet in traditional ways:** In many places, mass gatherings are now banned, meaning church services cannot take place for the time being. Even where not mandated, Archdeacon Wong said, “temporary suspension of church activities might be advisable to isolate people and buy time to put in place corporate social responsibility measures such as hand sanitisation, modified liturgical practices, health screening, contact tracing and physical distancing so as to resume gatherings with a new baseline. Take time to develop alternate worship and pastoral care arrangements that will serve sustainably for 12-18 months.”

Across the Communion, people are responding creatively to suspending traditional meetings for worship, where possible using social media, recording and live streaming of services and sermons to maintain a pattern of 'collective' worship.

However, it was recognised that some church members, especially the elderly or those without digital access, may find it difficult to engage with this, either technologically or emotionally, so alternatives are also being sought. Ideas being tried include people sharing in a service individually at a set time with a common prayer sheet delivered, ringing the church bell to signify that people are praying at home, and gathering (where allowed) in homes in small numbers to share in a service, a Bible study or to watch a live stream or recording together.

**Addressing the emotional gap:** Bishop Michael Beasley, chair of the Anglican Health Network, shared learning from former epidemics that is relevant to our response to COVID-19. In particular, Bishop Michael said: "We found that very good, high quality and extensive health information was being offered to the community from bodies such as the World Health Organization, but it wasn't touching on the emotional side of how people were responding to the outbreak. There was a great deal of fear; there wasn't much happening to build trust. What churches identified was that they could be really helpful in building trust and hope within that situation and countering fear".

**Countering misinformation:** Bishop Michael also reflected on how a major feature of epidemics is the massive amount of misinformation, rumour and confusion that can circulate. This perhaps has a parallel with our situation now, looking at the ideas circulating on social media about COVID-19. The Church needs to ask itself how we can be authoritative, reliable and provide helpful and accurate sources of information.

Asked about the best way to deal with suspicion, judgment and blame, Bishop Michael advised that telling people they are wrong is not helpful. Instead, listen to people's fears and speak the truth with authority.



**Providing relevant resources:** To address the situation in previous epidemics a series of bible studies has been created, which looked at fear, hope, preventing transmission and caring for affected communities and individuals. This resource is being revised for use in the current outbreak of COVID-19 and will be shared through this site shortly.

**Preaching and teaching:** The importance of the church's message through preaching was emphasised by Paulo Ueti, the Anglican Alliance's facilitator for Latin America, where the infections are increasing, as are fear and misinformation. Paulo spoke of how fear is leading to violence and xenophobia, which needs to be addressed and countered in sermons and teaching. Preaching is a key opportunity to shape attitudes and values, addressing people's hearts and minds. In particular, it is a time: to address issues of fear, confusion, suspicion, hopelessness and blame; to build hope; and to encourage safe and appropriate care and support for the vulnerable, the sick and when someone has died. Canon Grace Kaiso, the Anglican Alliance's senior adviser, also spoke of the need for good teaching about COVID-19 in sermons, with careful thought given to how people are interpreting it.

**Providing pastoral care for people who are self-isolating:** Although people might need to practise physical distancing, it is still possible to maintain close social connection through texts, emails and phone calls. People can feel very isolated, especially when media coverage of the pandemic is so extensive, so checking in on people matters. In many countries, governments are advising self-isolation measures for the elderly, so regular social activities (day centres etc) may no longer be possible. However, as discussed, there are other ways to help those in self-isolation to be supported, feel connected and continue contributing to the common life, such as being a powerhouse of prayer.

It is also the case that families staying together in isolation may face more pressure and stress in relationships, including the possibility of domestic violence. Robert Dawes, Programmes Director at Mothers' Union, stressed the importance of being aware of

these pressures on families and the need to help them develop coping strategies, support systems and help, where appropriate, in rebuilding relationships.

When the Church offers pastoral and practical care, we need to protect those who offer and receive that care from infection along with usual safeguarding measures.

**Caring for the most vulnerable groups:** It is vital that we think about others' needs, not just our own, especially remembering the most vulnerable in society: such as elderly people, single parent families, the long-term sick, homeless people, migrants and refugees, those dependent on food banks, people living with mental health issues or disabilities. People with temporary and informal work will quickly fall into poverty as work places close and they lose income. Some vulnerable groups in society may already have a level of engagement and support from the church. It will be important to consider what activities can be continued, which need to be adapted and which must be postponed until the pandemic is over. There are examples of churches adapting their care activities to continue providing support, while keeping safe both those helping and those being helped. e.g. Where churches have before offered meals for the homeless, they now offer 'take away' meals that can be collected outside the church building. Food banks and home food deliveries for those self-isolating will be lifelines for many.

**Reaching out:** The Church has 'social capital'. In some places, the Church has a very significant presence throughout society; in others it might not have the same reach but is still an important and respected voice. We can use that social capital to reach out to the wider community, many of whom are experiencing fear and anxiety at the moment.

**Encouraging health workers:** Archdeacon Wong from Singapore shared the example of how his diocese has reached out to health workers, some of whom have experienced negative reactions from a fearful public. The Diocese countered this narrative by giving each member of its social and medical arm – about 2000 people – a small gift of appreciation, which included a heart shaped cookie. They then decided they shouldn't just be reaching out to Anglican health workers so have joined in a wider prayer network

which organises synchronised prayer for healthcare workers and patients at noon every day. They also held a Healthcare Prayer Service in the cathedral, which was live-streamed and watched by groups across the country. The homily addressed fear and loneliness, referring to John 16 (peace overcomes troubles) and Hebrews 12 (a cloud of witnesses). The Church is providing pastoral care to health workers, giving them the opportunity to be listened to and to express their grief and stress.

**Learning from wider approaches to disaster resilience:** Dr Janice Proud, the Anglican Alliance's Disaster Response and Resilience Manager, and Nagulan Nesiah, Senior Program Officer for Disaster Risk Reduction, and Katie Mears, Senior Director, US Disaster Program, at Episcopal Relief & Development, shared some key learning from their experience of good disaster response and resilience practice.

Katie Mears shared three key points which people need in times of crisis:

- **connection** to community
- **information** – accurate and contextual
- **agency** – the ability for individuals to make meaningful choices, even if within limited options.

This final point is very significant in ensuring that we do not reduce vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, to being seen passive 'objects' of care but rather encourage them to see what choices they have personal control over, and how they can also be a source of hope and encouragement to others.

Nagulan Nesiah described the resilience equation as a helpful way of thinking through a difficult situation and formulating a response plan based on local assets (resources, skills and experience).

**Capacities:** What are the people, strengths, resources, assets, networks, etc that can be drawn on?

**Hazards:** What is government information on the virus and information from the local government about local incidence, etc?

**Vulnerabilities:** Who is particularly vulnerable in your community? Who is already vulnerable and who will become vulnerable through loss of income, lack of safe space, etc.

$$\text{Resilience} = \frac{\text{Capacities}}{\text{Hazards} \times \text{Vulnerabilities}}$$

And in conclusion:

### **Reflecting on ourselves as one global human family**

There can be a tendency at times of pandemics for nations to close in and protect themselves, but we also need to reach out globally to others, to share learning and resources and encourage one another. We are one human family in one shared home. This time has shown how inter-related and inter-dependent we are. As a global Communion we belong to the Body of Christ, continuing to share in each's others hopes and suffering, and to support one another in prayer and action. The Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, the Most Revd Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon, has written to all provinces saying: "As we all as nations, churches, and individuals respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, I wish to express heartfelt prayers for all of you as you act and serve as ministry leaders, citizens, and children of God connected to one another."

The Anglican Alliance will continue to convene regional and global consultations to build our common learning of best practice in church responses to COVID-19. We will document this on our website and share links to resources. Above all, we commit to

sustaining community at all levels and to building hope – “for nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39)