

Covid-19: The Response Guide For Church Leaders

Contributed by Ivy Drafor Amenyah on Mar 26, 2020

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 12:32, 2 Kings 12:15

Denomination: Presbyterian/Reformed

Summary: In the current challenge, the church must know what to do. This guide provides strategies for managing our members, interactions, and finances in productive ways to increase our relevance.

PREAMBLE

The church has been challenged beyond its capacity in the past few days. The whole world has been affected by the coronavirus which first infected people in Wuhan in China at the end of 2019. There are direct and indirect impacts of this phenomenon. People have been infected, the infection is spreading across the world, and all of us are affected in one way or the other. Presidents have suspended all large gatherings including church services, borders are closed, and many countries are in a complete lockdown. These developments came with little preparation from churches to manage their members and activities, especially with the use of digital technology. It is no doubt that many pastors and church leaders have limited capacity to switch to the use of technology, though others are technology savvy and up to the task. This can be understood because many of them were born before computers (BBC).

The restrictions on meetings and church services is a major blow to the church, especially in Africa, as we were not quite prepared for the drastic changes. Travel is now very limited within and across countries. The church's ability to mobilize resources will go down over the next few weeks. An initial response would be to panic but we need to stay calm, strategise and respond promptly and adequately, and continue to serve the members of our churches. Several people are sad, afraid and traumatized. Others will become lonely in the days ahead as we all miss the vibe of meeting, singing, dancing and praying together, which is the usual practice.

While this is a challenge, it also offers tremendous opportunities for the church. We are all compelled to stop, reflect and re-strategise. It is a time to analyse our practices and consider what is really important. In serving the Lord, activity is not equal to effectiveness. The church seems to have been running for several years now and we are now obliged to stop, look and listen. And if we listen, we shall hear the Lord speak to us

clearly. First Chron. 12:32 says "of the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do". The Lord will give us understanding on what to do.

Healthcare systems are overstretched and crumbling. Many African countries may not have the facilities and capacity to contain the disease, though numbers of infected people keep rising. The facilities are just not available in many countries across Africa.

According to the WHO, coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between non-human animals and humans. Several known coronaviruses are circulating in animals that have not yet infected humans.

This guide will help church leaders respond to and manage the situation with Covid-19 effectively. Institutions and individuals can also benefit. Get all your scientific and technical information from the World Health Organisation, National Health Service offices, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

SYMPTOMS

The WHO has indicated that the common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, the infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.

"We're emphasizing fever plus a notable lower respiratory tract symptom -- cough or trouble breathing," said infectious disease expert Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of preventative medicine and infectious disease. You have fever when your temperature goes up especially in the late afternoon and early evening. Dr. Schaffner said the cough should be a dry cough that you feel in your chest. Shortness of breath can be a third and very serious manifestation of Covid-19, and it can occur on its own, without a cough.

THE CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

Decreased incomes. Decreased incomes due to restrictions on large meetings with immediate effect, which means there are no normal offerings. Churches can only encourage the faithful members to continue to pay their tithes and give towards the work of the church. Salaries and allowances still need to be paid, utilities will need to be paid and other financial obligations need to be met. The church still needs money.

Restrictions on Church Services and Meetings. We cannot meet physically for the next few weeks.

The dynamics of church membership will change within the next few weeks. There will be shifts in membership and people will move to churches that offer them better opportunities of worship and spiritual experience. However, the work can grow in your hands as you rise up in the power of God and allow Him to work through you and succeed.

TAKING CARE OF THE FINANCES

We must encourage people to continue to give to the church because the church still needs money to run. With decreased incomes, church leaders can explore more giving opportunities and make it easy for people to give. Things can break down completely if we fail to mobilise sufficient resources during this period, and it will take a longer time to recovery after Covid-19.

It is a testing time and a great temptation for many pastors and church leaders, and a call for high level integrity, stewardship and faithfulness. The natural temptation is to offer your personal mobile money number to be used for paying tithes and contributions to the church with the good intentions to pay them into the church's bank account later. You want to avoid any form of temptation to channel monies into your personal resource base. The church is the Lord's and the monies contributed are to be used to take care of the church's business. Second Kings 12:15 says "moreover they did not require an account from the men into whose hand they delivered the money to be paid to workmen, for they dealt faithfully". May this be our testimony!

Here are a few things you can do:

1. Share the Account Information. Share the church's bank account information with church members so they can pay their tithes and contributions directly into it.
2. Online Payment System. You can set up an online payment system. Contact service providers who can set up a system for you with a short code which will immediately direct the payments into the church's bank account. Major ministries have used these systems for years and we can learn from them. You can add credit card systems here.
3. Reduce spending. Cut down on any expenditure that can wait. Take care of only the basic necessities of the church to keep it going and reduce spending to the barest minimum. Some building projects and expenditure should be discontinued. Be aware that there will be a considerable reduction in the finances of the church.

4. Reach Out. Find ways to reach out to the needs of people in the church and in your community and take care of such needs financially. There will be families that will become financially challenged and will need some support. Give towards such needs promptly.

When you set up a mobile money payment, avoid giving the MoMo number of the pastor or that of one of the elders, or even the financial secretary. Take the pain of setting up an official mobile money system for the church. This can also be linked to the bank account.

STAYING CONNECTED

There are so many ways to stay connected with each other as a church family. You do not have to be alone. Everyone should be encouraged to link up with others. There are many ways of doing that. Let us look at a few.

1. Apps. Applications like Zoom, Line, Freeconferencecall, and so on are available for group meetings. These are free and you can use them to manage your church interactions. Download and install the app, then encourage others to also install the same. One person calls the meeting, and you can share the link so people can join in.
2. Phone calls. Call each other frequently. Encourage the members of your church to call one another. Get the leaders of the church to keep calling people. This will help sustain the fellowship and a sense of belonging that church members feel when they meet other believers physically.
3. Home Church Meetings. Encourage families to hold church services in their homes and have family prayer times. Church leaders should share information on how to do this with their church members, and the Lord will help them do it.
4. No Visits. It is a time of no visits, and we do not encourage visits at this time.
5. Reaching the Special Needs Group. Find ways of reaching out to those who cannot read, who cannot connect to the internet, Facebook, WhatsApp or other platforms to participate in the live broadcasts. And there are some who cannot afford a smartphone and so cannot be connected. Find innovative ways of connecting with them so no one is left out.
6. Websites. Develop and manage a good church website. You can start with Facebook page, upgrading from profiles. Make it user friendly and a place people will find a joy to visit, interact, seek prayer, ask questions, and find information.

DEVELOP A CHURCH SUPPORT SYSTEM

1. Have a call in station. Have specific numbers and assign them to selected church workers and leaders to use and respond to calls. These are numbers people can call in and find help. Run it like a helpline station, carefully selecting people who are knowledgeable in the Scriptures and who are prayerful for this task. Share these numbers online and let people become aware of them. Encourage members and non-members to call in for prayer and other forms of support.
2. Pastoral calls. Pastors should spend their time calling people using the church's directory. Call until everyone is covered. If your church is not large, every member should receive a call from the pastor. Church leaders and elders must help in this effort, especially if the church is large.
3. Provide updates, support and advice. Advise church members to adhere to the directives and to follow the basic precautions of frequent handwashing with soap under running water, social distancing, staying at home and working from home to avoid human to human contact, using approved hand sanitizers, reporting any symptoms and seeking medical help when needed. Provide information on where they can get tested and when to seek medical help.
4. Check on the children. Not all the children who attend our Sunday School or Children Service programs have family members who come to the church. Quite a few come on their own or join the church bus. Devise innovative ways to reach out to church and non-church children. Jesus said "let the little children come to Me". Remember the orphans at this time.
5. Coronavirus and Persons with Disabilities. Persons with disabilities are part of our society and will need more attention and care. Imagine those with sight disability at this time. They are not able to see people around them and observe social distancing, or observe other precautions effectively. What about those with physical disabilities, some who are in wheelchairs. They need our love and care as a church community.
6. Coronavirus and the Aged. The aged are very lonely at this time and need us to reach out to them. Many of them are on medication and others need help to live comfortably. Make calls to them on a weekly basis and find ways of meeting their needs.

PRECAUTIONS TO OBSERVE

Observe the following precautions to prevent the spread of the virus.

1. Regular hand washing. Wash your hands with soap under running water for a minute. Find a way of closing the tap without possibly contaminating your washed hand. You can do so with a tissue.
2. Cover your nose completely when you sneeze. Covering mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing.
3. Thoroughly cook all food, especially your meat and eggs. Any contaminated food can transmit the virus. Vegetables and fruits should also be washed well.
4. Hand sanitizer. Ensure you get good sanitizers which consist of at least 60% alcohol. Keep one with you all the time. Use hand sanitizers very frequently and after contact with anything that can contaminate your hands. Rub it on your hands and not just the palms. Then wash your hands as soon as you find water available with soap. Do well to avoid touching door handles and water taps with your bare hands.
5. Social distancing. Physically distance yourself from others and avoid contact with people as the virus is transmitted from person to person. It is good to avoid everyone as you do not know who may have been infected with the virus.
6. Particularly, avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.
7. Take a bath and wash your clothes. Take a bath immediately you get home from work or after staying long away from home. Wash the clothes you wore outside and with which you interacted with people. Hung them in the sun if you cannot wash them after daily use. Leave shoes and footwear at the door.
8. Beware of all surfaces, door handles, elevators, ATM machines, rails, and counters. Do not lean on counters at banking halls. If you use a washroom, use your elbow to open the door if possible and then use hand sanitizer immediately. You do not know who has touched the door handle.
9. Do not touch your face with your hands when they are not washed. This includes your eyes, nose and mouth.
10. If you go to work:
 - a. Disinfect your office environment on a continuous basis. Disinfect all surfaces that are touched. Elevators must be disinfected properly as well as door handles, sinks, taps, and toilet flush handles.

- b. Provide veronica buckets, soap, and tissue paper at the entrance to your premises and ensure that people wash their hands properly before they enter.
- c. Install automatic hand sanitizer dispensers all over your premises.

In addition to these, stay away from public places, prepare your own meals at home, and stay at home as much as possible. Negotiate at your workplace to work from home.

AVOID PRESUMPTIONS

1. Presumption #1. I will not be infected if I come into contact with an infected person. This is like saying you will not get sick when you eat stale bean meal or you will not get burned when you put your hand into fire. Stay away from the fire.
2. Presumption # 2. My family members will not be infected when they keep going in and out of the house and come into contact with an infected person. Encourage all family members to observe the precautions.
3. Presumption # 3. The staff at church will not be infected when they come into contact with an infected person. You do not have any idea where your staff members go and who they might have interacted with. They may even not know this themselves. Educate them well, keeping in mind that what you know will not keep them from interacting with people who may be infected.
4. Presumption # 4. The hot climate will kill all the virus and so it will not affect me.

Avoid the presumptions and stay safe.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

When you see most churches online, they are usually either sharing some advert or giving information about some upcoming program they are planning. The times have changed for the better! We are all now required to share the Word of God directly on social media platforms and on our websites. What a blessing that is.

Covid-19 is a call to the church to move out of their comfort zones and take the gospel to where it is needed. Jesus said, the gospel must be preached to all nations. The times of asking people who are already saved to be saved, and making that call within the four walls of our church buildings are over for us. The unchurched can be reached more effectively and the passive church member can participate in prayer meetings and Bible studies.

Invite people onto your platforms and into your conference calls for prayer meeting and other church activities. You will be surprised how many will show up. People you least expect will begin to participate. Open up to them and they several people will respond.

Nursing mothers and busy workers can make time to be part of activities that nourish them spiritually. Wow! The opportunities and rewards are great!

House fellowships will flourish if we reorganize and manage them well, especially after Covid-19. It is a win-win game. God is a game changer and our role is to align with Him in this matter.

LOOKING FORWARD

Create and Manage a Good Database: Create a practical database of all the members and have it in a format that makes it easy to access and use. This will facilitate interactions.

Have some virtual meetings. We would have learned a lot regarding virtual meetings as we wait to recover from the virus. Those lessons should not be dropped quickly. The world is moving towards digital technology and the church needs to align itself.

Plan life after Covid-19. It will take effort to recover from the effects of Covid-19 on the church.

May the Lord preserve and keep us safe!

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