



NORTHEASTERN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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To all pastors and congregations of NELCSA,

“Lord, save me!” - This desperate cry from Peter follows just a few seconds after he boldly stepped out of the boat, full of courage, eager to copy the authority of his Lord (Mt 14, 30)

I feel a bit like Peter at the moment: Surely, with my Lord at my side, I can “ride this Corona Wave”, surely I can move forward with confidence and trust!

But then I see the waves - country after country declaring state of emergency, churches in Europe suspending all services, and, above all, infections from the virus doubling every two to three days. “Lord, save me!” - this is the cry and the prayer that can then help me back into the boat. Because the Lord does exactly that. He does not say to Peter: You of little faith, suffer because you doubted. Rather, he caringly reaches out and lifts Peter into the boat. He does not teach him to walk on water with Jesus, but rather climbs with him into the boat.

Currently we are facing a storm of which no one can predict how long it is going to last, nor how it will end. No one knows - not even the experts.

We can, like Peter, courageously ask: Lord, let me walk over these waters, let me experience your power - and I am sure some will walk, and some will experience his power.

Many however will be like the drowning Peter - I am sinking! - or like the rest of the disciples, fearfully clinging onto the boat tossed about.

“Lord, save us!” - let us pray these words - be it with confidence, or in panic.

I believe that he will reach out, grab hold of us, and climb with us into this tossed-about time!

Yours in Christ,

Horst Müller, Bishop, on behalf of Church Council of NELCSA

Corona Virus State of Disaster - implications for us.

This is a summary, dated 16 March 2020. As things develop and more insight is gained in the Virus, things are most likely to change. For that reason each letter needs to be dated, showing on which developments this advice is based.

With the declaration of State of Disaster, and possible “upgrade” to state of emergency if the spread continues, our response falls into two categories:

Laws of the country, and our responsible behaviour within the scope of the laws.

1) Laws of the country

It is important to keep in mind that the laws are not aimed at churches, but an attempt to deal with the problem. They do, however, have a direct impact on the church, since a core function of church is fellowship and community.

It is important that we adhere to the laws of the country during this State of Disaster (or emergency)

The one that directly impacts on us is the ban on all meetings with more than 100 participants. It is not a discouragement, but a ban.

We need to ensure that we adhere to that, and find ways to function within these limits.

I will touch on these below.

2) Our behaviour within the scope of the law

This currently applies to the bulk of our ministries - we can, in most cases, continue as usual, or to quote Paul: (almost) everything is permitted - but is it good? (1 Corinthians 6, 12)

Based on this we need to inform ourselves as to what can be harmful, even when not against the law. What should be avoided? What should be recommended?

The following is an attempt to give guidance. Ultimately each congregation, and each individual has to decide what is advisable and what not, even if not forbidden.

Basar: Many conurbations during this time have Easter sales or similar, or in a few weeks time their annual basar. Under the current rules, if they then still apply, such a gathering would be prohibited. Congregations are encourage to either postpone to a much later, yet unspecified date (the extend of this ban is not yet known), or to cancel completely. Since it is a fundraiser for many, you can encourage donations, or the non-perishable goods can be offered for sale for certain hours over a few days.

Perishables that have already been prepared, could be sold by email - i.e. inform as many as possible of what is available and arrange for pickup, or find an outlet that can sell on your behalf.

Sunday services: This is becoming a major challenge over Easter, which normally are our packed services.

Alternatives: "Stack" services that are known to be large into smaller services. If you have a sunrise devotion, followed by a main service, change the format, so that people attend either the sunrise service or the second service.

Congregation that as a rule have larger numbers attending can opt to have services in succession, with a break in between. Congregants can be requested to "book a seat", in other words, indicate which service they wish to attend. Once 100 have "booked" then next available service has to be chosen.

Funerals: Since these are unplanned, the congregation should be informed that funerals cannot have more than 100 mourners attending, and that physical contact during the service should not happen. When a funeral then happens, this needs to be explained again, but is not as shocking, since it was communicated beforehand already.

Weddings: These are planned, and if larger, need to be re-visited. This is tough, unfortunate but unavoidable.

Lenten Devotion: Most of these are attended by fairly small numbers and therefore are not in danger of contravening the ban.

For all services: Congregations are encouraged to acquire and provide **hand sanitisers**, (eg like the ones at supermarkets to wipe trolley handles). Ensure that the bathrooms are stocked with soap and, ideally, paper towels or blowers.

Congregants are encouraged to bring their own Hymn books rather than using the common ones. Where possible, use a projector rather than handouts or hymn books during this time.

In stead of printing announcements, make them available online.

People that are not well, sniffing or coughing are requested to stay at home. If it is a known, general condition that someone always suffers from, at least keep a distance.

Holy communion:

Bread: Who ever prepares the bread or wavers, as well as those distributing, should ensure that they have properly washed their hands before handling them. One can consider to have a sanitiser at the altar, where those distributing cleanse their hands at the beginning of communion, or even wearing surgical gloves. **It is not wise to let the participants take the bread from the plate, since then many hands touch the bread.**

Do not place the waver in the mouth of the recipients, but into their hands.

Chalice: If at all possible, rather use individual cups, since it seems that alcohol in the wine is not enough to "kill" the virus, nor the cleaning with alcohol.

Individual cups need to be cleaned with hot, soapy water before the next use.

Intinction: Dipping bread or waver into wine is less hygienic than drinking from the chalice, and is not an option during this time.

Joining of hands after communion: This is discouraged.

Greeting before and after service:

Due to physical contact being the main channel of spread, instead of shaking hands (Greeters, pastor) use a gesture similar to the oriental greeting: Place your hands together, prayer like, in front of you, and greet each other with a slight bow, while making eye contact.

The suggestion to “elbow greet” is unfortunate, since we are encouraged to sneeze and cough into our elbows. Do not go that route.

Serving Refreshments: Normal hygiene must apply. Cups need to be thoroughly washed with hot, soapy water. Those who prepare and serve tea also need to ensure that their hands had been thoroughly washed before.

Alternatives to services: Congregations that have the facility to record their services, either Video or Sound only, are encouraged to let us know. These recordings could be made available online as downloads for those who cannot attend services.

House services: Families, especially those who have to apply self-quarantine, are encouraged to hold house services in their families. This good tradition had been lost to most, but can be a wonderful experience during these times, where families can the worship, pray and share God’s Word together.

Bible Studies and cell groups: They play an important role in the life of congregations. In high-risk areas consider sharing online.

Where meetings do continue, observe the “no physical contact” rule.

These cell groups will play an important role of mutual support, prayer and encouragement in this time.

General meetings: Fortunately most congregations have concluded their AGM’s
Cancel all non-essential meetings.

Council meetings: Congregational councils need to ensure that their communication and leadership does not break down. You can still meet, but ensure that physical contact is avoided. If you are not well, do not participate physically. Rather join in by Skype.

Old Age homes: Many congregations have old age homes linked to them. Old people are most at risk from this virus, and therefore should receive the most care and prevention.

Access should be limited to necessary staff, and immediate family or closest friends. These outsiders should not visit if they are not well, have been travelling overseas or have been in contact with such recent travellers. This needs to be communicated to our seniors, so that they do not feel abandoned, but cared for. In all matters the Matron/Health care person in charge needs to be well informed, and their requests and instructions taken seriously.

When not well, stay at home and self-isolate. This is important, Not only are you protecting others, but those not well are much more in danger when contracting this virus.

Conclusion:

Easier said than done: Do not panic. Act responsibly, inform yourself, rather be safe than sorry. We need to protect without shutting down. Within the boundaries of caution and responsibility we need to continue as normal as possible, and find new ways to be normal!

Finally: Should you in your congregation have come up with better or alternative solutions, please let us know your solutions, so that we can share them with others.