

COVID-19 and the Church

We continue to hear news reports of the ongoing spread of coronavirus COVID-19. As this article is being prepared, there are now more than 350 cases in Australia, the government has banned gatherings of more than 500 people, and local shows and sporting events have been cancelled. Numerous other cancellations have ensued. All people entering Australia will have to self-isolate for 14 days, while cruise ships will also be barred from docking in Australia for the next 30 days. Even tighter restrictions will more than likely be announced in the coming days or weeks.

As the government continues to take action, what would we do as a church, if any form of gathering was to be banned for a time? We must recognise that our government is given to us by God to rule over us, protecting us and keeping order and so on (Romans 13). As citizens, we are obligated to obey those in authority. However, in such an unprecedented public calamity, human confidence is radically shaken. Fears naturally arise, and panic ensues. People need a steadying influence, a voice of calm reason to bring them perspective and hope, and this is what the church can offer through the continued preaching of the Gospel and administering of the Sacrament.

However, what will we do, if we are asked to suspend our divine services? First, if the government was to enforce a law banning any form of gathering, including church gatherings, then we must obey them. To not do so, would be acting in disobedience and a breaking of the 4th commandment. If we were asked to suspend our gathering for worship on a Sunday, this would not be detrimental to our faith. We can all read our Bible at home, and most, if not, all of us, has access to the internet where resources for private worship at home on any given Sunday are freely available from our website.

At this stage though, there are no intentions by the government to “close” churches, but can we do anything in the meantime to prepare for such a time if it were to occur? Let me suggest that we adopt a three-legged stool approach. We should remain medically informed, practically effective, and spiritually focused.

Medically informed

As a church, we must make sure we have accurate information. Don't rely on social media - it's a breeding ground for rumour and panic. We must check with local authorities to make sure we have the latest and best information available regarding COVID-19, its transmission, and treatment. If you are in one of those high-risk groups (the elderly, or those with some underlying health issue), listen to the advice of your own physician.

Regularly check with the Australian Government's website www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert also www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19 to find the latest information.

By now we know the fundamental facts. Prevention includes limiting social contact, respiratory etiquette, thorough and frequent handwashing, and daily cleaning of frequently touched surfaces.

Practically effective

We need to make sure we have thought through procedures we may want to implement now and contingencies should the need arise. According to our two-kingdom theology, we can ask, “*What is our congregation's responsibility with respect to complying with the government agencies trying to prevent the spread of this disease?*” If any of our congregations were to find themselves in a situation where many members were sick, would it be advisable to self-quarantine by cancelling services? How could the pastor continue to teach and shepherd the members and lead them if they're not able to be in church? As mentioned above, the AELC website can be a great tool for this.

We could strategize ways for our church to mobilise to provide food and other needed services to members if they become quarantined or to people in the community who are isolated because of the contagion. We can be creative and positive about this opportunity to extend compassion and care in Jesus' name.

For those in the congregation (including the pastor) who visit members: Wash your hands carefully and thoroughly with soap and water or medicated handwash before and after visiting with people. Keep a safe distance when you talk, and you may have to do without the ritual handshake – even at church.

Spiritually focused

Administration of the Lord's Supper: This deserves special attention. This is a time to encourage more frequent communions, not less. Satan delights in using fear to tempt us toward despair and to keep us from receiving Christ's body and blood. As we expect things to perhaps get worse before they get better, we must think through the proper administration of this sacred meal during this time, and so, could consider the following suggestions:

- The pastor and his assistants need to carefully and thoroughly wash their hands just before the Service of the Sacrament - and between tables if there is accidental hand contact with each other.
- Make sure that we are especially careful in the way the sacred elements are handled. The Saviour's body and blood always deserve meticulous care, but especially now.

- There really is no need for individual cups to be used if proper hygiene is carried out. Nonetheless, to help people be confident, especially the elderly and other high-risk groups, for a period of time, the use of individual cups may be considered. If there is the continued use of the common cup, although the cup is wiped with a cloth after every individual use, perhaps the use of alcohol-based wipes could be considered. However, there has never been a case where the common cup has spread or transmitted disease. We must be confident that the cup is carrying the Lord's blood, and He would not allow it to become a vessel to carry disease.

Despite the uncertainties and fears abroad in our land, we can be sure that we are Christ's and He is ours, and that through the preached and written Word He will strengthen and supply us with all our needs.

As Luther wrote, plague times are God's chastisement for our sins. We daily sin much and deserve nothing but His wrath and punishment. However, God, who is rich in mercy, has sent His only Son to bear all our iniquity in His own body and give us His perfect righteousness.

Through this and other public calamities, God is testing both our faith and our love. He wants us to learn how we should act in faith toward Him and how we should care for our neighbour in love.

Practice the deliberate care of your own soul. Set aside time for focused meditation in a private place where you can read Scripture and pray out loud so you can be strengthened by God's Word and Spirit.

The great news is that God is at work in all His people both to will and to do that which is pleasing to Him. Therefore, you may be sure that He will supply all we need for this current challenge. He's calling all of us to get out of ourselves and to live in Him by faith and to live in our neighbour by love. His promise is that He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).