



THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone

www.aelc.org.au

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

“This hasn’t happened before.” This is what a lot are thinking about the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus and the extreme measures the government is taking to halt its spread. It’s true, in our lifetime we haven’t seen these kinds of measures taken before, and it is quite possible that further restrictions could be coming.

While anxiety and fear abound, this is a great time for us, as children of God, to strongly show that *“God has not given us a timid spirit but a spirit of power, love and moderation”* (2 Timothy 1:7). *“Be strong and courageous ... The Lord will be with you”* (Joshua 1).

Therefore, the Christian response to plagues begins with some of Jesus’ most famous teachings: *“do to others everything that you want people to do to you”* (Matthew 7:12); *“Love your neighbour as yourself”* (Matthew 22:39); *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13). Put plainly, the Christian ethic in a time of plague considers that our own life must always be regarded as less important than that of our neighbour.

During plague periods in the Roman Empire, Christians made a name for themselves. Historians have suggested that the terrible Antonine Plague of the 2nd century, which may have killed off a quarter of the Roman Empire, led to the spread of Christianity, as Christians cared for the sick and offered a spiritual model whereby plagues were not the work of angry and capricious deities but the product of a broken Creation in revolt against a loving God.

But the more famous epidemic is the Plague of Cyprian, named for a bishop who gave a colourful account of this disease in his sermons. Probably a disease related to Ebola, the Plague of Cyprian helped set off the Crisis of the Third Century in the Roman world. But it did something else, too: It triggered the explosive growth of Christianity. Cyprian’s sermons told Christians not to grieve for plague victims (who live in heaven), but to redouble efforts to care for the living. His fellow bishop Dionysius described how Christians, *“Heedless of danger... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.”*

Neither was it just Christians who noted this reaction of Christians to the plague. A century later, the actively pagan Emperor Julian would complain bitterly of how *“the Galileans”* would care for even non-Christian sick people, while the church historian Pontianus recounts how Christians ensured that *“good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.”*

This habit of sacrificial care has reappeared throughout history. In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Martin Luther refused calls to flee the city and protect himself. Rather, he stayed and ministered to the sick. Luther produced a tract, *“Whether Christians Should Flee the Plague,”* where he provided a clear articulation of the Christian epidemic response: We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die.

To modern people acquainted with the germ theory of disease, this can all sound a bit foolish. Caring for the sick sounds nice, but it’s as likely to infect others as to save lives. In an intensely professionalised medical environment, should common people really assume a burden of care?

Here, a second element of the Christian approach appears: strict rules against suicide and self-harm. Our bodies are gifts from God and must be protected. Or, as Luther says in his essay on the topic, we must not *“tempt God.”* In his Catechism, Luther elaborates on the Fifth Commandment (*“You shall not kill”*) by saying that this actually means we must never even endanger others through our negligence or recklessness. Luther’s essay encourages believers to obey quarantine orders, fumigate their houses, and take precautions to avoid spreading the sickness.

The Christian motive for hygiene and sanitation does not arise in self-preservation but in an ethic of service to our neighbour. We wish to care for the afflicted, which first and foremost means not infecting the healthy. Early Christians created the first hospitals in Europe as hygienic places to provide care during times of plague, on the understanding that negligence that spread disease further was, in fact, murder.

The government has asked that for now, church groups no longer meet for worship. In obedience to this ruling, our church doors will be closed for worship. In doing so, we make the following recommendations:

1. First and foremost, as mentioned above, we must obey the government (Romans 13, Titus 3:1). *“Accordingly, Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29)”* [The Augsburg Confession Article XVI]. The current situation, where the government has made decisions in an attempt to slow down the spread of the coronavirus, including the request for churches to temporarily close their places of worship, is not a case of do we obey God rather than man, because we are not being persecuted or told to permanently close our church doors and burn our Bibles. God works through means. That is, He provides for our care by sending sunshine and rain, feeding us, giving us parents and others in authority, and of course, through His Word and sacrament. The Australian government, as having authority over us, has a duty of care to protect its citizens, and God, working through them, takes care of us. So any law made to limit contact between people, to close our borders, to practice strict hygiene etc., in order to spread disease, must be obeyed. Therefore, until further notice, ALL SERVICES INCLUDING SUNDAY SCHOOL AND OTHER ACTIVITIES (GUILD, CONFIRMATION, MEN’S FELLOWSHIP) HAVE BEEN CANCELLED.
2. However, in doing so, we need to be cautious. Satan will do all he can to disrupt and to weaken our faith. He sees the current ruling of the government, asking churches to stop meeting together, and so will try to make this a permanent thing. If our doors are to remain closed for some time, the danger arises for people to become so lax that when the doors do open again, they will stay away. We ask that you resist this by fervent and continual prayer for our church and its members, and to take up your Bible and read it frequently (especially important if in a family environment). Fathers, lead your family in worship! Also, try to keep in regular touch with each other via phone calls, skype, text, social group platforms, etc. THIS IS MOST IMPORTANT.
3. We must also remember the elderly among us, and those others who are in the high-risk category. We must be careful that we do not unknowingly expose them to any infection, while also practicing neighbourly love toward each other. Therefore, if there are any members (especially the elderly and frail) who will be confined to home for some time, we need to see that they are taken care of (do they have enough groceries and other supplies? Do they need to pick up medication from the doctor? etc).
4. Pastor will continue to make worship material available at www.aelc.org.au. The latest material is usually uploaded by mid-week. He will also provide a short form of service to be used for family worship, and is also working on getting recorded services uploaded to the website for members to watch in the privacy of their own homes. Make sure pastor has your current email address if you would like material emailed to you, and if any do not have access to the internet, please call pastor so he can organise delivery of printed copies to you. Other materials like Bible Studies, Parish news etc., will also be made available, as well as latest updates on the ongoing situation. Sunday School lessons will also be delivered for families with children.
5. What about the Lord’s Supper? Luther’s Catechism says *“We must never think of the Sacrament as something harmful from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy that grants salvation and comfort. It will cure you and give you life both in soul and body. For where the soul has recovered, the body also is relieved”* (Large Catechism V 68). Perhaps more than ever, during this time of crisis, we need to continue to regularly receive the Lord’s Supper. How shall we do this?

As we cannot congregate together, any who desire the sacrament during this time are invited to contact pastor who will make available the church office as a meeting place, that is, unless further restrictions come

into force halting any meeting altogether. In line with government recommendations, hand wash will be made available, and it is recommended everyone wash their hands when entering and leaving. PLEASE STAY AWAY IF YOU ARE SICK. If you would prefer pastor to visit you in your own home, please contact him to arrange. Pastor has been advised not to visit any nursing homes, unless there is an extreme emergency, but if any members do desire a visit, please let pastor know and he will see what he can do.

6. During this time of lockdown, unfortunately the bills keep coming! Please continue to support your congregation financially. Contact your congregation treasurer for bank details and utilise direct debit if possible.

God our Father has promised to hear every prayer made through Christ in faith, no matter where we are at. "We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, **but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.**" We trust the Almighty Father to deliver us from this trying time for the sake of Jesus' suffering and victorious rising. May the Lord cause us in this time of humbling to focus on the one thing needful in this life - faith in Christ's strong promises, and please, look out for each other!

The one who lives under the shelter of the Most High will stay for the night in the shadow of the Almighty.

I shall say to the LORD, "My Refuge and my Fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

For He Himself will rescue you from the fowler's snare and from the destructive plague.

He will cover you with His feathers, and you will take refuge under His wings. His truth will be your Shield and Buckler. You will not be afraid of the terror of the night or of the arrow that flies by day or of the plague that stalks in darkness or of the pestilence that lays waste at midday.

A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

You will only look with your eyes and see the retribution on wicked people.

For You, O LORD, are my Refuge. You have made the Most High your Dwelling-place.

No harm will happen to you. No plague will come near your tent.

For He will command His angels about you, to protect you in all your ways.

They will lift you up on their hands that you may not strike your foot against a stone.

You will tread on the lion and the cobra. You will trample on the young lion and the snake.

"Because he is devoted to Me, I shall rescue him. I shall protect him, because he knows My name.

"When he calls to Me, I shall answer him. I shall be with him in trouble. I shall rescue him and honour him.

"I shall satisfy him with a long life and show him My salvation."

Psalm 91

Every blessing in Christ,

From the Elders, and Chairmen of the various congregations.