



# THE DIOCESE OF SINGAPORE

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## PASTORAL LETTER TO THE ANGLICAN FLOCK IN THE DIOCESE OF SINGAPORE

Dear **People of the Cross**,

An uncharted stretch of our Diocesan journey has begun. The COVID-19 virus has heightened the level of human anxiety worldwide and shown the nations our human limitation (Ps 9:20). I am persuaded that God will harness this time of adversity to serve His good and saving purposes. We need the help of His Holy Spirit to keep in step with His purposes and to glorify the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have three main points to convey to you through this letter:

- 1) Our Public Witness as Christians
- 2) Our Pursuit of Christian Unity
- 3) Our Priority of Beseeching God in Prayer

### **1. Our Public Witness as Christians**

#### **1.1 Do not be driven by Fear or Selfishness**

We rely on the Lord to be our Protector (Ps 91) and our Provider (Phil 4:19). We can be assured of His all-sufficiency when we are sure of our covenantal relationship with Him through Christ Jesus. The way to overcome COVID-19 fear is to strengthen your COVENANTAL relationship with the Lord. [Click here for [Sermon on 15 Mar 2020 at Cathedral 9 a.m.](#) ]

#### **1.2 Let our faith make us a people of poise and praise**

The LORD is on the throne! His power and His goodness will overcome the present evil, as we cry out to Him in prayer. Christians may be afflicted but we are never defeated. Neither tribulation nor distress...no, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:31-39). The Lord's unswerving commitment to us is what holds us fast even

though we sometimes wobble in our faith. Let us therefore know the Scriptures more fully and seek the Holy Spirit's power to be a people of poise and praise in this time of shaking.

### **1.3 Follow our Advisories to demonstrate our social responsibility**

- a) *Practising safeguards:* The Diocese has all along taken the necessary safeguards to enable our churches to continue “meeting together” (Heb 10:24-25) responsibly despite the COVID-19 threat. We have sought to calibrate our response dynamically to the evolving situation by keeping our precautions in tandem with government policies and guidelines. We are grateful for the Government's lead on this. I also commend our churches for applying the safeguards diligently and our members for self-regulating. This has enabled our parish churches to remain open for worship services thus far. Thanks be to God!
  
- b) *An occurrence:* On Sunday (15 March) a member who worshipped at the Cathedral 9 a.m. service was confirmed two days later to be COVID-infected. He had just returned from a then non-listed overseas country, cleared our Health and Travel pre-service screening and joined a sparsely filled sanctuary. The sanctuary can actually hold 800 people but the Cathedral team on duty worked hard to reasonably achieve the 250-persons marker set by the government. The slight overflow was channelled to the outdoor Pavilion. The said member was asymptomatic that morning. We must pray for his full recovery and that no one else was infected. The Cathedral leadership decided to close the Cathedral grounds immediately from 18<sup>th</sup> March (as soon as it learnt of the case) till 3<sup>rd</sup> April to facilitate comprehensive cleaning and disinfection of the premises.
  
- c) *Making decisions “under God”:* The question that engages the senior Diocesan leaders and myself constantly during this time is this: How are we, as a Church, to show our social responsibility under God? The phrase, “under God”, is paramount to a priest's calling. A bishop or a priest is particularly called to serve the body of Christ by embodying and upholding the centrality of God at all times. This, in God's grace, has become fundamental to the way I have sought to lead our Diocese as God's appointed shepherd.
  
- d) *Decision to temporarily suspend our services:* As the senior leaders and I noted the significant escalation of the COVID-19 situation over the past few days, I brought the above question afresh to the Lord. As you would probably know by now, I found the Lord's peace in the late morning of 19<sup>th</sup> March to temporarily suspend “all our worship services and gatherings in our parish churches” in Singapore with immediate effect till 3<sup>rd</sup> April. The reason for doing so is to contribute our small part towards the concerted national effort to ‘flatten the coronavirus curve’.

- e) *In a position to contribute:* Because of the nature of the congregational life in our parishes and the structure of small groups that we have put in place over the years, we are in a position, before the Holy Week, to suspend our worship services for two weeks. This is in line with all the efforts being taken nationally in Singapore to mitigate the grim situation. I believe our action at this time would honour God and strengthen our witness of Christ's love to the nation.
- f) *Pastoral provisions during this time:* An updated Advisory (21 March 2020) to the clergy, deaconesses and parish leaders has been sent by the Diocesan COVID-19 Task Force to guide the churches on implementing the 2-week suspension of worship services and gatherings, as well as to indicate the steps we need to take to comply with the stricter 'safe distancing' measures the Government has called for. The Advisory includes the pastoral provisions that both the Diocesan team and your parish leaders are putting in place during these two weeks to ensure that members will continue to be cared for and strengthened through Word, sacrament and mutual encouragement.
- g) *Fresh opportunities emerge:* With the pastoral provisions in place, our life as God's people should not be unduly affected during this short time. Rather, the two weeks open up a 'window' for leaders to look at the current pattern and practice of our worship services, bearing in mind the need to incorporate the just released (20 Mar 2020) 'safe distancing' measures for some time to come. It also opens up an opportunity for clergy, leaders and members alike to adjust their pace of life, to grow in deeper personal worship of God and to start the practice of 'family devotions' in Christian households.
- h) *Keeping to biblical spirituality:* We must be careful not to allow the currently needed adaptations, of online services and the 'licence' to not attend a worship service even if one is very mildly unwell, to dissipate the spiritual discipline of worshipping together weekly as God's people. There is something intrinsic about *physically* coming together both in Heb 10:24-25 ('not neglecting to meet together...but all the more as you see the Day drawing near') and in Jesus' words in Mt 18:19-20 ('For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.'). After the two-week suspension, we will continue to grapple 'under God' about how He wants us to combine physical assembling of His people around Word and Sacrament with being a light of God to promote the welfare of the city (Jer 29:7; Is 49:1-6; Mt 5:14-16; 1 Pet 2:12).

## **1.4 Shine Christ's Light by our good works**

- a) I am so encouraged to learn of Christians, on their own or together with grassroots organisations, reaching out to meet the needs of those affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Many are affected, whether directly or indirectly. Some of our Anglican members are spearheading an effort to bring stranded Malaysian workers into sheltered accommodation. They were out combing the streets at night to locate and help these people as an expression of 'loving your neighbour as yourself'. In another instance, members of our Church joined grassroots leaders to personally distribute packs each containing sanitizers, soaps and towels to about 1,000 of our poorest elderly staying in HDB rental flats. This is the Church spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ (2 Cor 2:14) against a setting of gloom and the smell of death.
- b) The COVID-19 crisis can free us from our ingrained self-centredness and from worldly standards of success that control us by causing us to discover that true freedom and fulfilment come from giving and not getting. That is the way of Jesus Christ. A fitting lifestyle for all of us to grow in – not least during this period of Lent.

## **2. Our Pursuit of Christian Unity**

### **2.1 Unity is crucial to Christian witness**

A sustained period of high stress can lead to relationships imploding. This is as true of families as it is true of a parish leadership team and even apex Christian leaders as well. The COVID-19 crisis situation tests us on many fronts. Unity is crucial to Christian witness – which is why the devil is always looking for gaps to exacerbate tension and destroy the oneness which is a gift from God. We must guard and deepen the unity we have in Christ (Ps 133; John 17:20-23).

### **2.2 Forgiving graciously and speaking in love**

Different parishes may respond differently in the innovations, adaptations and strategies they employ in responding to the COVID-19 situation. Tensions could easily arise even within the parish because of different opinions and differences in temperament in handling a crisis. We need the Spirit's power to forgive graciously and to always speak truthfully in love. Anglicans affirm this at every Holy Communion service: "We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit, we were all baptised into one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life." [From Eph 4:1-6]. Beloved people of God, let us put these words into practice on every occasion.

### **2.3 Guarding unity at the national level**

Inevitably, there are comparisons across denominations about the response each group is making. Comparison can lead to rivalry and division. But the people of God in a land must stand as ONE – for Jesus’ sake. Also, we need to remember that in addition to the harvest of many souls, the other fruit of the Celebration of Hope national rallies in 2019 was the enhanced unity among Christian leaders in our land. There are two thoughts I would like to offer on how all of us can guard the unity among churches at this time.

- a) The COVID-19 outbreak is a long journey. Do not be hasty in judging a decision at any particular point in time. What was considered a poor decision at one point in time can turn out to be the right one at another point in time – and yet, the story may not end there either. So, let us be humble and let us be gracious. Let God alone be exalted! He will work all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom 8:28).
  
- b) Pray that the national church leaders will keep each other well-informed of the decisions they are making, while at the same time giving each other the space to make the decision for their own assigned field. We must trust each other to make the best decision according to one’s church context, one’s conscience and one’s judgment call. National pastors must stay as one band of godly shepherds to overcome the dark forces that threaten the well-being of our Church and country (see Micah 5:5-6). Pray that pastors will have the grace to subordinate unavoidable differences in order to build the common ground and prepare for revival. Pray that voices in the public square do not drive a wedge between national Church leaders. As God’s people, we know that God will honour every faithful servant of His; and that He is honoured by our humility and unity.

## **3. Our Priority of Beseeching God in Prayer**

### **3.1 Crying out to God**

The word ‘beseech’ (see Mt 9:36-38) means earnestly plead like a beggar, out of desperation and helplessness. As Christians who enjoy a considerable level of sufficiency in Singapore, ‘beseeching God’ is not the phrase most of us would use to describe our prayer life. But God is changing our prayer life through COVID-19. We, and the world, are only just learning how mysterious the coronavirus is, what incredible capacity it has to multiply itself once it finds a host, and how potent it can be. It may not be an exaggeration to say that COVID-19 is bringing the world to its knees. It must bring Christians to our knees in prayer.

### **3.2 Total dependence on God's mercy**

A prophecy reportedly given in 2015 says that: *“This (coming) evil cannot be controlled by the wisdom of men...it is only through the tears of the one who bears My name and wishes not the death of the dying, and puts on the burden and stands in the hedge and prays – which alone is the remedy and the weapon to contain it.”* (cited at Mohan C. Lazarus-cum-SAIB Prayer Gathering, Cathedral 2017). Consider this prophecy, my brothers and sisters, and if it rings true in your heart then receive the Spirit's stirring to start crying out to God in beseeching prayer. Do so until He stops the scourge and in His mercy brings the fullness of life back to our streets again.

### **3.3 Repentance is foundational**

I believe the Spirit is calling the Church to examine her lack of covenantal faithfulness to God. We need to repent, amend our ways, seek His forgiveness and pray for the healing of the land. Judgment begins with the household of God (1 Pet 4:17). It is time to re-visit 2 Chron 7:11-16 with a fresh listening to God and a willingness to be broken by the true state of our lives and of our Church.

### **3.4 Form intercession clusters**

Although there are now strict requirements on 'safe distancing', I believe the Lord will enable His people in Singapore to observe these measures and form prayer clusters all over the nation: in neighbourhoods, schools and offices. The Lord is gathering persons who will desperately seek the face of God, stand in the gap to intercede for the land and who will “give the Lord no rest” till He brings forth salvation to the nations through His restored people (Ps 24:1-10; Is 62:7; Rev 8:1-5). In my mind's eye, I see these prayer clusters as comprising persons of all ages, including children, and from all walks of life. One such prayer cluster that has tremendously blessed my wife and myself is the daily 6.30 a.m. prayer cluster at Kum Yan Methodist Church in the city district which is open to all Christians. With thanksgiving to God, our own Cathedral is another locus for prayer clusters, with the regular provision of corporate noontime prayer.

### **3.5 The fire of God's steadfast love**

When you receive this Pastoral Letter, you will also hear through your pastors the call from our Archbishop (Archbishop Melter Tais of Sabah) for the whole Province of SEAsia (the 7 nations in our Diocese plus Malaysia and Brunei) to pray together at a synchronised time from 12 noon to 12.15 p.m. daily, starting this Sunday 22 Mar 2020. Together, we are to cry out for God's mercy and might to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. This chimes in very well with our already launched national synchronised prayer at noon every day which rallies

Christians in Singapore to join together to specifically pray for our nation. There can be no doubt then that God is calling us to PRAY BESEECHINGLY and to do so in private prayer, synchronised prayer, prayer bands and prayer clusters. There is a devouring fire raging in the world because of COVID-19. It will be **surpassed** by the FIRE of GOD's STEADFAST LOVE as His people pray beseechingly.

### Conclusion

The tempo of events shaking the world is increasing. The Word of God prepares us for an escalation in the battle between light and darkness, life and death, good and evil before the great Day of God's final judgment and salvation. That day is the Day of Jesus Christ's glorious return, when darkness, sin and death will flee away and "God will wipe away every tear from our eyes" (Rev 7:17).

Beloved people of God, our times are in the Lord's hands. I believe there will be a mighty harvest through this time of hardship. God's ways are not our ways. But we know our God. He is unstoppable in His goodness and limitless in His power. And we have the HOPE of Christ to share with others in the world TODAY.

**God will lead us on a path** that involves both our brokenness before Him expressed in repentance and prayer as well as a refining and empowering by the Spirit. This path will lead our Diocese and all His Church to fulfil His bright purpose for His redeemed and re-created people:

*"Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
And thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and His glory will be seen upon you."*

*Is 60:1-2*

Let us stay on the path the LORD is calling us to and then the brightness of His glory will shine through His Church and bring a new dawn to our respective nations.

Yours in the love of Christ,



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