



Moravian Church in South Africa
Icawa Yama Moravi Emzantsi Afrika
Moraviese Kerk in Suid-Afrika



Fellow Moravians and Ecumenical Partners!

Greetings with today's daily watchword from ***Ps.145:17 "The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made"***.

This Statement on the Coronavirus Outbreak, commonly known as COVID-19, is the third in just over a week. If anything, this points to the fact that, as leadership, we are keeping our hands on the pulse, so to speak, in terms of the developments around the global pandemic which are unfolding fast and furious. Simply put, the outbreak, especially in our country, is definitely spiraling out of control, if one considers that there are 554 South Africans who have tested positive for the deadly virus. We all know that this number is going to rise, as this figure is only for those who were subjected to testing. There are many more who are infected but have not been tested.

This statement is in response to the new preventative measures announced on television by President Ramaphosa on 23 March 2020. In essence, the State President has directed that there will be a national lockdown effective, Thursday, 26 March 2020 at midnight until midnight on 16 April 2020. As Church, whenever Governments issue decrees of whatever kind, we are always called upon to assess those both theologically and critically. To this end, below is our brief theological assessment of the Presidential decree of a national lockdown.

The Introductory pages of the Constitution of the Moravian Church in South Africa (MCSA) as a Province of the worldwide Moravian Unity, better known as the Church Order under the heading: **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE** stipulate clearly that "*The MCSA recognizes the authority and laws of the state when and where they relate to the church's involvement with the law and civil rights on condition that such participation is not contrary to God's Word*". Against this backdrop, our Church Order further stipulates that "*Jesus Christ is the one Lord and Head of His Body, the Church. Because of this, the Church owes no allegiance to any authority whatsoever which opposes His Dominion*".

It is our view that our Government's decision of last night (23 March 2020) that there would be a national lockdown effective from 26 March 2020 at midnight is '*not contrary to God's Word*' as it is aimed at achieving a noble principle of preserving human lives that according to Scriptures are both sacred. As the MCSA, we therefore support the decision. The South African Council of Churches to which we, as the MCSA, are affiliated, last week on 19 March 2020 had already called for a national lockdown and had made this known to the State President, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, during his meeting with religious leaders. Furthermore, the call for a national lockdown and related prevention measures such as quarantines; self-isolation, etc do resonate with Biblical Scriptures such as Isaiah 26:20 "*Go home, my people, and lock your doors! Hide yourselves for a little while....*" amongst others.

The implication for us as Church is that no public worship and communion services, Passiontide readings during the Holy Week, and Resurrection services will take place during the nationwide lockdown period. Thus, dear colleagues, whilst we value togetherness in worship and Christian fellowship during this time of crisis, and out of love for each other and the neighbor, we will not gather in great numbers. To prevent a human catastrophe of enormous proportions we are to consider that what we normally do, in communion, is what we should not do now if we want to protect life. Therefore, gatherings of more than 100 people are prohibited, mass celebrations will be cancelled.

In this regard the WCC in its Pastoral Letter_20_3 says the following: 'Let us see this as a time to touch each other's hearts, by what we say, what we share, what we do – and what we do not do – to protect the life God loves so much. In that love, we must adapt our modes of worship and fellowship to the needs of this time of the pandemic, in order to avoid the risk of becoming sources of transmission rather than means of grace.

This is the time to be creative — from changing liturgical practices to going digital, to staying in touch with those affected or at risk, through phone calls and other remote means, and otherwise adjusting to this new reality'.

Easter and all related services, although not held in a Church building can still be realized both in our hearts and minds. The Passiontide readings can be done by families in their respective homes. Let us not lose this valuable tool of reflecting upon our faith in Jesus Christ as we revisit His suffering, death and resurrection.

To this end, Brothers and Sisters the Provincial Board now direct:

- **All Worship Services, Baptism Services, Confirmation Services, Prayer meetings and Communion Services, are suspended until after the period of national shutdown - further notice will then be communicated.**
- **Holy Week Passiontide readings and Preparatory Services are also cancelled.**
- **With regard to Funeral Services we will communicate as soon as we have familiarized ourselves with the government directive in this regard. Due to various municipalities dictating different regulations / guidelines for funerals our Ministers are encouraged to contact their municipal / town councilor or South African Police Services for clarity pertaining to funerals.**
- **Upcoming District Conferences for the period in question are suspended.**
- **The Provincial Board meeting scheduled for 30 March – 4 April 2020 is postponed until further notice.**

To compensate for the suspended worship services, the Office of the Bishops will formulate separate guidelines to ensure that our members remain spiritually nourished during these difficult times. These times are characterized by high levels of anxiety and outright fear of what lies ahead for us. To this end, online services, video clips, etc will be posted on the website.

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Ministers should note that they are not on leave during the time of national lockdown. They are encouraged to provide in the spiritual needs of the flock under their pastoral care using other means than physical gathering. The Church is not a building - the Church is people even if they are in their homes.

The flock definitely needs the shepherds more now than ever before. We are aware that psycho-spiritual problems of depression, withdrawal symptoms, etc during the lockdown are a real possibility and ministerial workers in the Church are encouraged to lead the flock with diligence and dedication.

As members, you are called upon to use this time profitably for intense prayers and supplication in line with the Lenten theme of fasting and prayer. It is indeed time for soul-searching for us as believers in line with the aforementioned Lenten theme. We also call on all our members, to bring hope amidst the situation in our country, to revive the family unit and make the most of the time we will be spending together as families.

Speaking of prayers, intercessions and supplication, all Bishops of the MCSA are especially called upon to step up the gear, as it were, in terms of one of their main functions in our Unity namely prayer, intercession and supplication for the whole Church. In this regard, the direct extraction from our Church Order is as follows: *"A Bishop has the special duty of intercession for the entire Unity, and for the Church of Christ as a whole"* page 13, paragraph 3.2

Although worship services and all services at church are suspended we will still encourage our Ministerial Workers to exercise their pastoral ministry and contact with their parishioners through regular telephonic or any other electronic means. Therefore, ***"Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne"*** (Heb. 12:2).

As fear and anxiety levels are likely to rise in our Church and the wider society, we wish to offer you the following message of comfort and hope: ***"Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will uphold you with my victorious hand"***
Psalm 41:10

Brotherly Yours.



Rev Martin Abrahams
Vice President: MCSA

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