

# WESTERN CAPE ECUMENICAL NETWORK STATEMENT ON COVID-19 – 17 MARCH 2020

*“You are the salt of the earth.”*

Throughout history one of the tasks of the people of God has been to identify how to live as salt and light in the face of the particular circumstances of their time. Famine, oppression, plagues, war and disaster have all been confronted and in these times we have been inspired by the brooding Spirit of God to act as salt and as light. The COVID-19 pandemic offers us such an opportunity; to serve the Spirit of love rather than a spirit of fear.

President Cyril Ramaphosa announced broad and decisive measures in response to this threat in South Africa on 15 March 2020. The decisions to restrict travel, to ban gatherings of more than 100 people, to close schools for a month, and several other actions, are bold and will impact the lives of every South African over the next few months.

We, as the Western Cape Ecumenical Network (WCEN), support the bold decisions to act swiftly and collectively in efforts to curb the threat we face. We call on all Christians in the Western Cape to support them decisively as an expression of love for our neighbours and care for the common good. As Christ would have us do, we are particularly mindful of the impact on the least of these, the already vulnerable and marginalized.

These decisions made by the government will only be effective if implemented on a local level. The success of these actions relies heavily on what happens on the streets and in communities across this country. It is here that local churches and their leaders are particularly well placed to exercise leadership by being salt and light at this time.

## **We call on all church leaders to exercise prayerful and diligent pastoral leadership at this time.**

Though expected, the President's announcement and the progression of the epidemic will generate uncertainty, anxiety and fear across our communities. The leadership we exercise over the next few weeks can frame a redemptive narrative enabling people to make choices and actions out of love and in the interest of the common good rather than from fear and isolation.

Andy Crouch wrote earlier this week that "A leader's responsibility, as circumstances around us change, is to speak, live, and make decisions in such a way that the horizons of possibility move towards *shalom*, flourishing for everyone in our sphere of influence, especially the vulnerable."

It is a time to lean into our calling as shepherds and to be pastoring our congregations and our communities to move the "horizons of possibility towards shalom". The WCEN COVID-19 Task Team will be communicating within the next 48 hours ways in which we can share resources across the network to grow our collective capacity to respond with shalom to every member of our extended communities.

## **We call on all church leaders to exercise leadership by taking care to disseminate accurate and helpful information.**

The truth is critical during times of crisis. Social media promotes an ego-driven race to share information and to be the person in the know. This creates fertile ground for false information, for lies, and for fake news, spreading confusion, fear and destruction.

As church leaders, we should be a people of truth and be diligent in ensuring that the information we share is verified and useful. We encourage all church leaders to choose patience and humility in sharing information. It is better to be slightly delayed and accurate than flooding communities with inaccurate or distorted information that then needs to be addressed.

The National Department of Health has established an excellent Whatsapp channel for general information. Send "Hi" to 060 012 3456 for the latest updates on the epidemic across the country.

The WCEN COVID-19 Task Team will be establishing channels of communication specifically for church leaders in the Western Cape to receive accurate and verified information relevant to them.

**We call on all church leaders to live by example in our individual and collective actions.**

The capacity to face up to this challenge will be determined by how we live and act, not by the good ideas we speak. Church leaders can model this by acting quickly and modelling best practices of hygiene and encouraging social distancing by rethinking church gatherings, and clearly communicating any plans for cancellation of events and services in the next few days. Be encouraged that every action to enhance social distancing contributes to the slowing of transmission rates of COVID-19 and ultimately reducing the burden on our fragile health care system.

These actions are not to protect ourselves necessarily, but rather we should all act as if we are carriers of the virus. In this way, we model behaviour to protect others and ensure that they do not get infected. We must model prophetically imaginative ways that care for the vulnerable, for our neighbours and build community. This will require planning and intent and the sharing of ideas across communities.

The WCEN COVID-19 Task Team will identify mechanisms to share best practice stories of emergent responses to this situation so that we can be learning together. By 21 March 2020, a Step by Step Guide for church preparedness will be released by the WCEN Task Team.

The Western Cape Ecumenical Network encourages all its members to promote, educate, and exercise compassionate and courageous leadership at this time. As Christ-followers, let us commit to **minimising** the transmission of COVID-19 over the next few months and to **provide practical, pastoral assistance to those most impacted directly by this outbreak. We think specifically of those who are quarantined and those who require financial support due to unpaid sick leave. Let us nurture solidarity** across our communities of faith, neighbourhoods, and networks, so that we may be strengthened to face this crisis together.

To receive information and resources from WCEN COVID-19 Task Team

- Whatsapp Broadcast Group join via this link <https://chat.whatsapp.com/C7tki6XSGSJ10Lad8Ke6Qe>
- Telegram Public Channel - <https://t.me/WCENCOVID19>

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