

Guidelines, Norms & Standards for SACC Member Churches and Affiliate Groups of Churches

To Self- Regulate to Protect Lives at Worship During The COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

[The New Normal of Church]

SACC National Church Leaders Forum in COVID Watch

“COVID-19 will test as never before our capacity as a Church to innovate and share with one another” -Thabo Makgoba, (Church Times, 2020)

Individual Church Responsibility:

These norms and standards will require detailed planning for application, with due regard to the diverse contexts of our congregations and their resource capacities. Churches will need to pay special attention to the needs of poor congregations, which mostly serve communities with no running water, and no easy access to sanitisers, in order to meet the requirements of these operational standards.

For this reason, it is recommended that churches conduct a quick status analysis of their congregations. This in the same way that schools have to have a readiness plan that is verifiable by central administration. The detailed recommendations of what to do before any congregation can consider worshipping together are on page 4 of this document. Churches are requested to study them carefully; including the suggestions of between 4 to 12 weeks of preparation time.

In adopting these norms and standards each church leader as member of the SACC National Church Leadership is assuming the burden and responsibility to protect the lives of the worshipping congregations of the church s/he is elected to lead. The SACC has used these norms and standards to make a case on behalf of the leaders of SACC member churches, for self regulation by member churches. That makes self regulation in each church to be the full burden of the member church leadership. In testimony of that, each leader needs to be conscious, and take every measure to ensure the application of these norms and standards in the congregations of the church. This we should do to save lives and ensure that our places of worship do not become the gateway to the grave for the faithful.

Stilling the COVID storm - The Challenge of This Moment:

South African society is at a crossroads in the struggle against the coronavirus/ COVID 19. On the one hand, we are bracing ourselves for a “storm” of infections as large-scale, country-wide testing reveals the true infection rate. The winter flu season raises the prospect of more infections that will reach a peak in the Spring. There is a growing number of Covid-19 related deaths and a growth in gender-based violence. On the other hand, many South Africans are expressing lockdown exhaustion, with hundreds and thousands of livelihoods lost, many more jobs on the line, and many people starving, with prospects for a revival of the economy and an



increase in Government revenue becoming more and more distant. The revenue challenge is just as big for the church institutions whose functioning depends entirely on the dedicated giving of the members, and for some, even more on the weekly takings without which there is no way to support the ministers of the church.

The Church, as an integral part of society, is faced with the same challenges as the rest of society. Its necessary and essential ministry has been disrupted as much as that of the work of any other sector, and its loss of revenue – which depends heavily on weekly giving at services – has a considerable impact on the estimated one million or more employed by the churches in various forms of ministry and pastoral social services. As we consider the policy options for the church, our people are in the throes of starvation, leading them to run in all directions with not a remote prospect of finding food, to mitigate the serious food insecurity. These are the large immune-compromised communities, not the ones flooding the beaches, but rather the ones risking to flood the food lines.

The reality of the vulnerability of poor people to this virus and its effects stares every sector of society in the face. We learn from StatsSA that 55% of South Africans are in dire poverty and therefore as immune-compromised and vulnerable as the elderly. We have in our communities some 300,000 people with TB, about 7 million people with HIV/AIDS, some 2 million are said not to be on anti-retroviral medication. We note too, that a significant percentage of South Africans, have conditions such as renal failure, and will require dialysis for the rest of their lives.

COVID-19 comes upon us on top of these longstanding challenges of our society. As we have already noted, as a country we are bracing ourselves for a “storm” of infections as large-scale. In the face of this, our people who are the present day disciples of Jesus, are crying out to Him in their heightened anxieties, saying “do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38 NRSV). The Church, the living body of Christ, must be the source of the voice of our Lord that rebukes the storm saying to the storm whirling around us, “Peace! Be still!” (4:39). **In our pursuit to bring back the worship and pastoral ministry of the church, we seek to bring that reassuring voice of Christ. These norms and standards are a small but significant way to effectively rebuke the storm of the virus in our congregations.**

The lockdown regulations that prohibit our meeting in public worship feel very hard on us and our churches. We have supported suspending public worship for very practical pastoral reasons, and it is necessary to remind ourselves of that context today. We have learned from science and observing trends in other countries that, while everyone may be vulnerable to infection, some 80-85% of the infected will not be seriously affected but that it is among the remaining 15-20% that the most danger to life will be. This includes the following categories of people: Those with weak immunity - mainly with underlying health conditions such as TB, diabetes, cancer, and HIV, especially those not taking anti-retroviral treatment.

The Church supports the staged adjustments to the lockdown, tailored according to regional and sectoral needs, upon which the Government has embarked. However, our ability to contribute to our people's spiritual needs – and therefore the nation's morale at this critical time – as well as the material contributions to people's welfare which our social ministries offer, has been curtailed by a failure to recognise clergy as providing an “essential service” to the communities in which we work.

In the tough choices between lives and livelihoods that all of society faces, the Church is obligated to place theological and pastoral imperatives, derived from the Scriptures and our lived experience as people of faith, at the forefront of our considerations. In the current situation, to reflect the compassion of Christ, we must prioritise the vulnerability of the poor to this virus and its effects.

The time has now come for the Government to treat our clergy/ministers/pastors, lay workers and volunteers as a service corps of “essential church frontline workers”, based in church buildings and other structures. **In that capacity, they can play a vital role in caring for our people's spiritual, emotional and material well-being under carefully-formulated guidelines to protect them in the way health workers, the police and the army are protected from infection.** These guidelines are tabulated in this report but the SACC will assist member churches and affiliates who may need to supplement their guidelines.

The return to Church will require careful management by the minister and local congregational leadership as Churches reopen. Strict adherence to laws regarding COVID-19 at all times and all protocols as prescribed by the government are to be observed. **Church leaders/ Bishops and other clergy should continue to make it clear that attending a live Eucharist service, is a decision for people to make, without risking themselves and others; and that churches where possible, will continue with streaming live liturgies. Ministers /Priests/Pastors should help their congregants/ parishioners make good decisions in this regard.** Those regarded to be at high risk of infection, such as the elderly and people with underlying health conditions, should be encouraged to stay at homes; and Priests, Deacons, Churchwardens/Stewards/officers and lay ministers should be most solicitous to ensure as many as possible who cannot attend live Eucharist services receive it using social media services and home visits.

In our considerations we need to remind ourselves that none of us are immune from contracting the virus, including the ordained. *[This is a critically important consideration as clergy may quite unknowingly be virus carriers. We must ensure that our pastoral ministry does not become a death warrant for the vulnerable who receive our ministrations.]* So precautionary measures must be practiced all the time. These include precautions that the Church centrally must lead, and those that lie in the hands of its local Clergy, and Congregation.

Local Church Preparedness:



1. ***COVID Task Team:*** The provision for the opening of public worship is NOT an invitation to go to church immediately. Level 3 begins on June 1; and the earliest a church can open should be June 7, provided that all the requirements of COVID Compliance are met.

The SACC recommends a preparatory period of 4 to 12 weeks for all churches to be able to function safely. This means ideally the first congregation to meet would be on June 28, if COVID ready, but it can take up to 12 weeks, to as late as last week of August.

The opening of worship space is for pastoral and spiritual purposes and must serve that purpose in the holiness of safety.

Before opening our buildings for services, each parish/local Church needs to be fully prepared. The recommended preparatory steps include:

- a. COVID Status Analysis for each congregation with specifics of what is required as per these Norms and Standards
 - b. Assessing what churches are not able to meet these on their own, and what should be done to enable them.
 - c. SACC is particularly sensitive in the case of the rural and poor congregations, that have challenges with water and sanitary provisions such as toilets and sanitisers. SACC Secretariat is exploring suppliers of bulk sanitisers, paper towels etc. that churches can procure directly at SACC negotiated rates.
 - d. Rural and outdoor churches that use reed mats will need new mats that can best work with spray sanitisers. Each province has mat makers and member churches these must take the trouble to support these churches with procurement.
 - e. Each parish/local Church must have a task team (with people with skills and knowledge of our guidelines and measures given by the State). Their sole purpose will be to inform and advise the Priest/Minister/Pastor and Parish/Management Council, on the developments surrounding the COVID-19. So that the local leadership can reflect on the recommendations presented to them, on how to continue with their Canonical responsibilities under all lockdown levels. This team is to regularly watch for information on the SACC COVID website, www.churchinaction.org.za, and the SACC WhatsApp information platform on 060 058 2107, and WhatsApp "hi". To feed in queries and information of local concerns, they can email to info@churchinaction.org.za.
2. ***Practical Safety Steps for COVID Task Team to consider:***
 1. Congregation Load-Shedding: Load-shedding of worship meetings entails, while encouraging attendance, that the congregation must be dispersed to limit congregation size for each service held. To do so, the following practical steps are suggested: *[People should no longer must come to church. They need to sign up ahead of time, and good management of this, by the COVID Task Team will be necessary.]*



1. Have a schedule of services to ensure compliance with regulations in terms of the numbers and social distancing. For example, check for a quota of attendees permitted, such as the current arrangement at funerals where only 50 people are allowed. A congregation of 50 can only fit into a church of 100 square metres or more, to allow for the necessary social distancing.
2. Where elderly people do come to worship, say above 55 or 60, it is recommended that they worship by themselves; this is the principle of defining worship attendees per service by age range.
3. Based on the above, services may need to be spaced. This can be accomplished by services may need to be introduced to accommodate for numbers, for example:
 - More than one gathering per Sunday can be allowed, or
 - Sundays and mid-week services can be arranged, and congregants encouraged to attend only one service and not two services per week,
 - Attendees arranged alphabetically to make the required quota for the worship service.
 - Where more than one service in a building is required per Sunday, time must be allowed for cleaning between services.
 - Weekday worship can be arranged on selected days or daily to accommodate numbers. A specific time should be allocated for daily worship. Lay Ministers can assist the ordained minister in conducting the worship service
4. Contact tracing:
 - A register of attendees needs to be maintained for contact tracing.
 - A roster, possibly, alphabetical order, of all congregations to be maintained.
 - Service times and attendance registers to be maintained with the personal details of attendees.
 - A register of all those in attendance should be kept and archived for possible contact tracing.
5. Church buildings to be 'safe places': *[Some rural churches, especially among the African Indigenous/Independent Churches, often do not use benches or chairs, but use reed mats for sitting. The old mats that are worn out will not take sanitiser spray well. Churches are advised to ensure that new and fresh mats are used to replace the old worn mats for the sake of safety.]*
 - Cleaning with detergents, all the buildings before and after services, to thoroughly sanitise the Church for the new congregation.
 - Floors and pews/benches/chairs need to be wiped down before and after services with cloths soaked in disinfectant.
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
 - Make sure that the Church is well ventilated by opening windows.
 - Safety bins to be provided with plastic liners to be easily and safely disposed of after each service.



6. Toilets need to be kept hygienic: [Special attention is necessary for protocols in safe and hygienic use of rural pit latrines, this requires further work with review of status analysis.]
 - Ensure adequate supply of 70% alcohol-based hand sanitisers. This will be critical for rural churches where running water may not be adequately available for long hand washing.
 - Soap, water, and paper towels (no cloth towels) must be provided. Even in the most rural of congregations, sanitising will be required. Ideally, running water and hand-washing with liquid soap ought to be used in this process.
 - Hand towels to be disposed of in a bin with a lid.
 - Sacristans/attendants need to be particularly careful in their preparation of the sacred vessels and the elements to be used in a service and both hygiene and sanitising must be strictly observed.
 - Sacristans/attendants, Lay Ministers, and servers must observe a similar discipline. Should a second or even third service follow, all the precautions observed for preparing for the first service shall apply.
7. Entrances: [Unavailability of gloves, running water and easy access to sanitisers in rural areas and poor communities in general, must be considered by church leadership.]
 - No greeters to be present at the door; only stewards to control the numbers entering based on social distancing requirements as per the regulations
 - Stewards at the door will take people's temperatures and those with readings of 38 degrees Celsius and above will be asked to return home.
 - Provision of sanitisers at all entrances.
 - Persons to be assigned at the entrance door to spray sanitisers on the hands of every member coming to and leaving the service.
 - They must also wear gloves, and wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
8. Contact time:
 - Reduce the service duration to ONE hour.
 - Allow at least 30 minutes before the next one.
 - Varying service times such as 9:00 am and then 11:00 am can be implemented.
9. Controlling people-to-people transmission:
 - People will need to be actively discouraged from attending if they have an infection of any type. No one with even the slightest symptoms of cold should attend services.



- Anyone with close contact with people who are showing symptoms in the past 14 days should also be prevented from attending. Members who have flu-like symptoms must avoid coming into contact with each other.
 - If any members present with flu-like symptoms, or have been exposed to any person exhibiting such symptoms in the last 14 days, they must be recommended to consult their family, family physician, or local clinic or hospital, as appropriate.
 - Medical personnel within the congregation should be reached out to assist with screening before congregants enter the Church and all those who screen positive be directed to seek medical help and possible COVID-19 testing immediately.
 - Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
10. Use of masks:
- Everyone entering the Church must wear a face mask to cover the nose and mouth completely.
 - The Church can supply cloth masks to those without any, or
 - Church Groups or members who have sewing skills can be requested to sew and sell masks at a reasonable price.
 - Cough or sneeze into the crook of one's arm, or into a tissue, then dispose of the tissue in a plastic-lined rubbish bin with a lid. *[This facility may not be available in rural and poor communities. The church needs to make extra efforts for constant provisions.]*
 - Indoor confessions where this practice is practiced regularly, to use antibacterial spray and a stack of paper towels, so that each penitent can spray the kneeler and wipe it down, and the area immediately surrounding it.
11. Social distancing: *[The social distance rule of thumb is that the church must know the length and breadth of the worship space such that a 100 square metre space can hold no more than 50 persons including the pastor/minister/priest.]*
- Social distancing must be maintained as per regulatory guidelines. As such, it will be based on the size of the Church and social distancing requirements that will determine the number in the congregation.
 - Attendees must be allocated by regions/blocks/sections to limit the number of persons per session to assist in the management of flow, attendance, and numbers at any given time (wyksgemeentes).
 - Seating must be according to the 'social distance' of the recommended distance between participants in every direction.
 - Marking out pews for the appropriate seating order.
 - Seating encouraged to be by alternate rows.
 - Only persons belonging to individual families (who live together without social distancing norms) may sit together.



12. Parishes/local congregations/churches [The local church COVID Task Team must have access to health information, and are advised to follow the ongoing information and educational SACC offerings in the SACC WhatsApp platform 060 058 2107, and website www.churchinaction.org.za]
- All members of the Church and congregation need to be frequently trained and educated about precautions and kept up to date with government regulations.
 - No one with even the slightest cold ought to attend services. This applies particularly to the Clergy, servers, and sacristans as they will be the common denominators in the event of the spread of infection across services held at the Church.
 - The congregations/parishes to procure forehead thermometer to screen and use members of the health team in the parish.
 - The president of the mass/Holy Communion, must sanitise before the service, at the preparation of the elements for the Eucharist and after receiving Communion.
 - Those leading worship, by the very nature of their task, could be allowed to not wear masks, but only during the worship.
 - Presider/preacher should ideally be the same person. Two ministers may share the services only in the presence of a cleric more susceptible to the virus, as a caveat against his/her exhaustion.
 - All should move into the sanctuary discreetly to limit contact with others as far as possible.
 - After disrobing, the Clergy shall again wash their hands with soap under running water for at least 20 seconds. Where this is not possible, a sanitising liquid must be used.
 - Pastor/Bishop/Moderator should take the responsibility on behalf of his or her Church, and should there be a breach, heavy punishment/penalty be placed on the responsible Priest, Pastor or Bishop, by the church, to demonstrate the seriousness and importance of ensuring that Churches too, are COVID-19 compliant. [Church leadership needs to consider how this can be implemented.]
13. Holy Communion [Church leadership to have a plan for orientation of all clergy on the significance of this set of all these norms and standards, especially on Holy Communion.]
- The most visible ritual for sacramental churches is Mass, Eucharist, Holy Communion or a service of common meal. Because Holy Communion is the meal of the whole faith community, when we do celebrate it in our homes it is important to let our brothers and sisters know that we are celebrating it, for them to intercede for us in prayer and rejoice with us in the celebration.
 - Physical distances to be strictly observed, with no hand contact during the service, especially at the peace.



- Communion in one kind should continue as was the case before the lockdown, still with no kneeling at the altar rail, but instead standing with the social distance provision. The Celebrant would administer the Sacrament at a safe distance, and only place it on the hand of the recipient and NOT the tongue.
 - Communion in one kind, individually received, whilst standing.
 - This means that only the minister will use the chalice.
 - The priest/minister/pastor, standing centrally at either the altar rail or sanctuary steps, shall administer the host to the communicant's hands.
 - Communicants must stand in a single file observing a two-meter distance between each person.
 - Churchwardens/ushers/stewards or their deputies must ensure the orderly approach to the distribution point and the safe return to the communicant's seat.
 - The blessing of non-communicants will require no physical contact with the person receiving such a blessing.
 - Communion to be distributed with sterile gloves. Lay Ministers of Communion sanitising hands regularly whilst administering Communion.
 - Preferably no wine to be served to prevent recipients from touching the chalice. If served, please note:
 - Communion wine to be taken only by the Celebrant, otherwise small distribution cups can be provided where permitted by regulations.
 - No handshaking, hugging, or kissing even during peace.
 - No greeting by hand, use your feet if need be, or just wave.
 - No holy hugs, only holy hand wave.
 - No elbow greeting, only waving of hands be done during Peace time.
14. Collection: [Reference is made here to use of disposable gloves and plastic lined bins for safe disposal. Churches need to orient local church management and maybe train dedicated COVID stewards - part of local COVID Task Team, to ensure availability and safe management of these things. Rural congregations may need to have incineration points to safely burn the disposables.]
- Collections and dedicated giving envelopes to be offered at the sanctuary step into large containers.
 - Collection to be done as people exit Churches maintaining distance.
 - Arrangements for planned giving to made at the banks otherwise the collection be put in a box or bag.
 - People taking offering should wear gloves and wash their hands as required.
15. Service suspensions (changes from normal practice): [To stop singing might the absolute test for many congregations! Church music leadership will need to provide from recorded or electronic music, this may be a bigger challenge; or maybe by humming of popular tunes.]



- There should be no singing, instead,.
 - Droplets are carried further when we sing and we also breathe in more deeply in singing, and as such, choirs have been known breeding grounds for the virus.
 - Instrumental music or solo singing can fill the other slots where hymns would usually be sung.
 - The singing of hymns may need to be considered VERY carefully. Two meters is not far enough apart for hymns to be sung. Similarly, responses need to *sotto voce* (intentionally lowering the voice) to avoid expressing any saliva.
 - All hymn books, bibles to be removed from pews:
 - Readings and hymns to be provided by electronic means where possible or printed in leaflet form.
 - Where projection of services on overhead screens is possible, these can be used to avoid the use of books such as hymn and prayer books and bibles that would ordinarily be found on pews at each service.
 - No offertory procession with either the elements or the collection. There should be no processions in and out of the Church.
 - There need only be one Lay minister assisting to lead the service, as well as one altar server to assist at the altar.
 - Presbytery meetings and other majority assemblies to be postponed indefinitely; unless they can be conducted electronically.
 - Sunday school is suspended until further notice.
 - Catechism classes are suspended until further notice.
 - No group meetings after services.
16. Outside church:
- No socialising before or after service.
 - Following the dismissal, the Clergy must observe social distancing when speaking to persons outside the building.
 - Should it be raining, this form of greeting will not occur.
17. Outdoor confessions with masks: *[This outdoor confession for those churches that practice confessions raises the question of whether the outdoors would not be an option for worship space in the open.]*
- Confessions may also be conducted outside the church, to avoid having to sanitise the confessional furnishings
 - No tea fellowship after the Service.
 - People attending Services should not walk in groups.
 - Individuals and family cohorts maintaining social distancing in Church parking lots.
 - No gathering outside or coffee bars after the service.

In Conclusion:

The church of Jesus Christ has never been here before, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba has said it all when he says: “COVID-19 will test as never before our capacity as a Church to innovate and share with one another” Now is that time. The objective to which we all commit, is to save lives. We shall walk this path, equipped with the ringing voice of Him who said, “Behold, I am with you till the end of the age”; even Jesus Christ the risen and ascended Lord!

SACC AFFILIATED CHURCHES/AND GROUPS OF CHURCHES

	African Catholic Church	Dutch Reformed Church	Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ	Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference
	African Methodist Episcopal Church	Ethiopian Episcopal Church	Methodist Church of Southern Africa	The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA)
	African Presbyterian Bafolisi Church	Evangelical Church of SA	Moravian Church in Southern Africa	The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa
	Anglican Church of Southern Africa	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church)	North Eastern Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, short NELCSA	United Congregational Church of Southern Africa
	Apostolic Faith Mission of Southern Africa	Evangelical Presbyterian Church in SA	Presbyterian Church of Africa	Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa
	Baptist Convention SA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa	Quakers in Southern Africa	Volkskerk van Afrika
	Coptic Orthodox Church	Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika	Rhema – International Federation of Christian Churches	
	Council of African Independent Churches	Grace Bible Church	The Salvation Army	