



## THE APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA DIE APOSTOLIESE GELOOF SENDING VAN SUID-AFRIKA

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## GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH MEETINGS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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***“The AFM should continue to be channels of Hope and not be channels of infection.”***

**-M.G. Mahlobo (AFM President)**

The president of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa announced on 26 May 2020 that *“Places of worship may re-open subject to strict restrictions, which is absolutely necessary if we are to prevent infections from rising, in accordance with norms and standards that will be set out in the regulations.*

*Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other recognized places of worship may resume services, but these will be limited in size to 50 people or less depending on the space available.*

*Social distancing will have to be observed and all worshippers and participants will have to wear face masks in line with the current regulations. All religious organizations must put protocols in place for, amongst other things, thorough cleaning, and sanitizing places for worship before and after services.*

*Our faith communities must ensure that any religious rituals that carry even the slightest possibility of exposing worshippers to risk should be avoided, and that where they form an essential part of religious practice, that sanitation is paramount.*

*Our religious leaders will be recognized as essential religious frontline workers for purposes of spiritual counseling to members of their faith organizations. Religious leaders will continue to officiate at funerals of no more than 50 people.”*

### **Guidelines and decisions:**

The following guidelines from the National Office Bearers, are based on the practical diversity within the AFM, as well as medical advice and aimed at guiding Pastors and local assemblies in their preparations to be ready for in-person church services where desired and possible.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating. The coronavirus attaches to a receptor which humans have in abundance, throughout their bodies, and this is part of why the

virus is so contagious. The original outbreak first came to light on 19 December 2019, highlighting how quickly the spread has happened. The spread of the virus happens through saliva droplets, which we express when we breath, or talk. A single person can therefore quickly contaminate an entire area. The virus also survives for 3-4 days on metal or wooden surfaces, and varying lengths of time on other surfaces.

Many challenges therefore need to be overcome to safely reopen our churches and this document seeks to provide guidelines to assist with the decisions of our Regional Committees and Governing Bodies. It is of critically importance that every person attending church services should have a mindset of being aware of and consider both their own and other's risks.

Transport to and from the church venue is one of the main areas that requires careful consideration. Congregants may be exposed while travelling to and from the venue, be it by public transport, or car sharing and should preferably take responsibility for their own hand sanitizer, face mask and other safety measures.

Where there are people saying that they would rather take the risk for themselves, it is important to remind them that there is no such thing as risk for yourself. When you behave in a risky manner, you put everybody else at risk.

**PLEASE TAKE NOTE THAT THESE GUIDELINES ARE SUBJECT TO THE COVID-19 REGULATIONS WHICH WERE PROMULGATED BY GOVERNMENT AND SPECIFICALLY TO THE GOVERNMENT GAZETTE OF 28 MAY 2020 (VOL. 659, NO. 43365) AND MIGHT BE UPDATED FROM TIME TO TIME.**

**It must also be stressed that the decision to open in-person services remains the prerogative of local Assembly Governing Bodies and that this decision must be based on their readiness to implement preventative measures effectively. There is no pressure on church buildings to open. If Pastors, Assembly leaders and Governing Bodies are unsure about their readiness, they should not open their buildings for in-person services yet. Every individual believer must also be allowed to decide for themselves whether they want to attend or not.**

**Churches must prepare to be and remain ready:**

As a church we have a diverse context regarding size, facilities and resources, therefore it is important that every local assembly should pay special attention and commit to do their utmost best in their context to adhere to the guidelines, according to the regulations issued by Government.

**Regions to assess the readiness of assemblies in their constituency:**

With the above in mind, it is recommended that Regions, as part of their constitutional responsibility, conduct an assessment of their congregations to determine their level of readiness and to assist them where possible.

**Responsibility of assembly leadership and members:**

The Governing Bodies of every assembly, as well as individual members are obliged and must take full responsibility to act in accordance with the regulations, to prevent the unnecessary spread of the virus. Our congregations and communities of faith should not be the sources of infection, but rather of prevention, Hope and the saving of lives.

All pastors, leaders and members need to be conscious and take every possible measure, to ensure strict adherence to these guidelines in the assemblies of the church.

### **Management required:**

The return to in-person church meetings, will require careful management by the pastor/s and local Assembly Governing Bodies as Church facilities reopen. Strict adherence to laws regarding COVID-19 and all protocols as prescribed by the government must be observed at all times.

Assemblies must develop a written plan for gatherings, which incorporates protocols and the measurements set out in the Regulations of Government and must ensure that there are no more than 50 people within the place of worship at a time.

### **Pastors and assembly leaders should make it clear that attending an in-person church service/meeting, is a decision for members to make, without risking themselves and others.**

Churches where possible, will continue with the availability of services and or sermons online and via social media platforms. Pastors should guide their members, especially the elderly, parents with young children and people with underlying health conditions (co-morbidities) to make the appropriate decisions in this regard.

We all need to remind ourselves that none of us, including our pastors, assembly leaders, church staff and worship teams, are immune from contracting the virus. We must ensure that precautionary measures are practiced **all** the time.

**To ensure that our churches will be and remain fully prepared, it is advised that each local assembly must have a task team**, consisting of two or more people with knowledge of the guidelines below, as well as the regulations given by the Government. Their sole purpose will be to inform and advise the Pastor and the Assembly's Governing Body, on the developments surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. This will enable the leadership of the assembly to reflect on and implement the necessary measures to adhere to the regulations and keep their members safe. Information in this regard will be regularly updated on the SACC COVID website, [www.churchinaction.org.za](http://www.churchinaction.org.za)

### **Practical Safety Steps:**

#### **1. Attendance Load-Shedding:**

1.1 Load-shedding of worship meetings entails, while encouraging attendance, that the congregation must be dispersed, to limit the size for each service held to 50 people at this stage. (This number might differ at different levels going forward.)

1.2 To do so, the following practical steps are suggested: People should not just pitch up at church. They should come in an organized and managed way. This might include one or more of the following ways:

- People sign up ahead of time to a particular service (day and time);
- Services be organized according to cell-/small groups, surnames (alphabetical), age range or living areas, etc.

#### **2. Assemblies should have a schedule of services/meetings:**

2.1 This will ensure compliance with regulations in terms of numbers and social distancing.

- 2.2 Services may not exceed 2 hours (it may be shorter), with at least 30 minutes intermission between services, to allow for cleaning and sanitizing of the facility.
- 2.3 Depending on the number of members in an assembly, services may need to be spaced, for example:
- 2.4 More than one gathering per Sunday can be allowed, or
- 2.5 Sundays and mid-week services can be arranged, and members might have to be asked to attend only one service and not two services per week.
- 2.6 Where more than one service in a building is required per Sunday, time of at least 30 minutes must be allowed for proper cleaning and sanitizing between services.
- 2.7 Week-day meetings can be arranged on selected days or daily to accommodate numbers.
- 2.8 Innovative possibilities should be explored, including but not limited to multiple services, meeting in small groups and the streaming of services.

### **3. Contact tracing:**

- 3.1 To enable the tracing of people who might be in danger of being infected, should it happen that a person attending a service becomes sick with COVID-19, the following must be in place:
- 3.2 A register of attendees at each service, containing the following information needs to be maintained: Full names, residential address and contact numbers or email address.
- 3.3 This should preferably be done by a dedicated person/s at the entrance/s, writing down the details of each person on entrance, and not by allowing everybody to use the same pen and touch the same attendance register, as this in itself can become a source of possible infection.
- 3.4 The attendance registers of all those in attendance, at all the different services, must be kept and archived for possible contact tracing for a period of 6 months.

### **4. Church buildings should be “safe places”:**

- 4.1 Where benches or chairs are not used, but reed mats are used for sitting, the old mats that are worn out will not take sanitizer 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.
- 4.2 Buildings should be cleaned with 70% alcohol-based detergents before and after services to thoroughly sanitize the church for the next service.
- 4.3 Floors and pews/benches/chairs need to be wiped down before and after every service with mops or cloths soaked in disinfectant.
- 4.4 Frequently touched objects and surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected before, during and after every service.
- 4.5 The pulpit should be cleansed and disinfected after use by a person and before another person uses it.
- 4.6 Churches should be well ventilated by opening doors and windows where possible.
- 4.7 Bins with plastic liners (black garbage bags) should be provided to dispose used tissues, paper towels, etc. and be disposed of easily and safely after each service.

### **5. Toilets need to be kept hygienic:**

- 5.1 Special attention is necessary for safe and hygienic use of rural pit latrines.
- 5.2 Ensure adequate supply of 70% alcohol-based hand sanitizers. This will be critical for rural churches where running water may not be adequately available for long hand washing.

- 5.3 Soap, water, and paper hand towels (no cloth towels) must be provided. Even in the most rural of congregations, sanitizing will be required. Ideally, running water and handwashing with liquid soap ought to be used in this process. (Water-cans with taps can also be used)
- 5.4 Toilets/ restrooms should be cleaned and sanitized after each individual use and before it is used by another person.
- 5.5 Paper hand towels are to be disposed of in a bin with a plastic (garbage bag) liner and be disposed of after each service.
- 5.6 Should a second or third service follow, all the precautions observed for preparing for the first service shall apply.

## **6. Entrances:**

- 6.1 People who arrive at the church for the service as scheduled, should move into the building orderly whilst adhering to the social distancing regulations of 1.5 meters.
- 6.2 Handshaking, hugging and kissing should be replaced by waving, nodding and smiling.
- 6.3 Greeters/ stewards at the doors should greet people verbally or with a nod, while avoiding physical contact. They must control the numbers of people entering and ensure that social distancing requirements as per the regulations are adhered to at all times.
- 6.4 Stewards at the door must take people's temperatures with a non-contact device and those with readings of 38 degrees Celsius and above must be asked to return home.
- 6.5 There must be provision of sufficient quantities of 70% alcohol-based sanitizers at all entrances. Preferably hands free- This can be accomplished by using foot or elbow operated pump bottles, or by individual stewards spraying or pumping the fluid onto the hands of people as they enter and leave the service.
- 6.6 There must be facilities for the washing of hands with soap and water at the entrance.
- 6.7 The stewards must also wear gloves and wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- 6.8 Where gloves, running water and access to sanitizers is a problem, special arrangements should be made for the washing of hands with soap and water. Water can be poured over well soaped hands, but this water must be discarded and not reused.

## **7. Contact time:**

- 7.1 The duration of the service must be between one and two hours maximum. The main purpose of this is to reduce contact/ exposure time for members and to be able to have more services.
- 7.2 Allow at least 30 minutes or more (depending on the size of the facility) before the next service for cleaning and disinfecting of the building.

## **8. Avoiding person-to-person transmission:**

- 8.1 Everybody should be advised and reminded regularly of the dangers of covid-19 and to avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- 8.2 People with any type of infection, must be discouraged from attending services. -No one with even the slightest symptoms like loss of smell and taste, sore throat, or dry cough, fever, body aches, shortness of breath and or difficulty breathing, should attend.
- 8.3 If a person with the above symptoms arrives at the service, he/ she should be prevented from entering the building. If the person has already entered, he/she must be isolated. The presence of the person with the symptoms mentioned must be reported to the person in charge, and arrangements must be made to transport him/her, in a manner that does not place other people at risk, to a medical facility for testing.

- 8.4 Anyone who had close contact with people who are showing symptoms in the past 14 days, should be prevented from attending. Members who have flu-like symptoms must avoid coming into contact with others.
- 8.5 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 physician, local clinic, or hospital.
- 8.6 Medical personnel within the congregation should assist with practical guidelines for screening members before entering the Church.
- 8.7 There should be no physical contact between people at the place of worship.

#### **9. The use of masks:**

- 9.1 Everyone entering the church, including the Pastor must wear a face mask, to cover the nose and mouth completely. **NO ONE** should be without a mask during the service.
- 9.2 Church Groups or members who have sewing skills can be requested to sew and sell masks at a reasonable price.
- 9.3 Members must be guided to cough or sneeze into the crook of one's arm, or into a tissue, and then dispose of the tissue in a plastic-lined rubbish bin with a lid.

#### **10. Social distancing:**

- 10.1 The social distance rule of thumb is that 50 persons including the pastor, needs a worship space of 100 square meters. Should the worship space be smaller than that, the number of members attending a service will have to be reduced accordingly.
- 10.2 Social distancing must be maintained as per regulatory guidelines of 1.5 meters between people seated or standing.
- 10.3 Seating must be according to the recommended distance of 1.5 meters between participants in every direction.
- 10.4 It is encouraged that seating be by alternate rows.
- 10.5 Where possible, chairs can be arranged to create the appropriate formation.
- 10.6 Pews should be marked out (for example with red sticky tape) to create the appropriate seating order and spacing.
- 10.7 Only persons belonging to individual families (who live together without social distancing norms) may sit together.

#### **11. Holy Communion, other liturgical practices and activities:**

- 11.1 Special care must be taken to observe strict hygiene during the preparation of the elements for Communion. The sanitizing of glasses and containers, as well as the hands of the person/s preparing the Communion is of utmost importance.
- 11.2 A practical way of distributing the bread and the wine must be found, without it passing from hand to hand or being touched by many hands. This can be done for example by placing the Communion elements on a table in the front of the church and by allowing members to come one by one, or in households -while observing social distancing to collect the bread and wine and go back to their seats, or members can bring their own where possible.
- 11.3 NO chalices shared by members should be used. Small glasses/ small distribution cups must be used by one individual at a time and thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after the service and before it is used again.
- 11.4 Physical distances to be strictly observed, with no hand contact during the serving of

Communion.

- 11.5 Ushers/stewards must ensure the orderly approach to the distribution point and the safe return to the member's seat.
- 11.6 Sunday school/ Children's church remain suspended until further notice.
- 11.7 The following liturgical practices remain suspended until further notice:  
Water baptism and Weddings. The solemnization of marriages by a pastor in his/her office is currently not mentioned in the official documentation and should only happen when Government issue specific guidelines in this regard.
- 11.8 The following liturgical practices must be conducted without physical contact and whilst upholding social distancing regulations:
  - Dedication of babies. (Parents to hold their own baby and Pastor stretch out his/her hand)
  - Prayer for the sick and or altar calls. (The person praying must just pray with hand/s stretched out. The person being prayed for must stand or kneel on his/her own.)
  - Funerals. (According to the regulations provided by Government.)

## **12. Singing during the service:**

- 12.1 When we sing under normal circumstances, we breathe in more deeply and breathe out more forcefully. This causes tiny droplets of saliva to be carried further into our direct environment and have been a known breeding ground for the virus.
- 12.2 Instrumental music or solo singing can fill the slots where hymns or choruses would usually be sung.
- 12.3 According to the regulations singing is limited to solo performances or pre-recorded performances (video/ CD) during the service. This means that one person can sing in front of the Church and that during the time that he/she sings, his/her mask may be removed. There must however be a distance of 2.5 meters between the person singing and any other person. -It should be safe for the congregation to hum, (but not sing) along.
- 12.4 NO dancing or gathering in the front or anywhere in the building. Members should remain in their places and dance there.
- 12.5 The Pastor may remove his/her mask while preaching but must at that time maintain a distance of 2.5 meters from other people. He/she must put the mask back on after the sermon.
- 12.6 There must be no sharing of equipment, objects, or books during the service.
- 12.7 Churches that normally provide hymn books and Bibles in their pews, should remove it, as to avoid it being touched by many hands and possibly become sources of infection.
- 12.8 Members should bring their own Bibles and only share it with their own household.
- 12.9 Where projection of songs or Scripture on overhead screens is possible, this should be used.
- 12.10 The number of different individual worship leaders/singers and musicians/band members should be limited, and social distancing and strict hygiene should be observed at all times.
- 12.11 Microphones, as well as the hands of the people using them must be sanitized regularly.
- 12.12 Chairs, musical instruments, and other equipment, should be wiped clean regularly, preferably with disinfectant/ soap and water.
- 12.13 No handshaking, hugging, or kissing is allowed before, during or after the service.
- 12.14 No social activities are allowed before or after the service.

### **13. Offerings:**

- 13.1 The persons counting offerings must wear masks and must sanitize their hands before, during and after the counting of offerings and must ensure that they do not touch their faces during the process.

### **14. When the service ends:**

- 13.1 At the end of the service members should disperse in an orderly manner, whilst making sure that they observe the social distancing regulations at all times.

### **15. Outside church:**

- 14.1 After leaving the building in a social distancing observing manner, there should not be socializing or group meetings after the service, or before the next service.
- 14.2 Pastors must observe social distancing when speaking to persons outside the building.
- 14.3 There should at this stage not be coffee/tea fellowship after the service.
- 14.4 People attending services should not walk in groups to and from the service.
- 14.5 Individuals and family/ household groups must maintain social distancing in the church parking lots at all times.

### **15 General observations:**

- 15.1 Pastors and/or assembly leaders should take responsibility on behalf of their Church to adhere to the regulations, and should there be a breach, he/she will be answerable to the Authorities.
- 15.2 All members of the assembly need to be frequently trained and educated about precautions and kept up to date with government regulations. This must include guidance on the regular washing of hands with soap and water, or disinfectant, and the cleaning of cell phones and work surfaces with disinfectant.
- 15.3 Touching stair railings and doorknobs should be avoided as far as possible.
- 15.4 The Pastor and/ or preacher must sanitize after and before every service by washing his/her hands with soap under running water for at least 20 seconds. Where this is not possible, a sanitizing liquid must be used.
- 15.5 Persons over the age of 60 and persons with underlying health conditions (comorbidities) should be encouraged (not forced) to continue worshipping at home during this stage.
- 15.6 All funeral services conducted in places of worship must be limited to 50 persons in total, as per the regulations.

### **In Conclusion:**

The COVID-19 pandemic and all its consequences pose uncharted waters for all of us, Government, and citizen alike. These are unprecedented times and the church has never been here before. Any person can get infected with the COVID-19 virus, by no fault of their own. It is important that a person with COVID-19 should not be side lined or stigmatized in any way, but that we should rather pray for the healing of such a person and provide pastoral care to that person, as well as to his/her family in any way possible. We must approach this situation with the required attention and responsibility and conduct ourselves and our assembly's in such a way that we strengthen our testimony as followers of Jesus Christ within our own community and the country at large.

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