

28 March 2020

A Pastoral letter from CWM General Secretary regarding COVID-19

Dear sisters and brothers,

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

We are facing an unprecedented crisis throughout the world at this time as we grapple with the impact of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. We do not know yet who or how many from within the CWM family have lost loved ones or are serving at the frontlines. We do know, however, we are all affected by the impacts of this tragedy that is unfolding before us. This letter comes to offer the prayers, encouragement and solidarity of the Council for World Mission to everyone; and particularly to express our solidarity with those whose pain is intensified by the direct impact on your family.

The world as we knew it has changed; and the need to adapt to this rapidly changing situation is not only urgent; it is fraught with challenges. As months pass and the end seems still out of sight, to our natural eyes, it is quite understandable if fear and insecurity set in. And yet, we can be encouraged by the inspiring ways in which individuals communities are rising in response to this crisis. There are opportunities for engagement that are emerging for the church in this time of great turmoil and isolation. In this our hour of brokenness and great need, as people of faith, we are called to persist in prayer, trusting in God's unconditional love and abundant grace for all.

Being community in a time of crisis

In an effort to curb and delay the spread of the virus, we are encouraged to practice physical distancing. As counter intuitive as it might seem, this is one of the effective actions we can take to demonstrate immense care and support for one another and protect each other from possible infection. This, however, comes at great cost to our normal life in community. It may also add to the growing feeling of helplessness and anxiety. In this dark time, it is important that we remain aware of the good that is also happening despite all the bad. Let us be reminded that God is still with us; that God still cares and loves so deeply; and that we are not fighting this on our own. Some of us have already been privileged to have heard of the many stories of bravery, compassion and care for one another coming from all corners of the world.

We have heard of the heartwarming and tear-jerking moments when in the midst of a total lock-down, people in Italy and Spain took to their windows and balconies to sing, chant, and clap, paying tribute to healthcare workers and those who placed their wellbeing at risk to serve the wider community. Some just sang to remind us of our humanity, our strength, and our spirit of resilience in the face of great darkness.

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We have seen and heard of many who are putting their lives on the line, working long days, often with limited resources, in an effort to save lives. At the time of writing this letter, one country alone, Italy, has lost 46 doctors in less than two months, with over 6000 healthcare workers testing positive of COVID-19. We applaud healthcare personnel who are prepared to be separated from their families and to work around the clock to fight this pandemic. We celebrate the unselfish and courageous act of solidarity as exemplified by the Cuban government and people, who despite the enormous needs at home, sent medical teams to help others in Italy, Jamaica and elsewhere.

Even with limited understanding of the new coronavirus, governments and healthcare authorities, across the world, are doing their best to disseminate information and raise public awareness. Great care is being taken to initiate and introduce various forms of precautionary measures to reduce the risk of infection and stem the spread of the virus. Let us receive these health advisories and instructions with understanding and grace. Let us lead by example, working together to support and comply with efforts being made to keep communities safe, especially in locations without the social infrastructure and medical facility to care for mass infection.

Being church where it matters

With the call for physical distancing, restricted movements and national lock-downs, come the personal challenges of loneliness, loss of livelihoods, and increased vulnerability due to isolation. COVID-19, and the responses to it, will highlight and complicate some already difficult situations in our communities. Experts have pointed out the mental health crisis that is already on our hands, induced by the impacts of COVID-19. Many will struggle with grief from untimely deaths of loved ones, but also anticipatory grief from fear of infection and death and from loss or fear of loss of livelihoods.

In many cases, the impact of COVID-19 on mental health will exacerbate situations of domestic abuse and violence against women and children. Worse still, in such situations we will now find the most vulnerable cut off from immediate help due to quarantines and national lock-downs. We call on communities of faith to be extra vigilant in these times in looking out for and following up on families and persons who are deemed to be at risk.

In addition to the global economic recession, the threat to justice and peace, especially in contexts where governing systems are fragile, is another growing concern. At present, governments of many countries have declared state of emergencies, which though intended to safeguard the people, the unrestricted powers assumed by heads of states of fragile democracies; and given to eager, enthusiastic and even inept security forces, may render them open to abuse and exploitation.

These are real challenges, and the insecurity and fear being experienced are natural and understandable. However, let us not despair; because, as people of faith, we bear witness to the

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God of life, who breathes life into dry bones and cause them to live (Eze. 37). These emerging challenges offer opportunities for churches to pay close attention and to act with due sensitivity, pastoral care and with a message of hope. Our response must be grounded in a spirituality of hope – a resistance to accept defeat as the answer and a readiness to do what is required of us to rise. In a time such as this, communities of faith are called to rise up and witness to an alternative way of living. We are called to witness to the loving care and compassion of the God of life who is able to bring healing and wholeness amid life's pain and turmoil (Ex. 14: 10-16; Mk. 4: 35-39). Let us never lose sight of hope in the wilderness of life because, indeed, if God is on our side, there is no need for us to fear “the pestilence that stalks in darkness” (See Ps 91, NRSV).

The safe haven of the physically gathered community for worship is no longer a reality at this time. As an immediate response, churches are organising online opportunities for worship. In an age of declining church numbers, some churches in the UK, South Korea, and United States have reported a surge of online church attendance up to four times the average total attendance for one weekend. Speaking to a reporter about how the church will adapt to this new demand, a leader of Emmanuel Church in Brighton, UK, responded: “I think we're going to learn how to be a community by other means and it's going to test us and stretch us, but I believe if we get it right, we'll be able to serve hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people”.

We celebrate this level of creativity and encourage the churches to continue exploring ways of being church where it matters – being the signpost of God's healing grace in the midst of life's storms when the foundation of our security is cut from beneath us (Ps 11, Ps 46). We encourage churches to explore and invest in the use of media technology in response to the need to stay connected in spite of the physical distancing; to provide worship resources to families; and to pay attention to the simplest forms of engagement, such as the timely message of affirmation, support and encouragement to those that are cut off from our fellowship, especially the elderly, the poor, and the disabled. Let us draw strength from our faith in the God of life, who promises to give us hope and a future (Jeremiah 29: 11) and whose gift of peace (Is. 43: 1-3a; John 14: 1, 27) anchors us and keeps us secure even when the storms are raging.

Calling God's people to prayer for healing, hope and renewal

Much is being said everywhere about the cause of this virus. Xenophobia and social stigma are parading themselves as we struggle to deal with this virus outbreak. Now is not the time to pass blame on any individual, country or region; neither is it a time to vent our anger, anxiety or frustration on others. This is also not the time to give free reign to the scourge of fake news. Various versions of the same story are being shared, some with more exaggeration and less accuracy, thereby heightening the tension and intensifying the feelings of dislocation, fear and despair. Irresponsible spreading of unfounded stories contributes to the worsening of mass hysteria. Already some people have become victims of mob violence due to being suspected of carrying the infection.

We do not have the answer to this pandemic as yet; and in our state of helplessness, we may be driven to despair. At a time of great challenge for the early Church in Asia Minor, when many were losing the courage to fight, John, banished to the island of Patmos, came into an experience with God and brought a message of hope to the people:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new Earth; for the first heaven and the first Earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He (God) will dwell with them; they will be his (God's) peoples, and God will be with them; he (God) will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Rev 21: 1-5a, NRSV)

Let us believe and pray together that COVID-19, with all the death and destruction it brings, will soon come to an end; and that a new day will dawn for the global community.

Let us pray for comfort in the face of death and dislocation, for healing amid the pain of sickness and helplessness and for peace in the midst of agony and anxiety.

Let us pray for healthcare personnel and those who risk their lives in the service of others during this pandemic. Let us pray for leaders of States, employers and all who make decisions for the welfare and wellbeing of others in this time of crisis.

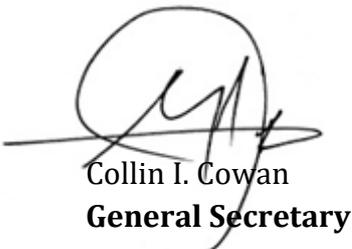
Let us pray for integrity, wisdom, the rule of law, and compassion in places around the world where governing systems might be negatively impacted by the temporary concentration of executive powers in one arm of government.

Let us pray for each other to continue giving our best, to look out for one another, serving our fellow human beings with generosity of spirit and with love and loyalty of heart.

Let us pray for courage, wisdom and creativity as we explore new ways of being church.

Let us pray for hope, where the will is crippled and our determination paralysed by the trauma of our circumstances.

Let us pray to the Lord.



Collin I. Cowan
General Secretary