

The Diocese of St Mark the Evangelist

(The Anglican Church in Limpopo Province)

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Statement by the Chapter and COVID-19 Advisory Panel of the Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist 29 May 2020

This statement supports and endorses the ad hoc decision taken by Diocesan Chapter on Wednesday 27th May 2020 that we strongly recommend our churches do not open for gathered worship services from the 01st June 2020.

Further information will be distributed shortly providing guidelines on what procedures and protocols will be required when we open the doors of our churches. These will require careful preparation and I suggest we use the opportunity while our doors are still closed to prepare for this eventuality.

Synopsis of the decision taken by the leaders of the Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist

After prayer and consultation with leaders and congregants of the Diocese, Chapter has decided to prohibit the opening of churches for gathered worship from the 01st of June 2020.

This decision will stand until with professional advice and consensus amongst our leaders, both within the Diocese and in ACSA, we discern the time is right.

This decision was not lightly or easily made. The overriding rationale of Chapter is that we protect the lives of the people of this Diocese in the face of a merciless and silent virus. This rationale must override for now the desire and human need for interaction on a spiritual level.

Context of this statement

On the 27th March 2020 South Africa was put under a hard lockdown by our State President, The Honourable Cyril Ramaphosa. This was in response to the COVID-19 outbreak which was then in its early stages.

The rationale for a lockdown was to self-isolate and avoid contact with as many other people as possible, thereby limiting the spread of the SARS COV-2 virus. This hard lockdown meant all church services, except for funerals, would be stopped.

The Anglican Church in Southern Africa fully supported this decision, whilst acknowledging the lack of services would be a heavy burden spiritually on our people and that church income would decline because many of our congregants pay their tithes and offerings only whilst at church.

Simultaneously, the churches affiliated to the SACC and under the leadership of the National Church Leaders Forum (NCLF), began to envision when and how the church may re-open at some yet to be determined time in the future. The church leaders had no intention of forcing the

hand of government, but also did not want to wait any longer than was necessary due to the spiritual and economic impact of the lockdown on the church.

Accordingly a document was drawn up after research and consultation with affiliate churches by the SACC and NCLF, and which appealed to Government and the National Coronavirus Command Council to consider the churches request and to determine under their expertise when this would be most feasibly achieved. This document was presented to government during the month of May, level 4 of the lockdown.

Announcement by the President

On the evening of Tuesday 26th May President Ramaphosa announced the lifting of restrictions on gathered worship services for all religious groups in South Africa. There would nevertheless be strict conditions, which would be announced later by the relevant government ministers so appointed. The lifting of these restrictions would be from the 01st of June 2020.

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba described his response to this announcement as being one of 'awe and trepidation'. He also called on the church to wait for further guidance from the regulations to be promulgated by government and the advice to come from ACSA leadership. We were, he said, to be 'gentle as doves and wise as serpents' as we discerned the mind of Christ in this matter.

Chapter agreed with that part of the announcement that clergy be permitted to visit and offer spiritual counsel to people. This aspect of the President's announcement is not in contention.

Immediate response from Diocesan Chapter

The Chapter of the Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist began texting and discussing the permission to gather for worship immediately after the President's announcement. The matter was committed to prayer and to be discussed further the following morning. Chapter's initial response was a combination of joy and caution.

As Bishop I was uncomfortable in my spirit about the risk of opening churches for gathered worship too quickly, this especially within the context of our Diocese and that we were yet at the projected national infection peak of COVID-19. Jenny and I spent a lot of time talking and praying about this and seeking wisdom and advice from our Lord that evening and early the Wednesday morning.

Early Wednesday morning I felt sufficiently convicted to mention my concern on the Synod of Bishop's Whatsapp Group and our Diocesan Chapter Whatsapp Group.

The Chapter group were quick to respond and to a person all expressed their equal concern and hesitation. Several of the Archdeacons discussed the announcement with their respective clergy and leaders to seek their opinion and advice.

The responses gleaned were unanimous that the Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist should proceed with great caution and should seriously consider not opening churches for gathered worship until further discussion and preparation had been done and consensus reached as to the timing of any gathered worship.

Ad Hoc decision by Chapter

By Wednesday evening the 27th May it seemed clear to me as Bishop that most of the leaders of our churches were not in favour of immediately resuming gathered worship, and with the

approval of Chapter I cautioned against any services being conducted in June, and asked that this decision be communicated to all churches. We would wait for further advice and counsel.

There were indications that at least one church was planning to gather for worship, because the President had said so. The relevant Archdeacon wrote a formal letter to all in his Archdeaconry appealing that we wait for further advice. This letter was followed the next day with a Whatsapp message to the Wardens and leadership of the churches in that Archdeaconry.

I also contacted a senior medical doctor on the Diocesan COVID-19 advisory panel to assess him of the decision and rationale thereof made by Chapter and to seek his opinion and advice. He was in full and strong support of the decision. He further undertook to consult with colleagues and draw up a set of medically advised requirements and conditions necessary before any of our churches open for worship.

Therefore

Chapter and the COVID-19 advisory panel hereby prohibits the gathering for worship in any church in the Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist. This decision irrespective of the permission granted by the President.

This decision will stand until as Chapter we receive professional advice from the COVID-19 advisory panel, Diocesan and ACSA leadership, and this in the light of our discernment of the mind of Christ.

Our decision in no way challenges the authenticity and best intentions of our President but is our acting responsibly for our own safety – which is very much what our President appealed for in our responses to his announcement.

It must be noted that in the fluid and evolving conditions of the spread of COVID-19 we cannot predict when we might deem it right to meet for gathered worship. This decision by Chapter may stand for longer than the month of June.

However, Chapter will be monitoring the situation closely and we are well aware of the spiritual and economic impact the lockdown is having on the Diocese, especially amongst those who do not have access to data and technology and who are feeling terribly isolated because of very little or no interaction with their church through digital means.

The overriding rationale of Chapter is to protect the lives of the people of this Diocese in the face of a merciless and silent virus. This rationale must override for now the desire and human need for interaction on a spiritual level.

Theological Reflection

I share with you one occurrence from Scripture when it was right and proper to delay any venturing into the outside world. I acknowledge Archdeacon Gail Blunden from whom I first heard this theological rationale.

In the account of Noah and when the Ark eventually grounded on solid land (Genesis 8), Noah did not immediately release the animals and his family. He first waited three months whilst the waters subsided, and he strove to discern the proper time. It was only after a further period of forty-days that he released a raven and later a dove. At first the birds returned to the ark because there was still the danger of the water, several weeks later the dove returned with a green leaf. Again, after a wait of seven-days the dove was released, and this time it did not return.

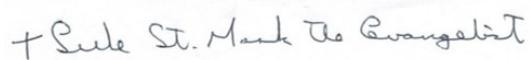
In the mind of Noah and in his relationship and obedience with his God, Noah waited until the proper time to open the doors of the Ark. The danger of the water had sufficiently subsided to persuade the dove it could now live outside of the confinement of the Ark, and Noah too recognised the time was right.

I suggest we likewise need to wait for the allotted time to pass. We need to discern what will be for us the dove to indicate the passing of this danger, and simultaneously to discern the moment God through Christ permits the opening of the doors of the Church.

In conclusion

We appeal for your cooperation in this decision by Chapter and assure you of our best intentions.

Yours in the love and obedience of the leadership of Christ.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "† Luke St. Mark the Evangelist". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

† Luke and Chapter
Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist
29 May 2020