



Pastoral Letter from Bishop Jay Behan in Response to COVID-19

March 20, 2020

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (Psalm 90:1-2)*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

These are extraordinary times. Amid the global coronavirus pandemic, it feels as though everything has changed overnight. Yet our God is still sovereign. The Lord is still on his throne, and Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Our trust and our hope are in him, and we rejoice together that our citizenship is in heaven.

Yet while we are citizens of heaven, we are also citizens of New Zealand. We love our nation and its people, and we long to be good citizens and good neighbours to those around us. Accordingly, these extraordinary times require us to take extraordinary measures.

I am therefore directing that the churches of CCAANZ suspend all public gatherings after (but not including) Sunday, March 22nd. This includes (but is not limited to) all Sunday gatherings, midweek church services, camps and conferences, and public youth or children's ministries.

I am also directing that the Lord's Supper not be shared at any public gatherings this Sunday.

Weddings and funerals may proceed as usual, within government requirements and guidelines.

These measures would have seemed unthinkable just a few short weeks ago. Yet as this crisis has grown, it has become clear that all of us need to make sacrifices and play our part to help stop the spread of this terrible virus. Cancelling our regular public gatherings is a very real and practical way in which we can care for the most vulnerable among us—not only those who attend our churches, but also all members of our wider community who would be particularly endangered by the spread of this virus.

But even as we take this decisive action, we remain absolutely committed to the ongoing mission and ministry of our churches. This temporary measure is important, but it does not define us. What defines us is—and always will be—the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and our desire to love and serve one another in Jesus' name. Therefore, we need to consider what gospel ministry and mission may look like as we enter this 'new normal' for a time.

The gathering of God's people is vitally important, a precious gift not to be taken for granted. While our larger public gatherings will not be possible for some time, it is my hope that more small private gatherings will spring up as a way for God's people to stay connected to one another. As a Diocese, we will work together to enable and resource these gatherings in various ways.

For example, I am encouraging our ministers to continue to lead God's people through the regular teaching and preaching of God's word, perhaps through pre-recorded sermons made available online, or via live streams on a Sunday. We envisage church members meeting together in homes—with small gatherings perhaps based around existing Bible study groups or geographical proximity—to listen to this teaching, pray together, sing God's praises, and encourage one another. Of course, these private gatherings would be restricted to those showing no symptoms of ill health, and will need to follow the best available advice around 'social distancing'. And they will in no way replace our large public gatherings, which we long to resume as soon as possible (we don't know when this will be possible; we will monitor the unfolding situation and provide regular updates). But we hope and trust that these smaller gatherings will provide a way for us to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" in the meantime.

For those parishes where it's not possible to provide in-house, video-based teaching and preaching, a list of easily accessible live-streamed Sunday services from other churches will be provided.

We also realise that these kinds of gatherings will pose significant technical challenges for some. Therefore, we will be working closely with local churches to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and resources to establish new forms of teaching ministry, as well as ensuring that churches can provide technical advice to parishioners who may need help in accessing these resources.

We will also be asking children's ministry teams to work with parents and caregivers to provide resources that will help them teach and encourage their children in age-appropriate ways, both on a Sunday and throughout the week. The Diocese will be liaising with local churches to help facilitate this process.

I recognise that cancelling Sunday gatherings may have significant financial consequences for some churches. Ministers will be addressing their churches on this subject, encouraging cash givers to commence regular online giving or to save cash gifts until a later time. Please continue to give cheerfully and sacrificially to the work of the gospel.

More importantly, we will have people in our churches affected by health concerns, facing financial loss or uncertainty, and dealing with stress as their lives change dramatically. This will require us to be thoughtful, kind, selfless, and generous.

Of course, Sunday gatherings are just the beginning of the ministry of our local churches. At this stage, there is no need for midweek Bible study groups to be suspended (though groups should follow best practices around social distancing, and no one should attend these groups when feeling sick). Other private gatherings can continue in line with government advice.

Even at the best of times, God calls on his people to consider creative ways that we can bring the unchanging message of the gospel to one another and to our neighbours. Just as the apostle Paul's desire was to "become all things to all people so that by all possible means [he] might save some," so we are all now called to consider how we might give of ourselves to

love and serve others during this extraordinary time. For example, we are already considering how we can use the coming Easter season to reach out together to our friends and neighbours—many of whom will be looking for hope at a time like this.

Perhaps our desire to care for one another will mean taking the time to visit someone else for prayer and mutual encouragement (health-permitting). For others, it may mean collecting groceries for those who are self-isolating, or going the extra mile to contact those who, for whatever reason, can't be visited in person. Perhaps we can all make it a habit to make a few phone calls each day to see how others are feeling and to pray together.

Whatever we do, it will be vital that we find ways to stay connected to one another. The age of 'social distancing' must not become the age of 'relational distancing'. On the contrary, let us step toward one another in love and kindness, using the technology and the other means that God has provided to care for each other during an unprecedented time.

It will also be vitally important to make sure that personal spiritual disciplines are in place. Make time for daily prayer and Bible reading. Gather with your family or flatmates for a few minutes of Bible and thanksgiving each day. Again, the Diocese will support your ministers and local churches as they encourage and resource you in these daily habits.

More than anything, let us all—as individuals and as churches—fix our eyes on Jesus and put our hope in him. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)

Remember, too, that “the word of God is not bound” (2 Timothy 2:9). The gospel began its spread through what we would now call 'house churches', and the Lord Jesus promised that whenever two or three gather together in his name, he is among them. As we continue to hold out the word of life to others, we can do so with the eager expectation that God will continue to feed his people and draw people to himself. The Lord has promised, “my word ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)

Please join me in continuing to pray to our sovereign God:

- That he would halt the spread of this coronavirus and spare further loss of life

- That he would guide researchers to find a vaccine and effective therapeutic treatments
- That he would “teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12)
- That he would make us “strong and courageous” during this extraordinary time
- That he would enable us to step toward one another and toward our neighbours in love, and that with his help we would be a great blessing to our communities
- That he would care and provide for all those who are particularly affected: medical professionals, businesses, the vulnerable, the lonely, the elderly, and others
- That many would turn to him and find the hope that Jesus offers during this crisis

Your brother in Christ,

Jay Behan

Bishop, Church of Confessing Anglicans