



Tools for pastoral care in Covid-19 lockdown time

Covid-19 suddenly changed the world we are living in. It became clear that the way churches function have changed, and will never be the same again. Pastors face new challenges. They have to make huge adaptations in the way they do their pastoral work; they need to search for new answers on increasingly difficult questions; the need and suffering of people they have to care for pastorally, grew exponentially bigger; they also have to come to terms with their own fears and anxieties.

Five topics are considered in this document:

1. As a first theme, Dr Gideon van der Watt is reflecting on the difficult theological question of God versus evil, a question that will undoubtedly become more prominent in this time (p2).
2. In a second section, Prof Jan-Albert van der Berg shares some pastoral keys for the Covid-19 lockdown time – foundational guidelines for a healthy pastoral approach (p4).
3. In the third article, Dr Juanita Meyer is looking at the increasingly relevant phenomenon of grief, the necessity of coming to terms with loss. And she is helping us to rediscover the importance of lamentation, referring to the Book of Lamentations (p6).
4. Rev Dawid Mouton gives some practical advice on how to assist people who are victims of family- and gender based violence, which is also becoming a matter of grave concern in these days (p12).
5. In a last contribution, Dr Gideon van der Watt is reflecting on some general challenges pastors face in continuing with their ministry, worship and prayer amidst the changes Covid-19 introduced, and suggesting some practical advice (p14).

With these reflections, Christian Literature Fund hopes to make a contribution in assisting pastors in their calling in these days. For more (affordable and free) material, go to www.clf.co.za

1. God's Providence and the existence of evil: a mystery

Throughout the ages, Christians confessed the sovereignty of God's will: God is ever present, taking meticulous care of everything in God's creation. God is almighty, and nothing happens outside God's will; not even a hair will fall from our head (Matthew 10:30). This is what the church confessed as the *Providence of God*; a confession in opposition to those who believe God withdrew from creation, allowing the creation to run by its own dynamics. To them God is remote and aloof – a view of God also known as *deism*.

But this doctrine of the Providence of God is severely tested by the sheer power of evil in this world, forces contradicting and opposing God's will. The reality of what we may call natural *evil* cannot be denied – we only have to point to the destruction and suffering caused by the current Covid-19 pandemic. And then there is also *moral evil*, the pain and affliction caused by human beings, individually and collectively. In South Africa, for instance, we still suffer from the scars of Apartheid. The question therefore arises: If God is indeed almighty and good, ever present, then why is God allowing these evil forces? Is God powerless to prevent this? Or is it happening within God's will? Is God perhaps not actively willing it, but nevertheless allowing it? Or even worse, is God maybe the ultimate cause of these evil forces! Is it possibly God's punishment, God's wrath aimed at a sinful world? Or is God incapable to overcome this evil force, at least for now? Will evil only be conquered one day, at the end of time? Even the Psalmist therefore cried out: "*How long, O Lord?*" (13:1), or: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (22:2). The question is: how can God's Providence (good care) be reconciled with the mystery of evil and suffering?

We tend to seek consolation in various answers. A first answer would be that we humans are just incapable of understanding God's actions. God is in heaven and we are on earth; God's ways are inexplicable and like Job we have to put our hand on our mouth, not trying to unravel this mystery. A second possible answer is: God is indeed punishing us through suffering. Is the Bible not teaching us to fear the wrath of God? We, the sinful world, deserve to be punished! Or a third answer might be: God is teaching us something, using suffering as faith formation, calling us to conversion and obedience. Didn't Peter say: we may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials... so that the proven genuineness of your faith may be refined ... purify it like through fire (1 Peter 1:7). Others give a fourth answer: God is not yet in control, but will only in future be victorious, in the hereafter. Or a fifth answer: God needs our cooperation. God will erase evil only through our activities, by our active participation in protesting against and combatting evil (for instance faiths or ideologies where the focus is only on human effort, human power, science and technology). Each of the above answers has some biblical truth to it; it does give some consolation. However, the danger is that these answers might just provide too easy or too simple explanations and are therefore open for abuse. For instance, it allows shifting of the burden and responsibility onto the victims of malevolent suffering. If only people could stop asking such questions, change their ways, learn to have strong faith and observe fervent prayer, or play their part in combatting evil (a list of sins is usually mentioned here), evil and the suffering caused by it will disappear. This is what many preachers often claim! In facing the terrible reality and power of evil, and our own vulnerability to it, and in experiencing existential anxiety, explanations like these do not really bring consolation. God's Providence and the reality of the existence and power of evil remains a mystery.

We must therefore admit, humbly so, that we just do not have adequate, rational answers to this age-old theological question, which is also called the *theodicy* question. Instead of looking for too easy escapes from suffering, and too easy answers, we should rather learn to face the inexplicable reality of suffering and our own fragility and mortality. And then learn to express our sorrow; learn to weep and grief and wait; and rediscover how to practise lament by “owning” the many lamentations in the book of Psalms and other Bible books. **But in lamenting, and this is where faith comes into it, we continuously seek God’s face, we bring our suffering, anxiety and helplessness before the Triune God. Our lament is directed at God. And then, instead of getting answers to the *why God?*-questions, we will encounter answers to the *where are you God?*-questions.**

Where is God? Where is God in our suffering? God is not far away, apathetic or aloof in our suffering; no, God is near us, close by, present. The Triune God entered into our human suffering, taking our suffering upon God self. In the Triune God’s inexplicable love, God is reaching out to us. This we see best in the salvific actions of the three Persons of the Trinity, which are acted out in the event of crucifixion. Moved by God’s love for the world, the Father suffers incomparable grief and loss in the passion and death of his beloved Son. Similarly, constrained by pure love for the world, Jesus Christ is taking our suffering and death upon himself. And from this agonising love, shared by the Father and Son, the Spirit emanates as Comforter, inspiring courage and hope to pray and work for the renewal of all things (see Migliore’s *Faith Seeking Understanding* p132 and Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* p246).



Zurbarán Agnus Dei, Prado Museum, c. 1635–1640,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamb_of_God

It is when we are met by the love of the Triune God, reaching out to us in our suffering, identifying with our affliction, embracing us who are suffering, that our hope is restored – hope despite the evil forces and against the despair of our suffering. The Spirit of God and of Jesus Christ then recovers our faith in the Providence of God, and opens our eyes for the goodness and grace of the Triune God – and so inspires us to work and pray for healing and restoration. The Spirit confirms this through the Word of God. The Spirit confirms that Jesus

overcame suffering, Jesus conquered death, and he rose again. And by testifying to this, the Spirit changes our lament into a song of praise. Already here, on this earth and amidst suffering, we will then be able to sing with the heavenly creatures before the Throne: *“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise”* (Revelation 5:12).

*Gideon van der Watt
(CLF)*

2. Some pastoral keys for the Covid-19 lockdown time

Isaiah 50:4: “The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens e morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.”

Ten days into the lockdown period, I received the following *WhatsApp* message from a minister, one of my friends:

I notice more and more that people are scared and this scares me! Almost everybody is afraid of the virus, others are anxious of falling ill, some are frightened of dying, and some are scared and worry a great deal about the time ahead, without work or money. Some even think the end of the world has come very near! What could I say to these people?

My friend’s message was sent with attached emoji’s, ones with big eyes and teeth wrenching. I answered the message, promising that I need time to think further. After a while I decided to call him and via *WhatsApp* video call we walked into each other’s study rooms – sitting around one “virtual” table – and started to discuss the following:

Key 1: Know yourself and acknowledge your own fears

We admitted to each other that it may be good to first of all acknowledge the fear, and even anxiety, in one self, before you even begin to assist others pastorally. Suddenly, in a couple of days, our whole world, but also our own, personal world, changed dramatically and permanently. Just the way in which our approach to the ministry in and of the congregation has changed during this last month, became a clear indication of this lasting change. It has been good that we could honestly acknowledge to each other that deep down inside ourselves we have the feeling that our own health and our future are not so sure anymore. The following days, weeks and months will have a big impact on us and our families.

Key 2: New ways of pastoral involvement

While talking on *WhatsApp* video call, we discovered that this time of the Corona pandemic, ironically enough, is also creating new opportunities for pastoral involvement with people and with each other. From a telephone discussion, SMS, *WhatsApp*, Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams (this is apart from all the other creative ways that people are inventing or applying anew in communicating over a distance), are all becoming new spaces to meet each other, discuss and assist each other pastorally. And yes, we even spoke about the, at fist very

strange, but later on wonderful experience to also be able to pray together and of for each other through cell phones.

Key 3: This particular time is requiring listening

Maybe it is precisely this thing of talking to one another that has become so important these days. People want to be heard, and they need to have the feeling that what they are saying is important enough to be taken seriously. In a time of abundant overflow of SMS's, WhatsApp messages and e-mails, it is important that pastors should be able to listen. We need to listen carefully, without wanting to speak too hurriedly or to give too quick answers. Just as the Servant in chapter 50:4-5 of Isaiah had to learn to listen; we need to learn to listen patiently and carefully to each other and to God – especially in this time we are living in.

Key 4: Listen, but especially also hearing

Part of good listening is proper hearing; to listen in such a way that the real message behind the words or the video's that are sent via Facebook or WhatsApp, will be heard. Of course we all laugh at these jokes being sent around, but it is sensible to understand that behind this humor, there is often hidden fear and anxiety. Regarding this, wise advice is that we must make sure what a person indeed wants to say, especially in these times. What are the prominent themes laying behind somebody's messages? Perhaps someone wants to convey the message that she is feeling lonely or that he is feeling worthless. It is important to remember that everybody does not have proper vocabulary to express themselves with sufficient clarity. Therefore, make sure what the real needs and desires are of the person who is approaching you for pastoral assistance. In these days people may have different



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needs: some might just long for a home-coming experience, being with someone – even if it is just through a SMS! – and to know that she is welcome and belongs somewhere. Others might want the experience that someone else understands the loss of health she suffered. Another person might want to express his fear of this time we are living in, but if you listen carefully, you actually hear anxiety over a broken relationship. Anxiety requires to be treated differently than merely telling someone not to be scared. Then it may indeed help to seek, hesitatingly and cautiously and together with the person seeking help, for God's presense in life and illness. Pastoral involvement in such a moment would mean that I assist somebody to discover that God's presense console one's deepest questions. That it gives meaning and hope.

Key 5: Hearing well leads to words of encouragement and hope

If one listens well like the Servant in Isaiah, you not only hear in a surprisingly new and right way, but you also know what to say ... and even how to say it. In order to develop the

necessary ability of discernment, one has to ask the right questions. What is the real need of the person talking to you, especially in this time of Covid-19? Is it about relationships? Is it perhaps about assistance for food or some other practical need? Is it maybe a spiritual question? Just like the words of the Servant of the book Isaiah are bringing hope, we also can, if we listen and hear properly, guide someone who is requesting it from us to having the right perspective. If a pastor learns to listen in this way, the Lord gives wisdom and enables us to speak words of consolation and encouragement. Perhaps the right pastoral approach in this time of Covid-19 is also to refer someone to a clinic or doctor or other specialist or to assist someone to plan and conduct a funeral, to arrange for food or other practical assistance or to indicate where such assistance can be found.

In the meantime, the WhatsApp connection between me and my friend – as it often goes with technology – started to break down. The signal wasn't that strong any more. Just before we hang up, we agreed that these keys that we discovered during our video call helped us to unlock new possibilities for pastoral care during this Covid-19 lockdown period... and it gave new keys of opening clarity on the meaning of this period itself.

1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have".

*Prof Jan-Albert van den Berg,
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3. Grief in a time of Covid-19 lockdown

The world has suddenly changed for everyone. Our sense of security is challenged by a lurking virus that stirs fear into the hearts of people. Our sense of stability is shaken by the realization that everything thought to be unfailing and unfaltering could indeed be torn to shreds by mere contact with another. Besides the real fear of illness – and in some cases death, – we fear what we do not know about this stranger, this uninvited visitor. We are not comfortable with not knowing. In an age of technology where knowledge is literally at the tip of our fingers, we do not understand what it is like, not knowing. But now we know. The result of not knowing, is in essence a sense of a loss of control.

This is the beginning of a series of losses experienced by people; losses which are inevitable, but nevertheless, unpleasant. Losses that we are not prepared for – unlike everything else in life where insurance companies assist us to prepare for – ironically - the 'unknowing', 'emergencies', or "in the unlikely event of ...", but somehow Covid-19 was not calculated into the "unlikely event of ...". No amount of money, or insurance could have protected us from this unpleasant visitation.

As it is, we find ourselves in a place of uncertainty. Some of us have already experienced numerous losses. Some big, some small, but all leaving an enduring mark on our identity. I say 'identity', because our past, our present and our future are encapsulated by the abstract concept of our identity. Our hopes, our dreams, our fears and of course, our faith are the building blocks of who we think we are. When our identity is threatened by the removal of

one or more of these building blocks, we face the danger of instability – an implosion – otherwise known as the experience of a crisis.

During the lockdown period experienced worldwide, and recently here in South Africa, many losses have been experienced. The first is the loss of freedom of movement, interpreted by some as a type of imprisonment. A loss of the freedom of movement causes a series of other losses, such as the loss of productivity and life-fulfilment through work. In turn, this might also cause a loss of income and livelihood and some may feel that they have lost the ability to provide for their families. Within the first week of the lockdown, police reports show that domestic violence increased dramatically, perhaps indicating a loss of a sense of power for some, and an unjust attempt to regain power through physical violence. Devastatingly, the victim of such violence experiences an immediate loss of human dignity and worth.

For some already suffering from anxiety and depression, they might experience an increased sense of fear of the virus and how it might affect their health and that of their families; for others they might experience a newfound sense that they do not feel safe in this world – a world previously experienced as safe and in our control – which causes anxiety never experienced before. In essence, depression and anxiety is a sense of loss of control.

Many people, if not all, experience a loss of relationality – of physical contact with a friend or a family member who provide comfort to their daily life and a sense of communion. Places of worship have temporarily closed their doors, resulting in a loss of spiritual communion with fellow believers and a community of support. Social media and the distribution of false information cause a loss of truth – a sense of what is truly going on in the world – which in turn causes fear and anxiety in undue proportions.



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An obvious loss if one becomes infected, is the loss of good health and for some the loss of their lives, and possibly a loved one. Perhaps the direct consequence is the loss of a sense of future – that things will never be normal again. This loss is embodied in a *loss of hope*. Hopelessness.

Thompson (1998: 21) states that

Loss is part of the human condition and an unavailable fixture of life. The inevitability of major loss, however, does not mean that many of us are well prepared to handle this type of stress.

The fact that we are unprepared to handle losses is unfortunate, because significant losses can result in the experience of many negative emotions, which disrupt our daily lives and if unresolved, can cause long-term psychological problems. The severity of the loss we experience is determined by the irreplaceability of whatever has been lost¹. This indicates that the trauma associated with the loss is not predetermined by what others regard a valid loss. The intensity of grief experienced after losing someone or something valuable, is the same for every type of loss, however insignificant in the eyes of others.

When a significant loss is experienced, a person might face a personal crisis. When a crisis is experienced a person might experience a temporary loss of the ability to cope sufficiently, and as a result, feelings of anxiety and depression increase². The response to a crisis in the event of a loss, is often grief.

Grief is "... a natural, normal, predictable and expected reaction" to a loss and involves the experience of intense, often negative emotions. It encompasses the experience of acute sorrow and deep sadness and is often embodied by physical symptoms of ill-health – a "tightness in the chest or throat, heart palpitations, dry mouth, shortness of breath or hollowness in the pit of the stomach"³. Often sleep and eating patterns are disrupted.

As uncomfortable as the process of grief is, it does have a purpose. Grieving helps us to express the impact of the loss on our being, often when words elude us. Through mourning we express our feelings about the loss; we express our protest at the loss, our desire to change what happened and our denial of what is happening. Grieving helps us to realise how valuable the object of our grief was to us, and to not take for granted other objects of our happiness that can just as easily be lost. For sorrow makes us appreciate joy, as death makes us appreciate life ... herein lies the paradox of life and death – without death, without loss, our purpose-driven life would be meaningless.

The Bible contains many examples of people who experienced losses, and as a result grieved, or mourned these losses. One such well known book is the book of Lamentations, which expresses the remembrance and mourning of the Jewish people of their fallen city and kingdom⁴. The importance of this remembrance traditions is highlighted by the fact that the book of Lamentations is read on Tisha b' Av as a deliberate *remembrance* of this great loss to the Jewish people. Not only do they not fear the experience of grief, but they choose to relive that experience in respect of those who had to endure these losses.

¹ Wright, N., 2011, The complete guide to crisis and trauma counseling: what to do and say when it matters most, Bethany House Publishers: Minneapolis, Minnesota, p. 52

² Callahan, J., 1994, Defining crisis and emergencies crisis 15(4), pp. 164-171

³ Wright, N., 2011, The complete guide to crisis and trauma counseling: what to do and say when it matters most, Bethany House Publishers: Minneapolis, Minnesota, p. 70.

⁴ H.L. Ellison as cited by David Guzik (2017), Study Guide for Lamentations 3, the Blue Letter Bible, iTunes Application

Lamentations 3 is divided into three different sections, of which the first is an extension of Jeremiah's sorrow and grief already narrated in the first two chapters of the book. This should give an indication of the prominent place that the act of grieving has in the lives of the Jewish people. Grief was not something that the Israelites feared, denied or avoided. Grief was embraced by the act and many times rituals that accompanied mourning, such as



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weeping or wailing, bowing their heads, sprinkling ashes, dust or dirt on themselves, growing their beards or hair, tearing their clothing or wearing uncomfortable garments and walking barefoot⁵. They actively lamented their sad fate – complaining to God about their afflictions, despair, at times expressing their anger towards God for allowing such losses to be experienced.

These acts expressed their repentance, appeal and sorrow. For the ancient people of God, grieving ultimately expressed their “regret and humility before their Maker⁶”. In turn, the mourning rituals they engaged in, served as recognition that humans are frail and that this is what life would be without the existence of God's goodness in it⁷. To grieve in this manner is to acknowledge that there is something spiritual and sacred in grief; and that “[G]rief is neither a problem to be solved nor a problem to be overcome. It is a sacred expression of love ... a sacred sorrow”⁸.

This is what Jeremiah did. He took his time to grieve. He mourned. He took time to remember and think about what is lost. He laments the impact of this loss on his life:

19 I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.
20 I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

And then he says:

21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

Suddenly Jeremiah's mood is lifted; his mind is sober and he realises:

22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

⁵ cf. Encyclopedia of the Bible, Biblegateway.com, Mourning

⁶ cf. Shir 2017:online source “Mourning as a Hebrew”, <https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/sitting-sackcloth-ashes/>

⁷ cf. Shir 2017:online source “Mourning as a Hebrew”, <https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/sitting-sackcloth-ashes/>

⁸ Dr Gerald May as cited by Wright 2011:74

Jeremiah remembers that because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed – we are not finished. Jeremiah remembers that hope is not possible without the goodness of God in our lives. Because of God, because of God's providence, because of God's goodness, we have hope. We are never totally and fully desolated. For God has compassion. For God cares. Chuck Smith⁹ accentuates this realisation beautifully:

God's love is not contingent upon what you are, but upon what He is.

This Jeremiah remembers. He moves from remembering his pain, to remembering God's compassion. Jeremiah faced a crisis. He did not face a problem; nor did he face a loss alone – he faced a *krisis*. The very nature of a crisis is its tendency to bring one to the proverbial fork in the road. The noun crisis comes from the Latinised form of the Greek word *krisis*, which refers to the turning point of a disease – the critical moment in which a person could either get better or worse¹⁰. In essence a crisis offers various opportunities of change, transformation and growth. The loss is the 'wound' and grieving is the cleansing of the wound. A crisis cannot be resolved before our bodies and our minds have not been cleansed of the infections of disappointment, of longing, of sorrow and of anger. But when cleansing – or purging – took place, hope for renewal arises. For Jeremiah, his hope lay in the fact that God is his portion, God is his salvation, and in salvation lies renewal:

24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him."

25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;

26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

A path has been chosen. The 'disease' took a turn and renewal is certain because God is compassionate, and his love is unfailing

But though he causes grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. (Lamentations 3:32)

God causes grief, God is in fact the Creator of grief – but be careful, not the creator of evil, pain and sorrow – but of grief. God is there with us in our grief; our bodies are crafted in such a way that when our pain is so deep seated to the extent that words escape us, our whole body turns to Him, in our sorrow, in our grief. Through the wails our bodies call out to Him; through the tears, we are comforted by God – our wounds are washed and soothed. Roy Fairchild¹¹ says,

Genuine grief is the deep sadness and weeping that expresses the acceptance of our inability to do anything about our losses. It is a prelude to letting go, to relinquishment. It is dying that precedes resurrection.

Jeremiah realised that in his despair, in his grief lie hope, because God hears our cries, because God is there in our grief, and because God is compassionate:

⁹ Chuck Smith C2000 Series on Lamentations 1-5, the Blue Letter Bible, iTunes Application

¹⁰ See <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/crisis>

¹¹ Fairchild, R.W., 1980, Finding hope again: A pastor's guide to counseling depressed person, Harper Collins: San Francisco, p. 117

31 For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.
32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.

From Jeremiah's lamentation something valuable is learned about grief during these times. Something psychology has found to be true: embrace your grief, as the "way out of grief is [ultimately] through it"¹².

In their book, *On Grief and Grieving*¹³, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, discuss the five stages of grieving as they have identified it through their research. David Kessler later on added a sixth stage to complete the non-sequential cycle. These stages are: Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining, Acceptance and Meaning.

Something of these stages can be identified in the Lamentations of Jeremiah and helps to give some framework to guide people through the grieving process as they mourn their loss. As such, Lamentations shows the importance of firstly identifying exactly what has been lost, and why it is experienced as a loss. This understanding helps one to properly grieve the loss, by expressing one's feelings of disbelief, anger, and depression. By actively engaging in mourning rituals, one's wishes for the loss to not be true are negotiated with God. As one's sorrow subsides, and the focus moves away from your one's pain and desolation, the loss is gradually accepted. Through acceptance our minds and our hearts remember the grace and compassion of God, and a glimmer of hope can be felt. Where there is hope, there is renewal – there is a future. As Christians we are allowed to grieve – we are even expected to do so. But through the Salvation of the blood of Jesus Christ we are always brought from a state of hopelessness, to a state of hopefulness.

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¹² Wright, N., 2011, The complete guide to crisis and trauma counseling: what to do and say when it matters most, Bethany House Publishers: Minneapolis, Minnesota, p. 74

¹³ Kübler-Ross, E and Kessler, D., 2005, *On Grief and Grieving*, SCRIBNER: New York.

4. Family- and gender based violence in the time of Covid-19

On the 2nd of April the Minister of Police announced that in South Africa, during the first week of the Covid-19 lockdown, there have already been more than 80 000 reported cases of violence against women and children. This number of reported cases was eventually adapted to 2300 cases (in reality it could however be much higher) – still enough reason for great concern! Can this be? In Namibia and other Southern African countries the situation is no better. On 6th of April the New York Times reported that domestic violence is worldwide on the increase, mostly due to the restriction of movement. As sad as it may be, this tendency makes logical sense.

Thousands of women and children, who might under normal circumstances be exposed to gender- and family violence, are now trapped in one house with the person responsible for this violence. Many people normally find restrictions of any kind very difficult; therefore one can expect that their levels of frustration would even be much higher in this time of limited movement. For others the fact that they have no access to alcohol is a huge frustration. Others are irritated because they cannot go to work. In many families relationships are normally tight and communication and social interactions tense. Being therefore forced to living together in secluded spaces (often very tight spaces!), chances for frustrations, conflict and even violence are so much higher. Many women and children who daily experience the sorrow and pain of violence find going to their places or work or schools a kind of escape. This is not possible any more. Facilities of protection (shelters) may also be filled already, or are not accessible. For many it became impossible to even leave their houses or yards. Consequently, the lack of physical contact with other people results in them not observing the physical and emotional “markers” of violence. The opportunity to discuss one’s trauma or fear with someone you trust is also limited. It may even be impossible to make a phone call or send an electronic message. Many women and children, but sometimes also men, feel captured, walled in, and therefore lonely and anxious – especially if they have to share a small space, day after day, with someone who is abusing them.

Violence and abuse can take on many forms in these times. There is physical violence, verbal violence, emotional attacks, financial abuse, etc. New forms of violence are also becoming more prominent in these days: locking up a person, forbidding her to go to the shop, taking away a person’s cell phone, forcing a person not to have contact with others, etc.. Methods of violent abuse could also include: prohibiting members of the family access to food or money, to sanitising equipment, medical cards, even medicine – the list can be long.

What can be done? What can I do as spiritual leader? How can I help in these circumstances? Must I even get involved? We are all in a state of restriction and it is not as if I can easily go on house visitation? In John 21:16 the Lord Jesus Christ again gave Peter his commission and calling, and the Lord is giving it also to us, his church (and especially pastors in his church): *“Again Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you love me?”. He answered: ‘yes Lord, you know that I love you’. Jesus said: ‘Take care of my sheep’.* Jesus himself linked this command inextricably to love for Him. The Covid-19 pandemic does not make us less responsible for the flock of Jesus. To the contrary, it underlines this calling! But what can I do? In a very practical way, the following may be considered.

1. Dear colleague, fellow pastor, take care of yourself: physically, emotionally, and spiritually! You cannot do much if you are ill, exhausted, drained, suffering from emotional and spiritual emptiness. Sharpen your spiritual discipline in these times, connect with colleagues and keep in contact with your local leadership team.
2. Try to maintain contact with your members. Send SMS's, make WhatsApp calls, send encouraging texts, post relevant information or phone those who need you as much as possible.
3. If you know of cases where families have challenges, in terms of relationship or even violence, maybe from previous events, take extra trouble to regularly contact these families. You cannot, however, take sole responsibility to reach out to all cases; make therefore use of your pastoral team or church council members.
4. Know where to seek support. Make sure you have the relevant contact numbers of the emergency services (police, ambulance, hospital, etc.). Of special importance is the contact details of the emergency or "life line" for family- or gender based violence. Give this information to your members.
5. Find out which local counsellors or caregivers or even psychologists may be in a position to render services, if only on telephone then. Inform members about this available support.
6. Communicate with members of your congregation to find out which challenges they face amidst this pandemic. Help them to distinguish signs of frustration and stress and seek help from other organisations, the local clinic, the doctor or even yourself. Relevant and simple information often help a lot.
7. Look for resources on the internet and read about the handling of family and gender based violence. Share these resources with your members.
8. If you suspect that a person needs urgent help but cannot talk, help making creative plans for a private discussion.
9. In severe cases, assist persons to consider a "safety plan" or an "escape plan" and to prepare for it.
10. Encourage people to maintain communication with others and to speak about their anxieties with those they trust. Encourage members to inform you confidentially if they suspect domestic violence in neighbouring houses.
11. Make sure that victims and survivors of family- and gender based violence realise that they are not the guilty ones, having to take blame for the violence. Consider your own language, never be judgmental, be pastorally sensitive, genuine, considerate, understanding, prepared to serve, always giving hope.



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In Christ, there is always hope for healing and reconciliation, also in the most dysfunctional relationships. And we as pastors may just be instrumental in dealing with conflict and restoring healthy relations.

The following emergency numbers can be of help:

RSA - 0800 150 150 (GGG/GBV) / 0800 055 555 – Childline / 0800 123 321 - Child Emergency Line / 0861 4 CHILD (24453) – Child Welfare SA 087 822 1516

Namibië: 10111 - Polisie / 116, 106 and 061 232 221 Childline-Lifeline +264 61 226 889

Here are also some valuable websites with valuable information you may recommend to your members:

<https://www.restoredrelationships.org/news/2020/03/19/working-home-and-domestic-abuse/>

<https://www.end-violence.org/protecting-children-during-covid-19-outbreak>

https://www.ucc.org/health_and_wholeness_in_the_midst_of_covid_19

<https://hds.harvard.edu/life-at-hds/religious-and-spiritual-life/spiritual-resources-during-covid-19-pandemic>

Rev Dawid Mouton

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5. Ministry, worship and prayer in time of Covid-19 – some practical thoughts by a fellow pastor

Covid-19 disrupted our societies, even more so and on a deeper level than we might realise at this moment. It became clear that this social and economic disruption will have lasting effects, even on the way we “do church” and express our spirituality. The way churches normally function in coming together, singing and dancing like one body, collectively listening to a sermon, jointly confessing our faith, worshipping and praying together, sharing our faith, bringing our thank offerings – what we confess as the “communion of the saints” – changed dramatically. And so have the role of pastors. This time of lockdown will also have a lasting effect on the role of ministers, what ministers focus on in how we execute our practical ministry, how we pray, how we preach, how we take pastoral care of our flock.

Self-care

This time of mourning and seclusion can also be an opportunity for self-care as pastors, for resting, being with one's family, exercising, doing the things we normally neglect, reading and studying, and for prayer and contemplation. Let us use it wisely.

Worship events

Worship services in a church building have currently been stopped; church buildings are empty. But that does not mean worship itself has been cancelled. Pastors already found many new and creative ways of continuing with the proclamation of the Word: live streaming, videos on Facebook and YouTube, SMS messages and WhatsApp groups, written sermons ... the list goes on. The message remains the same, the packaging differs. A good thing is that pastors had to learn to make it shorter, more compact, to really think about what to say, and how to say it with fewer words. We discovered new possibilities of electronic communications for ministry. On social media, however, there is an overflow of messages, and unfortunately often with dubious theological content. But it is nevertheless good that members also receive message from their own pastors – the personal link remains important in pastoral care. In doing a presentation, we should be careful not to project ourselves as pastors too much into the centre of our productions (social media can rudely expose this); it must be about the Good News of the Bible, pointing away from ourselves. The focus of the Good News should be on the love and care of God, the salvation and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the communion and consolation of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to realise that we cannot really duplicate or try to create a real church service on a virtual media platform. The settings are different, the symbolism and rituals should accordingly also be changed, without giving up too much of the meaning of worship. Ministering baptism or celebrating the Lord's Supper (which cannot be but concrete, in-the-body events, in communion with others) will be difficult, if not impossible. Not celebrating the Lord's Supper can be a way of fasting, lamenting and longing for one day when we gather again, gladly celebrating the Lord's Supper or Mass as body of Christ. (Where a church's polity allows it, families could be urged or guided to celebrate the Lord's Supper, as families). Funerals are even more difficult. When a body has been cremated, the family might wait for a funeral service at a later stage. But the majority of Christians want to properly bury their loved ones, as soon as possible. This has to be scaled down in these times, to only the closest family in attendance, and maybe only a ritual at the grave, while keeping social distancing, protecting each other.

A prayer ministry

In these times we rediscover the importance of prayer as central element in our ministry. Prayer breaks through all kinds of boundaries; it even conveys us into the space of intimate communion with the Triune God. In this space of communion with God, we may bring before God our own fears, our own questions, and our own anxieties of what the future will bring. In this space we may confess our own doubts, our weaknesses and our inabilities as pastors. We should again learn how to lament before God, even with rituals of lamenting. But this is also the holy space where we could intercede, like real priests, for and on behalf of others, bringing their sorrows and sufferings before the throne of God – this is our priestly calling, our prayer ministry. We may make a list, and go through the list

systematically: praying for our own family; interceding for our congregation members, one by one; praying for the lonely, the elderly, the vulnerable and the sick; praying for those who are rendering service at the forefront of the battle, the medical service providers, the caregivers, the police and others protecting us, those who have to expose themselves to this virus; and we should also pray for our leaders, particularly our president. We have ample time for this ministry; it will not be a wasteful activity. It will be good if we could tell people that we are praying for them, or even if we could briefly pray with them on the phone.

Prayer is also meant to praise God, to glorify God's Name, to thank God for blessings, for the life we receive from God's hand. This we should do, despite the circumstances around us. It will help us to strengthen our own faith again. It will therefore be good if we could also learn to pray using the words of the Bible (Psalms, for instance) or our Hymn books or denominational prayer books. We may even write out prayers and send it out to others.

It is also very important that we work towards establishing prayer networks, guiding others to join in prayer, at specific times or in creative ways. Elders and intercessors should be equipped for a prayer ministry.



<https://pcg.church/articles/5467/why-pray>

Family as church

This time of lockdown is helping us to rediscover the importance of family life, the exemplary role parents should play, the opportunity of spending much more time together; learning to depend on each other, helping each other. And we again realise that faith formation is something primarily happening at home, in families. The family is the core of being church; we only have to read the story of the growth of the early church in the book of Acts for proof of this. So often in our ministry we focus mainly on adults, neglecting the needs of children. And this might easily also happen in this time of lock down when children cannot attend school or Sunday school or play outside.

Pastors' role in this regard would be to encourage parents or grandparents to use this opportunity wisely, to make time for reading the Bible together, listening to or telling Bible stories, discussing faith and other emotional, spiritual, moral or practical issues, listening carefully to our children, praying together. Parents should set the example in strengthening

deep relationships of love and respect, for each other, but also strengthening our relationship with God, during this time of crisis. Pastors should help to equip parents for their role in the faith formation of their children; there are so many creative tools and networks available, on radio, television, in books and on the internet, or members of the congregation could be requested to share their knowledge and skills and find effective, practical ways of being church at home.

Community involvement

Even if our movement is restricted, a pastor's role in serving the community remains; it might even increase in these days. There are so many people with desperate needs: loneliness, poverty and hunger, vulnerability to domestic violence, neglect of children or the elderly, homelessness, the list can go on. Institutions of care, social services, NGO's, the police, community networks and leaders on different levels are playing a huge role. The church should render them a helping hand. This assistance can often be arranged by telephone; funds can be raised. Neighbours could be requested to help each other. Christens should be known for their compassion in times like these. It is amazing how much kindness and connectivity can be created through modern technology. We pastors should help activating a community response in the traditional ubuntu fashion. Pastors should continue playing a leading role in their communities, creating awareness, encouraging others, giving leadership, serving the community. This crisis is creating a volatile situation; desperation and anger can easily boil over in our communities. Pastors could play a constructive role to prevent further chaos and even violence. And, if necessary, pastors should not be scared in raising a prophetic and critical voice against instances of injustice, corruption, neglect, people who abuse this situation, etc.

For many, this time of mourning is experienced as something forced onto communities, something from outside or above, without taking into consideration the particular challenges local communities face. Isolation may be impossible in the long run; disrupting the economic en social functioning for a prolonged time, will not be an option; it may cause even greater harm than the virus itself. People need God, but they also need each other. In the near future we pastors will have to help finding responsible, balanced answers for our local contexts, ways to recover from this disruption, and healing again. Let us pray thoughtfully for wisdom.

And maybe this crisis is helping us to realise: church is not so much about **going to church**, but about **being church**. In this we are called to follow Jesus, imitate his love and reflect his compassion.

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(CLF)