



Anglican Diocese
of the Northern Territory

March 27th, 2020

Bishop's letter to clergy and laypeople of the Diocese of the Northern Territory

Dear brothers and sisters,

We are living in very unusual circumstances. It is not the first time that human communities have experienced times of severe sickness, but now that the world is so interconnected perhaps we feel it more than humans from past times. It is so important to remember and hold on to the truth that God loves the world, God rules the world, God has a goal for the world, and we are in God's hands. The gospel reminds us that the risen Jesus has promised to be with us to the end of the age. Jesus specifically says he is with us when two or three are gathered in his name – and I don't think God splits hairs about definitions of gathering. There were no Zoom meetings when Jesus walked the earth, but in our technology, a Zoom meeting is a gathering. And Jesus is with us by his Spirit even when we aren't gathered with others.

I sent an email message to church rectors and some others last Thursday, March 19th, announcing that we were suspending our Sunday services from March 23rd. Since then, the government has advised much stricter measures to try to limit the spread of the coronavirus. This includes severe limitations on the number of people attending funerals and weddings, and the closure of many recreational facilities, particularly those indoors. It is clear that the government wants us to refrain from all unnecessary contact, including in homes. As Christians, I believe we should be setting the best possible example in following not just the letter of the law but what the government is trying to achieve. So we should not be meeting in homes, even with a small number of people – no face-to-face Bible study groups, youth groups, even one-to-one home visits, except when absolutely necessary for a definite pastoral reason. We must find technological ways of meeting up with others, including phone, Skype, Zoom and other platforms. Where possible, our church buildings should be shut, so that people can't enter them for private prayer, even with social distancing. The virus remains contagious when left on surfaces, and open church buildings send a signal that we think it is all right for people to use them. There is a risk of infection from someone leaving the virus on a surface in a church building, and somebody else picking it up. As I said in my previous email, it is far better if we look back in a few months time and say we went overboard, than to look back and regret that we didn't do more because people have died as a result. I know that this is difficult, and difficult to explain in a cross-cultural environment such as we have in our diocese. People may think that these restrictions are giving in to fear, but really they are trying to express love for our neighbour, and use of the wisdom God has given us. It would be terrible if Christians were blamed in a few months because they were seen as trying to sabotage what the government wants us to do. The best thing we can do, if at all possible, is to stay at home.

The Chief Minister, Michael Gunner, in one of his press conferences, seemed to be suggesting a different way forward for remote Aboriginal communities because of the extra measures to protect them. I have been thinking about this, and have come to the view that because of various factors – essential service providers continuing to come in and out, movement between communities, FIFO workers in some places, and the vulnerability of the population, we should not be making exceptions to our diocesan guidelines even in those places. The risk of spread is too great.

I have heard that there are youtube clips and other messages saying that God will protect Christians from getting sick or dying from the coronavirus. This is not what the Bible teaches when understood properly. God's care of us is guaranteed, but our physical health is not guaranteed. The book of Job shows this clearly. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 says that God said no to his prayer that God would take his trouble away. Sometimes God says yes to our prayers for healing and protection, but God always knows what is best for us and he will answer our prayers with yes, no, or wait according to his perfect will.

Our churches are mostly moving to a situation where church services will be available electronically through Facebook live-streaming, Youtube, Zoom, or other media. Plans are being made for clergy and lay leaders to stay in touch with parishioners. Please be patient as we get used to this new way of working. Please ring one another up. We don't want anyone to be left behind.

Many resources are being developed to encourage churches at this time. The diocesan office has set up a Facebook page called Virtual Diocese NT especially to encourage our remote communities but open to everyone. The Anglican Diocese of the NT Facebook page is also continuing. Individual parishes are also sharing resources.

I ask you to be patient with your church leaders. They are no better equipped than the average person to deal with the changes that are happening, and they may not get everything right first time. Or even second time. But they are seeking to pastor the people that God has entrusted to their care, and it helps them to know that their congregations are with them. Please pray for them and for one another, that God will bring us all through this time spiritually stronger, closer to him, with a deeper sense of community – pray that the current challenges will be a stimulus for our growth and development.

With every blessing,



Greg Anderson
Bishop