

Covid-19 & Faith Communities – FAQs*

PROVIDED BY the Theological Commissions of the World Evangelical Alliance and the European Evangelical Alliance

(* FAQs = Frequently Asked Questions)

How do faith communities act in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and respond to frequently asked questions in this respect? The Theological Commissions of the World Evangelical Alliance and the European Evangelical Alliance have edited a joint document, in order to give Biblical perspectives and practical guidelines.

1. SHOULD PASTORS OBEY THE GOVERNMENT IF IT ORDERS THE SUSPENSION OF WORSHIP SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Governments have a God-given mandate to govern their citizens (Romans 13:6). While ministering on earth, Jesus acknowledged areas of life that were controlled by the government (Matthew 22:21).

As physical distancing is a well-established measure to stop the spread of the coronavirus, governments have taken measures to halt large gatherings, including church worship services. Such physical distancing measures do not specially target the church and thus do not constitute a direct infringement of religious freedom.

It is prudent for pastors and all Christians to respect the suspension of large gatherings. Such a suspension is not a shutdown of the church. Believers are still meeting together and worshipping God in many ways, whether online or as families. We still have the freedom to practice their faith and we should pursue our relationship with God as vigorously in these times as ever.

2. WHY DOES GOD ALLOW THE KIND OF SUFFERING THAT WE SEE NOW WITH THE CORONAVIRUS?

Suffering has been part of the human condition since the fall of Adam and Eve. The Bible records numerous instances in which God's faithful people endured all kinds of suffering.

Although suffering is a part of the human condition, God is not indifferent to it. When Jesus walked this earth, he had compassion on the suffering crowd (Matthew 9:36). Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35). God is full of compassion and offers us comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3). Ultimately, Jesus himself suffered to the point of death because of his love for this world. He redeemed the world and provided a way of salvation so that we do not need to suffer forever.

3. IS THE PANDEMIC A PUNISHMENT FROM GOD?

Some wonder if this pandemic is a judgment from God, a punishment for a certain wickedness. But we should be very cautious about making God responsible for the pandemic in this way.

It makes more sense to ask what we can learn from the current situation in the light of God's word. God, our creator, is involved in the history of humankind, guiding it by his providence. He upholds what we call the laws of nature.

When a disaster causes many deaths, we should remember the words of Jesus: “There will be earthquakes, famines and infectious diseases, but that does not mean the end immediately” (Luke 21:9–11). The providence of God does not preclude bad things from happening, even on a large scale.

When we ask how we could end up in this situation and what God might be saying to us, several answers are possible. We know that this virus affects humans through contact with animal species or through water contaminated by animals (e.g. rats). Perhaps humans have not kept the correct distance from the rest of nature. We also know that the coronavirus has spread at lightning speed as people travel all over the world (often for pleasure) and as products are shipped around the globe. Perhaps the pandemic is telling us something about the “transport addiction” of modern consumerist man.

4. IS THE PANDEMIC A SIGN OF THE END TIMES?

In one sense, we have been living in the last days since the time of Jesus. Events described in Luke 21:10 have happened throughout history. COVID-19 is not a defining event, but one that reminds us that the end is near. Jesus clearly said that we would not know when exactly the end times will come (Matthew 24:36). Our task is to “keep watch” and “be ready” (Matthew 24:42, 44).

This involves living as children of light, being imitators of God, and living a life of love (Ephesians 5:1). God calls us to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of” (2 Timothy 3:14). This includes the charge to “preach the word, be prepared, correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2).

5. ARE CHRISTIANS PROTECTED BY GOD SO THAT THEY CANNOT GET SICK?

As followers of Jesus, Christians have Jesus as their high priest, interceding for them in heaven. Christians can always approach God boldly with their needs (Hebrews 4:16), including physical health. However, this does not mean that physical healing is always manifested in the lives of believers on earth. Both the Old and New Testaments record instances of people of God, such as Paul, who experienced various afflictions. As Paul testified, God’s grace was sufficient for him and God’s power was made perfect in his weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Christians, as God’s ambassadors, are given to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Christians undertake this ministry as jars of clay that are physically weak yet filled with the power of God (2 Corinthians 4:7). As jars of clay, Christians can “waste away” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Our weakness and mortality clearly display that the all-surpassing redemptive power that is in us comes from God (2 Cor 4:7, 11).

While God remains the refuge and fortress of Christians (Psalm 91:2), a Christian’s life is also “fleeting,” described as a “breath” (Psalm 38:4–5).

6. HOW IS GOD AT WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC?

The gospel story is one where God the Father sent his Son to redeem this world. In turn, Jesus sent his people to the world, to tell of his redemptive power. His people continue to be sent today. They are involved in different levels of the management of this pandemic crisis. For example, they are involved in various acts of mercy done by Christians. This has included the direct medical support to the sick as well as the provision of food and other emergency supplies to those who are in economic need.

In addition, the pandemic and subsequent “shutdown” across countries presents itself as a good opportunity to reflect deeper on one’s life. In the Old Testament, Israel repeatedly turned back to God only when crisis situations brought them to their knees. This pandemic is providing many people with an opportunity to realize their need and turn to God. There have been numerous stories of how churches across the globe have united to pray together or to join forces in responding to this crisis.

7. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH AND BELIEVERS IN A TIME SUCH AS THIS?

The Church is the representation of Christ to the world. As such, it should shine before men such that they see its good deeds and praise our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16). This light continues during this pandemic. Church leaders, pastors and ministers should keep their faith, continue their work, and adjust their activities according to the demands of the pandemic. This may include reverting to house churches or using social and digital media to connect and shepherd the people of God. Finally, the Church and all its members should be “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope” (1 Peter 3:15).

The believers are members of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:27), the Body of Christ (Romans 12:4-8). As dearly loved children, we should seek to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1), providing compassion, wisdom and light wherever we are.

8. LOVING OUR NEIGHBOUR – PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Here are some practical ways of loving our neighbour:

- 1) Protect your own health. Your ability to help others will be greatly limited if you become ill or have to self-isolate.
- 2) Maintain strict physical distancing and encourage others to do the same. We cannot defeat the coronavirus until people stop transmitting it.
- 3) Don’t hoard supplies and thus deprive others of what they need. Instead, offer what you have to others.
- 4) Communicate only truthful and verified information.
- 5) Contact others—especially the elderly or those who are isolated—frequently by phone, text, or e-mail to encourage them and check on how they are doing.
- 6) Where permitted, go to the shops to buy necessary items for those who cannot leave their home.
- 7) Where government or private entities distribute food, inform people of how to obtain it, or advise the authorities of people in need who may have been overlooked.
- 8) Volunteer your time and abilities, especially if you have skills that can support healthcare delivery.
- 9) Give a gift of food or money to those around you who are most needy.
- 10) Offer to pray for your neighbours. It can mean a lot in this time of peril.

Of course, this list is non-exhaustive. As believers are inspired by the teaching and example of Jesus, and by Word and Spirit, they will find appropriate ways to show neighbourly love under the given circumstances.

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