



REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Interfaith Meeting in response to the coronavirus outbreak, Sefako Makgatho Presidential Guest House, Tshwane

Deputy President David Mabuza,

Members of the National Command Council present,

Leaders of different faiths,

Representatives from government departments,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is just over a month since I last had an opportunity to meet with our country's religious leaders.

It was under very different circumstances.

Then, as now, we were motivated by the firm conviction that the faith community can play a critical role in resolving our most pressing challenges.

Given the positions of authority you occupy in our society, and given the presence of places of worship in every corner of South Africa, we are now calling on you to be part of addressing one of the most grave public health emergencies our country has faced.

On Sunday, we declared a national state of disaster in response to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Over the past few days, government has begun implementing a wide range of emergency measures to scale up screening and detection, to limit and contain its spread, and to support the health care system in dealing with the sick.

You will all be aware of the measures we announced relating to border closures, travel restrictions, school closures, quarantine measures and protocols around social distancing and hygiene control.

On Tuesday, the National Command Council met for the first time, where we received a progress report on the implementation of these measures and on areas where new regulations have to be put in place.

In the light of the measures announced to encourage social distancing to curb new infections, there has been understandable concern expressed by members of the faith community on how this impacts them.

Attending daily, weekly or monthly religious services is an integral part of life for millions of our people around the country.

We are keenly aware of the important role congregational worship plays in giving solace, comfort and strength to the men, women and children of South Africa.

This is a practice for which we have the utmost respect.

At the same time, we are faced with a stark reality, and it is that this virus is spread through human contact.

In limiting the size of public gatherings to no more than 100 people we want to ensure that there is containment, because we have seen elsewhere just how quickly the coronavirus can be transmitted from one person to another, with even the most limited contact.

In response to government's directive, a number of faith communities have announced that large communal services have been suspended or cancelled, and either restructured to allow for smaller services or called on people to worship at home instead.

We are aware of the challenge this presents to our Muslim community, and the requirement to worship five times a day.

We are encouraged by the ongoing discussion among representative bodies to encourage worshippers to limit congregation sizes and to use alternative venues to mosques.

It is noteworthy that our faith communities are also harnessing the powers of technology, announcing that services will be livestreamed even through mobile phone applications.

I have seen the announcements from many faith communities encouraging proper hand washing, sterilisation of instruments used in religious rituals and proper procedures to follow when displaying flu-like symptoms.

The measures being taken are in line with those already in place elsewhere, including in the Vatican and the Holy Mosque in Mecca.

The measures we have adopted are in the public interest, and we thank you for understanding this and for ensuring your respective communities are given accurate and timely information.

In announcing the national state of disaster I said that extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.

We have to carefully weigh the need to protect the public from the coronavirus with ensuring that disruption to their lives is reduced.

It is also necessary to clarify that the regulations around gatherings over 100 people also apply to funerals, over which our religious leaders preside.

We call upon you to engage with bereaved families in the preparatory stages to impress upon them to confine the burial congregation to only close family wherever possible.

We know that this is a particularly sensitive and difficult subject to manage, and as government we will continue to drive the message out there that there really is no event that is exempt from the regulations.

During April, millions of our people traditionally make their way to various domestic locations for religious pilgrimages or visit holy sites abroad, as our Muslim brothers and sisters do to Mecca to perform the umrah.

As government we wholly appreciate the challenges this presents on a number of fronts.

The announcements by the Methodist Church cancelling Good Friday and Easter Sunday services, by the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) that the Friday prayer has been cancelled, and by the Zion Christian Church that the annual Moria pilgrimage has been cancelled were no doubt reached through great difficulty.

This something we keenly appreciate.

I want to assure you today that as government we are working with speed and urgency to restore the country to normalcy.

Our focus is on keeping people safe and healthy.

As religious leaders, you have shown your support for the national effort, and we thank you for this.

I want to call on you to extend your cooperation with us as government in reducing the impact of the coronavirus across all sectors of society.

Millions of South Africans are at risk of contracting coronavirus not just in places of worship, but in buses and taxis, in the workplace, and even in their homes.

This risk is greater in poor communities, many of which do not have access to safe and clean drinking water, and who are forced by circumstances to live in close proximity to others.

Given the high prevalence of HIV, Aids and tuberculosis, COVID-19 could have a devastating impact on our society.

The Department of Health has developed communication tools that clearly spell out what constitutes hygiene control and what to do to minimise the risk of infection.

I encourage you to make use of them and affirm them not just in services and gatherings, but in your pastoral work.

This is all the more important when it comes to helping and supporting those who are already infected.

Caring for the sick and reducing social stigma is a common thread to all religious faiths, and I call upon you to be part of the effort to ensure those who need help get it and that those who are already ill are not shunned by their communities.

In all the work that you do to care for the poor, the elderly and the vulnerable, we urge you take the necessary precautions to prevent the spread of the disease.

A critical part of our prevention effort is putting tracking mechanisms in place so those who have been in contact with an infected person are alerted and can present for testing.

In the same vein, strict quarantine measures have to be followed for those who have tested positive, and we have called for those who have been to high-risk countries to self-isolate.

We call upon you to use your public platforms to educate people about quarantine and what it means, but also to pave the way for those who emerge from quarantine to be reintegrated back into the community.

Our experience with the HIV/Aids epidemic shows that the faith community can play a critical role in breaking the stigma surrounding illness by educating our people.

This includes raising awareness that anyone can be a carrier of the virus, and that it is not limited to certain nationalities or races.

I call upon our representatives from the traditional healer community to play a prominent role in this regard, because millions of our people consult you for spiritual and health matters on an ongoing basis.

Aside from observing social distancing and hygiene control, including during the initiation process, let us use the relationships of trust we have with our patients to promote personal health and safety especially to those with compromised immune systems who are more vulnerable.

Similarly, you have a role to play in dispelling misinformation and false news.

The Department of Health provides regular, accurate and updated information on what we need to know, and this should always be our first point of call.

There is detailed information on how the virus is spread, on who is more vulnerable, and on what can be done to contain it.

The National Command Council, which is coordinating our country's effort, will also be regularly reporting back on the implementation of the emergency measures.

We continue to count on your support in driving the messages of social distancing and hygiene control so they reach every corner of our country.

While we are gearing up to manage screening and detection on a large scale, our public health care system will struggle to cope with millions of people presenting themselves for testing without due cause.

There are difficult times ahead.

Over the next month millions of our learners will be out of school and at home.

For many this will mean the loss of a nutritious meal or a place of safety during the day.

Parents who work will worry about who will be taking care of their children, especially in communities experiencing high levels of crime.

Potential business closures or downscaling will lead to a climate of uncertainty in the workforce as people worry about their jobs or about finding employment.

Students whose classes have been suspended will be concerned about whether they will be able to complete the academic year or graduate.

People in good health will be worried that they may have symptoms, and those with compromised immune systems or in ill-health will fear for their lives.

In such times, it is to you that they will turn.

It is to you that they will look for reassurance.

And it is to you that we too turn to spread the messages I have outlined, and to inspire confidence among our people.

Be the emissaries of hope you have always been; in giving strength to those flagging in spirit, comfort to the sick, and champions of social justice.

This disease knows no boundaries of race or class, but it is the poor and vulnerable who will need us most.

The Thuma Mina moment is upon us, perhaps as never before.

Let us keep the nation's spirits up and remind them that we are doing everything within our means to keep them safe.

We are in this together, and it is by working together that we will prevail.

We are, and forever will remain, our brother's and sister's keeper.

I thank you.