



A letter from the Bishop of Nelson

19 March 2020

To all Clergy and Churchwardens in Nelson Diocese

I'm writing this letter from home as I'm self-isolating, having recently returned from Melbourne. What we are living through at the moment is unprecedented and most of us have perhaps not experienced anything of this scale in our lifetime. This world can be a dark place. Sometimes it's hard to see light and hope in the midst of all that's wreaking havoc in different places around the globe.

We acknowledge and commend the efforts of the government and medical practitioners at large in addressing this pandemic. Thank you for all you are doing to remain calm and to shepherd your faith community in these uncertain times.

As a network of local churches that are vibrant, Christ-centred communities of faith, how should we respond?

As a diocese, we are committed to minimising the impact of Covid-19 within our communities and to extend the Kingdom of God by being a people of hope and compassion during times of uncertainty. Could I encourage us to:-

- a. **Pray** - This is the time to pray. Our power as God's people comes from God. Although we are in uncharted territory, with no clear trajectory for spread of Covid-19 and no obvious cure as yet, we can trust the God who holds our times in his hands. We have the privilege to trust the One who created all things, sustains all things, and controls all things (Colossians 1:16-17). Fear can be as infectious as the disease, so why don't we try to counter it with the even more infectious influence of faith? 'God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.' (2 Tim 1:7) We need God's help to respond well and to counter despair. What is your plan for prayer during this time? We have called for a Prayer and Fasting week across the diocese in the lead-up to Easter. You could set up prayer quartets (Connect four) in your ministries to encourage people to pray together or have a specific day the church is open all day for prayer or organise a prayer chain for 12 hours. Let us seek the Lord even more in this season and ask for His mercy.
- b. **Love** - This is the time to demonstrate that as followers of Jesus we are a community of love. We are called to respond to the human needs (be they physical, spiritual or emotional) with caring and loving service, as Christ has taught us. The way to conquer fear is to love and receive love. The tears of the child who is wakened by a bad dream are stilled by the embrace of someone who loves them. The words of a friend or neighbour can enable us to challenge the fears. Even appropriate humour can help. With the gift of truth and hope that we have in Jesus, we can care for one another lovingly, using words if not touch. We can go out of our way to look out for our neighbours and to those who are vulnerable or lonely. We can shop for one another. Perfect love casts out fear, and now is the time more than ever for the church

to be known by its love, worked out in down-to-earth practical ways. So here are a few thoughts on what you might do:

Make a plan: Work out a proper plan to put in place on how to show the love of Christ to your neighbourhood, as this situation will most likely last several months.

Care for the Vulnerable: With many over-70s being confined to home, why not ask people to look out for elderly neighbours and make a point of checking they are ok, phoning in regularly, offering to shop for them if they need help. Check what is happening in your local area & co-ordinate with others where you can - How can your church be good news in its streets?

Telephone Trees- Encourage parishioners to use telephone trees and build on these and, if possible, you might try and centralize some of those contact details in your pastoral care plan?

Meet Virtually: When self-isolating, we still need human interaction. Encourage and imagine new ways of keeping in touch, digitally, by phone, or even old-fashioned letters, which don't involve physical contact. This pandemic provides an opportunity for us to discover new ways of being God's people.

Take Precautions: Remind people often of, and role-model, the value of physical distancing, washing hands etc. as an act of love and compassion for those who are most vulnerable and lonely. Rachel Boyack will continue to provide Health & Safety updates on how we respond appropriately as the situation unfolds.

- c. **Hope** - This is the time to have hope. This is the moment to dream of what the church could look like if we were a dispersed community of faith. The history of the Church shows that when the church is dispersed, it grows. How might we share the hope of Jesus with those around us, through social media etc. With so many travel restrictions and meetings cancelled or suspended, this might be a great time for growing deep and reaching wide. This might be the time to organise your congregation into smaller groups to study the bible together. Our usual pattern of Sunday services and other mid-week gatherings might soon be disrupted but our churches will remain open; our faith in God is undiminished; public worship may not happen in familiar ways but the life of God's kingdom cannot be extinguished. Even in the darkness, the light of Christ shines bright.

Thank you for all you are doing in your churches and communities. Your leadership in these strange days is vital to the flourishing of those both within and outside the Church. We need to model good leadership, based in our confidence in the gospel.

I pray that you may enjoy good health and all may go well with you even as your soul prospers.
(3 John 1:2)

Grace and Peace in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Steve Maina