



Pacific Conference of Churches

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Pastoral Letter to Pacific Christians: Keeping Pacific Homes Safe in the Time of COVID19

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ across the many islands of the Pacific Ocean,

As we approach the end of our Lenten journey in the wilderness of the new coronavirus, many of us are reflecting on how COVID-19 is affecting the way we worship, engage in pastoral work, and what it means to be the Church, both at this time and in the future as the world, and our Pacific island communities face economic hardship, and a society that will be impacted by what is currently happening.

We and our congregations are taking physical precautions, paying attention to protecting ourselves and our families from this virus.

We monitor what is happening around the world and our own island communities, all the while praying and seeking divine intervention, wisdom and the courage to be good neighbours and practice Christian compassion.

While protecting ourselves and our families from COVID-19, there are issues we continue to struggle at home. In particular, the issue of violence in the home.

There are a number of homes in the Pacific and around the world that experience domestic violence: gender-based violence, violence against children, the elderly and people with disabilities and other minorities. These forms of violence can be physical, verbal, emotional, economic or sexual violence. They can be structural, meaning about how decisions are made and whose voices are heard, who does what work in the house that may have many people. It can also refer to those, particularly women and children who because of lockdowns, isolation, curfews, extended school holidays, etc are forced to stay in homes that may not be safe for them.

COVID-19 has made some of these situations worse as there are many people frustrated with being “stuck at home”. These frustrations include the fear of the virus, the fear not knowing whether they will have work and be able to contribute for the care of the the family when this is all over or those who have already either been sent home on leave without pay or been laid off.

In homes and communities that are male-dominated, there could also be frustration if the males in the home have lost gainful employment while women may still be working or earning an income.

This frustration is very easily expressed in violent behaviour towards others in the household.

Children will have been home for some time with schools closing in many places before lockdowns, states of emergency and curfews were initiated in response to the threat of COVID-19. Many schools will remain closed for a while longer. Our children now have much time on their hands, have to remain at home and also in many cases, away from friends.

These quarantine measures and restrictions on movements disrupt children's routine and social support while also placing new stresses on parents and caregivers who may have to find new childcare options or forgo work. Children and families who are already vulnerable due to socio-economic exclusion or those who live in overcrowded settings are particularly at risk at this time.ⁱ

Children globally are at risk of physical and emotional maltreatment, reduced supervision and neglect of children, increase in child abuse and domestic violence.

As we approach Holy Week, marked by Palm Sunday, which a number of our member churches observe also as Children's Sunday, we recall the actions and words of Jesus:

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:1–5, New International Version).

We also recall Jesus' stern warning about protecting children:

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!" (Matthew 18:6–7, NIV)

We must reach out to the families in our faith communities and encourage parents and guardians, to remain positive when dealing with their children, create daily routines for the children and family, spend one-on-one time with each child, and manage their own stress as best as possible. Family prayer time is a good time for sharing, reconciliation and inclusion of children in bible reading, sharing, prayers.

The World Health Organisation suggests that:

- *Children may respond to stress in different ways such as being more clingy, anxious, withdrawing, angry or agitated, bedwetting etc. Respond to your child's reactions in a supportive way, listen to their concerns and give them extra love and attention.*
- *Children need adults' love and attention during difficult times. Give them extra time and attention. Remember to listen to your children, speak kindly and reassure them. If possible, make opportunities for the child to play and relax.*
- *Try and keep children close to their parents and family and avoid separating children and their caregivers to the extent possible. If separation occurs (e.g. hospitalization) ensure regular contact (e.g. via phone) and re-assurance.*
- *Keep to regular routines and schedules as much as possible, or help create new ones in a new environment, including school/learning as well as time for safely playing and relaxing.*

- *Provide facts about what has happened, explain what is going on now and give them clear information about how to reduce their risk of being infected by the disease in words that they can understand depending on their age. This also includes providing information about what could happen in a re-assuring way (e.g. a family member and/or the child may start not feeling well and may have to go to the hospital for some time so doctors can help them feel better).ⁱⁱ*

As many of you know, according to current information, the Pacific region has some of the highest rates of violence against women recorded in the world – twice the global average with an estimated two in every three Pacific women impacted by gender-based violence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Women and girls are also at risk at this time of enforced lockdowns as I have mentioned above. It is important to recognise that with families being forced, to a certain extent, to stay together, that women, girls (and boys as well), may be at risk of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Women and children who live with domestic violence have no escape from their abusers during quarantine, and from Brazil to Germany, Italy to China, activists and survivors say they are already seeing an alarming rise in abuse. Even though helplines have been set up for women and children to call to seek help; many cannot make calls because they fear being overheard by abusive partners or are stopped from leaving home. Already lockdowns in other regions have resulted in domestic violence fatalities. In one case a woman was murdered by her husband in front of their children.^{iv}

Our Pacific way of life includes not only seeing the community as an extended family but also living in multi-generational and extended family households. Just as in times of natural disasters, the lockdowns for prevention of spread of COVID-19 means that everyone is home together. This brings a large diversity of people under one roof and may add to tensions in the home. Just as we are reminded by the prophet Micah to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God in our personal life, we must do our best to practice this in our homes.

In times of crisis our sisters and brothers living with disabilities, our elderly also need to be included in plans, home-based activities and be treated with dignity and respect. People with disabilities experience the world differently and this experience must be considered. Similarly, the wisdom of our elders and their needs must be heeded in these challenging times as they are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus.

One of the challenging issues for us to discuss in our Pacific faith communities is that of the LGBTIQ or sexual minorities. Whatever our views on gender, lifestyles and morality, it is important that everyone in our families, homes and communities must be safe, and receive the same care and protection from both the coronavirus and from violence.

In the midst of such potential for added suffering in our homes and communities, we are reminded of Jesus' new commandment, given to his disciples:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13: 34-35)

Perhaps on Maundy Thursday next week, our families can reflect on this commandment as they commemorate Jesus' last moments with his spiritual community before his betrayal and arrest.

St. Paul, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, reminds us of the type of love we are to practice with one another as family, as community. This practice of agape is very much

needed at this time as we find ourselves frustrated, stressed, worried and afraid, and sometimes, angry:

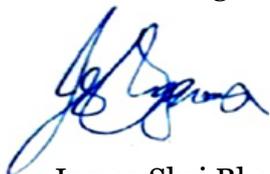
Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Cor 13: 4- 8)

Regardless of our personal, family or community relationships and status, let us, as sisters and brothers in Christ, as members of the Body of Christ, be encouraged by the words in 1 John:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 4: 16-21)

As we journey through Holy Week: from the triumph of Palm Sunday, the intimate sacramental commemoration of Maundy Thursday, the violence, shame and darkness of Good Friday and the joyful light of Resurrection Sunday; in the midst of global suffering, immense loss and pain, the doubt of the post-COVID-19 world; and our own current challenges, fears and frustrations in the Pacific; let us hold fast to practicing love, ensuring our homes and communities are safe spaces where love brings peace and light.

With blessings and love, your servant in Christ,



James Shri Bhagwan (Rev.)
General Secretary

ⁱ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic, Version 1*, March 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ World Health Organisation, *Helping children cope with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak*

ⁱⁱⁱ Along with high rates of violence – a violation of human rights – women and girls in the Pacific region experience constant and continual inequalities including low levels of participation in decision making, limited economic opportunities, restricted access to sexual and reproductive health and [other] rights. <http://www.fijiwomen.com/news/media-release/engaging-pacific-men-to-prevent-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

^{iv} “Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence”

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other