

## **Announcement about Sunday meetings in light of COVID-19**

Paul Harrington - Senior Pastor

Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020

I am writing to let you know that, in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board of the Trinity Network of churches has taken the proactive step to suspend all our main Sunday meetings until further notice. This means we will not be meeting in our usual gatherings from this Sunday 22 March 2020.

I have been the Senior Pastor the Trinity Network for over 20 years now. We have never taken the step of suspending our Sunday meetings before. It has not been a decision taken lightly. So why have we done it?

I'd like to answer that question in 3 steps:

1. Reflect on the promises of God and how we can be looking to our heavenly Father in times such as these.
2. Outline the reasons for this decision.
3. Explain how we plan to continue in ministry and fellowship.

### **1. What does God say to us in the current crisis?**

How should we, as followers of the Lord Jesus, be responding to a pandemic such as COVID-19?

#### **a) Remembering we have a loving and Sovereign Heavenly Father**

In Matthew 6 when Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray he says, "This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven...". Our God is not standing far off and dispassionate – he loves us and cares for us. This love is captured most clearly in the fact that the Lord Jesus gave his life to redeem ours. Even when faced with a crisis like the present one, we have a Father in heaven who cares for us and this world.

He is also sovereign. We know we live in a world that is 'groaning' (Romans 8:22), but in the midst of a suffering world God is at work for our good to make us more like the Lord Jesus (Romans 8:28-30).

#### **b) We should pray**

Given God's care and power it makes sense to cast all our cares on him (1 Peter 5:7).

So how should we pray? Confidently asking our heavenly Father to glorify his name. We can come before our heavenly Father requesting him to have mercy on the people around us. Pray for those health professionals who are providing front line services. Commend those in authority to God as they are

entrusted with making wise decisions for the good of the wider community. Ask God to use the situation to grow us more like his Son, Jesus. Ask God to draw many to himself and to help us know how we can commend the Lord to others in the present circumstances (1 Peter 3:15).

c) **Loving those around us**

COVID-19 is an opportunity to love and care for one another. As a Christian community we know the self-sacrificing love of the Lord Jesus and we are keen to model our behaviour after his. We may need to be a bit creative in doing this at a time when social distancing is one way in which this love should be demonstrated. Do think about those in your networks who are struggling with challenges of physical or mental health. Think through the ones who are most vulnerable and how you might extend love and friendship to them. It is also a time when we can care for those who do not have the security of knowing a relationship with our loving heavenly Father. We are surrounded by people who are anxious and panicking. Showing the love of Christ will have its impact. It may well provide an opportunity in time to commend the Lord Jesus to them. The resurrection of Jesus has secured our future and it means we know that our 'labour for the Lord is not in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:58).

**2. Why have we made this decision?**

We are all aware of the way COVID-19 has spread around the world and now taken hold in our nation. The government has introduced laws and recommendations for how we should conduct ourselves at this time. At the time of writing there is no restriction on church groups of less than 500 continuing to meet. So why take the step of not meeting when we are legally permitted to do so?

The best advice we are receiving from epidemiologists, health practitioners and government health authorities is indicating that it will not be possible to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The issue is, can we slow down the rate of the spread. If the virus spreads very rapidly as it has in many overseas countries, then the hospital system and medical services in our nation will be overloaded and unable to treat those who are presenting with COVID-19, yet alone the many other serious and critically ill people who present to hospitals on a daily basis. In some countries, where more rigorous social isolation has been practiced, it seems that the spread of the virus has been slowed, enabling the health professionals to better cope with the flow of sick people. This has meant that the mortality rates in those countries have been much lower. Many of you will have seen the graph which illustrates that the goal is to 'lower the curve' - to stretch out the rate at which the virus spreads in order to reduce the load on our medical system.

Here in Australia it seems we have an opportunity to take action now to slow the spread of the virus in ways which may not be available to us in the days or weeks to come. The government and health authorities have already taken action to quarantine those who have symptoms and require those who are returning from overseas to self-isolate for 14 days. A limit has been placed on gatherings of 500 or more people. However, we are all aware that we are being encouraged to go beyond these steps to limit the pace of the spread of the pandemic. Businesses and professional organisations have instituted protocols to limit the interpersonal interaction of their staff and members. Training seminars are being cancelled, universities are urging students to remain at home and access their lectures online and some employers are preventing their employees from attending meetings or limiting the number of people attending meetings. If workers can do their tasks at home, many are being encouraged to do so.

As the leadership of the Trinity Network have reflected on this situation, it seems to us that we can also be doing our part in a community effort to support this outcome by voluntarily stopping our main Sunday meetings. We have not taken this step lightly. Nor is it motivated by fear – we serve the Lord of Heaven and earth who has secured our life with him for all eternity through the Lord Jesus' death and resurrection. It is motivated by a love for the community around us and how we can best care for and serve them during times such as these.

### **3. How do we plan to continue to fellowship and serve for the foreseeable future?**

The situation facing us as a nation is unprecedented and it is the same for our churches. I am sure that things will continue to unfold and develop in the coming days. For the moment, these are the steps we plan to take

#### **a) Streaming of services**

In the last few weeks, we have been exploring ways in which we could continue to stream 'services' if we were unable to continue to meet. From this coming Sunday we will be streaming services online at the normal times of the meetings that you attend. The leadership of the church you attend will be in contact with you to let you know the details. Some of us may not have the technology or skill set to access this. Your church leaders will support you in working out solutions to this. The next few days will be busy as we set up the capacity to achieve this and then make it available on Sunday. Do be patient if there are some 'hiccups' as we roll this out.

#### **b) Small groups**

Many of you are in small groups that meet on a weekly or fortnightly basis. At this stage we think it is appropriate for these groups to continue to meet. It will be important to implement the advice that is available in terms of hygiene and social distancing for these meetings. If you have any symptoms or are vulnerable, then you should not be attending these meetings. Also, I am aware that individuals may choose to not attend groups for the time being.

Some health professionals, for example, are choosing to socially isolate, so that they can try to keep themselves healthy to serve others. This is a matter of wisdom for each to decide depending on their own circumstances. Again, your own church leadership will be in contact with you to explain what will be happening here.

It is possible that this advice will change in the next few days or weeks. I am aware that government advice in the UK is that these small groups should not meet.

Even if we reach a point when the members of these groups are not able to meet face-to-face the virtual fellowship of the members will still be essential.

**c) Caring for one another**

This is a time to be looking out for one another. It may not be sensible or wise to have face-to-face contact with other members of your church. However, do take the time to think about the people in your circle and how you can call or email them to make sure they are doing OK. Particularly be aware of those who might be more vulnerable because of age, health or other wellbeing issues.

You may be in a situation where you have particular needs. Again, the leadership of your church will follow up with communication to let you know what steps you can take to get support or encouragement.

**d) Caring for others in the community around us**

COVID-19 has exposed anxiety and fear in the general community. Many of us will experience a level of anxiety because of all that is going on. Nevertheless, it is also an opportunity to reflect on how we might love and care for family, neighbours and friends who are not yet in the Kingdom. Take some time to sit down and pray for those in your wider circle and then take steps to connect with them. There may be practical steps (providing meals, buying groceries, dropping a note of encouragement in a letter box etc).

Know that in the coming days I will be praying for you – that the peace of God, which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

With love in Jesus  
Paul Harrington

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