

Fifth Pastoral Letter to the Wesley Church Family **on the Covid-19 Situation (26 Mar 2020)**

(By Rev Stanley Chua, Pastor-in-Charge)



Dear Friends and Members of the Wesley family,

By now you would have heard and read the latest MOH (Ministry of Health) advisory that was issued two days ago (24 March 2020). In response to the recent spike in imported cases in Singapore as well as many countries having imposed total lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus, our Singapore government signals a new phase in our fight against Covid-19 with tighter measures. These measures will take effect from 26 March 2020, 2359 hours until 30 April 2020, but this may be extended if the situation does not improve.

For our purposes, here are three new advisory measures that would affect us directly:

1. All religious services and congregations will be suspended
2. All events and mass gatherings (e.g. conferences, exhibitions, festivals, concerts, sporting events, trade fairs) must be deferred or cancelled, regardless of size
3. All Singaporeans are advised to avoid holding and participating in social events and gatherings involving more than 10 persons at any one time. These include private celebrations like birthdays and weddings. For funerals and wakes, attendance should be limited as far as possible to family members only, and gatherings of 10 or fewer people at any one point.

Our Church being part of the wider community of Singapore will thus have to play her part in stopping the spread of this Covid-19 virus. Here are the measures that we will be implementing for our Church beginning this Friday (27 March 2020) till end of April 2020.

1. Continued Suspension of Worship Services and all Activities on Church Premises.

We will continue to suspend all Church worship services and activities on our premises till the end of April 2020. We encourage all Wesleyans and friends to continue to join us in our weekend online worship services. For Wesleyans, it would be helpful to keep to your regular weekend worship hours before these Covid-19 measures were implemented. This is to prepare for the day when all our weekend worship services are reinstated so that you will not have any problems adjusting back to our normal worship times.

During this period, the Church office will operate from 9am-6pm (Mon-Sat). Church members who wish to see any of our pastors or Church staff must make an appointment before coming to Church.

2. Suspension of all Physical Meetings for Small Groups and Bible Study Groups.

The new MOH advisory states: "Singaporeans are advised to avoid holding and participating in social events and gatherings involving more than 10 persons at any one time. These include private celebrations like birthdays and weddings." Although this advisory does not prohibit physical gatherings of less than 10 persons at any one time, our pastors and leaders have decided that we will stop **all** physical meetings including all our Small Groups and Bible Study Groups. The rationale for this prohibition is that it is hard for us to put a handle on all physical

meetings especially Small Groups and Bible Study Groups that are meeting outside the Church. Furthermore, the new advisory reflects the government's intent to impose penalties on those who flout them. By implication, if our Church allows such physical meetings, we could be in breach of the advisory. We encourage all to continue meeting regularly using video conferencing in the spirit of our Methodist tradition to "watch over one another in love."

3. Pastoral Matters

a. Purposeful Online Worship

From the early Church's experience, we know that the weekly gathering occupies a special place in our Christian life. A Church does not exist except when it is gathered. This is evident by the underlying Greek word for Church, "Ekklēsia," meaning "Assembly." The Word of God affirms to us that all Christians are required to assemble weekly for the purpose of worshipping God and the encouragement of one another (Hebrews 10:24-25). However, with the Covid-19 crisis, the physical assembly of God's people is no longer possible due to the government's most recent advisory to suspend all worship services till the end of April. We thank God that modern technology still allows us to assemble as an online community to worship Him. However, the use of modern technology is both a boon and bane.

Here's why. Rev Dr Samuel Law, Associate Professor of Intercultural Studies at Singapore Bible College, wrote an excellent article on *Livestreaming as Worship Requires Intentionality* where he has this to say:

One of the dangers of the prolonged use of livestreamed services is that our relationship with God can become casual [and irreverent]. Worship is no longer transcendent, but a side dish to Sunday morning breakfast.

In order not to let this happen, our online act of worship must be intentional. As a guide, I have attached the article with this pastoral letter.

b. Pastoral Support, Prayers and Counselling.

During this period, we wish to assure all Wesleyans that our Pastors and Pastoral Team Members (PTMs) are always ready to continue providing pastoral support, prayers and counselling to all who are in need. Please do not hesitate to call our Church Office at 63361433 if you need to contact any of our Pastors or PTMs for assistance. The contacts of our Pastors are also listed in the digital version of our Wesley Weekly.

c. Continuation of Daily Devotions and Prayers on Wesley Telegram Channel.

As it is no longer possible for us to meet physically to worship and encourage one another spiritually, our Pastors, PTMs and leaders have decided that we will continue to extend our Lent Devotions and Prayers using our Bible Reading Drive (BRD) beyond the Lent Period through Wesley's Telegram Channel. The purpose is to ensure that all Wesleyans will continue to be nourished spiritually.

d. Pulpit Ministry for This Season

Here's a statement from the "Theological and Liturgical Principles to Guide Lutheran Church in Singapore (LCS) Congregations During COVID-19 Pandemic":

During a pandemic, the work of the government is to keep people physically alive, and the church's role is primarily to keep people spiritually alive.

I cannot agree more. From the onset of DORSCON Orange alert being raised by our Singapore Government, I have been painfully aware and burdened that I need to keep our congregation together. But, more importantly, I need to keep all of you spiritually alive. Besides continuing our Daily Devotions and Prayers on Wesley's Telegram Channel, you would have noticed by now that I have been anchoring all our preaching sessions thus far. I hope that none of you will perceive that I am doing this because I am trying to hog the limelight or just because I am PIC. God forbid! I recognise that all our pastors are gifted in different ways. For me, my gifting is in preaching; thus, I believe God may have raised me for such a time as this. Therefore, for most of this Covid-19 period, I will be anchoring the pulpit ministry. This, however, is only for a season. Once we return to our normal worship services and practices, the rest of our pastors will be scheduled to preach again.

As I end this pastoral letter, I wish to remind all of us that amid these trying times, God is still with us and His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23). Even as we experience His mercies and love every morning, may I encourage all of us to respond in creative ways and opportunities, as led by God's Spirit, to share His mercies and love with others in practical ways as we continue to "Impact our World" for Christ.

Finally, let me thank all of you again for your continued support, love and encouragement to all of us here in the Wesley Staff and Leadership Team. Thanks especially to those of you who have taken the effort to write, email and text us with encouraging messages and bless us with little gifts of fruits, vitamins and other health products to encourage us on. As I remember all the love that you have showered on us, I want to encourage you too with these words of the Apostle Paul and with this, I end my letter.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:3-6 (NIV)

To God be the glory! Amen!

Yours-in-Christ,



Pastor Stanley Chua

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Livestreaming As Worship Requires Intentionality

Samuel Law, Associate Professor of Intercultural Studies

Is watching livestreamed Sunday services in response to COVID-19 considered worship? If the foremost authority on worship Robert E Webber is correct, not necessarily. If livestreaming is to replace the Sunday service, it must be an intentional act of worship.

Webber defines four acts to worship.¹ We must: 1) enter into God's Presence; 2) hear God speak; 3) respond with thanksgiving; and 4) be dismissed to love and serve. Most people who make effort in preparing to come to church and attend a worship service generally – though not always – make effort to go through each of these stages.

So why isn't listening to a livestream Sunday service considered worship?

Many people watching a Sunday service livestream may not have taken the first step to enter into God's presence. From anecdotal evidence, some wake up a few minutes beforehand on Sunday morning in their pajamas and turn on their computer. Then as they are watching the live feed, they are preparing and eating their breakfast. The danger of the prolonged use of livestreamed services is that our relationship with God becomes casual. Worship is no longer transcendent, but a side dish to Sunday morning breakfast.

If the livestreamed Sunday service is to remain an act of worship, then we must intentionally make effort to enter into God's presence, give our full attention to God speak, then respond with thanksgiving and commit to loving and serving the world. Worship is a ritual process in which we must step out of the routine and enter into a liminal period where we are pliable and receptive to the work of the Holy Spirit. Only when we enter the liminal state can we there be transformation (see W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, 2017).

So how do we do this? Singapore doesn't have many disruptions to the schedule, but living in the US, there are times where we need to cancel service in the winter when there are heavy snows. In such situations, my family will either listen or watch a pre-recorded sermon or watch a livestream worship service. With our four children, we made effort to make that Sunday morning not just a mundane "snow day," but something "extra-ordinary."

On those Sundays, I'd wake up early to make pancakes, a treat usually reserved for holidays or birthdays. The smell of the griddle, bacon, and hot chocolate fill the house and serve

¹ See Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, 1996).

to beckon my children out of their slumber. We have a good time to fellowship around the table, enjoying the special day where we are not rushed and could leisurely spend time with each other. Then, about half an hour before we gather to listen to the sermon or watch the livestream, we still go through the process of brushing teeth, getting changed, and then gathering together. We don't need to be dressed in our Sunday best, but we do change out of our pajamas. We are, after all, entering into God's presence. If listen to a sermon, everyone sits quietly in the living room. Kids aren't allowed to lie down or play with their toys because we want to be respectful as God is present in our midst. If we are watching a live stream, then we will follow the worship leader to stand up and to sit down. Even in our living room, we are participating in – not just watching – service. Afterwards, we have a short time to ask each of them, "What did you learn?" and spend a short time to pray together. As we carry out each of these actions, in our home, we are able to follow through the four acts of worship.

If one is single, one still must go through the preparation to enter into God's presence. Finish your meal, get dressed, then spend ten to fifteen minutes meditating on a psalm or other Scripture passage. Preparing physically and mentally as if we are going to church ensures that our heart, mind, and body are in the right state to worship God.

So as many churches are livestreaming – or have to livestream should we go to DORSCON Red – to ensure that we are immersed in the acts of worship during this time where we cannot do so by physically going to church, let us make effort to prepare for and walk through the four ritual acts of worship. It may require some extra work on Saturday night to get some goodies for the family – or yourself – and it may mean an hour or so less sleep, but let's remember whose presence we are entering.

Sure, Jesus is always with us even if we are in our pajamas and as we munch on our breakfast. But then He's just a bystander, not the focus of our attention.

If, however, we make effort to give Jesus all our attention, He will surely bless us by speaking to us to the extent that we will break forth with thanksgiving and a desire to love and serve Him. This is the promise that the apostle Paul writes about in Philippians 4:6-7. When the Lord is at hand because we have made effort to intentionally enter into his presence, we will not be anxious about anything, not even COVID-19, but with thanksgiving, knowing that He is present and hears us, can live in God's peace daily.