

Pastoral Care - Societal & Personal Healing, Social Distress & Mental Health

After a full six months of the country under COVID-19 regime, the churches and all social service agencies must adjust their service approaches to the needs of the people as the situation demands. This is a proposal for a review of aspects of the SACC COVID Pastoral Plan; to focus more on the effects on the people, of the lockdown, the economic knocks of job loses, collapse of businesses; domestic tensions, abuse and violence; all these promoting various manifestations of societal disquiet and mental health conditions.

These conditions have both societal and individual impacts that need attention. In this reality, the Pastoral Care part of the SACC COVID-19 Pastoral Plan needs to be fleshed out and contextualised with a focus on these societal and individual needs.

At societal level we need a public reassurance and healing campaign that holds the nation up in hope even when the individual circumstances say something else. In biblical terms, at this time the nation needs the message of the second Isaiah of Chapter 40:1 saying: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,...". This is to address the societal depression as well as to deal with the societal phenomenon that makes for the victimisation of women, so much more manifest in the depression of the Coronavirus lockdown and family stress.

At individual level the people need to find capable professional counselling and support in the face of livelihood loss; domestic violence that accompanies intractable complexities of the interface between poverty and family power dynamics of patriarchy.

Societal & Individual Interventions:

1. **Public Religious Events:** The proposal is for SACC to conduct, three differently targeted public religious events of healing as follows:
 - a. **Focus on health workers:** The morale of health workers has been affected by the death of colleagues through Covid-19; a disease against which they remain a critical force to fight. The SACC will partner with health worker organisations such as doctors and nurses associations to publicly acknowledge their toils before God, strengthen their resolve to serve, as well as comfort the families of those who have succumbed to Covid-19.
 - b. **Focus on rebuilding lives & livelihoods:** Many have lost hope at the collapse of their livelihoods. Yet many others are facing a difficult summer as the special Covid grants come to the end. But it is springtime and nature has much to offer. A public religious service that focuses on blessing household agricultural produce for food security and nutrition will promote productivity and highlight efforts in different settings of urban and rural environments. The focus on rebuilding lives is to say we must be differently equipped for our post-Covid life



- c. Ecumenical “you are not alone” service: People in distress feel like they are on their own, hence the resort to self destructive and harmful behaviours like suicide, domestic violence, and alcohol and substance abuse. This is a general societal uplifting event that focuses on the theme “you are not alone”. This may also be a platform to include brief messages from local large churches such as the Zion Christian Church, as well as international experiences on a “reach out in solidarity” basis, e.g. the Lutheran World Federation, the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance Church, the World Methodist Council (whose president is a South African).
2. Societal Defence of Women from Abuse: South Africa has over time earned notoriety over gender based violence and femicide. The lockdown has exacerbated this problem, which finds its fuel in the societal system that believes in the superiority of the male species and defines every interaction in terms of that dominant thought. This results in suicidal distress for men who lose their dominant status in the economic collapse; and in the frightful experience of domestic violence behind the closed doors of an otherwise happy looking family. This all-pervasive patriarchal phenomenon is graphically illustrated in the exhibition called “Republic of Sexual Abuse” - RSA. The SACC will launch this exhibition electronically, as a public education campaign for the societal defence of women against abuse. The main impact will be to raise awareness on gender based violence. The activation logic will follow a gallery style layout with a specific movement in mind that the digital execution will need to take into account.
3. Personal Healing Services: A two-part counselling support service is proposed:
- a. Distance Professional Counselling Service: The churches and civil society organisations are receiving many distress messages of appeal for help - to cope with life pressures arising from livelihood losses, resultant family stress and chronic domestic violence. People need someone to talk to, to listen to them, to counsel them, to give hope. Utilising the existing Covid WhatsApp platform, we propose to add a facility for people to request counselling support. Pools of three categories of professional counsellors shall be created:
 - i. Religious practitioners of various faith traditions, who may be called on to minister to a person who requires spiritual support.
 - ii. Social Workers, who can deal with family tensions, and especially where child safety is at stake.
 - iii. Psychologists who can help with depression and other aspects of mental health.
A person requesting attention through the WhatsApp platform would be contacted and upon assessing their need, would be referred to one of these three pools for appropriate professional help.
 - iv. District Counselling Coordination Hubs: In each of the country’s 54 districts and metros, there will be a counselling coordination centre through which a response mechanism may be availed for when physical attention is needed that cannot be addressed remotely through the WhatsApp appeal system.



In addition to the district coordination mechanism, there will be a need for district level training of trainers of contextual para-counsellors for local areas who may be ordinary religious ministers for each district/metro, so that through them we can have a minimum multi-faith cadre of relevantly skilled religious personnel available to the Local Ecumenical Action Networks (LEANs).