



UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THE PHILIPPINES
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**Pastoral Statement, Guidelines and Precautions
on CoVID-19 Pandemic**
13 March 2020

The Office of the General Secretary and the Management Committee of the National Secretariat has convened and prepared this brief Pastoral Statement, Guidelines and Precautions on COVID-19 Pandemic that has outbreak in the National Capital Region (NCR) and probably in some isolated areas in the country. In issuing and sharing this material to the jurisdictions, conferences and local churches, we would like to emphasize that we should not panic, but be analytical and responsive to the needs of our people and our faith communities who may need more assistance than ourselves.

This is aimed at allaying unfounded fears, by assuring our people that as the Body of Christ, we are ready to reach out, extend our support in ways possible and accessible to the Church especially our ministry of Pastoral Care and Counseling. The following are our guidelines and precautionary measures to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 in our communities and the larger society.

What is the Covid-19/Corona Virus and how is it transmitted

We share in the idea of the NCCP that there are a number of 'corona' viruses that have affected humans over recent years. All come from the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) family of viruses. Some may remember the 'SARS' virus from a few years ago which also originated in China and MERS which originated in the Arabian Peninsula. This current virus strain is officially called SARS-Corona Virus-2, or SARS-Covid-2. This has been abbreviated to Covid19 (as it was first identified in 2019).

The exact origin of Covid19 is unconfirmed, but similar to SARS, it is believed to have come from a family of virus common in bats that had mutated to affect dogs, raccoons, ferrets and civets. Also similar to SARS, this virus mutated enough to make the cross to humans. Within a short period of time the infections changed from animal-to-human to human-to-human transmission.

The challenge presented by CoVid19 is that it typically has an incubation period (the time from when you catch the virus until you show some symptoms and realize you have it) of 3-7 days, although it may extend as far as 14 days. During this period you may not realize you have the virus and can infect other people.

While the virus has a (relatively) low fatality rate and most likely will not prove serious in most healthy adults, if you unknowingly infect small children, the elderly or those with a weak immune system or respiratory illness, the risk becomes severe. Therefore, taking precautions to prevent the spread to the world's most vulnerable requires serious effort.

Disruptions in the Integrity of Creation and Hegemonic Power Play of Global Powers

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines has reckon with the implications of this pandemic in the light of how humanity and modern civilizations have violated God's creation through insatiable consumption of goods and resources that consequently disrupted the integrity of God's creation and harvest unprecedented plagues such as viruses that were once unknown existed. Manipulation of biological and chemical elements have been used by dominant societies and corporations that were tested and intended for use in biological and chemical warfare.

More so, the devastation of our natural resources such as the massive mining in many places around the country, the congestion and pollution of the National Capital Region and probably other regions increases risks of contracting CoVID-19 and sorts of health issues and hazards. Also this pandemic has exposed how the state has neglected the health care system of the nation. The much hyped 'universal health care system' have not been translated in terms of increased funding for basic to tertiary health care system and people's access to affordable health and medical services. This has opened our eyes to the lack of political will to improve the quality of health care system that serves the majority of the poor and economically challenged families and communities.

There are underlying political and military interests that posed threats to humanity and the use of biological weapons such as viruses can be opted by global powers as means towards political and economic hegemony. This pandemic must be understood in the broader perspective so that the Church is able to objectively inform the people at the grassroot level, because large part of information are focused only on precautionary measures on how to avoid contracting the CoVID-19 and less on findings and verified data on the causes and prevention of infection.

As a Church, the UCCP has empowered Local Churches and Conferences, that can decide the best possible response to the pandemic of CoVID-19. With their solid scientific data at hand, fear should not be the motivating factor in mitigating the impact of the virus, but Christian unity, compassion and love. While the guidelines of 'social distancing', or the thorough hand washing with soap and water, disinfecting personal effects and frequently hand-touched things such as door knobs, hand rails, and even one's own face (mouth, eyes and nose) are highly suggested, we need to be ready to assist and support those whose health are susceptible to infection, not just by suspected CoVID-19 but also by other lingering and underlying health issues of our people.

Let us be reminded by St. Paul's admonition:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,^[a] being born in the likeness of men (RSV Philippians 2: 1-7).

Practical Steps in Mitigating the Impact of CoVID-19 in the Local Churches and Conferences

In view of all this, we suggest the following practical steps in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 in the Local Churches and the Conferences:

- a) Don't panic. Take necessary precaution in mitigating the impact of CoVID-19, and protecting oneself from contracting the virus from possible points and sources of contact.
- b) We encourage Local Churches and Conferences to organized Health Emergency Response Team (HERT), define their functions and practical emergency functions.
- c) Incumbent Bishops shall coordinate closely with Conference Ministers on how to go about and manage the programs for impact mitigation of CoVID-19.
- d) Communications and monitoring of the situation and sharing of information to and from the various judicatories so that necessary responses can be afforded.
- e) Local Churches through their Church Council shall decide on suspension of church services, depending on the extent of CoVID-19 cases in the given area or region.
- f) It is highly suggested that if 'social distancing' is not possible, worship services can be held in homes, or family worship and order of worship of liturgies can be provided online by the Pastor.
- g) Conferences within the NCR through their Conference Council may decide to postpone their annual session in coordination with the office of the Jurisdictional Bishops, while those outside the NCR can moderate or wait for further development after 30 days imposed community quarantine in the NCR. What is being imposed on the NCR may not be true in other regions of the country.
- h) Continue to monitor health bulletin issued by the government especially those of the Department of Health (DOH).

Some Practical Suggestions to Avert the Spread of COVID-19 at personal and community levels

1. For those in highly susceptible communities and regions, such as the NCR and other highly urbanized cities in the country, if you are able, store food, water, medicines (good for a month) that should be replaced regularly.
2. Prepare emergency kit/supplies/bag for there will be a lockdown/emergency situation when people are not allowed to go from their homes.
3. Secure information on how to boost immune system and other preventive measures.
4. Sanitation of offices and homes will be done three times a day. For the national office maintenance department will facilitate the sanitation before and after office hours. Other staff will do it during afternoon in their assigned area, that's why materials should be provided.
5. Individuals should wash their hands when they come in the office, at least "2 happy birthday song".
6. One day after their travel, all national, jurisdictional, conference staff should not go to the office to ensure that they don't have any symptoms or to assess their physical condition after their travel.
7. The regular use of high grade alcohol disinfectant is encourage for all members. The national staff will follow the same and provided with alcohol and tissue for their office use.
8. There should be an infographics on CoVID 19 and advisory for our churches. The LLCDDM will assist in information sharing through email and social media.
9. For other practical steps on prevention and mitigation of CoVID-19, please see the NCCP guidelines below.
10. For reference to the resolutions from government see the summary of resolution from President Duterte, posted below.

May God grant us the wisdom how to overcome not just the CoVID-19 but also the challenges to our faith and witness as a Church. We pray that God’s mercy and healing like a ‘balm in Gilead’ reach out to all of us and find us whole again. Amen.

Management Committee
Special Meeting on CoVID 19
March 13, 2020

Bishop Melzar Labuntog, General Secretary
Rev. Francisco Hernando, OGS Executive Secretary
Mr. Lauro Millan, National Treasurer
Rev. Jesse Pagalan, CWWM Executive Secretary
Faith Justice Sanchez, Support Staff Organizational Ministries

References:

I. NCCP Getting Our Workplace Ready for COVID-19

1. Simple ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in your workplace

- Make sure workplaces are clean and hygienic
 - Surfaces and objects need to be disinfected regularly
- Promote thorough and regular handwashing
- Put sanitizing hand rub dispensers in prominent places around the workplace. Make sure these dispensers are regularly refilled
- Observe social distancing in the workplace
- Strictly observe good respiratory hygiene in the workplace
 - Ensure that face masks and / or paper tissues are available at your offices, for those who develop a runny nose or cough at work, along with closed bins for hygienically disposing of them
- If Covid-19 virus is present in the community:
 - If staff begin showing symptoms of a cold or flu, even a mild cough or low-grade fever (37.3 C or more), either isolate them immediately or ask that they work from home (upon assessment). Make clear to employees that they will be able to count this time off as sick leave, if needed.
 - RECOMMENDATION: Consider work-from-home mechanisms.
- When receiving Ecumenical Center guests and office visitors
 - When visitors and guests come from areas where there is virus infection, provide visitors with masks for the duration of their visit to protect your staff from infection.
- Recommend appointing a team in each office that has all the contact information and advisories for local health authorities in regards to suspected cases. Advice should also be given to family members to prevent transmission to vulnerable family members or the community.

2. Managing Covid-19 risks when organizing activities and events

BEFORE the meeting or event

- Check the advice from the authorities in the community where you plan to hold the meeting or event. Follow their advice.
 - Is the venue of the event located in a community where the virus is present?
 - Consider whether a face-to-face meeting or event is needed. Could it be replaced by a teleconference or online event?
 - Could the meeting or event be scaled down so that fewer people attend?
- Pre-order sufficient supplies and materials, including tissues and hand sanitizer for all participants. Have surgical masks available to offer anyone who develops respiratory symptoms.
- Actively monitor where COVID-19 is circulating. Advise participants in advance that if they have any symptoms or feel unwell, they should not attend.
- State clearly (in invitations and event advisories) that participant details will be shared with local public health authorities if he/she becomes ill with a suspected infectious disease. If they will not agree to this they cannot attend the event or meeting.
- Develop and agree on a response plan in case someone at the meeting becomes ill with symptoms of COVID-19 (dry cough, fever, malaise). This plan should include at least:
 - Identify a room or area where someone who is feeling unwell or has symptoms can be safely isolated
 - Have a plan for how they can be safely transferred from there to a health facility.
 - Know what to do if a meeting participant, staff member or service provider tests positive for COVID-19 during or just after the meeting
 - Agree on a plan in advance with your partner healthcare provider or health department.

DURING the meeting or event

- Provide information or a briefing, preferably both orally and in writing, on COVID-19 and the measures that organizers are taking to make this event safe for participants.
 - RECOMMENDATION: Task someone to make brief COVID-19 orientation material for activities
- Practice ways to say hello without touching.
- Encourage regular hand-washing or use of an alcohol rub by all participants at the meeting or event
- Encourage participants to cover their face with the bend of their elbow or a tissue if they cough or sneeze. Supply tissues and closed bins to dispose of them in.
- Provide contact details or a health hotline number that participants can call for advice or to give information.
- Display dispensers of alcohol-based hand rub prominently around the venue.
- If there is space, arrange seats so that participants are at least one meter apart.
- Open windows and doors whenever possible to make sure the venue is well ventilated.
- If anyone who starts to feel unwell, follow your preparedness plan or call your hotline.
- Depending on the situation in your area, or recent travel of the participant, place the person in the isolation room. Offer the person a mask so they can get home safely, if appropriate, or to a designated assessment facility.

AFTER the meeting

- Retain the names and contact details of all participants for at least one month. This will help public health authorities trace people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if one or more participants become ill shortly after the event.

- If someone at the meeting or event was isolated as a suspected COVID-19 case, the organizer should let all participants know this. They should be advised to monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days and take their temperature twice a day.
- If they develop even a mild cough or low-grade fever (i.e. a temperature of 37.3 C or more) they should stay at home and self-isolate. This means avoiding close contact (1 meter or nearer) with other people, including family members. They should also telephone their healthcare provider or the local public health department, giving them details of their recent travel and symptoms.
- Thank all the participants for their cooperation with the provisions in place.

***For any activity that requires gathering large groups of people (workshops, conferences, community mobilizations) consider postponing or cancelling the activity. Where the activity is important enough to go ahead, consider the same preventative measures as for the office (above). Make hand washing and mask wearing mandatory.**

3. Things to consider when you and your employees are traveling

Before traveling:

- Make sure your organization and its employees have the latest information on areas where COVID-19 is spreading.
- Based on the latest information, your organization should assess the benefits and risks related to upcoming travel plans.
- Avoid sending employees who may be at higher risk of serious illness (e.g. older employees and those with medical conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease) to areas where COVID-19 is spreading.
- Make sure all persons travelling to locations reporting COVID-19 are briefed by a qualified professional (e.g. staff health services, health care provider or local public health partner)
- Consider issuing employees who are about to travel with small bottles (under 100 CL) of alcohol-based hand rub. This can facilitate regular hand-washing.

***Cancel or postpone all local, national or international non-essential travel to locations where the virus is present.**

While traveling:

- Encourage employees to wash their hands regularly and stay at least one meter away from people who are coughing or sneezing
- Ensure employees know what to do and who to contact if they feel ill while traveling.
- Ensure that your employees comply with instructions from local authorities where they are traveling. If, for example, they are told by local authorities not to go somewhere they should comply with this. Your employees should comply with any local restrictions on travel, movement or large gatherings.

When you or your employees return from traveling:

- Employees who have returned from an area where COVID-19 is spreading should monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days and take their temperature twice a day.
- If they develop even a mild cough or low grade fever (i.e. a temperature of 37.3 C or more) they should stay at home and self-isolate. This means avoiding close contact (one meter or nearer) with other people,

including family members. They should also telephone their healthcare provider or the local public health department, giving them details of their recent travel and symptoms.

2. SUMMARY OF RESOLUTION from President Duterte as of 12 March 2020

- Code Alert System for COVID-19 is raised to Code Red Sub Level 2
- Stringent Social Distancing Measures in NCR are officially adopted for 30 days
 - Suspension of classes in all levels is extended up to April 12
 - **Mass gatherings, planned or spontaneous, are prohibited during the period**
 - Community quarantine is imposed in the whole NCR.
- Guidelines for other LGUs in other areas are as follows:
- Barangay-wide quarantine is advised in the event of 2 positive COVID-19 cases belonging to different households within the same barangay
- Municipality/city-wide quarantine in the event of 2 positive COVID-19 cases belonging to different households within the same municipality / city
- Province-wide quarantine in the event of 2 positive COVID-19 cases belonging to different municipalities / cities in the same province
- LGUs given access to Quick Response Fund upon declaration of State of Calamity
 - No work in the executive branch of the government, but a skeletal force will be maintained. Health and emergency frontline services will continue in full operation. The other two branches encouraged to do the same.
 - Flexible work arrangements encouraged in the private sector. DTI and DOLE to issue guidelines to protect workers' welfare.
 - Rail transports to continue operations, DOTR to issue guidelines for social distancing measures
 - Land, domestic air, and sea travel to and from MM suspended after 48 hours from issuance of Resolution up to end of 30-day period
 - Measures to be monitored and re-assessed 7 days after issuance of Resolution
- LGUs outside NCR to exercise sound discretion in suspension of classes
 - Entire government machinery to be mobilized to address developments in the COVID-19 pandemic
 - OFWs allowed to travel to China except to Hubei Province
 - Entry travel restriction imposed on travelers from countries reported to have localized COVID-19 transmission