



# The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

*A Christ healed Africa for the healing of nations*

## LIMPOPO SYNOD GUIDELINES FOR OPENING ON-SITE WORSHIP AND GATHERINGS AFTER 1 SEPTEMBER 2020

24 July 2020

### A. NOTE: THIS DOCUMENT SHOULD BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE FOLLOWING:

1. **Government Gazette (APPENDIX I):** Regulation No.609 of 28 May 2020. This stipulates government regulations regarding religious gatherings. Should subsequent gazettes be published which amend regulations for religious gatherings, the new regulations should be applied [http://www.gpwnline.co.za/Gazettes/Gazettes/43365\\_28-5\\_Cogta.pdf](http://www.gpwnline.co.za/Gazettes/Gazettes/43365_28-5_Cogta.pdf)
2. **SACC Document 'Guidelines, Norms & Standards... during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond', (APPENDIX II)** published on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2020 <https://www.stoswalds.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SACC-Guidelines-Norms-Standards-to-Self-Regulate-For-COVID-Compliance.pdf> Minor details in our document differ from the SACC document, as we have translated the SACC document into a Methodist context.
3. **Procedure for Opening Church Buildings (APPENDIX III)**
4. **Return to Worship Place Plan (RWPP) Checklist (APPENDIX IV)**
5. **Limpopo Synod COVID-19 Pastoral Letter 7, 20 July 2020 (APPENDIX V)**
6. **ACTIVE WAITING Document UPDATED 25 July (APPENDIX VI)**

### B. BACKGROUND

The Extended Limpopo Synod Executive meeting held on Wednesday 15 July 2020 considered the way forward come 1 September 2020, when the three-month moratorium on on-site worship expired. The meeting confirmed the evidence presented that the South African numbers are rising, that we are nearing the peak and that the country has a differentiated prevalence of the virus with Gauteng, the Eastern Cape, the Western Cape and Kwa Zulu Natal very high. The meeting, noting the complexity of the Coronavirus and the diversity in its prevalence in the country and the Synod, **decided to allow every Circuit to make its own decision and for every Circuit Superintendent to take full responsibility** for that decision. It was agreed that more than a legal responsibility, there is a moral burden of saving lives and reducing the spread of the virus.

### C. CRITERIA TO CONSIDER IN REACHING A DECISION ABOUT RE-OPENING FOR ON-SITE WORSHIP AND OTHER GATHERINGS

Noting that many areas will be near peak infection levels around September, the following should be considered in reaching a decision about when and how to open for onsite worship and other gatherings:

1. **Do we have everything in place to re-open safely?:** Circuits are referred to the document '*Procedure for Opening Church Buildings for Worship*' (Appendix III) and the RWPP Checklist (Appendix IV). No Circuit should open for on-site worship or gathering until all the requirements of these document, which are compliant with Government legislation, has been met.
2. **How prevalent is the COVID-19 virus in the surrounding area?:** Consult the following website to determine how prevalent the virus is in your area:  
<https://www.covid19sa.org/provincial-breakdown>
3. **Where is our District/Province situated on the bell curve of infections?** The infection level in a given area will follow a bell-curve shape (until a vaccine is invented, it will probably be a succession of bell curves (waves) lasting at least into 2021). Infection levels in an area may appear early on in a bell curve, approaching the peak of the bell curve, over the peak but still very high, or low on the curve following a peak. Bearing in mind our responsibility to protect lives and play our role in 'flattening the curve', Circuits are cautioned against opening for onsite worship on either side of the peak of the bell curve.
4. **What is the age profile of your congregants?** If your congregants are over 60, they are considered high risk for COVID-19 fatality. Even if the infection rates in your area is relatively low, consideration should be given to the wisdom of gathering people who are high risk together in the same physical space. Congregants over 60 should be strongly discouraged from attending church meetings.
5. **What is the age and risk profile of your Circuit clergy?** Circuit Stewards are responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of Circuit clergy. Where clergy are over 60 years of age or have co-morbidities, opening for on-site worship should take place in such a way that younger clergy can cover for their older colleagues, and older colleagues can continue to minister in ways that honour best physical distancing practice. Clergy over 60 are discouraged from attending church meetings.

### D. CONSIDER THAT THERE ARE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF RE-OPENING FOR ON-SITE WORSHIP AND GATHERING

It is important for Circuits to maintain bi-focal vision when considering how to respond to COVID-19. On the one hand, COVID-19 will lead to **short** crisis periods of high infection (the peak of the bell-curve). On the other hand, COVID-19 is likely to be with us for several years. Whilst it is not wise to meet for on-site worship and gatherings during peak periods, the church cannot suspend on-site gatherings for years. Circuits need to find a way to adapt and live with the virus whilst continuing to proclaim the gospel.

Circuits should avoid the binary approach of choosing between going back to how things were pre-COVID-19 or being in total lockdown. Instead, Circuits need to consider both what the 'new normal' looks like, and that there may be different levels of re-opening. For example, church offices may open for mask-to-mask pastoral counselling before sanctuaries are opened for worship; likewise, Holy Communion services or Leaders Meetings may convene before sanctuaries are re-opened for worship.

## E. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Can church meetings like Men's meetings, Women's meetings, Class meetings and Home Cells be held?**

Gatherings in private homes are considered to be social gatherings and are therefore not permitted under Level 3 lockdown regulations. Gatherings on church property are considered to be religious meetings, and so the regulations contained in the Government Gazette (Appendix I) which are covered by the *Procedure for Opening Church Buildings* (Appendix III) need to be applied.

### **What about Children and Youth Ministry?**

Where children meet in the same venue as adults, they must be included in the headcount which should not exceed 50 people. Where children meet in a separate hall, they may be considered a separate gathering, with the same criteria for meeting applied for adults.