



THE PENTECOSTAL ASSEMBLIES OF THE WEST INDIES (PAWI) TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Dear Brethren,

The Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies Trinidad and Tobago Response to COVID-19

(Details are subject to change as we monitor the dynamic changes on the ground)

Moses Lee was right when he said, *“The early church was no stranger to plagues, epidemics, and mass hysteria. In fact, according to both Christian and also non-Christian accounts, one of the main catalysts for the church’s explosive growth in its early years was how Christians navigated disease, suffering, and death”*.

History has shown that in times of national and global calamities and disasters the church has been on the forefront responding with faith, compassion, prayer and the sacrificial labour and care of those who were suffering and have lost hope. So whether it was the Antonine Plague, Plague of Cyprian, the Bubonic plague, or the current Covid -19, the church can do no less. It is an opportunity to experience growth and maturity. It is not a time to be driven by fear, religious fanaticism, paranoia and/or irresponsible social actions.

I am calling on the constituency of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies Trinidad and Tobago to rise responsibly with faith, prayer, sacrificial care for others and basic common sense. It is an opportune time for our God to shine forth and men and women be birthed into the kingdom of God. As salt and light in a darkened world, the church, under the Lordship of Jesus must manifest the rule of God on the earth and in our lives. To avoid contributing to the growing mass hysteria, we wish to distance ourselves from the panic, irrational behaviour, and the religious hype boarding on fanaticism and a presumptuous courting with unwise health and hygiene practices. Given the uniqueness

of Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies, our latitude of autonomy, our sensitivity to the voice of God in the body, our culture of prayer, faith, deliverance and an unstinting belief in the power of God, **a balanced and unified voice and approach** must be echoed in our congregations and land. We therefore ask that we consider the following five areas.

1. Reduce Hysteria, Panic and stigmatization

One of the most useful comments that I have read on addressing the spread, prevention and control of the virus came from Nicole Westman. Westman says, *If you are young and healthy, it's more likely that you'd spread the virus than get severely sick*". In fact the statistics show

- 80% of persons infected will only show mild or no symptoms of the virus. There are therefore many persons who may be carriers and unintentionally spread the virus.
- 15% will show severe symptoms needing hospitalization
- 5% will experience critical respiratory or organ failure
- 3% experienced fatality

Because the virus is spreading so quickly, the 70% to 80% recovery rate is not highlighted by the media. In fact, it is said that combined numbers of 2017-2018, 100 thousand people died from the common influenza in the US as compared to the 3,000 people who have died globally from the Covid-19 virus.

As a PAWI Fellowship PAWI T&T must not contribute to the hysteria, we must seek to balance the discussion on the ground in our churches, membership and the general public.

2. Responsible Health Practices

The World Health Organization (WHO) has already declared the Covid-19 virus as a pandemic. WHO is anticipating full blown cases in many countries of the world as seen in China and Italy because of what was deemed the alarming level of in-action.

There have been repeated releases in all forms of social media advising on the absolute necessity of good hygiene practices. Such as washing of the hands for at least 20 seconds, keeping social distance (3 to 6 feet) in social setting, avoiding large gathering, meeting only if necessary, avoiding airports, restricting of travels, ensuring proper ventilation in rooms, engaging in self-imposed isolation and quarantine if symptoms appear, sanitizing all places and objects that are touched, avoidance of touching of the face, nose, mouth, cover coughs and sneezes with tissue or inside elbow.

Since the virus can exist up to 9 days, uniquely for the church issues like hand held microphones with the accompanying buffer sponges must be sanitized and not shared, office telephones should be sanitized between users, serving of communion, Sunday school/Junior church increases the inevitable person to person contact. Checking of offerings will require (as some have already been practicing) sanitizers and gloves.

There are reports that persons diagnosed with the virus have received death threats and have experienced severe deprivation for food and basic needs in one of our sister islands. We cannot contribute to this stigmatization. Unfortunately, in our circles there are those who believe that it is their responsibility to espouse a hyper spirituality and faith that flaunts basic hygiene protocol. They even rebuke others for not having faith. We want to reiterate that this situation is a national one. All Trinidadians and Tobagonians must collectively speak one voice for control, prevention.

As a PAWI Fellowship we cannot allow our elderly to be exposed to the virus through direct or indirect person to person contact.

3. The Reality check for religious gatherings

In relation to religious groups and gatherings, the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in a recent press release made some important points of concern. He noted that, *“In South Korea the cases spread through the Shincheonji church groups, and several*

Singaporean who attend a big religious gathering...recently caught the virus....the issue of course not religion itself but that the virus could spread very quickly in crowded settings....Saudi Arabia have temporarily stopped umrah pilgrimages and the Pope live streamed his sermon to avoid crowds in St. Peter's Square.

In a release today, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, advised that there should be no congregating of more than 25 persons. This advisory, did not specify a period of time that this restriction will last, as things are still evolving. Notwithstanding, as the church, we should be compliant with these instructions.

As a PAWI Fellowship we will continue to explore innovative ways of worshipping and giving our service to God. We have preached that the church is not the building.

- A few weeks ago the members of the General Executive of PAWI met for a Zoom prayer meeting with members across the region. We can explore same and other forms of on-line technology to stay connected.
- Churches with AC units increase the probability of in-breathing in an enclosed environment. Since it is said that "sunlight is nature's greatest disinfectant" we may need to reconsider the use of AC units in our churches during this period.
- There is also a place for small group house meetings, so that numbers do not exceed 25 persons. Of course all hygiene protocol must be in place.
- **We cannot do church in large groups.** The decision as to who can come and who can stay at home on any given day of worship can prove to be a logistical headache. It is now required that we close the door until further notice.
- If it's necessary for the leadership of a church to meet, under the number of 25, it can be an opportunity for the internal planning and praying sessions.
- We will be seeking the guidance of the authorities as it relates to weddings and funerals. In Italy all services of such nature are now on lock down. Ministers/Pastors will have to meet with the respective parties/families to work out the new arrangements in keeping with the numbers from the authorities.
- The general sense of meeting with persons is shaped by whether the meeting or travel is absolutely necessary. Small groups, individual counselling of less than 25 persons should be informed by such protocol.

4. Staff leave/absence

We have seen a release from the Ministry of Labour re: guidelines during this period. This can be sent via WhatsApp, if we have not seen it. The 10 points are accompanied by contact number, 299-0300 ext. 2043, 2124.

5. National Week of Prayer Fast

We must remember that in Matt 24:8, Mark 13:8 Jesus declares that in the last days wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, troubles are only the beginning of birth pangs... the world has not seen the full blast of the end time drama as yet. Luke 21:28 declares, "And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draws near".

In light of this crisis, we must call on God in repentance and mercy. I am asking that we look **at March 22 to 29** as a week of prayer and fasting 6:00 am to 6:00 pm or if persons desire to do longer hours. This week is personally done at home. Bishops and pastors can designate a day/s that members and churches can take to prayer and fasting privately.

Grace and Wisdom be added!

Don Hamilton (Rev.)

National Bishop