

Dear Leaders and People of God in the SACC Member Churches.

Greetings to you all in the name of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that in these difficult times of the national Lockdown occasioned by the fight we must all mount against this deadly virus called COVID19, you and your families are safely at home following the guidelines and the regulations. We lift to God in prayer those families who have been directly affected by Coronavirus and either lost their loved ones, others are quarantined or are in hospital. We also thank for those of you are Doctors, nurses, the police, the army and many others who hourly put their lives at risk as they serve those who are sick and are dying.

The leaders of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) recognise that there is much confusion over the most critical matter - the growing desperation of families over hunger and food insecurity. The SACC Pastoral Plan has four pillars, including Crisis Relief that also deals with the question of food security. Guiding its intervention was the SACC commitment to finding a solution that does the following:

1. Respect the integrity and the purpose of the Lockdown such that our process of giving food to people who are desperately hungry, does not become a vehicle of the spread of the disease and thus inadvertently cause death amongst the most vulnerable in society.
2. Ensures that we do not create a situation where our people are part of a stampede in a desperate attempt to get a food parcel which they believe might run out before they get theirs. This might result in ugly scenes and possible injuries.
3. Ensures that every part of the country where the people are, is reached at the same time in real time, and avoid the possibility of those in the cities being advantaged while those who are in the remote areas are excluded or considered last.
4. Protects and respects the dignity of our people in their state of need.
5. Mitigates if not totally eliminate, the scope of corruption.
6. Keeps alive the local commercial infrastructure of neighbourhood regular shops and spazas.

We concluded that the best way to respond to the challenge of food security was to be a voucher system that made sure that as many as possible of the people are reached and the local economy of the people is not destroyed by a system of procurement that favours the big food distributors.

With this approach the SACC engaged the Solidarity Fund which is receiving donations from business and individual South Africans. While everyone agreed that the vouchers, once they become available, will be best as they give the power of purchase to the people, the Solidarity Fund wanted to meet the immediate urgency to place some food on the tables of homes, and proposed to start giving out food parcels to some 50 000, household initially, during the Easter Weekend with the hope to reach 300,000 very soon.

This Solidarity Fund decision was discussed at the SACC COVID Emergency leaders teleconference meeting using ZOOM on Tuesday April 7: The leaders decided that, while developing the Voucher System was the best option, there was, however, the urgent need to



respond to the current crisis by giving out food parcels if this was possible. This led to the resolution for each church to go and compile lists of needy homes so that when the Solidarity Fund food parcels roll out, they are ready - and the hope was that the collection and collation of this list would be over Easter weekend.

In this meeting, a specific question was put by one Archbishop as to whether there were any guarantees of money for food support from either Government or the Solidarity Fund, this, said the Archbishop, to avoid churches going to raise people's hopes without guarantees. The response was that there are no guarantees, but the leaders are taking the decision as provisional, given that the Solidarity Fund intends to provide food by the weekend, and that hopefully the lists the churches could gather might be accommodated in the targeted 300,000 to be provided. Indeed many churches went and gathered lists across the country.

However, three disappointing things happened:

1. The Solidarity Fund informed the SACC that the first round would be through four food distribution NPO's that will cooperate with provincial and local community structures to be used to distribute the food parcels, and the list already compiled, would be the basis of their first round of distribution. That meant that any lists prepared by the churches would be in the next round.
2. Yet, even for that first round, the Solidarity Fund had not yet been able to begin the food supply because of various logistical challenges experienced by the distribution organisations, and contractual processes with the Dept. of Social Development; hence, by Tuesday after Easter, the first round had not yet begun - something the Solidarity Fund could not help.
3. The new target date for the Solidarity Fund distributions through the four NPOs is Saturday April 18, pushing the prospect of attention to the lists of the churches further out.

A slim mitigating hope for people in the lists of the churches might be if the same people identified by the churches were also found in the lists to be used by the NPOs in the first 300,000.

The list of the agencies that would be used as food parcel distributors has been made available to SACC for information and we believe this can help local churches to connect with those who distribute in their communities so as to plug in.

There is a gap in the distribution capacity of the appointed organisations, in the rural areas of four provinces: Limpopo, Rural Eastern Cape, Rural KZN and Mpumalanga.

The SACC and Community Based organisations were asked to help the Fund with the distribution of food in those areas, where the Fund will procure, package, transport, have a tracking system of the parcels and in a church identified by the SACC deliver there and the church people would then deliver to the individual households in the lists.

However, the leaders meeting on April 14 decided that it is not wise to tie the churches to the uncertainties associated with the food parcels, given the current experience; and that there would also be security challenges for the local pastors who may be besieged by communities over inadequate food supplies, as it happened at Mitchell's Plain. Rather the SACC must fast

track the deployment of the voucher system to help all for a dignified food support as quickly as possible.

The meeting of Church Leaders on 14 April, in addition to the matters noted above, further acknowledged

- a) The food parcel possibility and the Identification and collection of names of the people in our churches, has raised expectations that the people are going to receive the relief they so desperately need, especially in the form of food parcels very soon. This expectation will not be fulfilled in the now, and even in a bit later it will be at best a partial fulfilment because those who will benefit will firstly be those who are part of the NPO and community lists.
- b) The meeting also acknowledged the reality that the food distribution, especially in the food parcels system, is a highly contested space which has become highly congested where political actors are at the forefront of the distribution of these food parcels. Apart from the group of four NPO's employed to distribute the food parcels in 5 provinces and most of the metros and towns with a list of names whose origin we do not know, there are many local, community and provincial organisations that are active in the space, whilst many others want to be active, let alone the government engagement. This creates a high level of congestion and thus confusion that can exacerbate tensions rather than calming them in society.
- c) The meeting acknowledges the reality that in some parts of the country there are tensions that are already at breaking point around the distribution of these food parcels, where sporadic violence can and is erupting as reflected in the news item that featured in the news about the experience of Mitchell's Plain in the Western Cape.

Having taken due regard of the above the meeting concluded on the following:

1. The best course of action for the SACC is to pursue with more urgency and focus the issue of the Voucher system so that it can be set up as quickly as possible. This is where the SACC energy must be spent on.
2. This means that the SACC will not take part in the distribution of food parcels as our participation will be limited to the Voucher system platform.
3. The meeting accepts the reality that our people's expectations that have been raised through the campaign of church leaders in their congregations, has been dashed for now, and this will result in great disappointment of our people who are in desperate need of food, and the food parcels distribution was the vehicle that they looked at for their immediate release.
4. Nevertheless it was emphasised that the collection of data through that the churches had embarked on is not a waste of effort, as this information is crucial for the work to be done once the voucher system has been established and is working.
5. The SACC commits to developing an instrument that can help churches identify in some realistic way who is to benefit in this program.
6. All that having been said, the acute sense of disappointment cannot be undermined, which comes when one is in need of food and hope seems to be coming and that hope is



not fulfilled in the time we wished for. This causes much anger and breeds hopelessness that comes with this experience. The SACC extend regret and apology for the way things have turned out. And this goes back to the question of guarantees that was raised by one Archbishop at the April 7 meeting; guarantees no one could give as the Solidarity Fund had its own processes, subject to the distribution agreements they already had with the 4 NPOs and the contracts with DSD.

Meanwhile, we were forwarded information from one of our Church Leaders that said:

“The Department of Social Development reported today, 13th of April 2020, at the COVID-19 Local Command meeting that there has been a huge demand for food parcels by community members, which has resulted in the Department being unable to verify individuals that qualify. A new system has been developed, which must be followed, that; employees dit uif

1. Individual community members shall apply for food parcels, using the following telephone numbers; 079 890 3471 or 079 890 0175.
2. Individual Community members must call, whats up or send a "please call me" sms to the above numbers when applying for the food parcels.
3. The names and details of the applicant will then be screened and verified with SASSA to ascertain if the individual qualifies to receive food parcels.
4. All the previous lists developed by Cllrs will not be applicable anymore.

The Department of Social Development will advise on any further developments on this matter.”

We checked on this posting with the senior officials with whom SACC has been assigned to communicate at DSD; and surprisingly, they do not confirm this information. Instead we have today been given another entry point for the local communities that the churches serve. We attach the full information sheet from DSD, titled “Provincial List Contact Details”. It provides for each district and metro, the number that every person that needs help should us. Again the principle is that each person must self-represent for food support in their district. In our view this may cut out the role of the churches in food deliveries. According to this DSD document (attached), the people who are not in the existing DSD database must call and register with SASSA for Social Relief of Distress. Even though this document says so, our information is that SASSA staff are not at work and there is no value in trying to work on their numbers. The best advice is that people must use the District numbers given in their area and seek help.

To complement this, and to accommodate churches that have already gathered names and those that have collected their own food, we made and were granted the following:

1. Churches that have gathered lists, may call the DSD District or Metro office nearest to them, and present their lists there for consideration. The district/Metro office will assess those names and determine which ones will be accepted. In other words it does not follow that any one and everyone on a church lists will be accepted. They have their own criteria for assessing. The best a church can do at this point is to present their lists. This I believe is a compromise that can help.

2. There are Churches that can provide their own food parcels to needy people. DSD says that these churches can bring what they have and link up with DSD centres, again through communication with the nearest DSD offices in their neighbourhood, and have a partnership. This might mean that the churches add their goods to the DSD parcels to be delivered with DSD. In the main, DSD do not want to move from the danger of wholesale movement of churches on their own delivering food all over the place. Hence the attached document says: "Food parcels are delivered to households by staff and volunteers working at the CNDCs". What we have requested and told can be done is that church workers could be registered as volunteers in the partnership with their church's food. This is important because it brings church credibility and accountability to the satisfaction of the people who would have donated the food to the church.

Dear Church Leaders, in an otherwise nasty situation that causes much pain and misunderstanding, we hope that these two negotiated provisions will in a small way restore our ability to remain together in the common effort to help our people without being sidetracked from the main agenda of COVID Combat.

Here is the summary of the position as we have it now:

- a) The SACC is solely focused on vouchers - preferably money vouchers that take account of the millions of people in desperate need. This we are advocating hard for with Government.
- b) Government, through DSD is primarily providing food parcels through the district and metro offices to people in the SASSA database. Anybody who is in that database who has need may call their district number given in the DSD sheet attached to this memo. They will be assessed and help determined.
- c) Anyone not in that list (those aged ages 19 to 59) must not follow what is in the attached document, that says they must register with SASSA. They must not try that because SASSA offices are closed. Instead they must still call the District/Metro DSD office numbers given in the list attached, and request food assistance.
- d) This does not nullify the lists already gathered by the churches. Instead, the churches are advised to submit those lists to the nearest District/Metro DSD office for consideration. There is no guarantee that every person on the list from a church will need supported. DSD has their own system of determining who qualifies. All the church can do is to submit that names and their relevant information.
- e) Churches that have or are collecting food donations for making parcels are encouraged to link up and partner with the nearest DSD for partnership, and have their food delivered together with DSD staff and their approved volunteers. DSD will allow that church workers be registered as volunteers in the partnership with DSD, thus bringing church credibility and accountability that provides surety and satisfaction for the organisations and individuals who would have donated the food to the church.
- f) Back to vouchers, our hope is that when the Government starts on vouchers, it will on a large scale, reaching everywhere, and the churches may have the ability through the LEANs to identify needy people who have somehow been missed, and ensure that no one is left out. For this we are as SACC advocating at all levels of Government. There are somewhere in the vicinity of 25 million people who are hungry in this country. They

can never get to all our lists. We are advocating, again with no guarantees of success, that Government must find a way to place money in their pockets to buy food where they can. But we are also saying the time has come for our people to grow some nutritious food - basic spinach and carrots in their backyards, and our new website [www.coronachurch.org.za](http://www.coronachurch.org.za), will carry a feature on food gardening. Nutrition is critically important for boosting our immunity against viruses.

In all of this it seems very clear that our focus MUST be in the formation of ecumenical structures in our communities LEANs, so that we have credible people who are trusted by all churches monitoring and even participating as volunteers in any relief work. We appeal to the leaders of our churches to appreciate that the SACC Pastoral Plan is not about the Government or Solidarity Fund food parcels. Food, critically important as it is, is one part of Crisis Relief, which itself is one part of four other pillars that all can only work well when we have taken the trouble to coordinate our churches in the communities where our people live and worship. The four pillars of our plan to which we appeal for us all to try and focus on are:

1. Systems & Structures for Local Organisation & Bulk Communication: Ten or more local churches will form a Local Ecumenical Action Network LEAN; each with WhatsApp network for its members; all LEANs in a district with a District Coordination Centre that relates to the SACC National Coordination Centre that relates to the State JOC and daily issues bulk WhatsApp communication for authentic information.
2. Crisis Relief: For the destitute, as identified by local church structures (LEANs), and in concert with Government, using a voucher system for basic needs purchases.
3. Pastoral Care: Focusing on the needs of the vulnerable; on support for victims of domestic abuse & violence; support for frontline health workers who are in our communities; and capacitating for peace management in case of conflictual protests.
4. Advocacy & Support for Rebuilding Lives, including:
  - a) Issues negatively impacting those who are socially and economically vulnerable.
  - b) Communities supporting education; beginning by mitigating 2020 matric disruption to long term Educational Youth Resource Centres sustained by local churches.
  - c) Aggressive local livelihoods development including business incubator model.

The absolute purpose of the total Pastoral Plan is to help South Africans out of the Coronavirus challenge, and come out with as few casualties as is possible; and instead to build up community resilience that bears witness in all our communities that there among them those charged with the mission to be the salt and the light of their communities. That is why our primary contribution should remain in the infrastructure for community care - the Local Ecumenical Action Networks, (LEANs) and in the WhatsApp Platform that carries daily Corona information, and pastoral messages. We shall also be using these communication tools to promote nutrition and home gardening for survival in the coming days. That is why we appeal for churches to create WhatsApp Groups for each congregation, and have its coordinator sent to the SACC on [support@sacc.org.za](mailto:support@sacc.org.za); and likewise, the LEAN coordinator in the neighbourhood of 10 or more churches to also be so listed for the critically important information to flow to them. That is why we appeal to the churches to give us lists of people that are prepared to participate



in an ongoing cycle of prayer for the nation and the health workers in the frontlines. This is work of the church no NGO or government can and will do.

Meanwhile, in this very grave situation of hunger and desperation, we commit ourselves to working with you so that as soon as possible those of our people who are desperate for food can access food in a respectful and dignified manner. We wish upon you and the people you lead all of the grace, love and peace that comes from our risen Lord and master Jesus Christ.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Yours for a Coronavirus-free South Africa

Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana  
General-Secretary, SACC.

