

12<sup>th</sup> September 2020

### **MESSAGE TO ALL IN THE UPCSA ON OPENING FOR PUBLIC WORSHIP IN COVID-19 TIMES**

The young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with bounty," declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 31: 13-14 NIV)

This message comes at a time when many congregations are contemplating to open the building for public worship, while some have started already, and others are still postponing. The decisions of all the Sessions are respected, as it is considered that they are taken after careful analyses of the situations and circumstances of each congregation. We encourage that the environmental analyses should always be the bases for the making of such decisions. In every situation, care should be given to adhere to the protocols and regulations that have been given by the respective governments and the health of the people should not be compromised.

We commend the ministers and leaderships who, against all the odds, provided ministry to the members of the UPCSA and the members of the church catholic, through the messages on social media, the conducting of virtual services, the conducting of funeral services, the conducting of visitations, the provision of pastoral care and counselling. Please convey the message of support to the entire membership of the UPCSA and assure those many congregants who found themselves mourning after the deaths of their loved ones, after the loss of jobs and income, due to gender based violence, due to victimization in their societies and churches, due to deterioration of health and living standards, etc., that God has promised to "turn mourning into gladness " and to "give comfort and joy instead of sorrow". Assure the members that we are still committed "to be a reconciled community of Christians exercising a prophetic witness to Christ". We invite them to continue to journey with us towards this ideal.

The UPCSA leadership and the Clerks of Presbyteries (at their virtual consultation that was held on 5 September 2020) identified key areas that should be prioritised, as congregations open for public worship. Those areas have been informed by the desire to pursue the mission of the UPCSA:

*We will proclaim our Triune God in Southern Africa through*

- *Bearing witness to the saving love of Jesus Christ;*
- *Building vital, reforming congregations for worship, ministry and discipleship; and*
- *Visibly proclaiming the Kingdom of God through unity, justice, peace and love.*

### **PSYCHO-SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL SUPPORT**

There is a need to, intentionally, provide psycho-social and spiritual support to the members. This should be done in consideration of various factors, including, but not limited to the following:

- The congregations could not hold their Good Friday/Easter services and many other important services thereafter. The prohibition of the holding of public worship took away the sense of belonging and fellowship. Many congregants did not get Holy Communion since the lockdown. Many suffered spiritually over the period.

- The congregations could not participate in the burial services of many of their deceased members.
- Many members lost family members, relatives, friends and loved ones who were buried under the strict protocols, thus rendering the services not so decent, as people would have loved to accord their deceased.
- Many members got infected with coronavirus and were in isolation and/or hospitals. They could not be visited or given any form of support. Many have not recovered fully from those experiences, emotionally and physically.
- Many members had sick people, due to COVID-19 and other sicknesses, but could not visit them. They live with the feelings of guilt.
- Many people, especially the youth, lost their jobs and income.
- The elderly and sick people could not be visited by the ministers, elders and/or leaders.
- The youth felt neglected and had to find ways of survival with no guidance and mentorship.
- It has been a time of loneliness, stress, and misery. These and many other experiences have been causes of much grief.

As we open services, there should be deliberate attempts to heal the wounds through, inter alia:

- Providing psycho-social and spiritual support to the ministers and the leaders – as wounded healers, and to the members of the UPCSA.
- Conducting memorial services to celebrate the lives of the departed.
- Holding services regularly.
- Conducting vibrant, healing, and liberating worship services.
- Rendering healing, encouraging, and spiritually uplifting sermons that are relevant to the people's situations.
- Providing counselling services to those in need.
- Visiting and encouraging the elderly.
- Visiting and comforting the sick and the bereaved.
- Addressing the issues of gender-based violence and corruption.
- Providing focused ministry to the children and the youth (considering that many lost their parents – leading to situations of child-headed families, and many are anxious about the academic year).
- Considering a hybrid of services (physical attendance and virtual services) to avoid the second wave of COVID-19 attack.
- Sending messages to the members frequently to keep in touch and to encourage.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**

The following issues were noted:

- Many people lost income (due to loss of jobs or closure of businesses), which affected cash flow in many congregations. Some ministers and other church workers have been affected, as they could not get their stipends and salaries.
- The protocols put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 rendered some of the “normal” administrative systems impossible, ineffective, and obsolete. It was not possible to collect offerings from the members. No meetings could be held. The Deacons' Boards/Stewardship Boards could not function.
- Many people do not have access to technological devices and could therefore not receive intimations, messages, and sermons.
- Many ministers and leaders are not abreast of the developments in technology.
- Many people struggle to connect, due to network challenges and lack of access to data.
- Due to these and other challenges, it was not possible for some Presbyteries to hold virtual meetings and for some congregations to have virtual services.

There will, therefore, be a need to:

- Fasttrack the training and/or upskilling of ministers and leaders to have a working knowledge of technological devices, as they will be indispensable to ministry and administration, henceforth.
- Presbyteries, Sessions and Commissioners are encouraged to use the funds that were set for travelling to stated and special meetings for providing data, for people to access virtual meetings.
- Improve communication systems to reach as many as possible.
- Devise other ways and means of ensuring financial sustainability to augment the offerings and tithing systems.

## **PROMOTE GENDER JUSTICE**

Mention has been made of many people who continue to suffer due to gender based violence before and during lockdown. The experiences of the youth have also been highlighted. It has also become so apparent, from the list of participants at the meetings that have been held, that the leadership and decision-making structures in the UPCSA are male dominated and, to a great extent, exclude the youth.

Therefore

- Presbyteries should expedite the setting of Gender Desks and Youth Desks to address the issues of gender justice and inclusion of women and the youth in the ministry and decision-making processes.
- The aspects of gender justice and youth ministry should be factored in the liturgies for public worship.
- Presbyteries and other structures of the denomination should be sensitive of gender justice when electing leaderships.

We continue to pray for growth, development, health, and strength. Let all experience and bear witness to the saving love of Jesus Christ. Let our congregations be vital and reforming for worship, ministry, and discipleship. Let us all, visibly, proclaim the reign of God through unity, justice, peace, and love.

Yours in Christ.



Lungile Mpetsheni  
**GENERAL SECRETARY**