



29 April 2020

Dear President Ramaphosa,

As Christians we have the highest regard for you and your God-given role, as the Bible instructs us to honour all established rulers (1 Peter 2:13-17; Titus 3:1-2). Our God has instituted the realm of state government and has placed you in authority for the good and protection of our country as His servant, for which we are very grateful (Romans 13:1-7).

Know that we pray regularly for you and the daunting task you face, that God may strengthen and uphold you and give you much wisdom in your many decisions (1 Timothy 2:1-4). We are called to obey the authorities that God has placed over us and to make your job easier, not harder. Our Christian faith should make us the best of citizens and neighbours, as the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”, “zealous for good works” (Jeremiah 29:7; Matthew 5:13-16; Titus 2:14; Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:10)^{1 2}. It is for this reason that we make our humble and respectful appeal.

We are concerned that in the risk-adjusted strategy there is no specific mention anywhere of religious gatherings, so we are appealing that *responsible religious gatherings be allowed* from Alert Level Four, based on three grounds: (1) our conscience; (2) the good of our nation; (3) our constitutional rights.

Our Christian Conscience

According to the Bible, public assembly is an essential of our faith. The very New Testament word itself, “church” means “assembly, gathering”. Physically meeting together isn’t merely a nice thing to do; it’s part of what a church *is*. We do not believe the church equals the building; but the church does, by definition, require public gathering (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:19,23,28). Scripture clearly commands that we:

- Not “forsake the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:24-25; Acts 2:42-47; 5:12)
- Preach His Word publicly and proclaim His gospel in the assembly (2 Timothy 4:1-5)
- Baptise converts and publicly partake together of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:38-41; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 11:17-34)(can be done hygienically with extra precautions)
- “Speak” and “sing to one another” in person (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)
- Read Scripture publicly (1 Timothy 4:13)
- Practice church discipline and restoration (Matthew 18:15-18; 1 Corinthians 5:4, “when you are assembled”)
- Minister to one another in countless ways that flow into and out of public gatherings, e.g., bearing one another’s burdens, meeting needs, encouraging one another (1 Corinthians 12-14; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11; Hebrews 3:12-13)

From that first Easter Sunday when our Lord arose, Christians have gathered on the Lord’s Day, that first day of every week, to fulfil these biblical mandates (Matthew 28:1; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10).

¹ If the time comes that COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa requires an army of volunteers to assist in (or in any other crisis), we as Christians want to be the first ones you would call upon, who would gladly risk our lives for the sake of Christ and our community.

² We as a local church are serving those in need through dispensing of basic necessities to our congregation and other congregations in the country.

The Good of Our Nation

With the present lockdown, we respect that our government is not in any way targeting Christians or singling out religious groups; the ban is on all non-essential public gatherings. Our government does acknowledge that some public gatherings are essential (courts of law, hospitals, shopping centres, and schools soon to resume). But religious gatherings have been relegated to the same “non-essential” category as pubs, restaurants, sporting events and social gatherings, and banned in every stage of lock-down.

However, we are convinced that Christian churches are unparalleled in their ability to instil faith, hope, and charity in people. Such character traits are vital to the well-being of society, particularly in times of crises. God has made us as both bodies and souls, and the health of our land depends on caring for both. We are grateful for your concern for the physical health of all South Africans. We would maintain that the spiritual and mental health of the nation are equally significant. Our mission is to tend to those needs, and we are very eager to do it.

Our Constitutional Rights

In appealing for our constitutional rights as Christians, we are following the example of the Apostle Paul, who twice appealed to his legal rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25). We believe that the lockdown regulations passed in terms of the Disaster Management Act are a limitation of the rights to freedom of religion contained in Sections 15 and 31 of the Constitution, which cannot be justified in terms of Section 36. Section 36 states that rights may “only be limited in terms of law of general application to the extent that the limitation is reasonable and justifiable..., taking into account all relevant factors...including less restrictive means to achieve the purpose”.

We believe that there are proven, “less restrictive” means available for guarding against the spread of COVID-19 without violating our religious liberties³. We are thankful that the Constitutional Court has stated many times the importance of the right to freedom of religion as part of dignity and equality within society.

We are appealing to you, President Ramaphosa, on behalf of Christians and people of faith in this rainbow nation, to uphold our hard-won Constitutional rights by allowing us to gather responsibly, for the sake of our consciences and the health of your people.

Thank you so much for inviting public comment and for hearing our appeal, amidst all the myriad of pressures upon you. May our Lord richly bless, keep and guide you in these trying times, and may we come through this stronger together as a nation. Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika!

Yours most respectfully and sincerely,

The Elders/Pastors of Antioch Bible Church

³ *Proposed practical measures for each phase of lock-down:*

Phase 4: Maximum of 30% of church capacity in line with Spain’s measures, temperature monitoring, face masks, hand-sanitation and social distancing

Phase 3: Maximum of 40% of church capacity, face masks, hand-sanitation, social distancing

Phase 2: Maximum of 50% of church capacity, face masks, hand-sanitation, social distancing

Phase 1: Maximum of 80% of church capacity, social distancing