

THE FIGHT AGAINST THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC
THE STORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA

INTRODUCTION

As the world continues to battle the new corona virus (COVID - 19) pandemic which has brought in its wake untold suffering (including death and devastation to our global economy), the Church Universal continues to pray and remains hopeful in the Almighty's intervention for the total healing of our World. It is in the mood of solidarity that the Presbyterian Church of Ghana shares, with other members of the EMS family, news about the current situation in our dear country Ghana and what the church is doing, through its collaborative efforts with the government, to win the fight against the pandemic and its associated outcomes.

A. THE GENERAL SITUATION IN GHANA - GOVERNMENT'S ACTIONS

As at 11th April, 2020, the country has recorded 408 confirmed COVID 19 cases, 8 deaths and 2 recoveries. In line with global trends, the Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo led government has taken measures, which are largely precautionary, to mitigate the spread of the pandemic and its effects of the citizenry. These measures include:

1. A four-week shut down of all ports and entry points to Ghana with effect from March 23;
2. A three-week partial lockdown in the two major cities (Accra and Kumasi) - effective March 30, with exemptions for essential service providers. Two weeks prior to this partial lockdown, there had been a ban on all public gatherings including funerals, church services, parties etc. across the country;
3. A massive nationwide civic education campaign to heighten citizens sense of awareness of the pandemic and their responsibilities to themselves and fellow citizens in combating the pandemic;
4. The total mobilization of the country health delivery "machinery" in readiness to deal with the CONVID 19 and other related matters;
5. The Government continues to offer a modest but meaningful economic and social support to the general public and residents in areas affected by the lockdown. These include picking up of some utility bills, direct supply of food to the needy, granting of tax reliefs to frontline health and security personnel as well as supplying the needed logistics to health and other frontline workers. Add to all the commendable measures taken by the government is the regular engagement of the public by the president and his team to ensure firsthand information to the citizens. All these actions seem to be driven by the strong life-affirming philosophy exposed by the President in one of his broadcast speeches to the nation: "We know how to bring the economy back to life. What we do not know is how to bring people back to life. We will therefore save people's lives, then their livelihoods."

It is worthy of note that in taking these actions the government has been in direct consultation with all the identifiable stakeholders including the Legislature, Traditional Rulers, Religious Institutions, Faith Based Organizations and Trades Unions among others. This consultative approach has worked very well to ensure the cooperation of these stakeholders and the effectiveness of the measures employed in this fight.

B. ACTIONS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA

Being the oldest continuously existing church in the country with an acute sense of patriotism and track record in social witnessing, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana has, from the onset, been in the thick of things as regards the fight against the COVID 19 virus. From its own resources the Church has been complimenting the government's efforts in the civic education of the citizenry and the general social intervention for the people.

1. Pastoral Letters To The Faithful

In Pastoral letters dated 17th and 30th March to the faithful, signed by the Moderator of the General Assembly - Rt. Rev. Prof. Joseph Obiri Yeboah Mante, the Church addressed certain salient issues relating to pandemic and measures being undertaken by the government in collaboration with its stakeholders to fight it. The Church urged the members to endeavour to comply with these measures as their God-given duty to self and humanity. Below are some extracts from the Pastoral Letters:

a. On Personal Hygiene & Respiratory Practices – Precautionary Measures

"In light of the gravity of the situation regarding the current pandemic, the PCG leadership directs, until further notice, as follows:

- i. The PCG affirms the directives issued by the President of the Republic of Ghana to suspend all Congregational Services and meetings. For us, this includes, actual Sunday Morning worship services, Church group meetings, Revivals, Lent Prayer, Children Service and Easter Monday Picnics for four weeks. PCG Schools will remain closed until further notice. Agents are to strictly comply with these directives.
- ii. All official PCG foreign trips are hereby suspended until further notice, unless with the stated approval of the Principal Officers of the General Assembly, and all members of the Church are strongly advised to refrain from embarking on foreign trips or local trips unless they are extremely necessary. Additionally, we should discourage travel into the country by our Foreign Partners in the meantime.
- iii. Observation of the following personal and respiratory hygiene practices, among others, as recommended by the Ministry of Health (MoH) is crucial:
 - Avoid handshakes and unnecessary close contacts.
 - As much as possible do not touch your face, nose and eyes (with unwashed hands).
 - Wash your hands frequently with soap under running water and use alcohol-based hand sanitizers. In places where taps with running water are not available, Veronica buckets and other improvised means for hand washing under running water and soap should be made available on our Church premises at visible locations.
 - When it becomes very necessary to administer sacraments during this period, as much as possible, it should be limited to Ministers who are to ensure that they wash their hands with soap under running water or use the sanitizers before handling the communion elements and to remember to keep appropriate social distances.
 - Church cleaners/ushers should, at least, clean the door handles, rails and washrooms located on church compounds very often. The environment of the chapels and our institutions should also be kept clean. Let us use this period to enhance the Cleanliness Campaign the Church is embarking on.
 - Use tissue to cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and this should be discarded appropriately after use. In the absence of tissue, one may cough into the inside of the bent elbow if one is wearing a long sleeve top, or into a cloth. These should be washed or hanged in the sun as soon as one gets home.

- As much as possible, avoid overcrowded spaces and ensure you are in well-ventilated environments.
- Funerals, weddings and naming ceremonies are to be suspended or at best held privately”

b. On Use Of Electronic Media - Communication

The PCG called *"on the Government to extend the limitation placed on the number of people who can congregate at a place, to cover all social gatherings, including pubs, night clubs and drinking bars"*. This call was headed in subsequent directives from the government. In the light of this limitation, the Church all its Agents to use both traditional and contemporary media to reach out to members during the four week suspension of church services. Media platforms such as Community Information Centers, Social Media Platforms - YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and the like were suggested as platforms the Church could use to reach its members.

The Head office of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana has also used the opportunity to reach out through both traditional and contemporary media to the world during the Sunday services. Television broadcasts of church services are shown on major TV stations across the country while Facebook live streaming and YouTube videos are shared to reach out to both congregants and the general population with live sermons. It is heartwarming to note that large numbers of participation have been recorded during online broadcasting with over 5, 000 views per every Sunday service. These videos and sermons can be assessed on (<https://pcgonline.org/> or on PCG TV on youtube).

c. On Hope Of Restoration

The church members were encouraged to adhere to all directives issued by the Church, the Health Ministry and the Government to help contain the pandemic. As is characteristic of all such Pastoral Letters, the Moderator ended on a note Hope of Restoration and Wellbeing - *"We are not living in normal times but I do firmly believe that God is still on the throne and we are also assured that Jesus has promised us *Peace I leave with you: my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* John 14:27 (NIV).*

2. Social Actions – Donation of Food and Other Consumables

In response to the President’s appeal for institutional support in the fight against the pandemic, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana has made several donations to Government Institutions and Frontline Health Workers. For instance on 24th March the Moderator and the Clerk led the General Assembly to make a donation of food and assorted drinks to the three designated Health Facilities for the COVID 19 pandemic. The Church further pledge to provide lunch daily for a week for the front line Health workers at these designated Facilities. The General Assembly’s kind-hearted and public-spirited gesture continues to be replicated with the by other individuals and Courts (Presbyteries, District and Congregation) of the Church. Items that are being donated include medical supplies, toiletries, food stuff, money etc. The church appreciates the need to critically support especially health workers and all stakeholders in the fight against the pandemic to ensure that its impacts on the Ghanaian economy is reduced.

In a related Social Action, the PCG is helping to deal with some of the challenges of the lockdown by making available Presbyterian School spaces as temporary residence for the homeless and poor in the society.



A donation by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana to the three designated health centers for the Covid-19 treatment in Ghana. Rt. Rev. Prof. Joseph Obiri Yeboah Mante (4th left), Moderator of the General Assembly presenting the items to Dr. Charity Sarpong (3rd right), Regional Director of Health Services, Greater Accra Region.

3. Taking Care Of Its Own

In response to the church's appeal, the various Presbyteries, Districts and Congregations have extended social support to church members and people in their communities who are affected by the lockdown and other measures being employed to fight the pandemic. Also, the leadership of these Courts are doing everything humanly possible in the circumstance to extend pastoral care and spiritual support to their members. The psychological and general social needs of these members are also being addressed.

4. National Prayer -Spirituality

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana was involved in the National Day of Fasting and Prayers declared by the President on the 25th of March, 2020 which was preceded by a special Presidential Breakfast Prayer Meeting attended by all Heads of Churches.

The PCG continues to involve its members, through its social media platforms and weekly television broadcasts, in praying for the world, the nation Ghana, the vulnerable, the sick / dying, bereaved / lonely and, more especially God's intervention in bringing an end to this pandemic.



Picture: Breakfast prayer meeting organized by the President of Ghana at the Jubilee House. The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Rt. Rev. Prof. Joseph Obiri Yeboah Mante (3rd left), prayed for all health workers and frontline staff. Source: Jubilee House.

CONCLUSION

The fact remains that our world today is in very difficult times as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic with its associated devastating cost of human life and general wellbeing. In Ghana, as in many other nations of the world, the church's collaboration with the government and all other stakeholders has been successful in sustaining and winning the fight against this deadly pandemic. We remain firmly hopeful that the predicted worst which is yet to come will be averted by God's Divine intervention. Indeed, with the Lord on our side, this pandemic TOO SHALL PASS.

NB: The below sites may be referenced for more on the current situation in Ghana and the measures being out in place to combat it <https://www.ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/#>.
<http://www.presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches>.

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