

The Methodist Church in Singapore

新加坡基督教衛理公會

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Pastoral Letter to All Methodist Brothers and Sisters

To all dearly beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: May the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

How I look forward to when we can meet face to face, to hear your sharing and to talk with you. But due to the dire situation of this pandemic, the Government has decreed that the whole of Singapore, at all levels, must join together as one, to deal with the unbridled spread of this virus.

Consequently, we have to adjust our strategies in a timely manner. This means that our churches are sometimes faced with sudden changes. Knowing that this is an extraordinary time, it is to be expected that we have to make adjustments whenever necessary. This is a particularly tenacious virus, capable of mutating quickly. The only recourse left is to beat the virus to the finish line.

Perhaps some of our brothers and sisters may have misgivings about the decision below, but for the sake of the health of our families, and of our neighbours, and for the unfinished mission and responsibilities as Christ's disciples, we must learn to restrain ourselves, to abstain from what we may have taken for granted. This too is a sign of an honourable character.

The three Annual Conference Presidents and I had a lengthy discussion, covering many different perspectives. Each one of us put out valuable views and critical considerations, till we reached an unavoidable and painful decision: **to suspend Holy Communion until the end of April**. Let me take this opportunity to share our explanation with everyone.

1. Holy Communion is one of two important sacraments of the church and we are instructed to do it often "in remembrance of Christ". Our founder, John Wesley, teaches that it is **a means of grace** and the early church celebrated it daily. Over time, the sermon took precedence to the sacrament, and it is celebrated monthly in most of our Methodist churches, partly from historical shortages of Church Elders to conduct the rite. Holy Communion may only be presided over by an Elder of the Church.

In this extreme situation and the civic action required to overcome this disease, let us join together with other countries to work towards the health of our nations for the blessing of the generations that come after us. Let us put aside this act of piety for the moment and in turn,

replace it with an act of mercy. Thus we fulfil our responsibility as a good citizen and a good neighbour by this temporary suspension of the Holy Communion.

In this regard, we strongly encourage all church care groups to meet up, not physically face to face, but through teleconferencing platforms.

2. How frequently should the Holy Communion be observed? Of course, when it is permissible to do so, we should do it as often as meaningful. New testament churches lifted up broken bread daily in remembrance of the Lord. The early Church made it a practice to conduct the Holy Communion on the first day of each week. After the reformation, the focus of the worship service shifted from the Holy Communion to the sermon. A sermon would be preached every week and the Holy Communion was conducted after a certain number of weeks. Later, it became a once-a-month occurrence.

In the missions movement during the 19th century, many churches were built and as there was insufficient presiding pastors, many rural churches conducted the Holy Communion 4 times a year, or even just 2 times.

Under special situations, the Church could not conduct the Holy Communion every Sunday or every month. Now we are dealing with an extraordinary situation. Because of the government precautionary measure of social distancing, there are to be no more than 10 at any gathering. The Church has suspended Sunday worship and other events that may aggravate the urgent situation. The Church takes these regulations very seriously. Gatherings may cause cross infection, thus adding to the strain on the medical services and compromising the safety of those working on the frontline who risk their lives daily.

3. There are other ways by which we can show our love for the Lord and remember him and his means of grace. This is by the study of the Word and spending time in prayer, training our spiritual life, that we may be even more knowledgeable about the truth, understand God's will, and further deepen our love for the Lord.

This does not require us to come into contact with others. We can study the Bible by ourselves and pray for others. We can even use video calls to ask for advice or show care to others as we pray with one another over the phone. Thus, in this time, we can temporarily use other methods in place of the Holy Communion to remember and show our love for our lord.

4. What are the challenges if we were to let our members celebrate the Holy Communion at home? Who will consecrate the bread and wine? And when will the consecration be done? How do we deliver the elements to the homes of the members? When shall we conduct the Holy Communion? Is there a liturgy to follow? Who will administer? How do we prevent members from coming together for the Holy Communion? How do we maintain safe distancing? How then do we demonstrate the fellowship and communion of the saints? We realised that there are many difficulties in this matter.

Dear sisters and brothers, as disciples of Christ, and as responsible citizens, we entreat you to embrace the directions of the government, and demonstrate self-control. Do not go to each other's homes. The MCS sees the Holy Communion as sacred and significantly meaningful. Aside from what I had said earlier, the Holy Communion is also about our gathering in fellowship in the name of the Lord, thus remind your members not to go and buy the elements and conduct it by yourselves. That is against the teaching and meaning of the holy fellowship.

Many of the medical staff fighting against the ravages of this virus are our members. There are many others who remain at their posts day and night, to ensure that life continues as normal for us. And there are many brothers and sisters in the Lord, who are still concentrating on the fight. Indeed, their efforts are worthy of our respect and move us to tears. Let us then wait patiently together for that day, when we can come together with hearts full of joy and thanksgiving, and around the Lord's table, through the Great Thanksgiving, to commemorate His acts of mighty love, and revel in deep fellowship.

Together with you in Christ,

Bishop Dr Chong Chin Chung
Rev Dr Gregory Goh Nai Lat, CAC President
Rev James Nagulan, ETAC President
Rev Dr Gordon Wong, TRAC President