

Faith provides a lifeline in times of trouble

The national lockdown in South Africa, which enters Level 3 today, can be seen as a kind of test our country needs in order to focus on what really matters to society and in our personal lives.

One Biblical reason for trials has always been to expose what is in a person's heart or to test the quality of a person's decision or, as far as our nation is concerned, the quality of our social compact.

Pressure has a way of revealing what is hidden behind the façade of public display.

The stresses brought on by the lockdown have exposed to many how vulnerable our own financial strength and planning is: how fickle dependence on employment or the success of business can be; or how a person's livelihood can be stripped away by a force bigger than they can control.

While philosophically, and introspectively, this observation may be true, the practical reality of it goes much deeper.

There is more than financial stability to a loss of income. It affects that provider's peace of mind, self-esteem and violates a person's dignity to the extent that we can no longer be the woman or man we set out to be, and we see ourselves as letting down those who depend on us.

But such personal trouble fades in the face of the prospect of having no food and no means to provide it.

The ripple effect of the loss of income is almost endless and does not even stop at death, because loss of life leaves the surviving loved-ones with grief and bereavement that will plague them for years to come.

And when grief has become tolerable years later, those families will have to live with the missing, the emptiness, the questions that cannot be answered and the trials and growing pains that come with having started over and doing things differently.

It is at times like this – when powers beyond our control (the Covid-19 pandemic and the political response) plunges us into a downward spiral – that faith in the Lord God of heaven and earth becomes a life-line for many who espouse faith.

And not only does prayer and faith become a lifeline in the sense of an emotional pillar, but calling on God in crisis produces real results.

And it is in such pressing situations where one discovers the very real presence of God and His power to turn things around.

This lockdown also exposed to the nation what goods and services are actually essential – and not necessarily only what was legally allowed.

But even more so, it has exposed the glaring reality of essential services that were not allowed.

My mother had been a nurse all her life and I recall that she had twice been pricked with an HIV-infected needle in the course of her work.

They have protocols that they follow when that happens and the rigorous treatment she received following these incidents have left her thankfully unaffected by the virus.

But talk about putting your life on the line!

There are many others, including security personnel and retail staff who are risking their lives to provide the services we need during the lockdown.

But the exponential climb in counselling needs, as recorded by the national emergency line and the spate of domestic violence throughout the nation during this Lockdown have exposed the dire need for a service that had always been part of the fabric of any community and every society in South Africa – and that is the ministry of a pastor.

Proactive and reactive pastoral care services had always provided families with a buffer in times of internal friction.

Be it friction between spouses or parents and children, or even just to encourage during a time of fear and stress.

In many of our communities the absence of these ministries during the lockdown was evident in the looting, riots, rise in abuse cases, and rise in social resistance to illogical regulations – the buffer was gone!

And at this point we need to recognise and commend the religious leaders and pastors who found ways to obtain permits in order to visit families and people in distress in order to provide spiritual and physical care.

The General Household Survey of 2013, by Statistics SA, showed that 84.2% of our population affiliates in some way with the Christian faith.

And as a mostly Christian nation or as a nation of faith, people need their faith community and spiritual support, not just because spiritual leaders can give it, but because the people demand it.

It is my sincere prayer that our collective eyes will be opened to the needs exposed by our national lockdown.

And that those in power will truly appreciate, on the level of regulatory provisions under the State of National Disaster, the role of religious leaders in the social harmony and peace in our nation.

And we do it by providing care for individuals, families and whole communities.

God has entrenched Himself in our nation, and He has done so through His church.

Life and history should teach us that in times of trouble, you should never shun those foundational support structures that had carried you before the trouble started and that will still be there when the trouble is over.

With that said, let me conclude by saying: The church is here to stay.

And the people need us to be present in times of trial!

This is not a request: it is a statement of fact, borne out by the visible impact that the church has in communities in which it is active.

Pastor Alain Walljee: Bay Christian Church