

An open letter to church leaders in South Africa - Alan Platt

Allow me to start by commending South African leaders. You are unquestionably some of the most resilient people on the face of the planet. In the midst of the pandemic, severe weather, riots and plundering, racial tensions, and this against the backdrop of political instability and corruption, you represent a resilience that is rarely found in leaders in many other regions of the world.

I truly respect you as heroes in the faith, and therefore trust that my contribution through this communiqué will bring direction in the midst of the many decisions that you have to make.

Focusing on COVID-19, we seem to find ourselves postured between two options in response to the current regulations that have been handed down by government to the church as to our engagement in the midst of the pandemic. The first being that either we comply to a directive from the President, that seems to have many reasons for the church to experience dissatisfaction and discomfort. Or, the alternative, to rise up in resistance and in essence manifest a unified rebellion to the regulations, which would be very similar to the very resistance that we frown upon when evident in other sectors of our society. This could make the church feel that we are between a rock and a hard place, having to make a choice for one of these options. This is an effort that I pray will empower you to make the decision you feel is the right one at this time as you lead your people.

Let me first address the challenges of both the above positions:

1. **The regulations of government imposed on the church.**

It is true that the engagement of government with the church, to get their input in making decisions that are currently imposed, did not reflect the desire to involve the voice of the church. It is with disappointment that the church has felt that it has been regulated to a place where its voice and its contribution to the greater good in South African society is not being valued or respected. It is unthinkable at this stage, that government would not see the important role that the church could play at this particular time. We are a constitutional democracy were it is expected of government to include its citizens or at least key stakeholders in a conversation when it regulates these constrictive social frameworks. The church would have appreciated at least to come to a consensus decision that is both responsible and implementable. This, taking into account that the church represents a great diversity that warrants creative regulation. The unfortunate unintended consequences that the lockdown regulations are now resulting in for the church as a whole, in particular in the more rural areas of the country where many churches on the verge of being rendered obsolete. *(At the time of writing I am not aware of any new engagement from government with the church. If this has subsequently happened, it is unfortunate that it was not seen as vital over the last few months)*

It is also extremely disappointing that there is no consistency and evenhandedness in making decisions that implicate the church. There is no logic if the taxi industry can proceed with limited regulation, as well as casinos, gyms, restaurants, and other places where people gather, but strict regulation is handed down to impede the gathering in places of worship. Houses of worship are not asking for special treatment during this public health crisis, but they are to be guaranteed fair and equal treatment. The government can't force one group

to follow stricter regulations than others, or crack down harder on churches than secular organizations within the community. The implication of such an act is suggesting that other institutions will be more responsible than the church. This is hardly understandable, especially as the church exists with the interest of its people in mind. The church is one of the few social institutions who are directly faced with the aftermath of people dying from this pandemic.

2. Rising up in resistance with a unified rebellion against the regulations

It seems that we're trying to hold together two principles at the same time: one is that the Bible clearly teaches that we should respect and obey authorities that have been placed over us; but then on the other hand we should obey Christ rather than men if there's a clash between what the State requires and what God requires. In this case, we as the Church need to be very clear on what God is requiring of us at this point in time. Here there seems an inevitable degree of difference of opinion amongst Christians. It is crucial to understand that scripture doesn't allow us to disobey simply because we dislike a law and find it inconvenient, or even to disobey just because we distrust the Government or its ineffective handling of this crisis.

The real questions that we have to wrestle through biblically and in conscience are the following:

What is it that we're actually prevented from doing? We're not prevented from believing, preaching, caring, or gathering online. There are some things we can't do if we don't gather physically - but would Christ demand that we disobey in order for us to meet physically? The State did not order Churches to close forever, but rather for a period of time, now with a limited amount at that. Unfortunately, this does not take into account the space available in the different church facilities. What we are dealing with is the sense that the measures that have been given through to the church are perceived to be disproportionate to the risk in certain circles. However, we've got to be careful how we articulate what this challenge is, and be truthful and honest in our assessment of what the risk might be if we do decide to gather people together. Here we must recognize that we if we minimize the reality of this virus, regardless of government regulation, we could contribute to the possibility of more people contracting the disease because of our gatherings.

Lockdowns are not easy, they are a hard and require sacrifice, in particular for the church. We believe humanity were created for community and this implies physical connection. It is simply not good for humanity to be alone. Isolation has horrible side-effects. Lockdowns have negative side-effects. They are hard on us and on our people. They impact on people's livelihoods and lead to painful realities. We might do well to continue to ask the question how can we facilitate interaction between our people in this time in meaningful ways, without us contravening the framework of Government regulation.

The fact that the church is divided in its position towards vaccination has also not been helpful. We can have a measure of sympathy with people who feel that the vaccination has not yet been tested in terms of its possible side effects. But side-effects from using medicine is not new. Countless people live with side-effects from the medicine they take. Some are trivial while others are almost as bad as the illness or disease itself. However, the reality of the devastation the pandemic is causing, is reason to believe that taking the vaccination is in essence taking the 'highroad' for the sake not only of yourself, but as a contribution to

secure the possible end of this pandemic spreading rapidly and rampantly across the globe. We are literally being asked to make a sacrifice for the well-being of our neighbours, and making sacrifices for the benefit of others is exactly what Christians are called to do. A strong word of caution is to be issued to those who are using any biblical reference to discourage vaccination. This is to be seen as bad and unhelpful exegesis of Scripture.

We might also consider that in our engagement with the State, it will not be helpful if we parade an arrogant attitude with threats and ultimatums which do not reflect the spirit of Christ and are sure not to serve Kingdom interests in the long run. A haughty attitude becomes an aberration, and a regrettable one at that, fatally flawed by a hubris that makes the church seem condescending and judgmental, lacking the servant heart of Christ born out of humility and compassion for the pain of humanity. This might also be a time for the church to ask the question of how we will engage with the State in all matters by creating a channel of communication that can serve the future.

We also need to recognise that the State has the power to coerce the closure of places of worship and then enforce that through the police and their authority. So in terms of blunt power the state is able to shut Churches down. The circumstance in which we therefore choose to disobey the regulation of Government, is when we believe we have a higher duty to obey Christ, and obeying Christ would be prevented by obedience to the stated legislation. If we are prepared to do that, we've got to openly and honestly recognise that we will then accept the due penalty for our disobedience if we are then arrested and charged. We therefore disobey with our eyes wide open, knowing that there will be consequences that might follow.

It could be that at this time we as the church are experiencing loss, which in some way is birthed from a fear of not seeing our people respond in coming back to our events in the way that we previously experienced. This might be fueled with an understanding that this could have implications on us economically which might even implicate on our effective functioning going forward. This is the time for introspection, where we evaluate our own motives and insecurities, and consider whether there aren't other and new ways to serve the mandate of the church going forward.

In the light of the above consider the following as guidelines:

- ❖ Are you prepared to violate regulations that the state is imposing because of your conviction that it is impeding the mandate to function as the church of Jesus Christ?
- ❖ Does your decision truly reflect your concern for your people and the community, or does it serve your own advantage and needs?
- ❖ Are you prepared to suffer the consequences if you do decide to violate the regulation and engage on functioning outside the pre-scribed legislation?
- ❖ Will the action that you take today contribute to serve the long-term Kingdom impact that you want your church to have in your community.

I pray grace and wisdom over you as a leader as you make your decisions to lead your people.

Blessings,
Alan