



Pacific Conference of Churches



Biblical Theological Guidance during COVID-19

Led by the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC)

The following guidelines draw on a Pacific Conference of Churches' letter entitled "[Christian Faith in the time of COVID-19](#)"ⁱ, the [Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate](#)ⁱⁱ, and social media posts by Pacific Island theologians. This synopsis has been put together by UnitingWorld for Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CAN DO).

For use by all Christian churches

These guidelines could be used by Church leaders as they lead their churches nationally, in synods and presbyteries, in radio or television interviews and social media. They can be sermon guides for Ministers preaching to congregations and in communication to members.

Summary of Key Messages

1. COVID-19 is not a punishment from God
2. No group or person is to blame
3. COVID-19 does not discriminate. Christians are not immune
4. Faith and sound medical advice are not enemies
5. Wise faith calls us to be prepared as an act of discipleship
6. Physical isolation does not mean spiritual isolation: care for those most vulnerable
7. God is with us in our suffering

1. COVID-19 is not a punishment from God

Guidance from the Pacific Conference of Churches

"As much as we may be attracted to simplistic and shallow faith-based answers, the Pacific Conference of Churches is appealing to our sisters and brothers in Christ, to not be swayed by claims that COVID19 is a punishment from God for certain communities, countries or people".... "Yes, Christians are saved through the gospel of God's grace. However, this salvation does not mean we escape physical corruption, futility, and death. This pandemic, as others before it, is not condemnation, it is not punitive." – Rev James Bhagwan

- **Rom 8:1** - There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- **Rom 8:22-23** - We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.
- **1Thess. 5:9** - For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.
- **1Cor 15:55** - Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?



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Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate

The hand of God is not responsible for every disaster. Sometimes the Bible gives an explanation for disasters, at other times it does not. The Bible does not provide easy explanations for the causes of disasters or suffering nor guarantees that God will remove or prevent suffering. (TDRCC Bible Study Introduction, pages 2-4)

Dwelling on God's wrath as a cause of disasters is not helpful and neither does it reflect or do justice to God's immeasurable love, mercy, and compassion embodied in Jesus Christ. (TDRCC Framework Paper 1.3, page 3)

We will all suffer the 'storms of life' – regardless of whether we are (in Jesus' words) foolish or wise. Natural disaster is not a punishment for wrongdoing. (TDRCC Bible Study 2, page 18)

2. No group or person is to blame

Guidance from the Pacific Conference of Churches

"Just as some of us have done in the aftermath of a natural disaster, we must resist the temptation to demonize or scapegoat, which increases in time of stress and shortages." – Rev James Bhagwan

Jesus himself rejects that approach when he meets a man who is blind, in a story recounted in the Gospel of John:

- **John 9:1-12** – "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
"Neither this man nor his parents sinned,"

This is Jesus's definitive rejection of the image of the monstrous Father.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus responds to the story of a stone tower that fell and crushed a crowd of people:

- **Luke 13:1-5** - "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you."

Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate

Jesus is asked whether the cause of the man's blindness is his sin or his parents? Jesus replies that neither the man nor his parents sinned but rather 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him'. (TDRCC Framework Paper 1.3 Is Someone or a Particular Group to Blame? Page 3)

- **John 9:1-3** - As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."



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3. COVID-19 does not discriminate. Christians are not immune.

Guidance from Rev Dr Cliff Bird, Theologian from the United Church in Solomon Islands

“I keep hearing from many religious corners very familiar statements along the lines that we do not need to fear or worry about corona virus. We only need to have faith and God will protect us. This is very worrying indeed, and quite unfortunately is the wrong messaging to be preaching and telling people.” – Rev Dr Cliff Bird

Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate (TDRCC)

The Christian tradition has sometimes seemed to teach that following Jesus will allow us to avoid life’s storms or somehow protect us from suffering / pain / disappointment. This parable suggests that as Christ’s followers, no matter how faithful we are, we won’t avoid storms (the houses of both the wise and foolish men suffer from disaster). (TDRCC Bible Study 2 “Be Prepared in Every Way.” Page 15)

- **Matthew 7: 24–27** - “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

4. Faith and sound medical advice are not enemies

Guidance from the Pacific Conference of Churches

“Faith and prayers hold us together in hope and community while science tackles the virus in scientific and practical ways.” Rev James Bhagwan

Guidance from Rev Dr Cliff Bird, Theologian from the United Church in Solomon Islands

“Listen to health authorities and hear what they say. Keep faith and sound health and medical advice together. Both are important at a time like this. Faith and knowledge are not enemies but are friends and companions for a life that is care-filled and careful. Keep safe.” – Rev Dr Cliff Bird

Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate

Preparedness does not mean a lack of trust in God. We are reminded that ‘faith by itself, if it has no works is dead’. We are required to pray, discern and act. Preparedness embodies prayer, discernment and action. (Framework Paper 2.1.1 Preparedness: An Element of Discipleship. Pages 7-8)

- **James 2: 17** - So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.
- **James 2: 26** - For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.



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5. Wise faith calls us to be prepared as an act of discipleship

Guidance from the Pacific Conference of Churches

“Jesus reminds us the difference between wise faith and foolish faith in the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt: 7:24-27). God’s wisdom in this time can be seen in the decisions by Churches to suspend worship services and offer liturgies and worship material for small groups and families, recorded and live online and radio and television broadcast and limited visitation. These will deepen the spirituality of their members, strengthening their resilience in this critical time.” – Rev James Bhagwan

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Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate

Building a sustainable and resilient community requires preparedness. As churches, and as part of our active discipleship and custodianship of creation and the resources available to us, it is our responsibility as Christians to be prepared to respond in love. (TDRCC Framework Paper 2.1: Preparedness is an act of discipleship. Pages 7 – 9 and TDRCC Bible Study 2 “Be Prepared in Every Way” Pages 13 – 18)

- **Mark 12: 28-34** - One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.
- **1 John 4: 10-21** - In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also



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ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

- **Matthew 5:43-45** - "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

6. Physical isolation does not mean spiritual isolation: care for those most vulnerable

Guidance from the Pacific Conference of Churches

"Physical Isolation does not mean Social or Spiritual Isolation. This is an opportune time for the church to review its role as God's hands in society by safely ministering to, providing and caring for the poor, sick and the aged – those most at risk from COVID-19." – Rev James Bhagwan

Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate

We need to be aware and sensitive to who is included or excluded, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in our DRM planning, policies and evacuation procedures. Christians have an obligation to care for the most vulnerable in our communities or societies. (TDRCC Bible Study 3 "There is Always Room at God's Banquet Table." Page 24)

- **Luke 14: 15–24** - One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must



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go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

7. God is with us in our suffering

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“As we approach Easter, let us continue to live in the hope that the resurrected Christ offers, that he has come that we may have life and have it abundantly. (Jn 10:10).” – Rev James Bhagwan

- **John 10:10** “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Guidance from the Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate

The Bible speaks of faith that offers confidence that God can be trusted in the midst of suffering even if much remains unclear and uncertain. This trust is based on God’s character – that God is loving, faithful, compassionate and just. (TDRCC Bible Study Introduction: Page 2)

ⁱ 20200330 PCC Christian Faith in the time of COVID-19 https://pacificconferenceofchurches.org/f/virus-is-not-a-punishment?fbclid=IwAR0XT5i7LftbOHihNa9PgaYd3v-d1138Ze_w7NJCngTO-7oftbFIBmcmegA

ⁱⁱ Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate, CAN DO, 2019
<https://www.unitingworld.org.au/theologydisasterresilience/>