8. But what about you, the pastor?

If someone told me four months ago that the world would be as it is now, I would have frowned and then burst out laughing.

And yet, here we are.

No gatherings.

No (or few) people.

Many church buildings are locked.

In many ways, the church is in ‘reset’ mode too.

But what about you, the pastor? How are you doing? How are you really doing?

I am a pastor too. This is the 17th year of doing this on a full-time basis. Like most in ministry, a large part of my life has until recently revolved around meetings, pastoral care, teaching and administering the sacraments.

And church services.

Like the people we serve, our lives are not how they used to be. Almost no part of it.

To evaluate where we’re at is no simple task. It’s not all good, but it’s most definitely not all bad either. For one, I don’t mind the absence of meetings on most weekday evenings!

But it’s a daunting time. At the time of writing this, South Africa is about to pass the 5 000 infection rate. Just over 100 people have died due to Covid-19. Hospitals and health care providers are still bracing for the storm to come. We don’t know what lies ahead.

So this is perhaps the biggest thing that binds us all together: extreme uncertainty. We have – in our lifetime, collectively – not had to deal with uncertainty on this scale. And it’s playing out on almost countless levels.
How is that affecting us, as pastors?

You and I are seen as leaders. Long ago, whether we understood it or not – when we heeded the calling to become ministers of the Word of God – we effectively signed up to become leaders. We were to be prominent, not in the self-serving sense of the word, but in the ‘we are going to be looked up to’ sense of the word. We are observed, gauged and followed.

I am feeling the weight of this prominence at the moment. And I am filled with doubt.

You see, I am uncertain too. And scared.

I am often confused by mounds of (often conflicting) bits of info and stats.

I feel financially vulnerable.

I compare my feeble YouTube messages to the stylised versions of cooler pastors than myself.

I wonder if I’m of any use now that I cannot visit hospitals to comfort the sick, stand in front of groups to impart knowledge and be padded on the back by committed fans.

But despite these feelings, I am much closer to my true purpose and the initial reasons I signed up.

For one, there’s a lot less nonsense. Nobody is worried about the stain on the communion table’s tablecloth. I am not getting phone calls about the floral arrangement or the organ’s pitch.

My main concern has become well-being, sense-making, encouragement and assistance, which includes feeding the hungry.

And this is proving to be hugely rewarding.

If I were to be honest, I feel more alive.

Yes, it is tough. Yes, we can’t plan ahead. Yes, we don’t know when we’re going to get together again.

And yes, we don’t know if the church will survive in the same form it had before.

What we can do now is focus. We can focus on the life-affirming presence of God. We can focus on speaking more prudently, on walking more humbly, on choosing our battles, on gaining more theological clarity and better perspective on ourselves, our planet and our place in the world.

This is not a fruitless time. It is a good time, in many ways kairos time.

Like you, I pray. Sometimes I use many words, sometimes not. Often, I forget to pray.

But here’s a prayer for us, for you, for this time:
Lord, Immanuel, the Present One,
We need to know, more than ever, that you are not absent.
We need to remember that you have always been with us,
and we need to confess that we have failed to notice you.
We were too busy, had too many things and not enough focus
on what is really important.

Lord, have mercy.

We pray that we will be useful in your service,
that we will remember your great command
and that our attention and energy
will be focussed on serving with love and humility.

Lord, have mercy.

We pray for all who observe us: may they see you.
We pray for all who hear our words without seeing our body language: may their hearts be touched.

We thank you for our church buildings: may we look at them with fresh eyes.
We thank you for our elders and fellow workers in your vineyard: may we accept that this is a time to be pruned.

We thank you for a living hope, brought about by the risen Christ.
We thank you for wifi and fibre, for mobile phones and YouTube.

We thank you for family and friends.

Lord, we thank you for everything.

We commit ourselves to your service,
we accept your guidance,
we value your presence more than ever before.

We pray all this, and the things we cannot say, in the name of Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

AMEN.

Rev Rudi Swanepoel
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