

July 6, 2020
Diocese of Swaziland

Coronavirus has created fear among us, it has shattered us and we feel hopeless. It has disrupted our spiritual lives. The virus has made it difficult for us to be fully social, restricting social gatherings, including the church. The restrictions have not spared families who do not live in the same house. I am missing my children who are across the border in South Africa and my husband in Kenya.

These restrictions are painful but we have not allowed the restrictions to interfere with our faith. We remain united emotionally and spiritually by providing opportunities to care for each other.

Young people have not been spared from the impact of the coronavirus. A number of jobs have been lost especially in the informal sector where the young people (15-34) are the majority. This is a challenge because the population of Eswatini is youthful, with 39% of the population between the ages of 15-34.

A further complication is that the virus has come to a people that haven't gotten over the HIV infection. Women are disproportionately affected by Eswatini's HIV epidemic stemming from gender inequality. Apart from HIV the country is also severely affected by a tuberculosis TB epidemic and around 70 per cent of all TB patients are co-infected with HIV. In the midst of all this vulnerability, the first confirmed patient with COVID 19 was diagnosed in Eswatini on 14 March; since then, the number of patients with COVID 19 has grown daily.

The church through PEPFAR (U.S. government grants) has appointed care givers in most of our parishes to work alongside government for HIV testing while also sensitising people on the coronavirus. The care givers report to parish priests.

Although classified as a lower-middle income country, 59% of people in Eswatini are living below the poverty line. The emergence of COVID 19 has given the church an added responsibility. Due to loss of employment, many families have become vulnerable and without food. We have had to find resources to contribute food to the starving families.

Loneliness is a COVID 19 side effect especially for youths. Schools and restaurants closed. Sporting events were cancelled. Play dates with friends curtailed. The church youth groups can't gather, youth mission trips and conferences were cancelled. With the closing of church doors, we have found ourselves with youth who had very little interaction outside of their homes and this has affected their mental wellbeing. We have had to find ways to reach out to them and help them deal with their loneliness.

COVID 19 further raises concern for increases in gender-based violence against women, and girls. Gender-based violence is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries. We are encouraging our churches to speak out against and report cases of gender-based violence.

We will get through this crisis. With God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we will bridge the world from fear to hope and from confusion to understanding. We remain committed.

+Ellinah

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