

Fighting COVID-19 during Lent: Prayer, Relief, Restoring Hope

The Evangelical Fellowship of India is committed to serve the Church and the nation in this time of crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, life has been thrown off balance. In India, the near month-long lockdown will be a challenge, socially, economically and medically. It will be more severe for the poor, the homeless, the landless, the Tribals, the Dalits and sections of religious minorities for whom life, even in normal times, was difficult. While no specific guidelines or economic package has been announced to ensure the survival, we hope a safety net will be created soon.

As this note is being written, there are currently 410,465 confirmed cases and 18,295 deaths from the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak globally. India has so far lost 10 lives to this disease and close to 575 Indians have been found infected.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced a lockdown of 21 days. He has assured that essential services like water, electricity, health services, fire services, groceries and municipal services, would be operational. Educational institutes, Commercial establishments, offices, markets and places of worship shall remain closed. All modes of transportation have been suspended. **EFI appeals to its member congregations to take adequate measures so that the lockdown is observed as intended.**

Many migrant labourers have been stranded in their places of work. There is no transport home, no wages to buy food, and no shelter. EFI appeals to the authorities to take cognizance of this genuine problem and make adequate arrangements so that the people are not unduly inconvenienced. An appeal is also made to the Law enforcement authorities to act with empathy and grace.

The Christian community must take the responsibility to lead the nation in hope and spiritual strength in fighting the menace of COVID-19. The coincidence that the crisis takes place when the community is in deep prayer during the Lenten season, is an occasion therefore, for us, to come together and join forces with the authorities and the people in this common fight.

During this difficult time EFI seeks to serve the Church and the nation at large in the following ways:

Mobilizing Prayer

EFI along with other Church networks is mobilizing prayer for our nation and the world at large. The coming Sunday i.e. 29th March 2020 has been designated as the Global Day of United Prayer and Fasting for India and the Nations. We urge everyone to join in and stand in the gap to intercede for our nation and the world. But our prayers need not be limited to one day only. We must be constantly in prayer, and the lockdown is a great opportunity for this. We know that God hears our prayers. As we humble ourselves, seek His face and turn from our wicked ways, He would heal our land. (II Chronicles 7:14)

Mobilizing Help

History tells us that the Church has been at the forefront of serving the society during pandemics. Our concern and prayers must also move us to be engaged in reaching out even during this lockdown to be agents of hope and help to the suffering and the needy around us. EFI is appealing to all Churches and will work with its member bodies to find creative ways in which God's people can be a blessing to those around them. We are mobilizing trauma counsellors who can serve people using digital communications to ease their anxieties and worries.

We appeal:

- To Churches to survey the need in their communities and be involved locally as much as they can while keeping necessary precautions. We need to serve the poor and the needy in our communities.
- To young people in our member congregations to reach out to the aged and people who need help, near their homes and help them procure essential items and to check on them regularly to find out how they are doing.
- To our organizational and institutional members including schools, colleges, hostels, seminaries as well as Churches in cities and towns to contemplate if their premises can be used as places of shelter to migrant labourers or people in need. We are sure that the local authorities in cities and towns would appreciate help in this manner.
- To our member hospitals and hospital associations to continue to provide the excellent service that they are already rendering in these difficult circumstances.

We **advise against** running open community kitchens which may generate crowds. However, Churches may prepare food, pack it in disposable containers and may distribute them to the homeless or people in need with the help of the local authorities.

Spiritual Resources

During the lockdown there will be a lot of time for families to be with each other. This can be a golden opportunity to catch up on some reading, to build closer bonds by having meals together and playing indoor games. It can also be a blessed time to build each other spiritually.

EFI and our member bodies will be sharing resources that are being developed to help individuals and families spiritually. Please do check our website: www.efionline.org and our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/EFoIndia>) for more updates on this.

Fostering Community

The lockdown perhaps is God's gift to us to look beyond our meeting places and buildings and to recognize that the Church of God is people and even though religious gatherings may close, the buildings may close, the Church can never be closed. Wherever we are, we are the Church of God. And so EFI appeals to all its member Churches to build strong congregations using digital mediums including social media. Thanks to technology, we are more connected than before. Many Churches across India have already had a taste of virtual services on 22nd March. However, for people who yet have questions on the use of technology for Church worship services or prayer meetings, we will soon come up with a webinar with subject experts to help us in this. Stay tuned to our

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Facebook page. This will be particularly important if you are interested to hold digital services during Good Friday and Easter.

EFI also appeals to Churches who are good at digital technology and who have the infrastructure to use it in service of communities around you. Fun events like digital singing competitions, gameathons for young people and even digital story time could be organized for your community to keep them closely knitted. Social media tools like WhatsApp and Instagram can be used for this purpose.

The bottom line: EFI is appealing to all its members to be safe and observe the lockdown as it is intended to be but also to reach out, while keeping necessary precautions, with our prayers and creative initiatives to be bearers of hope to a world desperately seeking it.

Released by:

Rev. Vijayesh Lal
General Secretary

NOTE:

We make a special appeal to our members – Churches, Organizations and Individuals, to come forth generously in supporting the work of organizations doing excellent medical and social work during this COVID-19 crisis. Organizations like Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA), Christian Medical Colleges, St. Stephen's Hospital, EFICOR, World Vision etc. need to be supported by the community at this time. The EHA has 20 Hospitals, majority of them hospitals in rural areas, where medical help is a dire need.

The Lenten season is a time when many Christians fast as an act of self-denial and keep aside money to give to Churches on Easter Sunday. We appeal to member Churches to consider sending the sacrificial offerings to the organizations involved in medical and social outreach during the COVID-19 outbreak, so that they can use it at their discretion to buy equipment like ventilators, PPEs, and medicines etc. or to pay salaries to medical and social work staff. It would be an encouragement to these organizations, particularly the people working day and night, to know that the community stands with them. We also appeal to Churches to consider if they would be willing to offer their premises as OPD locations, should there be a need for that.