

SACC Local Ecumenical Action Network (LEAN) - Starter Pack

“Getting through the COVID-19 pandemic will require people to act together where they are. We all have a role to play and that there is a lot we can do in our own communities. We commend the government’s response to COVID-19, and offer these guidelines as a way for churches to work together in communities to strengthen and support the government’s response. The church has been a vehicle for public good and change in this country, let us step up together in this challenging time.”

The goal of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the District coordination centres during this time is to support Local Ecumenical Action Networks (LEAN’s) in communities across the country.

With Gratitude

We acknowledge our deep gratitude to the *Cape Town Together* movement who piloted this methodology over the lead up to the National Lock Down in March 2020, and developed a comprehensive Community Action Network (CAN) starter pack that is now serving dozens of small neighbourhood networks across Cape Town. With their permission, we have adapted this starter pack for the SACC. We recommend visiting their active Facebook page *Cape Town Together* where you will find more resources. Churches based in Cape Town are recommended to connect with an existing CAN in their area.

Contents:

- 1) What is a LEAN?
- 2) How do LEANS fit into the bigger picture of churches in South Africa and the SACC?
- 3) What does this LEAN starter pack offer?
- 4) Before you get started
- 5) Starting a COVID-19 Rapid Response LEAN
- 6) Getting organised
- 7) Growing your LEAN
- 8) Key characteristics and principles of a LEAN
- 9) Actions that LEAN groups can take
- 10) Things to remember

1) What is a LEAN?

A Local Ecumenical Action Network (LEAN) is an existing network (e.g. fraternal, alliance etc) or new group of :

- ten or more churches
- from a local neighbourhood
- from different denominations
- that have connected with each other
- to collaborate with local action during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

These are community-level, locally initiated and organised groups that exist to provide a response to the particular issues faced by communities with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. These groups will be made up of at least ten local church leaders or organisers, who will make the connection with one another, register their LEAN with the SACC, and then work to mobilise their local community to assess and respond to the issues in that community with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each LEAN should represent a specific area (e.g. village, township, suburb, ward, or section thereof, etc.). Within these LEANs, there may be several church congregations and neighbourhoods represented, and therefore the network may decide to organise themselves internally according to these structures. The action of the LEANs will be informed by their local contexts.

2) How do LEAN's fit into the bigger picture of churches in South Africa and the SACC?

- Each LEAN is organised at the level of local churches and their community and is also connected to the broader SACC network. This means that LEAN's act locally, while also drawing on our collective experience and energy to share lessons and resources across the country.
- The response will look different in each local network of churches
- The aim is not to create a centrally controlled model. Instead, we are looking to set up a system that can collectively support many locally-led church and community initiatives.

SACC's broader plan of action around COVID-19

The SACC COVID-19 Pastoral Plan: The SACC COVID response is both for the immediacy of the crisis, and as springboard for rebuilding a new and long term reality of greater social cohesion and economic vibrancy at community levels beyond the COVID-19 onslaught. SACC also believes that such an effective COVID response will be driven and championed at local level by a well informed and coordinated leadership that is deeply connected to the realities of the community that the leadership serves.

The SACC Plan will have the following 4 pillars:

- **Systems & Structures for Local Organisation & Bulk Communication:** Ten or more local churches will form a Local Ecumenical Action Network; each with WhatsApp network for its members; all LEANs in a district with a District Coordination Centre that relates to the SACC National Coordination Centre that relates to the State JOC and daily issues bulk WhatsApp communication for authentic information.
- **Crisis Relief:** For the destitute, as identified by local church structures (LEANs), and in concert with Government, using a voucher system for basic needs purchases.
- **Pastoral Care:** Focusing on the needs of the vulnerable; on support for victims of domestic abuse & violence; support for frontline health workers who are in our communities; and capacitating for peace management in case of conflictual protests.
- **Advocacy & Support for Rebuilding Lives, including:**
 - Issues negatively impacting those who are socially and economically vulnerable.
 - Communities supporting education; beginning by mitigating 2020 matric disruption to long term Educational Youth Resource Centres sustained by local churches.
 - Aggressive local livelihoods development including business incubator model.

3) What does this LEAN Starter Pack offer?

This document is designed to support LEAN's to take collective action in response to COVID-19. Evidence from all other outbreaks teaches us that local community-led responses are critical. This document shares some ideas and tips to get started in strengthening your church and your community's capacity to respond to COVID-19.

It is just a start.

Your LEAN may have lots of other ideas, and we hope you share them with your Coordination Centre and the SACC. We would suggest creating WhatsApp Groups where possible, but relying on your local knowledge to create platforms for fast communication and action such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Choose what works best for your community.

4) Before you get started

It is essential that any community-based responses are conducted safely and do not expose community members to increased risk, or contribute to the spread of the virus. For this reason, all LEAN activities must adhere to official guidance from the Department of Health.

At the moment, this involves adhering to the full National Lock Down as the key tactic to #stopthespread of COVID-19 and to monitor directives from the government going forward. That means, setting up and conducting LEAN affairs will require use of electronic communication and meeting systems such as Zoom or other Telecon methods. LEAN leaders are not exempt from the lockdown regulations, except where

such has been approved by Government through its processes for the specific needs that will have been negotiated.

It is of vital importance that any information shared through the SACC network is scientifically accurate and medically sound. During a pandemic, false information can be as dangerous as the disease itself. For this reason, we ask that LEAN members only share information and guidance as disseminated by the Department of Health.

5) Starting a COVID-19 Rapid Response LEAN

Organising your churches and your community into an effective, action-based community support network isn't easy. People have their own stresses and worries, and can be resistant to volunteering their time and energy.

With a bit of energy, organisation, and prayer these barriers are easily overcome. Once you get going, you will be amazed at the commitment your churches and community have to offer.

First steps :

- Reach out to ten or more other church leaders in your immediate area to ask if they would like to form a LEAN. Local ministers in many communities have an inter-denominational "Ministers Fraternal" of ministers of all churches of all traditions in that community, others have the old organisation of over 100 years, called IDAMASA (InterDenominational African Ministers Association of South Africa); or one or other alliance of churches. These already create a foundation for the Local Ecumenical Action Network - LEAN.
- Share this starter pack with them to help them understand the purpose of the LEAN
- If possible choose churches you have worked with before as a starting point.
- Reach out to neighbouring churches that you have never worked with before – crises like these can be good bridge-building moments
- Working across church denominations is a wonderful way to build church unity!
- These are the times where, for the common good, we are able to work beyond our differences and work on a common goal
- Find a safe way of communicating and discuss how you want to work together as a LEAN group
- Share what you each bring to the LEAN group
- Share what you each need from the LEAN group
- Register your LEAN group with the SACC by sending a message to **Secretariat, SACC National Coordination Centre, on support@sacc.org.za.**

Please note that when working as churches together it is important to:

- be unbiased and unprejudiced in who you provide assistance to
- avoid religious manipulation and favouritism

- avoid political manipulation and favouritism
- work where possible with other faith groups and with non-religious leaders in your communities
- see what is already happening and bring your resources to that
- lean into what you can, learn from existing progressive networks and social justice advocates and movements

Next steps:

- As soon as possible allocate key roles to LEAN members and decide on a communication strategy
- One of the most important roles is an administrator to:
 - Collect the contact details of all the LEAN members
 - Collect important documents and save them where other can members can find them
 - Keep records of decisions taken and tasks assigned to LEAN members
- A communication strategy needs to include a platform for communicating among LEAN members and a way to spread the word about LEAN activities to others:
 - To communicate among LEAN could consist of a WhatsApp group, an email mailing list, or group Skype calls (or a combination of these).
 - To tell others about your LEAN activities and achievements, you might want to set up a Facebook page, or use another form of social media
 - As your LEAN grows, you will probably need to assign the task of managing communications to two or three proactive, high energy and engaging LEAN members.
 - Your communication strategy must be inclusive, so make sure all your members have access to the platform you choose.
 - The congregations of the LEAN member churches will be receiving daily WhatsApp briefs from the National SACC WhatsApp platform. That way all LEAN members will be in the loop.

IMPORTANT TO NOTE: while the church leader may well be the person who first reaches out to other leaders to initiate the formation of a LEAN, make absolutely sure from the outset that key members of your congregation are involved. They may become the main champions.

Avoid these two extremes:

- Having the church leader run with all aspects of the LEAN and failing to draw in any lay leaders or congregants
- Withdrawing entirely from the LEAN and leaving the involved congregants feeling like they are representing the church alone in the LEAN

6) Growing your LEAN

Although it's okay to start small, there will be a lot of work to be done in the coming months. This means you will need to grow your LEAN, while at the same time staying organised, and action-oriented.

One way to do this is to reach out to other churches that you may not know as well, or have congregants recommend new churches who could join.

Invite people as you go rather than worrying that they were not involved from the start. If necessary apologise for not inviting them at the beginning, but emphasise that you'd love to all work together now!

7) Key Characteristics and Principles of a LEAN

Being action-oriented

- Although there might be a lot to do, and a lot to worry about, don't get overwhelmed by the endless possibilities
- Pick one thing that is achievable given the size and strength of your LEAN and GET IT DONE
- Remember, one successful activity will generate more energy and new members.

Being collaborative

- There may be groups and organisations already operating in your neighbourhood. We don't want to fragment, undermine or duplicate the efforts of another community action group.
- Ask around and look online to find other active groups. Get in touch with them, introduce yourself and your LEAN. Find out what they have been doing, where you could collaborate, and what still needs to be done.
- Focus on filling the gaps in your community.

Being faith-based

- Discuss with the co-leaders of your LEAN ways that your spiritual practices can be celebrated and included equally during the process of working together: for example, when you have online meetings alternate who opens the meeting so that different styles are embraced.
- Help one another decide upon a way that differences can be addressed in order to be able to pursue a common aim together
- Be aware of the power that religious institutions and leaders hold in society – some of your most faithful and skilled LEAN members will be lay people and you don't want to lose their contribution during this time.

Being a guilt-free zone

- It is important to be conscious of the fact that your LEAN members likely have other duties and responsibilities at work and at home, and these intensify during stressful times. Feeling torn between these duties or feeling guilty about not contributing enough to the LEAN will cause people to pull away.
- The culture of the LEAN should be that everyone has something to offer and their best is good enough.

Keeping your LEAN safe

- Safety should be the top priority of any LEAN activity. It is incredibly important that no LEAN members are placed at risk of contracting COVID-19, and that the LEAN activities do not contribute to the spread of the coronavirus.
- Some basic principles to follow in this regard include
 - Meet online unless members have an essential services pass
 - In-person meetings with those who do have passes should involve as few people as possible, and should apply the principles of social distancing (wash hands before and after, don't come if you are sick, don't touch your face, don't touch each other, and stay at least 2 meters apart at all times)
 - As far as possible, make sure LEAN members who have essential services passes have access to masks, hand-wash stations or hand sanitiser when engaging in LEAN activities and understand the restrictions of Lock Down very well.

Keeping your LEAN healthy

- All LEAN members should monitor their own health closely
- Agree on hours of work e.g. no WhatsApps before 8h00 and after 18h00, except for clearly unavoidable emergencies.
- Discuss rules of online engagement and agree on what works best for your group
- There is no shame in pulling back if you need to.

8) Actions that LEAN groups can take

PLEASE NOTE: During the Lock down, only registered essential services workers can have contact with people outside their home, while adhering to strict hygiene protocols. Your District Coordinating Centre contact will be able to help you with this process.

All other suggestions below would need to adhere to the rules of Lock Down.

Before initiating any projects however, we recommend that LEANs carry out the following seven steps which will assist them to discern where to focus their attention and energy:

- Area mapping to get an idea of the people within the LEAN's borders
- Identification of individuals that may be vulnerable (the elderly, people with disabilities, people who are unwell, people who do not have access to food etc.)

- Taking inventory of the resources present within the LEAN. This could be wide-ranging and include things like funds, skills (medical, legal, communication etc.), networks etc.
- Identify existing formal and informal networks like community groups, other religious organisations, NGOs, soccer clubs, among others.
- Identify groups of people who are already mobilised in your community. You can link them in to your COVID-19 response activities.
- Identify Spaces that might come in handy, such as church halls.
- Identify local businesses and people that might be willing to donate supplies or money

But among the things we encourage to be done through the local network in this time of the corona crisis include:

- a. Identifying the most vulnerable families and persons - elderly, the destitute, people who live on casual or day work, homeless and beggars, people who have lost incomes as a result of the present situation, some of them vendors who sell in the street; all such people in the locality who need urgent support - food, blankets and warm clothing as we get to colder weeks (especially if lockdown is extended). These lists and their situations need to be collated and communicated to the SACC District Coordination of which the LEAN will be advised as soon as it is registered.
- b. Using the SACC WhatsApp Platform to communicate issues, concerns and challenges observed, raised and experienced by local communities.
- c. Setting up crisis relief mechanism that are appropriate for their area, in consultation with the District and National Coordination Centres.
- d. Setting up care centres that can be used by Health Authorities against the Coronavirus - tracking, testing, isolation and treatment of people.
- e. Setting up a Family Support Unit that includes people who can be trusted with internal family challenges, especially domestic abuse and violence. We anticipate an escalation of this scourge that has already defined South Africa in negative terms globally.
- f. Identifying and facilitating support for frontline workers on the coronavirus fight - such as health workers, police and military personnel living in the locality.
- g. Facilitating the capacitation for peace management in case of conflictual protests in the community.
- h. Invite other organised groups in the locality - stokvels, burial association, clubs, neighbourhood group, and any other social groups that wish to connect to the information system for this period.
- i. Setting up a matric student support system, and an ongoing Youth Educational Resource Centre, which the covenanting local churches in the LEAN, must pledge to support. This is described more fully further below.
- j. Facilitating and supporting economic and livelihoods development programmes.

Once you have identified all your community's strengths and resources, the next step is to think about what makes your community vulnerable to COVID-19. This will help you know where to focus your community action responses.

For example you might have limited access to taps and water pipes, you might have a high number of people coming into your community who could spread COVID-19, or maybe you have some people in

your community who believe false information about COVID-19. Once you have identified your vulnerabilities, you can start developing a plan to turn these vulnerabilities into strengths.

One of the most important things to think about in your community mapping, is people who are particularly vulnerable and might need extra support. People can be vulnerable because they are at high risk of getting sick from COVID-19, but some people are also vulnerable to the economic consequences of the pandemic. Think about who might need extra support from community volunteers during this time.

Once you have all this information, you can start developing a plan. There are some ideas presented below, but your plan will depend on your community's needs. Remember, no one knows your community better than you do.

- The provision of **pastoral care**. This could include front-line workers such as health workers, police and soldiers who live in your area; individuals who have been identified as vulnerable; those who have tested positive and others.
- The mobilisation of **peace-building** capacity within your communities. In this time of lockdown and the associated restriction of various freedoms, we see a significant emergence of conflicts of various kinds – within the home, pertaining to criminal activity, or within the wider community. This may require locally trained volunteer observers who can monitor incidents, as well as professional mediators who can assist with conflict resolution.
- We recommend a family support unit made up of people who might be trusted with intimate family conflicts, domestic abuse and violence.
- **Advocacy** to ensure that vulnerable populations are considered, protected and taken care of in the COVID-19 response. Local networks such as LEANs could play a key role in identifying how the current realities are impacting vulnerable groups (such as the homeless population, refugees or people with disabilities), and finding ways to highlight these to district and national structures, and advocate for change.
- **Spreading trusted information:** People need to understand the coronavirus and how it is spread to know how to protect themselves and those around them. However, there is a lot of fake information out there. You can help to make sure everyone has the facts they need by circulating good reliable notifications based on official information via WhatsApp or other virtual platforms. The daily SACC WhatsApp platform is designed for exactly this.
- Remind others **not to spread fake news; it is now a criminal offence.**
- **Support people who are in lock-down needing help from the community:** Raise funds for groceries to be delivered, ensure grants are accessed, ensure people have access to support lines needed.
- Help prevent the spread of COVID-19 **in communities with shared toilets and tap:** see notes at the end of document for details – could be a separate worksheet

While the LEANs themselves will initiate and implement local action in their communities, the SACC's district, provincial and national coordination structures will do their best to assist LEANs with guidance, collaboration, sharing and possible resource provision. This would take place through the LEAN coordinators liaising with their contacts in the SACC's District Coordination Centre (DCC).

9) Last things to remember:

- Protecting the community from COVID-19 is possible if everyone works together.
- Remember: Facts are stronger than fear!
- Most people who get COVID-19 will recover fully. Many might not even realise they were infected, but most will feel like they have a mild flu.

- It is very important your community has a good understanding of the coronavirus so that they can be safe but not panic.

- No one is safe unless we are all safe.

- Coronavirus doesn't discriminate. No matter how hard I try to protect myself, I am at risk if those in my community are at risk. That is why it is so important to work together and support each other to protect the whole community, especially the most vulnerable.
- Keep it local.
- No one understands your community's needs and strengths better than you and your neighbours.
- By working with those around you, and drawing on the resources already in your community, you can help each other stay safe.
- In responses to issues on this scale, collaboration is key, and thus it is important to identify other local organisations/structures that are doing similar work, and figure out how you can support and add strength to each other in this time.

THE END