

The spread of coronavirus is just the latest test of the strength of communities across Australia. It shows how fragile we are, but it will show how strong we can be. Despite being in a relatively wealthy nation, bushfires, floods and now coronavirus show that ultimately we are *not* in control. The one thing we can determine is how we respond.

Governments and health agencies are acting to provide institutional care and support. Their response is vital, but it's hard to overstate the importance of local communities at a time like this. The care that really counts as COVID-19 spreads rapidly is the care and support of family, friends and local communities.

But first we have to confront our fears.

There is a serious risk that this virus could divide our community rather than bring us together. The virus of fear is worse than COVID-19. The fear is understandable. We're facing a pandemic we don't fully understand and we can't predict where the danger lies. It's everywhere but we don't know where. Nor do we know how long it will last. We may be in for the long haul.

We can be tempted to lash out at others, blaming others for infections. We can hoard groceries, looking after our own interests without consideration for others. We can distance ourselves from people, not just physically as a sensible precaution but also emotionally. Our locked doors can become closed hearts. There's nothing human about that; and it will do nothing to contain the threat. We risk fearing people because of the virus they carry rather than doing whatever we can to help other human beings in need.

There's a risk that social distancing will mean that vulnerable people are isolated and unsupported. People who live alone, who may be old or infirm and who don't have family or friends nearby are very much at risk. Precautions like two weeks of isolation will put a strain on anyone, but especially on those who don't have a regular income, sick leave or a solid social network.

Civil society will play a massive part in offering help to people. I think particularly of the 60 percent of Australians who have a religious faith and the important role their network of churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious centres can play. The Catholic Church has more than 1,300 parishes across Australia. Their knowledge of their communities and the services they already offer, like a home visit or a hot meal to a family in need, will be crucial in helping people cope through this time.

The tendency to shun people who are sick was something Jesus knew well. The Gospel calls us to welcome people, whether foreigners or local, in need of food, clothing or shelter. It urges us to reach out to people who are sick.

To meet these challenges and to calm our anxiety it's important to think ahead. This will require a new kind of creativity. Have a plan. Bushfire plans saved lives over the summer. COVID-19 plans can do the same. What will you do if coronavirus strikes your household? What if your children's school is closed or you have to work from home? Get reliable information from [health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au).

Talk with your neighbours about practical things — like checking on one another or asking who will go to the shops to get supplies if one or more families in your street are sick. Do the things that give you a sense of calm. If you're a person of faith, pray to the God of hope, trusting in his care. You will know what helps you. Whether or not you're a person of faith, simple things like a reassuring smile, a kind word or a touch of humour can make a difference to people who may be struggling in ways that aren't obvious.

There's also an economic dimension to local communities. Buying and selling are moral actions. We are responsible for how we spend our money. How we spend has a real impact on others. Consider how you will spend through the time of the crisis. Will you support your local shops or other small businesses that might struggle?

Businesses, too, have a community obligation. They might be tempted to put prices up if there are shortages; but that would be cruel. Some small businesses might find it difficult or impossible to provide financial support to their employees if they can't trade, but they might be able to offer help in other ways.

The coronavirus is testing Australians and the resilience of our local communities in a way we haven't seen before. It's testing the human family world-wide. If we can discover our shared humanity more deeply through it all and create new forms of solidarity, then we'll come out the other side of this ordeal as better people and stronger communities.

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