

Coronavirus outbreak

47-year-old patient recounts how doctors helped her through ordeal

Jean Iau

As she struggled to breathe because of the coronavirus, Mrs Zhang wondered if her end was near.

The 47-year-old woman, identified in Singapore as case 15, was discharged yesterday after making a full recovery. The Ministry of Health later shared a transcript of her experience.

Describing her time at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), she said she was quickly sent to the Intensive Care

Unit (ICU) as her condition deteriorated. In the ICU, doctors and nurses moved swiftly to help her.

"At that time, I could not move, but my mind was clear. I heard their conversation clearly.

"A doctor kept holding my head and telling me not to worry. She said: 'Don't worry, we will insert a tube to help you in your breathing.' She kept reassuring me. She is indeed a very gentle lady," related Mrs Zhang.

She and her husband, as well as their teenage son, were among the 92 Singaporeans who were evacu-

ated from Wuhan on Jan 30.

The housewife, a naturalised Singaporean who has lived in Singapore for over two decades, did not show any symptoms when she boarded the flight in Wuhan.

But she was found to have a fever during a medical screening when she landed in Singapore on the same day, and was then sent to the NCID by ambulance.

She recounted: "I was very scared. They stuck the oxygen tube into my nose, and turned up the level so that I could breathe... But because my lungs were not function-

ing well, it did not work. I remember vividly the day I had extreme difficulty in breathing, and felt that I was dying. I thought: 'Am I dying?'"

While Mrs Zhang's husband was not infected with the virus, her son tested positive and continues to receive treatment at NCID.

Mrs Zhang said a nurse takes a sample from his nose daily and, although he is not cleared of the virus, he has not had other symptoms.

She said: "I am slightly comforted to think that as a mother, I have brought him up to be a sturdy boy, to better fight the virus."

But it is clear the whole ordeal has taken a heavy toll on her and her family. "When I came out of ICU, my husband told me that he hadn't been able to sleep for a few nights. I know if I was in his position, I would have collapsed," she said.

Mrs Zhang expressed her gratitude to the medical staff at the NCID, who treated her "like family" and kept encouraging her every day.

Now that she has been discharged, Mrs Zhang plans to go back to her daily life.

"I just want to go back to my ordi-

nary life, to go exercising with my friends, then grocery shopping, and have a cup of coffee. Later in the night, prepare dinner for my husband and children. I think that would be good."

To the other patients still undergoing treatment, she said: "We must pull through. We have family and friends. This disease does not mean inevitable death.

"I have confidence in our medical team and their skills. I believe they will be able to save us," she added.

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No service at church but members use video calls to pray together

It was not like any other weekend service yesterday morning at Grace Assembly of God's Tanglin and Bukit Batok branches.

With 18 confirmed cases linked to the church, including its senior pastor Wilson Teo, services and activities have been suspended for the next two weeks, with its premises closed till Feb 25.

Even without a physical church service, many church members synchronised prayers at 9am yesterday.

A staff member, who is currently serving a quarantine order, told The Straits Times: "This morning felt very different from every other Sunday.

"I miss seeing the smiles on fellow Gracians' (as the church's members are called) faces, greeting them and shaking their hands, worshipping God beside them and just catching up on their lives," said the staff member, who declined to be named.

It is the second church group to be identified as having a cluster.

The Life Church and Missions in Paya Lebar was identified as a cluster on Feb 8, with five cases linked to it.

Grace Assembly of God, which has the biggest cluster of coronavirus infections in Singapore, has more than 4,000 members and conducts services in English, Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese, and has services for its 200 Filipino members as well.

The church, which was first set up with Cantonese services in the early 1950s, has four Saturday service timings and five Sunday timings across both branches.

The staff member who spoke to ST is one of more than 70 who have been issued with quarantine orders to minimise the spread of the virus.

But even though church members are staying at home, they are not retreating.

Those who are not quarantined are going around delivering food and supplies to church members who need the service, the staff member said.

"Someone just delivered made-in-Korea vitamin C at my doorstep. That warms our hearts and keeps our spirits high," he added.

Another churchgoer, who also declined to be named, said that while there are no online services as staff members are serving home quarantine orders, churchgoers have been inventive.

The 31-year-old said of her parents' cell group meetings, which have been suspended indefinitely: "We are worried (about the coronavirus outbreak) for sure but the cell group is hosting cell via Zoom (a video conference call platform)."

In a Facebook post on Saturday night, Mr Kenneth Kwan, an executive board member of the church, noted that there has been a sudden surge in people forming prayer groups.

"Cell groups have started to use video calls to replace face-to-face meetings. I thought that this might affect attendance, but it actually increased!" said Mr Kwan.

In a statement yesterday, the church said it would monitor the situation on a daily basis and anticipates that church operations will resume on Feb 26.

Jolene Ang



It was a quiet Sunday at the Church of St Alphonsus in Novena yesterday, with public mass for Catholics in Singapore suspended indefinitely amid the coronavirus outbreak. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Some churches broadcast online, others take precautionary steps

Some live-stream weekend services, while others take measures such as fever screening

Choo Yun Ting and Jolene Ang

It was an unusually quiet Sunday morning at the Church of St Alphonsus, or Novena Church as it is more popularly known.

Fewer than 30 people were at the public areas at 9am when The Straits Times visited one of Singapore's most iconic Catholic churches, which has a seating capacity of 1,500 and normally holds four sessions of mass or worship services on Sunday.

A few churchgoers, some donning masks, were seen yesterday sitting outside the main church and praying silently.

On Friday, Archbishop of Singapore William Goh said that public mass for Catholics here would be suspended indefinitely from noon on Saturday to minimise the risk of spreading the coronavirus.

Filipino maid Luvimin Calepardo, 45, who has attended Novena Church for more than eight years, said it was much quieter than usual.

"(It is my) routine every Sunday, to come here and attend mass. I saw the news about how masses are cancelled, but I decided to come here to pray on my own anyway," she said.

Although mass has been suspended indefinitely, a pre-recorded one was broadcast online by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore yesterday.

Ms Rachel Tan, 24, noted that it was a novel experience as she had

never watched a recording of mass before.

"While I feel slightly uneasy that I'm not attending mass this weekend and therefore unable to receive holy communion, I recognise that it is necessary for the health of not only the churchgoers but the rest of the community as well," the trainee lawyer said.

Several large Christian churches have also suspended services.

Mega-church Faith Community Baptist Church, which is located in Marine Parade and Bukit Merah, told church members on Saturday that services would be moved online.

A worship session was streamed live - The Straits Times understands that only about 20 staff members were in the audience - and church members were directed to give their weekly offerings through PayNow or card payments. A sermon was part of the service as usual.

A 27-year-old churchgoer, who declined to be identified, said: "It's definitely not exactly the same. You lose the communal effect of being in a church and going to service with other people. But it's a good replacement for a physical service, and the responsible thing to do, given the current coronavirus situation."

However, many churches are continuing with their services as usual.

Three churches which The Straits Times visited yesterday - Barker Road Methodist Church, New Creation Church and Paya



Temperature-screening measures were in place at New Creation Church in Buona Vista, where many attended its services. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Lebar Methodist Church (PLMC) - had temperature-screening measures in place. PLMC has also begun live-streaming church services.

Ms Jin Ai, 60, a member of PLMC, which Singapore's case number 41 - a 71-year-old man - had visited before he was confirmed to be infected, said the church live-streamed its services for the first time yesterday.

"Attendance at the 9am service today was about half of the usual, which is normally attended by more than a thousand people. Numbers have definitely fallen since (case 41) was confirmed," she said.

But there was positive feedback from members who watched the live-stream, said Ms Jin, who added: "We are streaming the services live so that our members can worship together, just through different modes."

Student Lee Jewelyn, 13, who was one of the congregants attending service at PLMC yesterday, said: "The church has taken precautions, such as sanitising public areas and temperature screenings."

She added that pews have also been marked out to facilitate contact tracing if needed.

At New Creation Church in Buona Vista, large numbers of congregants were seen coming and going at The Star Performing Arts Centre in between morning services.

Churchgoer Wu Hui Yi, 35, said: "It doesn't really seem different from the usual apart from (temperature-screening and cleaning) measures. It seems like it's just as crowded as it usually is."

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