

Pandemic Plan for the Church

Ministering to the Community in a Time of Crisis

The Role of the Church in a Pandemic

*“For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat;
I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink;
I was a stranger, and you invited Me in, naked, and you clothed Me;
I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.”*

Matthew 25:35-36

Christians in Plagues (Pandemics)

“It is our care of the helpless,
our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents.
‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’”

Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD)

Church history tells us that Christianity grew and thrived during difficult times such as persecution and plagues. While still young and developing, the early Christian Church grew to a worldwide entity despite great hostility and resistance. During this time, the Roman Empire consisted of territorial holdings around the Mediterranean Sea, in Europe, Africa and Asia. Under this rule there was great persecution toward Christians.

The early Christian Church achieved unprecedented growth during the second and third centuries A.D. Numerous historical and sociological explanations have been advanced to account for this phenomenon and its role in the eventual "triumph" of Christianity under Constantine. Long overlooked in this endeavor has been the role of several spectacular disasters that occurred in the empire in this same period. Most notable are two periods of devastating and widespread epidemics that hit especially hard in the eastern provinces in the 160s and again in the 250s.

It has been determined that the fabric of Roman society was substantially disrupted and demoralized by these catastrophes, and that this helped opened the door for Christianity to spread. During these pandemics Christians offered a more satisfactory explanation of the catastrophic events. Second, Christian values of love and charity were expressed by the practices of social service in the times of crisis, thereby creating a network of medical care. Third, with even minimal medical attention, the survival rate among the Christians (and any of their pagan neighbors whom they treated) was substantially higher than that in the general population. Over

time, the proportion of Christians in the total population was thereby dramatically increased. When coupled with the network effect of those pagans now disengaged from traditional ties and attracted by Christian benevolence to new attachments, the result was to alter irreversibly the balance of the Roman Empire.ⁱ

The Plague of Cyprian (250 AD)

Throughout this period, in addition to the persecution, there were recorded plagues. The Plague of Cyprian, believed to be smallpox, lasted for 20 years from 250 AD to 270 AD. Accounts claim that at the height of the outbreak 5,000 people died each day in Rome.

Early records show that people in their terror, were abandoning the sick in the streets. Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, instructed the Christians to care for the sick, and bury the dead, including dying pagans. The people obeyed, despite the fact the pagans blamed them for the disease and persecuted them.ⁱⁱ

Because of their compassionate actions in the midst of the plague, the Christian historian, Eusebius writes:

“All day long some of them [the Christians] tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all, so that their deeds were on everyone’s lips, and they glorified the God of the Christians. Such actions convinced them that they alone were pious and truly reverent to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Ordinary pagan families were encouraged to abandon their homes when family members contracted the plague. Again, they knew no other way to isolate the disease than to leave the afflicted family members behind to die, perhaps slowly. Christians were duty-bound not to abandon the sick. Jesus had said that in caring for the sick, Christians were caring for Him. So, even though Christians knew little more about medicine than the pagans did, they stayed with their family members, friends, and neighbors who were suffering. Consider this account of the great epidemic of the year 260, left to us by Dionysius of Alexandria:

“Most of the Christians in our city showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of others. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending their every need, helping and comforting them — and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pain.”^{iv}

Historians determine that superior survival rates would have produced a much larger proportion of Christians who were immune, and who could, therefore, pass among the afflicted with seeming invulnerability. In fact, Christians most active in nursing the sick were likely to have contracted the disease very early and to have survived it as they, in turn, were cared for. In this way, a whole force of miracle workers was created to heal the “dying.”^v

Epidemiologists estimate that basic health care, such as providing adequate water and warmth, can result in as much as a 30 percent higher survival rate. Hence there were many more Christian survivors than pagan survivors. This by itself was enough to change the ratio of pagans to Christians substantially. Also, pagans who were cared for by Christians also enjoyed a higher survival rate. These survivors then would tend to have loving relationships with Christians in place of the suspicions of the past. Conversion rates soared.^{vi}

During the same plague in Alexandria, under the episcopate of Dionysius the Great, a brotherhood formed called the Parabaloni. Following the example of Epaphroditus, they voluntarily undertook the care of the sick and the burial of the dead. They received their name from the fact that they risked their lives (*paraballesthai ten zoen*) by exposing themselves to contagious diseases.^{vii}

Further account from Dionysius of the plague at Alexandria, he writes:

“At all events most of the brethren through their love and brotherly affection for us spared not themselves nor abandoned one another, but without regard to their own peril visited those who fell sick, diligently looking after and ministering to them and cheerfully shared their fate with them, being infected with the disease from them and willingly involving themselves in their troubles. Not a few also, after nursing others back to recovery, died themselves.... But the Gentiles behaved quite differently: those who were beginning to fall sick they thrust away, and their dearest they fled from, or cast them half dead into the roads: unburied bodies they treated as vile refuse; for they tried to avoid the spreading and communication of the fatal disease, difficult as it was to escape for all their scheming.”^{viii}

Acknowledging the huge death rate, Dionysius noted that though this terrified the pagans, Christians greeted the epidemic as merely, “schooling and testing.” Thus, at a time when all other faiths were called to question. Christianity offered explanation and comfort. Even more important, Christian doctrine provided a prescription for action. That is, the Christian way appeared to work.^{ix}

Imperial Period of Roman Empire

During the Imperial Period of Rome, disease was a devastating but normal part of life. In the densely populated cities of Rome, there were a multitude of causes of illnesses including the sewage systems, public bathing houses, poor hygiene, and poor diet. Wars, famines, droughts and pestilence were common occurrences. Influenza, malaria, smallpox, sexually transmitted diseases, measles, and viral hemorrhagic fever have all been cited as maladies of which the Romans suffered.

The Roman Emperor Julian reigned around the year 360, during a time when Christianity was rising. He like all Emperors, was Pontifex Maximus, Chief Priest of the State Religion. He embarked on a mission of religious reformation within the Roman Empire. His aim was to destroy Christianity but to revive the ancient pagan hierarchy and traditions. In a time when disease was prevalent, Christians also suffered persecution, yet Christianity grew.

Julian wrote a letter to his chief priest of Galatia, Arsacius, observing the kindness of Christians and the advance of their cause, and charged him to incorporate the Christians tactics by instructing priests to practice a similar lifestyle:

“The religion of the Greeks does not yet prosper as I would wish on account of those who profess it. But the gifts of the gods are great and splendid, better than any prayer or any hope... Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause?”^x

In a letter to another priest Julian wrote,

"I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence." ... "The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."^{xi} (Galileans was a term used for Christians as Jesus was from Galilee.)

According to Christian historians, it has been widely reported that after Julian had been mortally wounded in battle, his final words were, “You have conquered, Galilean.”

1918 Influenza

Unfortunately, due to the focus on war efforts, there are not many written records from the 1918 Influenza in the United States. However, our neighboring country of Canada has several records of those who endeavored as volunteers, and the fruit of their labors while risking their lives to save others.

During the 1918 Influenza, Canadian, nurses found their ranks depleted as the case load of patients increased. In addition to many serving overseas in the war effort, those left behind contracted the Spanish flu in large numbers, despite their wearing gowns and masks that covered them from head to toe. It was not long before the first of many calls went out for volunteers to help in hospitals.

A call for volunteers

The British Red Cross VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachments) were already very involved in caring for the sick and wounded during the First World War. At the start of the pandemic, a request was made for the recruitment and training of more volunteers:

In addition to hospital duties, volunteers were often assigned to homes in which all the adults were incapacitated. It was not an easy job, particularly for some of the younger women, who quickly lost their eagerness to help when they found themselves in ramshackle, dirty houses where they were expected to wash and diaper ragged, runny-nosed children on top of cleaning up after adult patients who could do nothing for themselves.^{xii}

Vancouver Mayor Gale called for more volunteers charging “People are actually dying in considerable numbers without the care and attention that even the meanest stranger within our gates is entitled to.” He went further stating, “Hospital staffs were worn out to the stage where they sometimes were unable to provide what was needed. Do those who could give assistance realize how greatly their services are required?”^{xiii}

October 16, 1918, the mayor of Ottawa, Harold Fisher stated, “People died last night because they had no one to look after them last week when they had nothing but a mild case of influenza. People will also die next week unless they have someone to take care of them tonight.” That night there were 900 people in the hospital with flu in Ottawa.^{xiv}

Lieutenant-Governor Sir Charles Lake also issued a proclamation urging everyone to show a spirit of neighborliness by calling on those living nearby to ensure “they are all right.”

In Saskatchewan, Mrs. Gladys Nelson from the small town of Outlook was one of many women who over the weeks cooked meals for those unable to feed themselves. She worked so hard that she was made an honorable member of the St. John Ambulance Society. Only three people died in tiny Outlook.^{xv}

Many women from various churches participated by daily going to their local health minister to enquire on the worst cases. They would then go to the fellowship hall in their church buildings, cook meals and deliver them to families. It was determined that these efforts saved many lives.

Dr. Margaret Patterson (Sisters of Service)

The need for volunteers to help in the nursing of numerous people in their homes throughout the city of Toronto was overwhelming. Miss N.A. Gibson, the secretary of the Home Bureau of Nursing sent out a public appeal for help from trained and untrained women.

“We will visit homes where these helpers are, so that we can follow up their work and give them instruction.” Miss Gibson said that on Saturday, when cases were reported to her and help asked for, there were some five or ten families which she could send no one to. “(The Star October 7, 1918: 2).^{xvi}

To meet this growing demand for nursing care within homes, Dr. Margaret Patterson began a lecture series for training women in the basics of patient care. She knew something must be done to save the lives of the sick and dying. It was described as a course in general preparation for nursing at home. Sponsored by the Ontario Emergency Volunteer Health Authority, the courses began October 16 and were held initially in the Parliament buildings. By the time the lectures began volunteers packed the large auditorium, requiring many to listen from adjacent corridors. By October 17, four lectures had been delivered to over 1000 female volunteers, and within a day over 100 were attending people with influenza.^{xvii} Dr. Patterson called the

Graduates of the intensive two-day course received a badge upon graduating. Dr. Patterson named these volunteers, “Sisters of Service.” Patterson’s programs proved effective in training hundreds of women in the best methods for reducing lung congestion and keeping fevers down, as well as for treating patients in the home. In Toronto, the Sisters of Service provided care to approximately 1000 families in need. In fact, the program was so effective that it was soon taken up in other parts of the city and other communities across Ontario.^{xviii}

Sisters of Service

Among the students of Dr. Patterson’s program was Catherine Donnelly. She arrived from Alliston, Ontario to Alberta shortly after the pandemic began. After training she volunteered to nurse the sick in their homes. This was a soul-searching experience as she came to realize the great lack of spiritual and material resources for families and their children. Her

inspiration led to the founding of a new Canadian Catholic Women's Religious Order called the Sisters of Service (SOS), still active today. ^{xix}

Church Volunteerism and COVID-19

After the COVID-19 pandemic, many church and non-profit leaders have looked back with 20/20 hindsight and question how things could have been handled differently. One article examining this quandary begins with “Were we ready? Of course not. We had no time.”^{xx} Another article titled, “We Weren’t Ready, We Still Aren’t Ready,” uses the word “decimated” when describing the voluntary sector in the pandemic’s first months.^{xxi}

Concerns about Covid-19 exposure and public health safety measures limited people’s willingness and ability to perform volunteer work. A lot of churches saw their longtime, reliable volunteers back away from their roles because their age put them at risk. Even those who remained willing to serve were unpredictable; the likelihood of illness or exposure at home, especially during pandemic surges, meant more volunteers were calling out sick when leaders were strapped for help. A lot of churches lost their long-term, reliable, go-to people and were left with no one. The tendency became to ask everyone and take anyone, which is not the best approach. ^{xxii}

There are many plans written to instruct volunteers what to do during a pandemic crisis. However, the crisis itself poses a threat to the very existence of a volunteer program. The volunteers themselves face the threat of acquiring the virus and getting sick. Fear, age limits, personal health, family members’ health all factor into availability, and a person’s desire to serve in such a capacity.

Hurricane Helene, September 2024

In late September 2024, Hurricane Helene caused widespread catastrophic damage to the Southeastern United States. It was non-profit disaster relief organizations and local churches that banded together to help those who were devastated from this storm. Organizations such as Samritian’s Purse, Baptists on Mission, Mercy Chefs, helped with clean-up, rebuilding, distribution of food, water, and blankets. Many brought with them specialized skills such as chainsaw teams, shower and laundry services, and medical professionals. Most importantly, they brought spiritual support, offering prayer and encouragement to those affected. Even today, as FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) has fallen short in giving adequate aid to those still suffering, many of these organizations continue to work to help those hurting and bring the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ into the crisis.

Conclusion

Throughout ancient and modern history there are recorded the sacrificial acts of those who risked everything to further the cause of the Kingdom. These acts, though many performed individually, had an eternal impact on those who were suffering. In God's sovereign ways, through disasters, plagues, and persecution, by loving our neighbors, Christianity is spread.

As in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, by loving our neighbor, we fulfill the law. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27)

Even as Jesus was telling of His glorious return, He was encouraging His listeners to be ready.

"Therefore, be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming... Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions."

Matthew 24:42-47

Today we are being warned of another pandemic, as the Body of Christ, we do we do not have to sit back in bewilderment and lament of our inability to meet the needs of our community. We can walk circumspectly, anticipate the disaster, prepare, and be ready to minister to the community in the time of crisis.

Like Dr. Margaret Patterson during the 1918 Influenza, the mission of this ministry is to prepare and equip those willing to stand in the gap and be able to safely care for themselves and their community in the event of a devastating pandemic. This plan has effective means of reaching hurting people in our communities with food, medicine, and other assistance in the Name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This in turn, earns us the opportunity to share the Gospel, the Good News of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

By preparing we will not only be able to run with the footmen in a time of peace, but we can even outrun the horses.

*"If you have run with footmen, and they have tired you out,
then how can you compete with horses?
If you fall down in a land of peace,
how will you do in the thicket by the Jordan?"*

Jeremiah 12:5

- ⁱ “Epidemics, Networks, and the Rise of Christianity”, Rodney Stark, University of Washington, page 159, American Theological Library Association, <http://www.foresthomechurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Epidemics-Networks-the-Rise-of-Christianity-by-Rodney-Stark.pdf>,
- ⁱⁱ “Cyprian” Dan Graves, MSL, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/cyprian-11629611.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Eusebius, The Church History,” Translation and Commentary by Paul L. Meir,regel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI 49501, 2007, p. 293
- ^{iv} “The Growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire”, Christianity in Rome, Adapted from Mike Aquilina and Rodney Stark, the University of Washington, page 3, <http://huron2.aaps.k12.mi.us/smitha/HUM/PDF/Growth-of-Chr.pdf>
- ^v “Legacy of Love”, quoted from “The Rise of Christianity” Rodney Stark, <http://www.unityinchrist.com/LegacyOfLove.html>
- ^{vi} “Ordinary People Change the World”, Randal Dick, Pure Religion...Undefined, Grace Communion International, O, [http://www.gci.org/gospel/evang/ordinary.pure religion ... undefined](http://www.gci.org/gospel/evang/ordinary.pure%20religion%20...%20undefined)
- ^{vii} “Parabolani” Catholic Encyclopedia, Copyright 2009 by Kenneth Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11467a.html>
- ^{viii} “To the Brethren of Alexandria” St. Dionysius of Alexandria” (Part of another Easter Letter), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, July 6, 2011, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/feltoe/dionysius.dionysius.letters.e14.html>
- ^{ix} “The Rise of Christianity,” Rodney Stark, Harper Collins, Princeton University Press, San Francisco, 1997, p 82
- ^x “Julian the Apostate Letter to Arsacius”, Then Again, Primary Source, David W. Koeller, 2005, [“http://www.thenagain.info/classes/sources/julian.html](http://www.thenagain.info/classes/sources/julian.html)
- ^{xi} “Ordinary People Change the World”, Randal Dick, Pure Religion...undefined, Grace Communion International, O, [http://www.gci.org/gospel/evang/ordinary.pure religion ... undefined](http://www.gci.org/gospel/evang/ordinary.pure%20religion%20...%20undefined)
- ^{xii} “Dr. Fred and the Spanish Lady; Fighting the Killer Flu,” Betty O’Keefe and Ian MacDonald, Heritage House Publishing Company, Ltd, British Columbia, 2004, page 96
- ^{xiii} “Dr. Fred and the Spanish Lady; Fighting the Killer Flu,” Betty O’Keefe and Ian MacDonald, Heritage House Publishing Company, Ltd, British Columbia, 2004, page 124.
- ^{xiv} “Dr. Fred and the Spanish Lady; Fighting the Killer Flu,” Betty O’Keefe and Ian MacDonald, Heritage House Publishing Company, Ltd, British Columbia, 2004, page 64.
- ^{xv} “Dr. Fred and the Spanish Lady; Fighting the Killer Flu,” Betty O’Keefe and Ian MacDonald, Heritage House Publishing Company, Ltd, British Columbia, 2004, page 68

^{xvi} “Send Only Your Serious Cases.” Delivering Flu to Toronto: An Anthropological Analysis of the 1918-19 Influenza Epidemic in Toronto, Ontario Canada.” Karen Slonim, Dissertation presented to University of Missouri-Columbia, December 2010, p 170.

^{xvii} “Send Only Your Serious Cases.” Delivering Flu to Toronto: An Anthropological Analysis of the 1918-19 Influenza Epidemic in Toronto, Ontario Canada.” Karen Slonim, Dissertation presented to University of Missouri-Columbia, December 2010, p 172.

^{xviii} “Dr. Fred and the Spanish Lady; Fighting the Killer Flu,” Betty O’Keefe and Ian MacDonald, Heritage House Publishing Company, Ltd, British Columbia, 2004, page 63.

^{xix} “The Story of Catherine Donnelly”, <http://www.catherinedonnellyfoundation.org/cath.html>

^{xx} “Were We Ready? Covid’s Impact on Church Volunteerism” Karen Kogler, “The Equipper”, January 2, 2021, <https://theequipper.org/were-we-ready-covids-impact-on-church-volunteerism/>, accessed July 15, 2025.

^{xxi} “We Weren’t Ready, We Still Aren’t Ready: The Voluntary Sector in Post-COVID-19 Recovery” Adam James, “Engage” October 2020, <https://engagejournal.org/volume-xxi-issue-1-october-2020/we-werent-ready-we-still-arent-ready-voluntary-sector-post-covid-19>, accessed July 15,2025.

^{xxii} “How the Pandemic Impacted the Church, A 2022 Summary of Trends”, The Christian Trendwatcher, <https://www.christiantrendwatcher.com/blog/how-the-pandemic-impacted-the-church>, accessed July 21, 2025