

Pandemic Plan for the Church

Ministering to the Community in a Time of Crisis

Treatise for a Cell Church Model During COVID-19

As the world experiences COVID-19, world health officials and local governments continue to implement Social Distancing. The goal of Social Distancing is to reduce contact between adults in the community and workplace. These measures will consist of the cancellation of large public gatherings and the alteration of workplace environments. These cancellations will include not only the gathering of Sunday morning assemblies, but all other meetings as well, for example, prayer meetings, sporting events, concerts, and any other social or ministry meetings. In addition, these recommendations do not distinguish between gatherings held indoors or out.

During the 1918 Influenza Pandemic similar mitigations were put in place to control the spread of the virus. It consisted of three waves; it started in March 1918 and peaked during the second wave with more deaths than the first, and finally subsided in the summer of 1919 almost 18 months later.

Currently health officials are trying to predict the severity levels of the COVID-19 pandemic to determine how and when to implement mitigations. It has been determined that there may be additional waves of the virus and the pandemic and mitigation measures could last for months or even years. Many believe that COVID-19, a coronavirus may become seasonal and continue to circulate like influenza viruses and the seasonal cold.

In addition to the unknown as to the duration of the pandemic, no one knows what the Church will look like after the mitigations are lifted. Will church buildings ever again be able to be the focal point of gathering? Will people be afraid to return? Will those who did not engage during the social distancing return? What about the opportunities lost to invite neighbors and friends to a gathering? With all the unknowns, will Church ever be the same?

Since the conventional way to minister to the Body of Christ is a weekly gathering; the Church should be prepared to be able to minister in unconventional ways. Depending on the size of your church, as well as the limitations placed due to the effects on society in a pandemic, an alternate method of ministering to the Body should be considered. There is Biblical evidence for the benefits a cell (home) church model, as well as historical and current evidence. If your church has not already incorporated small groups into your daily practice of ministering, this will encourage you to begin such a ministry.

In addition to the continuation of the mandate to not forsake the gathering of believers, it also allows the pastor and leaders to stay engaged with the flock to ensure that all are healthy or getting proper care if they fall ill. For more information on pre-identifying the vulnerable people in your church and to minister to them, please see the article “Ministering to Vulnerable People.”

Depending on the severity of the circulating corona virus and the government enforcements of social distancing, groups of ten or less are usually allowed. Home church groups then should not

exceed the number of ten, which also allows for comfort and the spinning off a new group if the current one grows. The formation of groups should be based on geographic location. This would ensure all group members may still attend in the event that a quarantine is put in place prohibiting movement from area to area.

Biblical Evidence

In the early days of Christianity, the Church was under great persecution. Followers met in homes of fellow believers to escape notice from the Jews and eventually the Romans. Scripture reveals this as early as the book of Acts.

“Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart” Acts 2:46ⁱ

“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” Acts 5:42ⁱⁱ

“When Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’ And when he realized this he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” Acts 12:11,12ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul states that he preached both publicly and went from house to house:

“How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Acts 20:20,21^{iv}

In other books there is evidence of house meetings. Priscilla and Aquila hosted a house church in Ephesus, and in Rome:

“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house”. Romans 16:3-5^v

“Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.” 1 Corinthians 16:19^{vi}

Philemon’s house was also open to such group meetings:

“To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.” Philemon 2^{vii}

Cell Churches in the History of Christianity

We have already established that the early Christians during the times of Paul and the apostles met not only publicly but also regularly in homes for worship and breaking bread. Persecution from the Jews and Romans required the early Church to meet secretly. This section will look further through history at the persecuted Church and establish the endurance and continued existence of the Church was due to meetings held in the home.

At first Christians were considered to be a Jewish sect by the Romans and were tolerated. However, when the church grew and was made up largely of gentiles, they were no longer exempt from emperor worship. This brought on persecution from the Romans. With persecution both from the Jews and the Romans underground meetings happened in homes around Jerusalem, surrounding cities and in Rome

Persecution by the Romans was of great significance in the first two centuries. Nero blamed the Christians for a fire that he started which destroyed much of Rome. Persecution consisted of being accused and arrested; and the sentence of death was brought on in horrific ways. Christians were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs; crucified; set on fire to light the darkness; and fed to lions; in addition to other means of execution. Just to bear the name Christian was a crime.

The Great Persecution of Diocletian was the last and most severe. In spite of such persecution Christianity survived and thrived through such times by means of the existence of house gatherings. Until the changes which prohibited persecution were brought about by Constantine, Christians continued to meet in homes.

Later, during the Middle Ages, another form of persecution came about. The Inquisition, established by the Catholic Church started in the 12th century. Their goal was to fight against heretics against Catholics. New movements such as the Waldesians, and Protestants were considered heretical. Supposed heretics were accused, arrested, and subjected to torture until they repented of their ways. For several hundred years, the Christians met secretly in house churches. The author of Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan, was imprisoned for preaching in such a setting in the 1600's.

In 1415, John Hus, founder of the Waldesians and Moravians, was burned at the stake, like so many others, for believing in the salvation by grace and disagreement with the Catholic Church. There were other movements such as the Lollards, the Brethren of the Common Life, the Friendship Band, and the Anabaptists. All were persecuted by the Catholic Church and the Inquisition, and all met in illegal, underground, small groups in homes.

When Martin Luther posted his 95 Thesis to the church door at Wittenberg in Saxony Germany on October 31, 1517, he advocated house churches

As various kings and queens reigned in Europe, their personal views and beliefs toward religion would also reign in the lands. The actions of these monarchs and waves of their to and fro influence can be seen in the 1500's through King Henry VIII, his son Edward, his daughter

Queen Mary I, then her half sister Elizabeth. Dependant on the reigning monarch, there was tolerance or persecution of the Protestant Church. However, in spite, or more correctly through these dangerous times, Protestants grew and flourished by meeting in individual homes.

On a trip across the Atlantic in 1735, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church was exposed to Moravians. The Moravian Church, started by Jon Hus who objected to the practices of the Catholic Church, flourished under persecution by gathering weekly in house meetings. John Wesley's mother, Suzanna, was a small group leader in their home when he was growing up. The Methodist Church was built by cell groups called classes.

Today, many churches encourage home group fellowships to foster a more intimate and nurturing environment for growth, just as in the early Church.

Modern Day Cell Churches

The greatest examples of modern day cell churches are those of Korea and China. The Yoido Full Gospel Church led by David Yonngi Cho of South Korea boasts of a membership as great as 1,000,000 as of 2007. When church membership grew to eight thousand, Cho decided to restructure the church. He divided it geographically by zones, and church members in each zone comprising a cell would meet weekly in the home for worship, bible study and prayer. When cell membership reached a certain number, another cell was formed.

In China, as early as 1922, Watchman Nee established house church meetings. Under the persecution of Chairman Mao Tse Tung, the Chinese house church movement developed after 1949. This was in response to the Communist government requiring all religious organizations to register. In addition, government officials interfered with the church activities and preaching and worship had to be approved. The independence of Protestants is believed to influence imperialism. Even under communist persecution, the underground church in China thrives, and it is estimated to consist of 67 million Christians.

Other countries, particularly those of Islamic faith and under Sharia Law, Christians meet in secretly in underground house churches. Although our brothers and sisters suffer great persecution, they are strengthened by their fellowship in secret meetings.

Case for the Cell Church Model

It was Constantine who began reforms and stopped the persecution of Christians. It was also Constantine who set up the modern church as we know it today. It was by his design that a paid, professional clergy be set up. This took the ministering of people to each other out the hands of lay people and assigned it to one person.

It is clear that Constantine's intentions were to allow Christians to meet in public without threat of persecution. However, his changes were not all beneficial. By setting up paid clergy, he took the act of ministering to one another out of the hands of lay people and placed it into those of one man in the community. Christians no longer met in the more intimate settings of their homes, but now met in buildings with everyone facing in one direction toward the preacher.

Worship, Bible study and prayer were the foundation for home fellowships; however, teaching, preaching and evangelism have been relegated to one man. In the past, visiting and praying for the sick and other similar ministries were the responsibility of the people, now it is the duty of the pastor. In the modern church, people no longer participate, they go to church to sit and listen. Only a few are raised up to exercise their God given spiritual gifts, and the priesthood of believers is left to the professionals. In many cases, the clergy is made of educated people, and not necessarily those who are spiritually minded. Few people rise to leadership roles, however in the house church model, more leaders are needed.

The cell church model would encourage the involvement of all people in the priestly duties of the Church, not just paid staff. It would encourage others to study their Bibles not just for personal transformation, but for teaching as well. Those with a heart to lead worship, prayer, or share a word would be allowed to participate.

A cell church model would also promote evangelism by individuals instead of relying on the work of one man. This would be done by inviting friends and neighbors to attend a less conventional and more comfortable setting. This setting would promote commitment to one another as relationships are nurtured and grown. In a more intimate atmosphere honesty, vulnerability, and accountability would be cultivated. The venue would lend itself to the making of more committed disciples, a directive to all believers, not just paid clergy.

The Significance of a Cell Church Model in End Times

When sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked Jesus to tell them what will be the sign of His coming, and the end of the age. Jesus answered,

“You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.” Matthew 24:6-8^{viii}

As we watch and discern the times, we see nations coming against nations. These nations are not necessarily countries with geographic borders. Fear that Isis will breach our borders and become a threat to our Christian freedoms is close to becoming a reality. However, persecution is already here. It seems that to be politically correct nowadays is to be anti Christian. Our rights and our freedoms are being denied as well as attacked. All social, political, and moral arguments have become our culture against Christians The United States of America is no longer a Christian nation, but has fallen from its' original roots. We no longer discern what is holy from the profane; we call good evil, and evil good. Billy Graham once said, “If God doesn't soon bring judgment upon America, He'll have to go back and apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah” . As in the past and present, an underground church will survive and even thrive.

Persecution is not the only cause for the prohibition of church gatherings. If the government were to enforce Social Distancing during a pandemic, public gatherings would also be forbidden. Establishing a cell church model would greatly enhance the leaders' ability to continue to

minister and shepherd the flock. The ministry of prayer, Bible study, visiting and caring for the sick would be placed back into the hands of the lay people.

With the social effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Distancing is not the only concern. Officials have expressed concern that as the pandemic continues it will eventually undermine society's infrastructure. There may not only be widespread sickness, but a shortage of health care workers, services, deliveries, food, and fuel. To already be established in loving relationships in a small group gathering, caring for one another in a disaster would come naturally. They would share gifts, skills, talents, and even supplies. Reaching out to neighbors in the local community would also come naturally. Such a response would cross denominational lines. If people are not already planted in such a group with established relationships, then during this disaster they may become like scattered sheep separated from the Body.

As in the days of the Plague of Cyprian, in 250 AD, the mercy and love Christians shown to one another and to their neighbors will triumph through the judgment. The love demonstrated would allow the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and the hope we have in Him to be shared, furthering His Kingdom in the midst of the crisis.

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