



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

Mercy Triumphs Judgement

One morning, while reading the book of Hosea, I asked the Lord, “Why did you make Hosea marry Gomer?” Instead of God requiring me to search out the answer, He gave me immediate revelation to His purpose in this directive. This revelation came in quick flashes of theories and concepts which can be summed up in one statement. By identification with the Father’s heart, and sacrifice and suffering, authority is gained in the spirit realm. Hosea had to marry Gomer to identify with God’s broken heart by marrying a harlot then forgiving her and showing her mercy. This obedience and identification gave Hosea’s prophetic words power and authority.

This concept was proven in my own life when I was on my first trip overseas to respond to a disaster. I thought it was my skills as a paramedic that was going to make a difference and give me the authority to share the gospel. Although my skills qualified me to go and participate on the team, it was the compassion and mercy God formed in my heart for the people that we were caring that allowed Him to flow through me in a wondrous way. He showed me that the true way to outrun the horses that carry the judgments of Revelation was to show mercy; *“mercy triumphs judgment”* (James 2:13). I not only learned what the Lord requires of me, but why He requires it.

There are illustrations in the Bible of God’s people, through their sacrificial acts of mercy and caring for another during a time of calamity, furthered the Kingdom of God. The Good Samaritan, by showing mercy, proved that this act of love fulfilled the law (Luke 10:2-37). In the book of Philippians, Paul refers to Epaphroditus as one who risked his life and came close to death for the work of Christ. (Philippians 2:29). And while the apostle Paul lay languishing in a cold dungeon, chained, and under the imprisonment of Nero, he was abandoned by friends, and believed to be at the end of his life. He states in the second letter to Timothy that only Luke, a physician, is with him (2 timothy 4:11).

Over the years as I have responded to disasters with medical teams, I learned early on that a relationship must first be created before anyone would listen to what I had to say about Jesus. That relationship was established by the help being provided in the form of medicine, food, or clothing. James exhorts us to do good works with our faith, but in addition we are encouraged to meet the needs of others, not to just preach the word.

*“If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them,
‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’
and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?”*
James 2:14-17.ⁱ

During a time of crisis, as in plagues or disasters of the past, Christians can play a major role in caring for the sick, serving the community, and bringing the gospel into the disaster.

Christians in Plagues (Pandemics)

The early Christian Church grew to a worldwide entity despite great hostility and resistance while still young and developing. During this time period 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.

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

Early records show that everyone was abandoning the sick in the streets. People rushed about in terror. 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

The early Christian movement 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 hit 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 translated into 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.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 member 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}

“Moreover, 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 survived it as they, in turn, were cared for. In this way, was created a whole force of miracle workers to heal the “dying.” And who was to say that it was the soup they so patiently spooned to the helpless that healed them, rather than the prayers the Christians offered on their behalf?”—*Or both.* “^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*) in 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}

The Roman Emperor Julian reigned around the year 360, he like all Emperors, was Pontifex Maximus, Chief Priest of the State Religion. 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?”^{ix}

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." And he also wrote, "The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."^x (Galileans was a term used for Christians as Jesus was from Galilee.)

The Modern Day Church

During the more recent worldwide 1918 influenza pandemic, there are several records of those risking their lives to save others during the 1918 Influenza. Unfortunately, due to the focus on war efforts, there are not many written records of this time period in the United States. However, our neighboring country of Canada has several records of those who endeavored as volunteers, and fruit of their labors.

During the Spanish Influenza, in the provinces of Canada, nurses found their ranks depleted as the case load of patients increased. They, too, 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.

In addition to hospital duties, volunteers were often assigned to homes in which all of the adults were prostrate. 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.^{xi}

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?”^{xii}

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.^{xiii}

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.”

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.^{xiv}

As the shortage of hospital beds, doctors, and nurses became more acute, one caregiver decided to take an unusual step. Dr. Margaret Patterson knew something must be done to save the lives of the sick and dying, so she instituted a training program for volunteers that 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. She told her first student: “We must band together to fight this disease which seems to affect chiefly the respiratory organs and we are very much concerned with heart’s action.” Graduates of the intensive two-day course each received a badge upon graduating. 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 fact, the program was so effective that it was soon taken up in other parts of the city and in other communities across Ontario.^{xv}

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.^{xvi}

By showing mercy, we are loving our neighbors, even those considered as our enemy, we fulfill the law (Luke 10:25-37). Throughout ancient and modern history there are recorded the sacrificial acts of those who risked everything to further the cause of the kingdom.

For many years I have studied, researched and written documents regarding Christians living in the end days. There are those who are in the cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) who went before us who were watching and waiting for Christ’s return. For two thousand years they watched the skies patiently waiting for the last trumpet to be blown. I believe we are living in the last days of that with every birth pang that comes, His imminent return will be upon us. We were born for such a time as this.

As we watch and wait, let us also prepare for His return, by preparing a people for His coming. Jesus said there will be wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes (Matthew 24:6-8). As we prepare for such difficult times, let us also prepare to help those in need in order to bring the gospel into the situations and offer hope.

There are several effective Christian disaster relief organizations, designed to send relief workers into a disaster and bring the gospel. Samaritan's Purse states that for over 40 years, they have done their utmost to follow Christ's command by going to the aid of the world's poor, sick, and suffering. They are an effective means of reaching hurting people in countries around the world with food, medicine, and other assistance in the Name of Jesus Christ. This in turn, earns them a hearing for the Gospel, the Good News of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

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

ⁱ James 2:14-17, Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission

ⁱⁱ "Cyprian" Dan Graves, MSL, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/cyprian-11629611.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ "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>,

^{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...undefined)

^{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} "Julian the Apostate Letter to Arsacius", Then Again, Primary Source, David W. Koeller, 2005, <http://www.thenagain.info/classes/sources/julian.html>

^x "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...undefined)

^{xi} "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

^{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 124.

^{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 64.

^{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 68

^{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 63.

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