



Pandemic Plan for the Church

Ministering to the Community in a Time of Crisis

Treatise for a Cell Church Model

When government mitigations for a pandemic are implemented, social distancing will be put into effect. This measure will be considered during a Pandemic Severity of 2 or higher and will be enforced by local authorities. Please see the section on “Community Mitigation Plans” or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website for more information.

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. Cancellations will include not only the gathering of Sunday morning assemblies, but all other meetings as well. These will include prayer meetings; sporting events; concerts; movie theaters; and any other social or ministry meetings. In addition, these recommendations do not distinguish between gatherings held indoors or out.

Since the conventional way to minister to the Body of Christ is a weekly gathering, the Church should prepare to minister in unconventional ways. Depending on the size of your church, as well as the limitations placed due to the effects on society, alternate methods of ministering to the Body should be considered. There is biblical evidence for the advantages of a cell church model, as well as historical and contemporary examples.

If a pandemic were to occur with the social effects of the 1918 influenza, social distancing would not be the only concern. Officials have expressed concern that such a pandemic would undermine society’s infrastructure. There would 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 occur more readily. They would share gifts, skills, talents, and even supplies. Reaching out to neighbors in the local community would also come willingly if people were prepared. Such a response would cross denominational lines. If people are not already planted in such a group with established relationships, then if such a disaster were to take place, they might be cut off from the Church and become vulnerable to the circumstances. If your church has not already incorporated small groups into your regular practice of ministering – this section will encourage you to begin such a ministry.

Biblical Evidence

In the very early days of Christianity, the Church was under great persecution; fear of persecution from the Jews required the early Church to meet secretly. Followers met in homes for prayer, worship, and the breaking of bread. As the apostle Paul, Barnabas, and others spread the gospel through the land, it was through house churches that meeting were held and the Church not only survived the persecution, but grew.

“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 2:46

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

“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 12:11,12

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

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

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

Cell Churches in the History of Christianity

At first Christians were persecuted by the Jews, but also eventually the Romans. This drove the Church underground and house meetings happened in Jerusalem and in the surrounding Roman Empire. Eventually persecution by the Romans was of great significance, leading to severe pursuit and torturous punishment for the next two hundred years. Some of the dreadful treatment was of Christians being accused and arrested; 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.

Over the span of two hundred years, under the rule of Roman emperors such as Marcus Aurelius and Decius, Christians were hunted and killed for bearing the name Christian. The Great Persecution of Diocletian was the last and most severe. In spite of such oppression Christianity survived and thrived through such times by means of the existence of house gatherings. In the year 313 AD, the Edict of Milan issued by Constantine, brought about changes. Among these included persecution was now prohibited, and Christianity became a legal

religion in the Roman empire. Although Christians did meet publicly, they also 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 find heretics who disagreed with the doctrine of the Catholic Church. As in the ways of the Romans, those accused were considered heretics, they were arrested, imprisoned and tortured, until they recanted. Persecution continued on into the 1300's and men like John Wycliffe were found as enemies of the Church and were declared heretics.

New movements such as the Waldensians, and Protestants were considered heretical. In 1415, John Hus, founder of the Waldensians and Moravians, was burned at the stake. He, like so many others, believed in salvation by grace and disagreed with the Catholic Church. The author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan, was imprisoned for preaching in an underground house church setting in the 1600's. There were other movements such as: the Lollards; the Brethren of the Common Life; the Friendship Band; and the Anabaptists. All were persecuted and met in illegal, small groups in homes. For several hundred years, Christians met secretly in house churches. When Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg in Saxony Germany on October 31, 1517, he advocated house churches as a means of gathering.

As various kings and queens reigned in Europe, their personal views and beliefs toward religion would also reign in the lands. Depending on these monarchs and their particular beliefs, there was tolerance or intolerance. This can be seen in the 1500's through King Henry VIII, his son Edward, his daughter Queen Mary I, then her half-sister Elizabeth. 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, flourished under persecution by gathering weekly in house meetings. When John Wesley was growing up, his mother, Suzanna, was a small group leader in their home; consequently, the Methodist Church was built by cell groups called classes.

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 Yonggi 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 to registration, government officials interfered with church activities, and preaching and worship had to be approved. It is believed by government officials that the

independence of protestants led to thoughts of imperialism. Even under communist persecution, the underground church in China thrives, and it is estimated to consist of sixty-seven million Christians.

In other countries, particularly those under the influence of the Islamic faith and Sharia Law, Christians meet secretly in underground house churches.

Case for Cell Church Model

It was Constantine who began reforms and stopped the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. 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 employed as leaders. This changed the practice of ministering to each other in the Body of Christ and gave the responsibility to those ordained as clergy. 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.

Worship, Bible study and prayer were the foundation for home fellowships. However, in this new model, 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 people "educated" in religion, and not necessarily those who are spiritually minded. This is not said to discredit the importance of biblical knowledge or education, but rather to bring attention to the truth that the Church is a "fellowship of believers" and as the Body of Christ, one's personal faith was not meant to be merely an intellectual ascent or to play an observational role. The cell church model would encourage the involvement of all people in the priestly duties of the Church. 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 could and would be allowed to participate.

A cell church model would also promote evangelism by individuals instead of relying on the work of one man – the pastor. This would be done by inviting friends and neighbors to attend a less conventional and possibly a more comfortable setting. This setting would promote commitment to one another as relationships are nurtured and grown. A more intimate atmosphere of honesty, vulnerability, and accountability could be cultivated. The venue would lend itself to the making of more committed disciples; a directive to all believers. This setting would also be conducive for the Body of Christ to cultivate a deeper prayer life.

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 the sign of His coming will be, 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

As we watch and discern the times, we see nations coming against nations. These nations are not necessarily countries with geographic borders. Fear that the nation of 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 in our culture seem to be 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.

Cell Church Model in a Pandemic

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. The current means of shepherding a flock would be disrupted. By establishing home group fellowships in advance would enable the flock to remain under the umbrella of the leadership and relationships maintained. If cell groups were set up by geographical methods, then people would be joined together with other believers within their local community.

If a pandemic with fallouts such as the 1918 Influenza were to occur, then as predicted by health and government officials, the infrastructure of our society would be greatly disrupted. Food, fuel, and other necessities would become scarce. It would be more prudent for believers to meet within their local area then to drive across town. In addition, reaching out to neighbors and even inviting them to the group would come more readily than to reach out strangers in another locale. Although social distancing would limit the amount allowed for a gathering, these relationships would be established before the mitigations were enforced.

In addition, reaching those in need in a local community, those with special needs who may become vulnerable in such situations, would already be known to the group. Please see the chapter titled “Pre-Identifying Vulnerable People” for more information.

Another element to consider as an advantage to home groups is the consequences of isolation and quarantine. If family members are forced to remain home due to voluntary isolation or quarantine, fellow group members can ensure they are cared for by delivering food and essential supplies. Again, it is more prudent to perform this type of ministry while in a close geographical area.

A pastor or priest who shepherds a flock that is already established in a cell church model will find it much easier to ensure his members are cared for spiritually and physically. Those established as leaders, as well as the members of the group, can look to each other for help and support. For more information on establishing a cell church model and reaching out to your people in unconventional ways, please see the section relating to “Prepare for Days when Gatherings Are Prohibited”, in the chapter titled “Church and Community Mitigation Plans” Additionally, see the section titled “Pre-Identifying Vulnerable People” for more information.

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