

Theological Motivation for Emergency/Pandemic Preparedness and Response

Christians in Times of Pandemic/Disaster

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“In the wake of the First World War a huge influenza pandemic swept the world, and it is estimated to have killed a very conservative 20 million people. 600,000 died in the U.S.A. and another 20,000 in Canada – the so-called Spanish flu often being brought home by soldiers returning from Europe.”

Over the past few years we are hearing more and more on the Avian Flu as being the next pandemic. The jury is still out on whether this is the ‘big one’ that folks have been expecting; but, as researchers say, even if it isn’t, it is only a matter of time before influenza or something akin to it mutates, jumps from other species, and begins to wreak havoc. They remind us that it isn’t a case of ‘if’ something like this happens, merely ‘when’.

Current best estimates suggest that 4.5 to 10.6 million Canadians will become clinically ill; 2 – 5 million will require out-patient care; 34,000 – 138,000 will require hospitalization; and between 11,000 – 58,000 Canadians will perish. This will not be business as usual.

The nature of a major pandemic by definition and historical records alike, unlike any other emergency, happens, than it happens some more, and it keeps on happening. Just when it looks like it is going to recede, it returns even more severely than before. It happens in virtually all communities, leaving little possibility for outside help; and with it, being a novel infectious disease, comes a fear of infection for self and family.

We have learned from previous influenza pandemics there is compelling evidence that preparation by governments is not enough to completely lessen the impact of a future influenza pandemic without the support of the private sector.

We have an opportunity like never before to put our faith into action. As Christians, are we ready to serve and comfort those afflicted and offer Christ’s love to those dying or seriously ill. Are we prepared to give sacrificially and trust God for His protection? Have we considered the consequences, both from God’s expectations of His Body, or those who are watching us to see how we respond to such an emergency? What would be the results from Christians taking an active role in showing Christ’s Love through their care of others?

The early church was characterized by generosity and sacrifice. Christians were not afraid to die. There was an association of men and women called the ‘*parabolani*’ the gamblers. It was their aim to visit the prisoners and the sick, especially those who were ill with dangerous and infectious diseases. In AD 252, plague broke out in Carthage; the people threw out the bodies of their dead and fled in terror. Cyprian, the Christian bishop, gathered his congregation together and put them to work burying the dead and nursing

the sick in that plague-stricken city; and by so doing, at the risk of their lives, they saved the city from destruction and desolation. (Barclay) They knew that death was not the end.

Social scientist Rodney Stark examined the link between social transformation and the early church. He found that this small group of early Christians had introduced a new vision of humanity to the Roman World. Christian religion provided a compelling new vision of humanity that was observable—not in organized programs of the church but in the lives of its followers, that drew many to the faith. The growth of the church, in part, was due to the **practiced** beliefs of Roman Christians. The hope – and the **real life** evidence that this was no ‘wish theology’ – was compelling and attractive to ‘those without hope.’”

Stark noted:

- 1) The Christian population in Rome, prior to the plagues, was significantly lower than the pagan population.
- 2) The survival rate among Christians was much higher than it was among non-Christians, due simply to the impact of Christian compassion expressed in very elementary forms of nursing.
- 3) Many non-Christians fled when the afflictions came while a larger number of Christians chose to stay, offering care to one another and even to those outside their circle-of-belief. One can see how the Christian demographic would have risen while the pagan population would have decreased.
- 4) When sick non-believers were cared for by Christians, a natural bond of gratitude would be created. The unbelievers who ‘pulled through’ due to Christian love, would want to continue to exist within loving Christian enclaves. But even pagans who did not get sick would have perceived the difference in the way Christians expressed compassion from the self-centered response of those who did not share the Christian’s hope. This would provide an attractive picture of the Christian community of which an unbeliever would not likely have previously been aware.

Stark helps us understand the implications of this by saying, “Another way to look at this is to put oneself in the place of an unbeliever who survived who now faces greatly increased odds of conversion because of their increased attachment to Christians.” Again, it boils down to building loving relationships with those who do not know Christ and let them see Him living through us. They had chosen to make relationships, not programs or paperwork, their strategy. That means that nothing should stand between us and the ability to offer care.ⁱ

William McNeill comments, “When all normal services break down, quite elementary nursing will greatly reduce mortality. Simple provision of food and water, for instance, will allow persons who are temporarily too weak to cope for themselves, to recover instead of perishing miserably. Pagans saw Christians do this for one another and they

experienced Christians doing this, even for themselves, as non Christians. They saw Christian care-givers undergo the ‘miracle’ of martyrdom and in this they learned about the One who gave His life for them. Others who were ill experienced the ‘miracle of healing when they got well through the loving touch and drinks of water that accompanied the heart-felt prayers of Christian friends.ⁱⁱ

God chose the local church for a grand purpose and equipped it with unique strengths: We have learned that when it submits to God’s intentions, it becomes a model of God’s agenda in its society. As it submits to God’s intentions, it increasingly reflects His image and character.

Each generation of each local church has a choice; to be an administrator of God’s agenda for its community, or not. Throughout history, the church has usually understood social and cultural transformation as an essential part of its task. Jesus’ intention was that evangelism and social concern be intimately related to one another, and many periods of church history have reflected His intention. People following Jesus loved God and neighbour and were salt and light in their communities.

What Can We Do to be Prepared?

The field of “emergency preparedness” is one to which it is often difficult to recruit people ahead of time. We tend to think of emergencies and natural disasters as happening to others, to someone else and definitely somewhere else!

Ignorance of the unknown is often the greatest hindrance and anxiety and fear cripples effective service. The scope of a pandemic is something that for this generation, we can only imagine or read about from by-gone days. Think of an emergency that affects not only a nearby neighbourhood but a whole city; that lasts not hours or days but weeks or months; that doesn’t seem to focus on the elderly but rather on healthy young adults; that incapacitates a quarter or more of those trying to respond to it; that affects all surrounding cities, provinces, and countries such that no outside help can come in...and it continues – stops and continues again...ⁱⁱⁱ

Do we know that a pandemic will occur in the next year or two? No... Does it matter? No... Why not? A pandemic is a near certainty and the signs have never been accumulating wider and faster but whether it comes or not is not the defining matter. What should compel our actions is our love for God. The process of becoming more Christ-like as we grow in compassion and love for our neighbour is the gift we give ourselves.

Spiritual Readiness

A Biblical model of compassion in action is in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah recognized a need, wept and was broken hearted over the situation. He prayed and then took action mobilizing others to be responsible for their own piece of the wall.

Prayer is the callisthenics that get us in shape for the marathon of service. Prayer and action, therefore, can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer without action grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us into a deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always give rise to concrete acts of deeper solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick and dying, and the oppressed, they will always give rise to prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ.

Nehemiah related everything whether large or small to the desire to do the will of God, in whose presence he lived and moved. He modeled for us:

- ♥ How to pray when there seems to be no human solution to our problems.
- ♥ How to blend human and divine factors when facing these predicaments.
- ♥ How to keep God's sovereignty and our human responsibility in proper balance.

What problem confronted God's servant when he left the splendour and comfort of the Persian court to return to the city of his fathers? Furthermore, what did he plan to do about it? Little is gained by being exposed to a problem if we are not prepared to seek a solution.

Nehemiah certainly responded to the report he heard. It was not a knee jerk reaction over an overwhelming need. Even though he had a strong emotional response over the bad news, he took time to pray, fast and meet with God. He had a God given concern that propelled him out of his comfort zone. He had a passionate concern for God's people and God's agenda that superseded his own personal comfort and prosperity.

Any intention to sacrificially meet the needs of sick and dying people – should the pandemic become a reality, will be actualized by people who are intimately connected to Jesus. Only those who walk closely with the Lord will have the strength to nurse the dying like the 1st and 2nd century Christians did in Rome. It depends, not so much on how merciful we are, but on how deeply we ourselves love the Lord.

Physical Readiness

Each church has its unique area of ministry and sphere of service. Let us again take Nehemiah's example and follow his strategy to engage the community to service. God used Nehemiah to gather his people in Jerusalem; not just to start well, but to finish better. The key we're going to see is that every single person that day made a personal commitment. Not to Nehemiah, but to God. Nehemiah set the pace; the people followed. Nehemiah was a master in the art of coordination. He understood that coordinated people can sustain commitments. The combined effort of the group is far greater than the sum of its parts. As people work together and find their niche, the results are exponentially far greater than what we can do working apart. Lots more fun too!!

Nehemiah realized that personal commitment always begins with *leadership*. He modeled it convincingly. He didn't say this is what you ought to do...this is your problem. He knew that motivation is caught much more than taught. So he set the pace. He invited others to join him after they had agreed that it was a common problem that they ALL had to face. Every part of the solution depended on 'WE doing something together.'^{iv}

Personal commitments bring awesome power. They are very powerful, not just in the spiritual realm. Genuine commitment focuses and increases our attention on the challenge before us. Making a personal commitment means we sign up in advance and say, 'I pledge by the grace of God to do this'.

- ♥ Do we have a solid strategy in place to be ready to respond to a need of national proportion? We need people like Nehemiah that realize that getting others involved and passionate to follow God, always begins with strong Godly leadership.
- ♥ Could a system be in place to be '**On Mission with God**' to network, mobilize and equip brothers and sisters in Christ to be ready as the world becomes increasingly burdened with natural disasters, pandemics, poverty, disease and war.

Relational Readiness

Do we know our neighbours? Do we have people who do not know Jesus whom we can be prepared to care for? As we have discussed, building relationships is the key so it is critical to be intentional in our efforts to meet others where they are in a real way.

We know the impact of Godly Love. As humans we have all a need to be loved and when we exhibit Christ's presence in our lives as we serve those that do not know Jesus as their Saviour, they will be drawn to Him.

Studies affirm that weakening bonds of friendship have far reaching effects. Among them: fewer people to turn to for help in crises, fewer watchdogs to deter neighbourhood crime, fewer visitors for hospital patients and fewer participants in community groups. The decline, which was greatest in estimates of the number of friends outside the family, also put added pressure on spouses, families and counsellors.

We have an opportunity today as never before to practice what we believe. We can allow circumstances to silence us, or we can see the shaking of the nations as an opportunity to put 'feet' to our faith and make a difference for God's Kingdom.

Mutual Assistance Groups

A church response to a pandemic is a shared commitment from the whole church body, being a visible and tangible witness of the gospel, acting as channels of God's Love. Since Pastors and other ministry leaders in the church will be over-extended it will be

necessary to have mature individuals who will be ready to fill in the gap. Lay people will have opportunities to minister in the lives of friends, neighbours and fellow church members.

A major flu pandemic would cause a shift in the way we traditionally gather to worship. Public gatherings (including church assemblies) would likely be closed or banned temporarily due to the fear of contracting the virus. In an environment of 'germ avoidance' gathering in large groups would be an unlikely occurrence. Public health officials call this 'social distancing' so church attendance would be one such activity to be avoided. Many would be reluctant to go out in public, for fear of contracting the flu virus. Due to a high anxiety level, however, Christians would greatly benefit by having an opportunity to meet with others to share, pray, and encourage one another.

During times of crisis, 'Mutual Assistance Groups' (house churches or virtual house churches) would provide a more casual but very meaningful worship/support experience. This would be a time of reaching out with emotional support to offer encouragement, personal one on one listening, being a real friend, counsellor, offer hope, new meaning for life and concrete symbols of love. A time for putting one's faith into action and demonstrating 'living proof of a loving God' without engaging in religious exploitation. Mutual Assistance Groups would give those grieving a sense of orientation into life...being a true witness for Christ by what is done...as well as by what is said. Strong bonds of friendship resulting in new followers of Christ is often the natural outcome that will extend into eternity...

May we live our life as people who know God is watching, inviting us to invest all that we are and giving all that we have into His Kingdom.

Discipleship

"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together." Hebrews 10:24-25

We need current church leaders who are willing to explore this crucial area of training church members in community spiritual leadership and practical pastoral supportive care. The people of the church are to gather and be instructed and encouraged for compassionate service. As they go 'out' to serve and be Christ's Ambassadors, they will be an expression and fullness of God's love.

'Proclamation' and 'demonstration' are both needed to communicate the Gospel in its fullness. Preaching is essential yet the message is hindered if there is not the reality of God demonstrated.

'Turning the face of the church outward, giving its resources away, blessing the community, unleashing the gifts of laypeople to serve - this is what our living God desires for His Church.'
Pastor Robert Lewis – 'The Church of Irresistible Influence'

Partnerships

Health care facilities will be overextended and national and provincial pandemic influenza plans have sites churches as 'non-traditional sites' and congregation members as workers for healthcare delivery. Could you imagine the witness for God's Glory if Christians were actively involved as newly trained volunteers being channels of God's love in their communities? What an opportunity to partner with regional health authorities and to walk in the steps of the Great Physician!

It is easy for us to imagine that we will suddenly come to a point in our lives where we are fully prepared, but preparation is not suddenly accomplished.

In fact, it is a process that must be steadily maintained. It is dangerous to become settled and complacent in our present level of experience.

The Christian life requires preparation and more preparation.

Oswald Chambers

"Where do people go if you can't go to a hospital, if you can't get 911 to answer? They go to their faith facility. There is apathy out there, however, to a pandemic," Bishop Kirk Stevan Smith said. "Experts will tell you if a pandemic hits full bore, more people would die within the first year than have died, to date, from AIDS."

With continued talk of an Influenza Pandemic becoming a reality, Christians have an 'open door' of opportunity to provide a living demonstration that the Christian message is genuine. In a world lacking in integrity and character, the post-modern generation is searching desperately for something real and authentic. They will not take Christians seriously unless churches and para-church organizations demonstrate an authentic way of life—being communities that model the character of God in their relationships and mode of living.

The church's manner of speaking the truth must not be aligned to the techniques of modern propaganda," writes Newbigin, "but must have the modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus." The church is called to be a witness to the gospel through an authentic demonstration of love and unity.

In the days of the early church, the thing that most impressed their neighbours in the Roman Empire was the community of love they witnessed among believers. In every age, the most persuasive evidence for the gospel is not words or arguments but a living demonstration of God's character through Christians' love for one another, expressed in both their words and their actions. The gospel is not meant to be "a disembodied message," Newbigin writes. It is meant to be fleshed out in "a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it" – who exhibit in their relationships the beauty of God's character."

Whether a Pandemic comes or not is not the issue. We have before us an opportunity to engage in an activity that will not only strengthen the faith community but will be an authentic witness of God's existence, building lives and communities before a watching world.

Thank you for joining God's Work as we narrow the gap between our religious life and our ordinary life being 'salt' & 'light' as we build Bridges of Love.

As we tackle the process of becoming the compassionate people that God calls us to be, we need agreement on the true nature of compassion. Is compassion through individual spiritual challenge the way to touch others with the Love of Christ?

Our compassion and concern must drive us back to a fresh view of God, a clear view of ourselves, and a new view of others. Learning what it takes and actually making a difference for God each require a different pace. You can sprint to the knowing, but the doing is a marathon.

When He saw the crowd, He was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He began feeding the hungry - - healing the sick - - and teaching them how to live. Mark 6:34-56

The Bible has told us to be 'salt' and 'light' but how would this play out in our normal day to day activities and how best could we attain this Biblical 'reality'. God's agenda for His World includes healing and restoration of all things that He created. It includes the physical—redemption of the creation. It includes the social—the healing of the societal ills of our lands. It includes the spiritual—the personal redemption of our spirits. The Bible is clear that God not only loves the people He created, but His agenda includes the healing of all creation. (Col. 1:20)

'The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds. If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world.

Charles Mali

The pervasiveness of the secular/sacred split is less surprising when we realize that most Christians are concerned about being a Christian in their work, but they don't think in terms of having a biblical framework on the work itself. Being a Christian we often keep our faith and profession in separate, parallel tracks—running along side by side like train rails that never touch or intersect. Clearly, developing a Christian mind powered by God's Word would build the City of God when our actions are directed by the love of God, offered up to His service.^v **Even though Christians know Christ the mind has not been transformed for Christ.**

Being justified and right with God is the important starting point, but how we live after conversion – growing in our love for the Lord and maturing and being equipped to carry out the mission God has given each of us for a just and humane society, is how we participate in God's work. God is not only engaged in the work of salvation but also in the work of preserving and maintaining His creation.

Once we discover that the Christian worldview is really true, then living it out means offering up to God our entire powers— practical, intellectual, emotional, artistic—to live for Him in every area of life. As it captures our entire being and redirects our every thought, the notion of a secular/sacred split becomes unthinkable. By God’s grace, we can make a significant difference within our sphere of influence—but only as we ‘crucify’ our craving for success, power and public acclaim. We can expect the process of developing a Christian worldview to be a difficult and painful struggle—first inwardly, as we uproot the idols in our own thought life, and then outwardly, as we face the hostility of a fallen and unbelieving world. Our strength for the task must come from spiritual union with Christ, recognizing that suffering is the route to being confirmed to Him and remade into His image.

A Working Definition of LOVE

As we take a look at a working definition of LOVE, we see that it is ... ***“intentionally doing something caring or helpful for another person, in Jesus’ name, regardless of the cost or consequence to oneself.”*** Intentionally” means that love does not happen by accident. Love happens because it is planned and premeditated. Love is determining to act in a particular way.^{vi}

“Doing something”...means Love is ACTION. When the Lord teaches us about love, He refers us to the covenant relationship He has so graciously come into with us when we are born again. Every time we think of the love of God and don’t remember the covenant relationship, we will try to *‘feel it’* because human love is based on feeling. The love of God is not based on feeling. Covenant love compels us to give of ourselves when deep inside everything says, “I don’t want to do what I am doing. Because ones love for God is greater than our own desires, it compels us to move forward and let go of our own agenda. It is not love by feeling, but love by **will**. We will obey because God has called us to follow His command to love our neighbour.^{vii}

It is only as we come into covenant love, that we can love our neighbour as our selfThe Covenant relationship is what fuels our drive for the great commission.

Love is being in touch with God...opening up and reaching out to others...so they, too, can touch God. As we serve as channels through which people experience God’s love, we will be on our way to the fulfillment of God’s greatest commandment from Matthew 22:39.

As we humbly lay down our lives for the sake of others and set ourselves apart for the Lord, the world will step back in wonder...

Without love, we can do many great things, demonstrate the gifts of the Spirit and exercise all the disciplines in the will of God; but it will all be in vain. We must recognize that God is love, and love is the foundation that will sustain an authentic and satisfying life clearly demonstrating Christ’s love for us. They will know we are His Disciples by our LOVE...

When the church proclaims and is a sign of the reign of God – whether by loving enemies or tending to the sick – it will be a contrast community in the eyes of the world. As we demonstrate full engagement in witness to the world but in a way that is different from the world, that witness is grounded in Jesus Christ, who calls us to be ‘in the world...but not of it’. John 17:14-16

*“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time
we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.
Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people”.*
Galatians 6:9-10

The church must rediscover its essential role and discover that the great chasm can be bridged as we reconnect with our communities and experience the ‘Impact of Church as a Faith Community’

Paul reveals the biblical mystery of how “building community” is the “work of the cross”. He challenges believers to create an authentic Christian community-of-faith, wherever one lives, works, and journeys. The “mission” of a Christian community is to reconcile differences and present a unity of vision. Through history, “communities of faith” have demonstrated a “belongingness” that brought hope during times of uncertainty. Accordingly, a vibrant faith-based community appears attractive to outsiders, because many of them are looking for a new “family” where belonging embodies certainty, midst their life-experience of injustice, suffering, and loneliness.

God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, instructs us to become ambassadors of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:18). It is only through the transforming work of Christ on the cross that reconciliation makes community possible - - and only through the church on earth, is God able to demonstrate His grace and wisdom. From Jesus’ words in John 12:24, “unless a kernel of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it will not bring forth fruit” we learn that the cross is the method of missions: accordingly, if a believer does not make choices for death, they will not bring forth life.

Every non-Christian culture has enough common grace to recognize some of the work of God in their midst and be attracted to it, even while Christianity in other ways will offend the prevailing culture. So we must neither just denounce the culture nor adopt it. We must sacrificially serve the common good, expecting to be constantly misunderstood and sometimes attacked; walking in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents.^{viii} It involves being yourself and focusing on others. It’s based on everyday things, such as asking questions, listening, giving away your attention, and praying behind people’s backs. Each of these perfectly sane activities helps communicate the gospel.^{ix}

In his counterintuitive book ‘Leading Quietly, Harvard Professor Joseph Badaracco steers us away from the well-worn leaders-as-heroes path and onto the road less traveled, where

ordinary people get things done. The most effective leaders are rarely public heroes, these men and women aren't high profile champions of causes and don't want to be. Finding and connecting with others is not about boldness it is about **LOVE**. The suffering of Christ sets the standard for the suffering of Christians. When we pay attention to people we nudge them towards Jesus to become the connecting bridge between them and God. In essence, we become builders of the Christian community.

A "community builder" is recognizable by a number of characteristics:

- Has experienced vulnerability and brokenness - avoids power...
- Attitude of servant-hood - - comfortable standing at end of the procession.
- Views each individual, through God's eyes, as having a treasure within.
- Celebrates, with stories, what God has done in other peoples' lives.
- Exhibits sacrificial giving and suffers for Jesus –

♥ **Are you catching a vision for the world, your community and your church?**

No one accomplishes anything significant alone. We need a community of believers to make a difference. If renewal in leadership is going to take place, leaders must rally around something in which they believe.

♥ **Is there a way to not only turn churches outward but also to *join them together in unity of purpose?***

Nothing brings churches together in a city better than prayer and good works. Suspended by these two towers, a broader and more powerful bridge of spiritual influence is being constructed to the glory of God. As different as many of us are, these two components develop a spiritual authentic common ground.

♥ **So how does a church reach out, not only to its community, but to the whole city?**

The answer is, **NOT ALONE!** No matter how large and influential a church might be in a local community, that church represents only a small part of the body of Christ. And as good as its bridge-building efforts may be, its impact will be, at best, limited. No one church can effectively reach a city! The city is too large, too diverse, and too complex, for any one ember from Christ's redemptive fire to light the way.

Fear

Fear of the unknown will hinder our witness and ability to care and minister to our neighbours. By being informed, prepared and having a solid foundation in our faith will help alleviate our fears and ineffectiveness. In Psalm 91 God has promised to protect those who are His own.

Because Christians have a hope that is super-natural our response will be dictated not only by how merciful we are but more importantly by how much we love God. Coming from a Biblical perspective gives Christians such a unique vantage point.

Informed Christians with practical tools for impacting our communities have the potential to make a huge impact across our country. Can you imagine the witness that the faith community could have to a watching world? Can you imagine what effect solidarity within the body of Christ could have to the health/medical community and the government? Can you imagine caring for those in your community and showing them that churches are willing to work together demonstrating the love of Christ?

“...I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”

1 Corinthians 9:22

“The fear in the hearts of people just withered them. They were afraid to go out, afraid to do anything... You just lived from day to day, did what you had to do and not think about the future. If you asked a neighbour for help, they wouldn’t do so because they weren’t taking any chances...”

Susanna Turner, Philadelphia Hospital volunteer during the 1918-19 Pandemic.

IMAGINE!

There is a great need that exists today of reconnecting the Church with the community in which it is found... and to do so in a way that makes allows the Church both real to and reachable by its neighbours.

Robert Lewis, in his book *‘The Church of Irresistible Influence,’* asks us:

Can you imagine the community in which you live being genuinely thankful for your church?

Can you imagine city leaders valuing your church’s friendship and participation in the community—even asking for it?

Can you imagine the neighbourhoods around your church talking behind your back about ‘how good it is’ to have your church in the area because of the tangible witness you’ve offered them of God’s love?

Can you imagine a large number of your church members actively engaged in, and passionate about, community service, using their gifts and abilities in ways and at levels they never thought possible?

Can you imagine the community actually changing (Proverbs 11:11) because of the impact of your church’s involvement?

Can you imagine many in your city, formerly cynical and hostile toward Christianity, actually praising God for your church and the positive contributions your members have made in Jesus' name?

Can you imagine the spiritual harvest that would naturally follow if all this were true?

Whether an influenza pandemic comes this year or in the next 5-7 years, could we not use this time to further equip our churches to reach out to our hurting communities—our neighbours—in concrete, understandable, compassionate, and life-transforming ways?

What does God require as a response, if we should encounter such a wide-scale upheaval? Are we prepared to step out in love?

In Acts 2:42-47, Luke reports that all believers were together and had everything in common. He goes on to say that they enjoyed the favour of ALL the people. Does the church today enjoy the favour of all the people in our communities?

I think we would all agree that we have much work ahead to accomplish the model that Jesus laid out for His church. Matthew 5:16 says, *“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven”*.

We have an opportunity, not only corporately as the church, but individually as followers of Jesus Christ, to shine brightly in our communities across Canada. As we respond with Christ's Love we will indeed be the shining light exhibiting through everyday humanity, His life and Love to the World.

PandemicHistory,ChurchHistory

The following is an excerpt from the article by Paul Kaak of the Church Multiplication Associates (see http://www.cmaresources.org/articles/pandemics_viral.asp). It is entitled **Pandemics and Viral Mission**.

Epidemics and the Rise of Christianity

There is historic precedent for the church to turn to in this regard. The following comments are drawn primarily from Chapter 4: “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversions” in *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark (1997). Stark, a sociologist at the University of Washington, wrote this book to make sense of the amazing growth of the Christian church. He writes from a sociological – not a theological – point-of-view. Setting subjective faith aside, Stark minimizes attributing early church growth to miracles and message. Instead, he points to certain social experiences in the first few centuries, AD.

In 165AD and again in 251AD, two devastating epidemics hit the Roman Empire. The two probable diseases, “smallpox and measles can produce massive mortality rates when they strike a previously unexposed population” (p. 73). Stark believes that the Christian response to these epidemics made a significant contribution to the apparent “miraculous” growth of the church. Consider the following reasons:

The Content of Christian Faith was Hopeful

Pagan and Hellenistic philosophies in the Roman Empire could not bring comfort to people’s suffering. Christianity, on the other hand, “projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future” (p. 74). Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote in 251AD that the plague allowed Christians the chance to learn “not to fear death.” For Cyprian, this had to do with both facing one’s own death as well as the way believers say goodbye to “our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord” (cited in Stark, p. 81). Those who are “of the world” can make no sense of Christian hope amidst the fearful probability of death.

The growth of the church, in part, was due to the practiced beliefs of Roman Christians. This hope – and the real life evidence that this was no “wish theology” – was compelling and attractive to “those without hope.”

Christians had a moral obligation to love others

Stark says that something “alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another....Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the reach of family and tribe...These were revolutionary ideas” (p. 86). Consider, in contrast, the example of Galen, the famous classical physician who “lived through the first epidemic.” Stark asks, “What did he do? He got out of Rome quickly, retiring to a country estate in Asia Minor until the danger receded” (p. 86). The critique that this is just one’s man’s response deserves an answer: This is “what any prudent person would have done, had they the means – unless, of course, they were ‘Galileans’ [Christians]” (p. 86). In Rome, brother turned away from brother, child from parent and friends left friends to die. The pagans did not provide sacrificial care for one another. They cared only for themselves.

In his book *Plagues and Peoples* (1976) William McNeill comments, “When all normal services break down, quite elementary nursing will greatly reduce mortality. Simple provision of food and water, for instance, will allow persons who are temporarily too weak to cope for themselves to recover instead of perishing miserably” (p. 108). Pagans saw Christians do this for one another and they experienced Christians doing this, even for themselves as non-Christians. They saw Christian care-givers undergo the “miracle” of martyrdom and in this they learned about the One who gave His life for them. Others who were ill experienced the “miracle” of healing when they got well through the loving touch and drinks of water that accompanied the heart-felt prayers of Christian friends.

In drawing out the implications of this, Stark describes what would have occurred in the population of a hypothetical Roman city and offers some statistical analysis. I will try and summarize his insights here. (For more detail, see pages 91-93.)

First, Stark notes that the Christian population in Rome, prior to the plagues, was significantly lower than the pagan population.

Second, it can be assumed that the survival rate among Christians was much higher than it was among non-Christians, due simply to the impact of Christian compassion expressed in very elementary forms of nursing.

Third, many pagans fled when the afflictions came while a larger number of Christians chose to stay, offering care to one another and even to those outside their circle-of-belief. One can see how the Christian demographic would have risen while the pagan population would have decreased.

Fourth, when sick pagans were cared for by Christians, a natural bond of gratitude would be created. The unbelievers who “pulled through” due to Christian love, would want to continue to exist within loving Christian enclaves. But even pagans who did not get sick would have perceived the difference in the way Christians expressed compassion from the self-centered response of those who did not share the Christian’s hope. This would provide an attractive picture of the Christian community that a pagan would not likely have previously aware of.

Stark helps us understand the implications of all this by saying, “Another way to look at this is to put oneself in the place of a pagan who, before the epidemic, had five very close attachments, four with pagans and one with a Christian....[After the epidemic]...there is, in effect, one of each – a dramatic equalization” (p. 92). The consequence? “...pagan survivors faced greatly increased odds of conversion because of their increased attachment to Christians” (p. 93).

ⁱ Rodney Stark, “The Rise of Christianity”

ⁱⁱ William McNeill, “Plaques and Peoples”; 1976

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Foggin, “Of Churches, Pandemics, and Emergency Preparedness”; Reconnecting the church with the community in which it is found...

^{iv} Chip Ingram, Holy Ambition...What it takes to make a difference for God; Moody Press, Chicago, 2002

^v Nancy Pearcey, Total Truth – Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity; Crossway Books, 2005

^{vi} Win/Charles, Arn, Carroll Nyquist, “Who Cares About Love”; Church Growth Press, 1988

^{vii} John Mulinde, “The Covenant Love of God” – Set Apart Workbook 3; A Trumpet Media Pub. 2004

^{viii} Christianity Today, May 2006

^{ix} Jim Henderson, “a.k.a. Lost”; Discovering ways to connect with the People Jesus Misses Most, Waterbrook Press, 2005