

The Church and Pandemics

WINNIPEG, Man. — In 1996, sociologist Rodney Stark attempted to find out how Christianity went from being a small rag-tag group of people after Christ's death and resurrection to being the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

In his ground-breaking 1996 book, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force*, he asked: "How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?"

Stark concluded that while there was no single answer to explain "the triumph of Christianity," one important factor was the way the early Christians responded to two terrible epidemics. The first, in 165, killed up to a third of the total population of the Roman Empire in 15 years. A second, in 251, struck with similar results.

According to Stark, the way the Christians selflessly cared for the sick left a powerful impression on their neighbours. While non-Christians would sometimes "discard" the infected "onto trash heaps," Christian believers "would go and rescue them and give them some dignity in dying, often in the process contracting the disease themselves."

This care for others, and the Christian practice of mutual aid, enhanced the young faith's reputation and helped to cement the rise of Christianity.

Says Stark: "To cities filled with homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of

family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.”

Tim Foggin is a family physician and active church member in B.C. As a doctor, he wants to be sure that people are prepared to weather the pandemic. As a Christian, he wants to make sure that the church is active in responding to the needs that will result from the illness. When a flu pandemic hits, Christians will either “prove themselves irrelevant” when so many people are in need, he says, or “play a huge role” in responding to the crisis. He hopes that today’s Christians, like the Christians of old, will do the latter.

People interested in ways faith groups can respond to a pandemic can learn more at the June 20-21 Faith Community Summit on Pandemic Preparedness and Response at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) in Winnipeg. The goal of the Summit, which is sponsored by the International Centre for Infectious Diseases (ICID) and CMU, is to help faith leaders make sure their groups are integrated into official pandemic response structures; explore ways to serve members and neighbours affected by the outbreak; and find ways to work together to create proactive, responsible and meaningful pandemic strategies. The cost of the Summit is \$159 per person. For more information, or to register, go to <http://www.icid.com/faith/> or **e-mail**.

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