

India Missions Association
The National Federation of Mission Organisations in India



India Missions Journal

The Half yearly Journal of IMA, Volume 6 No.1&2 January – December 2021

MISSION CHALLENGES AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

INDIA MISSIONS ASSOCIATION

IMA Past & Present:

- India Missions Association (IMA) was formed by the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) in their conference at Devalali, Maharashtra in 1977 to be a uniting body for Indian Missions.
- IMA began with eight member Missions. Today IMA represents 284 Indian church / mission agencies that has 50,000+ Christian workers.

Vision:

- To connect and enhance missions and churches for synergized witness.

Mission:

- It assists and trains missions and churches for ministry
- It helps members to partner with each other, to share their resources, etc.,
- It assists members in research, and training.
- It motivates accountability and care.

IMA Objectives:

- To Be an Association
- To Disseminate Information
- To Establish Mutual Accountability
- To Be an Initiator
- To Empower Missions
- To Be a Challenging Voice Association
- To Be a Catalyst
- To Be a Facilitator
- To Connect Peoples
- To Present a United Stand

IMA Activities

1. **Vision Casting Ministry:** In keeping with the IMA objectives, one of the primary activities is to cast a broader mission vision for Indian missions. Directing and mobilising prayers and involvements on the current and urgent mission needs.
2. **Fostering Closer Relationship among member Missions** is accomplished by visiting members and by organizing members get-together. IMA also provide an ideal platform for Networking and Coordination among Mission Agencies.
3. **Conducting Need Based Trainings :** Basing on the current needs, Missions trainings or consultations are organized to address issues, such as Mission Conclaves, Advanced Mission Leadership Training, BandhuSeva, Persecution Care, etc.
4. **Initiating Networks:** Networks of Missions with common goals or area of ministries are established to enable them to relate to each other for synergized efforts.
5. **Communications:** E-News, Journals, newsletters are the channels for effective communications and information.
6. **Developing a Broad Base for Prayer and Support:** IMA as the overarching body for missions in India need prayers and support from all who has passion for the Mission of Christ in India. Thus, we need volunteer prayers & support partners, and also mobilisers of such partners.

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Volume 6 No.1&2 January – December 2021

The half-yearly Journal of the India Missions Association,
the National Federation of Missions in India.

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Editorial Note

The world has changed drastically with the onslaught of COVID- 19 pandemic and so has our perception about life and the way we do missions. Mission challenges in the past few months have been quite intense and the changing scenario has been outlandish for many on the mission field. This issue of India Missions Journal is on “Mission Challenges amidst the Pandemic” with different research and reflections from various fields of our Lord’s ministry.

Sungjemmeren Kijong Imchen writes on the “Mission Challenges amidst the Pandemic” by broadly classifying his writing into three parts. A well-researched paper with the needed data, he brings in the general scenario of the impact which the pandemic has wrought upon humanity. In this light, Imchen brings in the impact which the missionary enterprise had to bear (and perhaps an ongoing brunt too). He pushes the readers towards a common mission as the world makes an effort to come back to normalcy. **Jessy Jacob** from her personal involvement in the Lord’s ministry resulting in first-hand experience writes on, “Beyond the Barrier: Mission Challenges amidst the Pandemic”. Jacob talks of the variations which happened in the last two years, and the struggles people had to go through to adapt to the changing scenario. Interestingly, she brings in both the merit and demerits of these changes and ends with a positive note of trusting God.

Rev. Dr. Saphir Athyal’s “Making the Most of the Worst of the Times” is a pure retrospection during the first lockdown which silenced the entire globe, and at the same time made the world scream in pain. While highlighting the untold misery caused by the pandemic, Dr. Athyal also draws out some positive lessons and ways to renew our relationship with God. **Dr. Limatula Longkumer** in “Women and the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Feminist Reflection” rightly recognizes the woes and cries of women from every corner of the society. When household chores, official work, church activities, online classes for children and many other nameless responsibility became confined to the four walls, the brunt which every women had to bear and pay was just too much. Longkumer also talks about other marginalized sections of the society and how human beings became insensitive during this sensitive time of suffering and death.

Dr. Chanreiso Lungleng's "Human Sufferings and the Gift of Lament: A Meditation on Lamentations 1-2," takes an unconventional road whereby he encourages people to lament during this time of chaos and despair. Lungleng takes Lamentations 1-2 as the basis of his meditation and brings out a background which is grounded well, and meaning of the text. He clearly points out three reasons as to why one must lament. **Bethel G. Zhimo** writes on "Thriving in Silence: Some Challenges and Supposed Growth," based on the infancy narratives of Jesus Christ. She writes on the supposed growth of mission workers and organizations who were otherwise thought dormant by many sceptics.

Bishop Daniel Ponraj briefly highlights some of the relief activities during the lockdown in "Doors Wide Open: The Response of the Church in Overcoming the Challenges of Pandemic in our Nation". From his personal involvement in reaching out to the less fortunate ones during the lockdown, Ponraj unleashes the harsh reality and testimony of the beneficiaries. **Rev. Vidush Bhandari** succinctly brings out the impact of the pandemic in his article, "Mission amidst Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities," with special reference to theological institutions. Bhandari further talks of the opportunities which were evident amidst the pandemic and spells out certain ways of making use of them.

Meyikumzuk Ozukum touches upon a significant part of our lives in his article, "Rituals and Ceremonies in Dilemma: Some Challenges in Light of the Pandemic." The last word, the final goodbye is considered solemn by people from every walks of life, and yet we were robbed of this sincerity during the pandemic. Ozukum highlights the importance of rituals and ceremonies in our lives and also mentions certain mission challenges in regard to death and funerals.

These are just few challenges amidst the many and likewise we have seen ample opportunities to share the love of God. The journey continues despite the uncertainty, for the Lord is faithful and He will never fail us.

Bethel G. Zhimo

Editor, IMA

Mission Challenges Amidst The Pandemic

Sungjemmeren Kijong Imchen*

Introduction

COVID-19 is taking many lives. It is affecting our economy, politics, and religion, which in-turn is likely to affect food security and the missionary enterprise. It is rapidly leading humanity to a strange and unknown world and so this Pandemic needs to be mitigated. This paper expands this line of thought in three sections: First, it exposes the multi-faceted impact of this Pandemic on humanity; second, it estimates its interference of the missionary enterprise; and third, it calls for a common mission of mitigating the effects of this Pandemic.

A clarification on what mission means in this paper: First, it adopts Indian Missions Association's usage: "IMA defines MISSION as reaching across geographic, ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, or ideological distances... the unreached..."¹ Christians have reached, is reaching, and will reach the unreached to fulfil the Great Commission. This task will remain until the end of time. Second, "common mission" has been used to mean a collective agenda for humanity, which is to mitigate the effects of this Pandemic. This is momentary.

Impact On Humanity

Pandemics are catastrophic. During the Black Death, about 30–50 percent of the European population perished. More recently, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has killed over 35 million persons since 1981. Chinmay Tumbe asserts that "the many facets of the cholera, plague and influenza pandemics... claimed over 70 million lives between

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¹Ebe Sunder Raj, *200 Indian Mission Pioneers in 50 Years of Service* (Chennai: The Author, 2020), 24.

1817 and 1920, with India being the epicentre in all these episodes.”² This Pandemic too is taking many lives, in millions, especially of the poor and the vulnerable. Too many are dying too rapidly that those living cannot provide them with a dignified exit.

This Pandemic is changing humanity in every way. Two reports suggest so. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in a 25 pages Research Report states that “Covid-19 marks the start of an era of continuous, rapid change.”³ The writers of the Report enlist 7 areas of changes: population (aging, urbanization, and migration), resources (energy, future pandemics and climate change, food), technology (robotics, additive manufacturing, internet of things, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology), information (access and privacy, data growth, false news and social media, and knowledge and learning), economics (globalization, supply chains, inequality, labour dislocation, and innovation), security (expanding national security, fragmentation, gray zone, and return to terror), governance (political awakening, democratic decline, and trust). Another Research Report by the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) has also enlisted possibilities and uncertainties in these areas: trade and supply chains, health multilateralism, digital diplomacy, mobility industry, and democratic activism.⁴ Too many changes in a short period will give rise to a strange world for many of us.

This Pandemic has caused **short-term fiscal shocks and longer-term damage to economic growth.** Ramakumar and Kanitkar

²Chinmay Tumbe, *The Age of Pandemics (1817-1920): How They Shaped India and the World* (Noida, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins India, 2020), cover page.

³Samuel Brannen, Habiba Ahmed, and Henry Newton, “Covid-19 Reshapes the Future” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/resrep25198>.

⁴Florence Gaub and Lotje Boswinkel, “Geopolitical Game-Changers in the Making,” *How Covid-19 Changed the Future* (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2020), 6. <https://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/resrep28676.6>.

analysed the impact of this Pandemic on the Indian economy and concluded that, “[t]he pandemic-induced economic crisis after March 2020 affected all economic sectors.... This crisis also led to a major loss of employment; at least 13 million people disappeared from the labour force between February and October 2020.”⁵ *India Today* states, “[t]he report prepared by the US-based Pew Research Center showed that the number of Indians in the middle class—those who earn between \$10 (724) to \$20 (1,449) per day—shrunk by roughly 3.2 crores.”⁶ Eleanor J. Murray stated that mitigating the economic impact of this Pandemic will require every skilled economist to put their skills to use. Epidemiologists and economists together can offer solutions to the economic problems deepened by this Pandemic.⁷

This Pandemic has created pressure points in the global order. Cimmino, Kroenig and Pavel reports of intensification of rivalry between the United States and China; Russia facing internal pressure; NATO weakening; China exerting power and influence over the Indo-Pacific region; tension increasing in Transatlantic region; and WHO in crisis of legitimacy over slow response and deference toward China; etc.⁸ There was an increase in clashes between states and citizens, population displacement, and heightened social tension and discrimination.⁹ The Center for

⁵R. Ramakumar and Tejal Kanitkar, “Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Indian Economy: A Critical Analysis,” *Investigación Económica* 80, no. 315 (2021): 3.

⁶“Pandemic Pushed Over 3 Crore Indians Out of Middle Class: Pew Research,” Online News, *India Today*, March 20, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/pandemic-pushed-over-3-crore-indians-out-of-middle-class-pew-research-1781297-2021-03-19>.

⁷Eleanor J. Murray, “Epidemiology’s Time of Need: Covid-19 Calls for Epidemic-Related Economics,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 4 (2020): 106.

⁸Jeffery Cimmino, Matthew Kroenig, and Barry Pavel, “Taking Stock: Where Are Geopolitics Headed in the COVID-19 Era?” (Atlantic Council, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/resrep24633>.

⁹Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, “COVID-19 and Political Unrest in Northeast India” (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/resrep26621>.

Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) reported that “beyond recent societal upheavals, the pandemic is sowing the seeds for **long term unrest**”¹⁰[emphasis added]. These political developments are shaping the post-COVID-19 world order.

This Pandemic has disrupted religious life, which caused so much pain, desperation, and confusion. Congregation is a central part of the ethos of many religious communities. By limiting public gatherings to 50 people or fewer to reduce the spread of this Pandemic, religious communities were affected. When clerics could not give spiritual support and guidance to the sick, they suffered lonely deaths. Restrictions hampered traditional mourning rites, causing pain to the bereaved.

This Pandemic increased uncertainties regarding food security. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has declared that “the global food system feeds four-fifths of world’s population and has been severely disrupted by Covid-19.”¹¹ The World Bank reports that, “as of April 2021, the World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that 296 million people in the 35 countries where it works are without sufficient food-111 million more people than in April 2020.”¹² Insufficient food has led to an increase in food price which are directly lined with institutional breakdown and mass protest. Food insecurity continues to pose a risk to political stability. India is relatively secure and so it can play an important role in mitigating food insecurity of other countries.

This section has dealt with COVID-19’s multifaceted impact on humanity, which has ushered an era of new normal. The next section will describe the expected interference of this Pandemic on the missionary enterprise, along with suggestions for coping with it.

¹⁰Samuel Brannen, Habiba Ahmed, and Henry Newton, “Covid-19 Reshapes the Future” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25198>.

¹¹Brannen, Ahmed, and Newton, 7.

¹²“Food Security and Covid-19,” World Bank, May 21, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19>.

Covid-19 and The Missionary Enterprise

There are around 60,000 missionaries under 260 missions with an indigenous fund of 500 crores operating India.¹³ Their primary task is to fulfil the Great Commission. However, lockdown has paralyzed much effective missionary work. This Pandemic made the “going” highly challenging for evangelists and missionaries.¹⁴ But like missionaries and administrators who responded differently to pandemics before¹⁵ we need to find novel ways to engage in mission. Amidst this Pandemic we must try to innovate ways to reach the unreached. As digitalization is trending amidst the pandemic ministries are happening online. The church has gone digital. Missionary organizations need to enhance their digital strategies, too. The internet holds great potential for sharing the Christian faith in people groups.¹⁶ Creating appropriate digital contents for each people group would be a significant challenge. This Pandemic has disrupted theological education, missionary training, missionary conferences, consultations, and seminars. Missionary organizations and institutions can gain back the ground and momentum lost in mission mobilization by using the Internet.

Missionary organizations depend on the giving of partners. Some factors that affect giving are altruistic aspiration, fundraising, and prosperity. The global geopolitics and economic upheaval caused by this Pandemic are likely to affect all these factors. Western and indigenous partners may not give sufficiently to the cause of mission. Dependency on foreign funds has been an issue for mission organizations in India even before this

¹³Raj, *200 Indian Mission Pioneers in 50 Years of Service*.

¹⁴Mandryk Jason, *Global Transmission, Global Mission: The Impact and Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Kindle.

¹⁵Benjamin L. Hartley, Robert A. Danielson, and James R. Krabill, “Covid-19 in Missiological and Historical Perspective,” *Missiology: An International Review* 49, no. 1 (November 6, 2020): 6–20.

¹⁶James R. Reed and Lorrie C. Reed, *Reimagining the Great Commission: 21st-Century Digital Discipleship* (Center Street Consulting, 2019).

Pandemic.¹⁷ It made people suspect Indian Christian's loyalty to the country. Desperate times are ahead, but it will be best if our organizations can truly become indigenous.

This Pandemic is weakening the missionary force. First, it is immobilizing long term Western missionaries. They find themselves forced to self-isolate. So many are going home. Their return is uncertain. Second, there is a suspension of the short-term mission, which is a multi-billion dollar per year industry. However, Indian missionaries can find courage and encouragement from one another. This situation demands different missionary organizations to bond and act together. IMA must play an important role in strengthening the bond of partnership. Old and new 'partnership models'¹⁸ which work must be urgently and fully adopted by all indigenous missionary organizations under the IMA.

Christian communities are witnessing at a cost. Like other religious and secular communities, Christians are showing God's heart for the vulnerable by displaying their spiritual gift of hospitality, along with their foundational values of impartiality, generosity, and compassion. An estimation in 2006 suggests that the Catholic Church alone has thousands of hospitals and dispensaries in India, thus contributing to one fourth of the health care in India.¹⁹ Certainly, all these and other Christian hospitals and dispensaries, along with all Christian medical practitioners, are rendering their sacrificial services. Christian communities and individuals are also helping many, especially the vulnerable, to cope with the pandemic. In that process, many Christians have lost their lives. This is resulting in a phenomenon of leadership

¹⁷K. Rajendran, *Which Way Forward Indian Missions?: A Critique of Twenty-Five Years, 1972-1997* (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 1998). Also, Frampton F Fox, "Foreign Money for India: Antidependency and Anticonversion Perspectives," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2006): 137-42.

¹⁸Rajendran, *Which Way Forward Indian Missions?*

¹⁹L. Stanislaus and Jose Joseph, "Introduction," in *Healing as Mission*, ed. L. Stanislaus and Jose Joseph (Pune / Delhi: Ishavani Kendra / ISPCK, 2006), 289.

vacuum in churches, mission organizations, and theological institutions. It will be a challenge to find qualified personnel to fill these empty spaces.

This Pandemic is likely to put the missionary organizations to a long halt; or worst, render them ineffective. However, troublesome times can lead the organizations to a more powerful enterprise of cooperation, trust, and partnership. During these uncertain times, they can also give heed to a call on a common mission.

A Common Mission

This Pandemic has been affecting every aspect of our lives and particularly our agenda of evangelization. And so, this common mission to mitigate its effects is urgent. Igor Yurgens states that, “as the COVID-19 crisis continues, any predictions or recommendations as to its further course are inevitably tentative and approximate. Its scale and more important, its duration can only be guessed.”²⁰ Although uncertainties remain, taking a cue from the history of pandemics, epidemiologists suggest a coordinated response focusing on maintenance of situational awareness, public health messaging, reduction of transmission, and care for and treatment of the ill to mitigate this Pandemic.²¹ McCann and Matenga postulate that the core to COVID-19 mitigation lies in whether governments will rise to the challenge on the ground of equality.²²

²⁰Igor Yurgens et al., “COVID-19 and Rebalancing the Global Agenda,” *Challenges of Global Governance Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), 20, <https://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/resrep24934.8>.

²¹Nita Madhav et al., “Pandemics: Risks, Impacts, and Mitigation,” in *Disease Control Priorities: Improving Health and Reducing Poverty*, ed. Dean T. Jamison et al., 3rd ed. (Washington (DC): The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2017), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK525302/>.

²²Gerard McCann and Chrsipin Matenga, “COVID-19 and Global Inequality,” in *COVID-19 in the Global South: Impacts and Responses*, ed. Pádraig Carmody et al. (Bristol University Press, 2020), 169

India has risen to the challenge. For WHO's Chief Scientist, Soumya Swaminathan opines, India's approach has been robust in combating COVID-19.²³ Along the same vein, Minakshi Raj wrote that "public trust in the government in general [has risen] to 6 percent during the pandemic and is higher than several other countries... the country... has come together to develop creative means of providing health care, COVID-19 testing, PPE, transportation, and food for its underserved."²⁴ And although there were many who made allegations, there were others, like Dulal Bhattacharya²⁵ who appreciated the government's efforts.

As the government is doing their best to mitigate the effects of the Pandemic, every religion and people of India must try their best to cooperate with the government. This will be a complicated task because India is religiously pluralistic and culturally diverse. There must be an exceptionally good reason for WHO's to involve religions as effective partners to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs also affirmed that "religious actors have large roles to play".²⁶

Religious actors, which in our case, are the indigenous missionaries and administrators, must give heed to Katherine Marshall, a senior fellow at the Center, who offered some suggestion. Here below is an excerpt:

²³Priyanka Sharma, "WHO Lauds India's Effort in Covid-19 Fight, Urges to Focus on Data Management," e-paper, Mint, July 4, 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/who-lauds-india-s-effort-in-covid-19-fight-urges-to-focus-on-data-management-11593854660795.html>.

²⁴Minakshi Raj, "India's Response to COVID-19," in *Coronavirus Politics: The Comparative Politics and Policy of COVID-19*, ed. Scott L. Greer et al., (University of Michigan Press, 2021), 189, <https://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/10.3998/mpub.11927713.12>.

²⁵Dulal Bhattacharya, *COVID 19 & Its Impact: A Brief Review* (Exceller Books, 2020), Kindle.

²⁶Berkley Center for Religion Affairs Peace and World, "Religious Responses to COVID-19," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/religious-responses-to-covid-19>.

First, religious leaders can help to **convey messages** (mainly of WHO) during times of crisis. They can model constructive behaviours by respecting quarantine requirements, for example. They can invoke compassion and care rather than anger and recrimination. Second, (religious leaders) ...can play important **advocacy roles**, insisting that governments and partners focus on those most in need, such as adolescent girls, prisoners, refugees and children in orphanages. Third, pandemics heighten discrimination against marginalized groups, including immigrants, refugees and racial and ethnic minorities. Religious communities can **counter** prejudice and tension. Wise religious leaders **admonish, plead and teach** their adherents to focus on **common humanity**....Fourth,... religious leaders are often among the most trusted categories of leaders. So, they can **play** a vital role in **tackling the fear and misinformation** surrounding COVID-19. Fifth, governments and religions must **alleviate mutual suspicion**²⁷ [emphasis added].

A pandemic is a time to build trust between governments and religious groups. It is an opportune time to knit trust between different religious groups. We are contributing to nation building by cooperating with the government to mitigate the effects of the Pandemic. This common mission might also teach us important lesson on how to think and do things differently while accomplishing our task of reaching the unreached.

Conclusion

This Pandemic has transformed the world and humanity. Its economic, geopolitical, and religious disruption has made a lasting mark on humanity. The mission enterprise in India is hit hard. To recover from such setbacks, missionaries must continue to collaborate with the government to mitigate the effects of the Pandemic.

²⁷Katherine Marshall, "What Religion Can Offer in the Response to COVID-19," *World Politics Review*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/28789/religion-and-covid-19-faith-during-a-pandemic>.

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Beyond the Barrier: Mission Challenges amidst the Pandemic

Jessy Jacob*

“Hello, Am I audible?”, “Can you hear me?”, “Can you switch on the video?”, ‘Network issues’ are some of the common phrases we hear these days. The world has drastically changed during the last one and a half years with a transformation from real into the virtual! A tiny invisible virus has turned the entire world upside down. The unexpected pandemic resulted in a series of lockdowns that disrupted all outside activities including community worship, camps, conferences, Committee meetings, and even travelling. Dreams were shattered. Plans were foiled! For some this experience was suffocating being confined at home all the time like caged animals waiting for freedom.

Christian mission also faced huge challenges with everything coming to a complete standstill leaving people helpless and apprehensive. However, this did not stop the Mission work. Rather, it got sharpened benefitting the urban and semi-urban community the most. “Necessity is the mother of invention” came true to Churches and mission agencies who had never explored the uses of technology holding it tightly. Although there were initial hiccups, as time passed by, the Church/mission agencies were able to engage with their regular community worship, prayer meetings and other training programs. Once again it was proved that nothing can stop God’s work whatever the hurdles!

Despite these prominent successes, the pandemic brought in undefined challenges and the church needs to investigate this to develop strategies to overcome it.

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I. Digital Overtaking The Traditional

One of the flip sides of the pandemic was that the church was given an opportunity to re-examine some of our most basic assumptions regarding how we participate in the mission of God. It challenged the traditional beliefs and practices held by the Church forcing her to think differently and resorting to creative ways of fulfilling her mission. A large number of churches turned to electronic platforms to reach out to their members, and this inevitably gave rise to the digital church which was a radical shift. Earlier believers felt guilty if they did not attend church physically but the closure of church buildings turned this around with the plea to ‘please join us on YouTube or other electronic platforms. It crossed denominational boundaries as worshippers were no longer restricted to church affiliations. They can follow preachers and other evangelists they like and listen to a wide range of sermons with different and distinct perspectives. It opened ways for changing our theology focused on institutionalism, structures, roles, and rites rather focussed on God’s transforming presence in the world.¹

But the challenge we faced was limited interactions and intimacy with each other. The necessity to grow as a community with accountability and different faith expressions are non-negotiable and the Church can easily exist as an organism estranged from the ground of being. There should be a brainstorming to see how we can reduce the gap created.

Earlier, we could not even imagine students sitting in front of their devices the entire day attending classes, but slowly it has become the lifestyle. What was more surprising was that the attendance of virtual meetings was more as compared to physical meetings. This was mainly because of the convenience for people who could now attend programs behind the safety of a closed camera, not bothered in the least even about their physical appearances. While this maybe criticized by many, this was one reason that led to the increasing

¹Jerry Pillay (sage journal) Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies, accessed on 25/5

number of participants in any program. Just the fact that people could now be themselves without having to travel or worry about getting ready, and sometimes even without brushing their teeth.

Yet another advantage of the pandemic was how it paved a way for mission agencies to conduct programs even with less resources and limited finance while still guaranteeing greater outputs. The new normal showcased a much more cost-effective way of reaching out to and training individuals.

II. The Hidden Me

The legacy of Christian mission is centered on an intentional, intimate, and personal relationship with people. With the transformation to the online mode, face to face interaction is missing. One can hardly understand the other person's feelings and emotions sitting miles apart. It is extremely easy to put up different kinds of emojis and fake emotions sitting behind a screen. The reality is far from the truth. One to one relationship is something that is at stake. I remember one such incident where two people lived in the same neighborhood and yet they did not know each other even after the 3 days' program. What a tragedy! Personal mentoring through physical presence, understanding people and being empathetic towards them, the importance of the healthy physical touch, all these are part and parcel of mission, and all of these have suffered with the shift to virtual. Technology has taken over human touch! Visiting people and spending quality time with them has become a thing of the past. All those human interactions that we took for granted on a daily basis like meeting someone for coffee, quick conversations and the like have faded into history. We don't realize how efficient those interactions can be until you're trying to manage that remotely.²

III. "Zoom Into The Room"

The pandemic ushered in a new era of increasing dependence

²<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-challenges-work-economy-sharan-burrow-ituc/> accessed on 24/5

on electronics Zoom/Google meet/ WebEx, and so on. Many of us were not well equipped to use digital platforms but were pushed into it. However, this had the positive effect of making us all switch towards technology- a much needed step in the 21st century. We cannot however ignore the challenges this brought about. In the excitement of having as many as events or activities as possible to reach maximum audience, knowingly-unknowingly online platforms have invaded into our lives. Many times people in the same household are caught up in different meetings online that go on late into the night, thus jeopardising even the family life. We as a family had to say ‘no’ to some of the programs that kept coming up one after the other when we realized that these programs were eating into our family time. For some reason being busy is misinterpreted as doing ministry actively. We were thinking to ourselves that one way God worked in this pandemic was to slow down life for humans who were racing against time to achieve far reaching goals. However, humans turned this around, becoming even busier during the pandemic to the extent that they now do not even have time for God. People involved in the university mission have testified that slowly but steadily they are able to see the negative effects of regular virtual meetings. For most of the students the classes are online and joining for a Bible study or camp immediately is costly not only in terms of finances but also led to fatigue and other health issues. Also, since students are online, there are more sources of distraction and having a concentration for more than an hour is next to impossible for students. The change to online meetings also put undue importance on the quantity of participants than the quality. The success of a program is measured by the number of participants in it. It would be a matter of pride to say, “700 people are attending!!” This rat race for large numbers existed even before. This was only enhanced with the arrival of online platforms which offers users unlimited hours to hold their meetings. Quantity at the cost of quality is dangerous in the mission work.

Another challenge faced in this dependence on online platforms was speaking to an electronic gadget. Even after a year it is quite

strange to speak to the device without seeing anyone as most people choose to keep their videos switched off. The result is that when one speaks, all that is visible on their screen is a bunch of names. In such a context we can only assume that they are listening. Online platforms have made us value physical interaction much more where so much can be understood merely by the expressions of the people listening.

Having said all this, one positive impact of the online mode is that we discovered the opportunity to connect with the global world sitting at one corner of it. We were able to use people from across the world as resource people for our programs which is otherwise not possible due to lack of accessibility. Additionally, we were also able to make many teaching platforms available to those participants from across the world who were previously unable to attend such programs due to various issues! Despite these obvious benefits, what cannot be ignored is that these opportunities were available only for those who have the privilege of enjoying online facilities!

IV. Included Yet Excluded!

It is an undeniable fact that we live in a world of disparity—the rich & the poor, the privileged and underprivileged. On one side we are excited to be globally informed the fact is that the gap between the rural and urban is widened during the pandemic. Though online activities were on spike in this period, a good number of people did not have the basic facility required to own a smart phone to get involved in any of the online meetings. This is because in India, 65% of the population lives in the rural areas.³ Thus, despite the many developments in technology and internet facilities, many of the rural areas do not enjoy good internet or even the needed gadgets. In fact, many of them do not even know how to use a smart phone. The data packages are required to access the internet in case there is no Wi-Fi Router. Many people in rural areas do not have enough money to get these data packs which

³<https://statisticetimes.com/demographics/country/india-population>, accessed on 25/5/21.

can help them access online platforms for learning or mission related activities. Thus, despite the many activities we were proud of conducting, we often overlooked those who are left behind without access to the Internet not having any sort of fellowship or interaction. This led them to feel lonely, bored, depressed and devastated. The subsequent result was that Mission work among them got affected due to this lack of access to them. Reaching out to them with the gospel itself was almost impossible.

Apart from Internet and technical issues, many children in India do not even have proper desks, books, or even supportive parents. For these reasons, dropout rates are still extremely high in India and other similar countries. A long period of disengagement can result in a further increase in the percentage of such children. There are many ways to somewhat solve these issues. Use online tools to assure that lesson plans, videos, tutorials, and other resources are available for some students and probably, most teachers. But also, podcasts and other resources that require less data usage. Working with telecommunication companies to apply zero-rate policies can also facilitate learning material to be downloaded on a smartphone, which more students are likely to have. Apart from this, Radio and Television are also powerful tools. Remote learning is not only about online learning, but about mixed media learning, with the objective of reaching as many students as possible today⁴. Mission agencies and churches can adopt some of these innovative ways to reach out the unreached! We need to rethink our ways and means to reach out to those who are left out thus including them also in the fold.

V. Addressing The Mental Stress/ Depression

We are into a new normal, learning to live with the present crisis, getting adapted to the different lifestyle. Work from home is the new culture for many with advantages and challenges. The working hours are more flexible than before, but the demand is on rise especially for the working women with multiple challenges at

⁴<https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/educational-challenges-and-opportunities-covid-19-pandemic> accessed on 24/5

home, not getting enough support from the family which resulted in conflicts and separation in many families. Some of the counsellors testify that during the pandemic the number of calls for help has increased more than 15%. The Church/mission agencies have greater opportunities to provide assistance to help their members and even those outside the church.

With the flexibility in working hours and growing pressure for more outputs people must work round the clock. Hence the availability of people for Church and other activities have reduced considerably. Finding a suitable time to get connected with them is quite difficult as those who go for work also have too many protocols to follow and too much extra work to complete. This adds to their mental stress and as a result, they would not prefer to join for another program that would yet again take up more of their time. We need to help them out by making our programs more feasible according to their time and convenience.

A harsh reality that most people faced during this pandemic was the increasing amount of suffering. Many people are still going through tough times losing their dear ones. The pain of getting separated from a loved one especially if it's premature, is something that is not easy to bear. To add on to this, many people lost their jobs (especially migrant laborers and other daily wage earners) which was a severe setback not just to the economy but to the family as well. Students were affected as many of them lost their campus placements and other job opportunities. Students in their final year of college continue to face an uncertain future. Students who have just entered their college life have not yet had the privilege of going and seeing their campuses! What made things worse was that many people struggled without even basic facilities. All these resulted in mental strain, depression, helplessness, and hopelessness. Thus, it was not surprising that the suicide rates started increasing. This was particularly so among students who when unable to attend classes, ended their lives in frustration. Even drop out cases started increasing as many students had to drop out from their courses due to poor network connectivity or

lack of adequate resources. In this way, they were denied social interactions and interpersonal skills. This is where talking to them and being available for them becomes especially important. Trying to know and understand their personal struggles and giving them the hope in Christ should be our objective. The field of counselling & rehabilitating the needy has opened greater avenues for ministry. Covid patients, and even the front-line workers who tirelessly work for them need mental support as they go through severe fatigue physically, mentally, and spiritually. Some may need a listening ear to vent out their pain. Making a call, talking to them, encouraging them, and praying for them will make a huge difference in their life.

VI. Evangelistic Efforts are at Stake

COVID-19 has strengthened the possibilities of spreading the Gospel on a broader scale and reaching the un-churched, people of other faiths, as we grapple for answers in the current struggles in the world and tune in to electronic platforms for encouragement and hope⁵. We see Churches and other Christian organisations using different social and other media for communicating the gospel but again the rural crowd has limited access to it. Even for others, getting fresh contacts and developing them in the faith, lifestyle evangelism, personal evangelism, tracts distribution, mass evangelism etc., all are affected badly. Christmas program was one big event in most of the places at least in India when hundreds of people from other faiths listened to the good news. The present need however is to find out creative ways to reach out to them through different channels. Counselling and helping people practically in their needs can open new avenues for connecting with people.

VII. Holistic Mission

Many people believe in winning and caring for the soul. There is a divide of ‘secular and sacred’, ‘spiritual and worldly’ even among

⁵Jerry Pillay (sage journal) Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies, accessed on 25/5

the evangelicals. The history of Christianity teaches us that missionaries were involved in every area of life, be it in the medical field, the development of printing presses, education, hospitals and so on. They were concerned about the overall need of a person/a community/a society. Jesus' way of ministry was always holistic, meeting the individuals' needs and bringing them out of it. People have been devastated in many ways during this pandemic and the challenge is to rehabilitate them back to normalcy.

Mission is all about bringing God's entire creation to its original intention and we need to do everything that is possible to fulfill God's heartbeat. We can even give hands to some of the agencies who are helping the poor and needy if we are in a position to do something on our own. We personally witnessed how people irrespective of their religion came forward and helped the migrant laborers with water and food, gave them jobs and paid their salary even without getting their services. Many people came out to help those families financially where there is no earning member, helping them to stand on their own. It is worth appreciating how the Sikh community, risking their own lives came forward in giving food and other provisions last year when the mass movement of migrant laborers took place. Many churches and schools were challenged to come forward by seeing them. Similarly, we need to think and act out of the box to reach out to the people in their own context.

VIII. Financial Constraints/ Economic Challenge

Initially, we thought that the expenses for any mission organization or Church would be minimal due to a smaller number of physical programs. Therefore, we felt that finances would be met without any struggle. But the fact is that many people either lost their jobs or were only getting less than half of their salary. Thus, people found it difficult to make their own ends meet. This was one reason why contributions toward mission work also got affected. There were however some people who despite the financial struggle, faithfully continued to send their offerings and other contributions. However, this is still not enough to meet the needs of the churches

as pastors and missionaries are paid their salaries through these contributions. Additionally, they are also used for the development of Mission schools, mission homes, orphanages, and hospitals both in rural and semi-urban centres. The financial crunch therefore affected these areas as well. Finding or making job opportunities for those who desperately need is the need of the hour.

IX. “Where Is God When It Hurts?”

This is the big fat question the world is grappling with right now. The pandemic has touched the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the righteous and the unrighteous alike. When the Church preached about healing-the church itself was afflicted with pain and forced to respond on the silence of God. People are in real misery and when we speak of a God who cares, it is quite strange for them and hard to understand. The question is, “If there is a God who cares, why then is there so much suffering?” Many people have lost their dear ones, many are fighting for life, many are struggling without oxygen, without beds, without money and so on. What is the relevance of good news at this juncture? It has become exceedingly difficult to communicate the love of God to those who are in misery. Our duty now is to give hope to the hopeless and courage to the fearful. That is what the Good News is all about. So, let us make use of every opportunity to make the message of Jesus relevant to the needy world!

Conclusion

Covid 19 has challenged mission work to a great extent, but it has also opened up new opportunities to reach out to people. God’s mission will continue whatever the circumstances because He is the author of it. We need to be fine-tuned to understand his heartbeat and be his hands and feet. Understanding the context and being incarnational is what God expects at every juncture. We need to be sensitive to his voice and obey him, He will open new avenues for us to impact the world in a different way. Let us be available for God to use us to expand His mission on earth, using every opportunity to build His Kingdom.

Making the Most of the Worst of Times

Saphir Athyal*

The whole world is a battleground! We are all under a siege! With the present swift exponential increase of Covid-19 throughout all the countries, where we are headed to this time, no one knows. Thick dark clouds covering the whole world and every nation. Suppressed anxiety and fear on most faces. Global lockdown and economic disaster. Doctors and medical personnel on the frontline of this war working overtime with alarming shortage of staff and medical equipment risking their own lives. No vaccine nor even a medicine for this in view in the foreseeable future. Data and statistics of people getting sick and dying showing rapidly increasing numbers every minute.

Living With Questions Unanswered

This is not a time to blame God, any nation, any government, or any scientist. We are in it all together as the human race. This ‘enemy virus’ does not know any boundaries in terms of nations, race, gender, culture, age and social status. Our usual concept of power, the power of wealth, military, titles and positions, all are bowed down to the dust before this puny little organism of coronavirus. We are forced to submit to the truth of Ps 144:4, “Man is like a mere breath; His days are like a passing shadow.”

Where is God when we need him the most? If he is all powerful how can he stand aside and do nothing? Has he abandoned the world—his world, his people? We should not be presumptuous to try to explain what God is doing or not doing. Sickness, pandemics, deaths and tragedies that we experience in this shattered world are

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the outcome of the misuse by humankind of God's precious gift of freedom of will. Yet, he stands with us in our miseries, and he helps us to make some good come out of it all.

Coronavirus And Sin- An Almost Perfect Match

There are significant contrasts, but some of the similarities are noted below. Though tempted to elaborate on each, I will not do so to keep this article short.

- i. The covert, secretive and stealthy ways of both, in spreading from person to person.
- ii. The source of both is alienation from God. His will for us is our wholeness and goodness.
- iii. Both attack the vital organs. The virus attacks the lungs, and sin attacks heart, mind and the whole person.
- iv. Shelter from both is in keeping a safe distance. Social distancing. "Flee from evil" (I Corinthians 10: 13).
- v. Both has no respect of any boundaries—national, gender, age and status, thus leveling all.
- vi. The Virus needs a living cell to live and replicate. Sin is not abstract; needs a living person.
- vii. The sheer power of both the virus and sin on people.
- viii. Facing the fact of the problem and its seriousness is the first step toward a cure. In virus, transparency and truth to people, and in sin, confession to God and to those sinned- against are necessary.
- ix. Even when conquered, both sticks around. Virus mutates and comes back in another form. So also, does our sinful nature unless it is overcome by the power of the gospel of Christ.

Is there a Bright Side to this Darkness?

Some good results have come out of this crisis.

- i. The covert, secretive and stealthy ways of both, in spreading from person to person.
- i. WHO says that air pollution kills 4.6 million people globally each year—in China 1.3 million and in India 1.2 million. As industries, factories, and travel by air, train and private vehicles are curtailed, if not stopped, for a few months now, the atmosphere is significantly cleaner. So, one may say (insensitive as it may sound to the loved ones of the many thousands who died) that Covid-19 is saving the lives of many times more people than those who die of it?
- ii. Countries with the largest economies boast of their power with a spirit of arrogance that in wealth, military and scientific knowledge lie their strength and greatness. With heavy global economic disaster and impending recession, maybe they will be more accommodative of countries with weaker economies.
- iii. Nations are learning in a new way how we are all interdependent and interconnected, and how we need one another. They know that they have to put aside geopolitical squabbles if they have to work together to develop medicines and vaccine for this, and save as many lives as possible. So also, the need for humane cooperation to make life on earth more livable.
- iv. The spirit of godlessness, irreligion, secularism and immorality has been on rapid increase in the world. Deriding faith in God as unscientific and foolish is common and in vogue. Could it be that because of this crisis, a lot of people in times of helplessness, agony and anxiety seek some power beyond them and turn to God? With the closing

down of places of worship, many have come to realize that religiosity and rituals are in themselves no substitute for true spirituality.

- v. Now we get to enjoy the small and simple things in life, so also, the ordinary things which in busy lives we missed. We eat simpler food which we learn as what is only necessary, cherish our environment, talk to neighbors over the fence, and appreciate colors, flowers and birds around. Now we do things such as, remembering highlights of old days, enjoying old photos and files, dreaming of our future and may be making definite goals, and learning new things about the use of internet, mobile, Zoom platform, and online business (as the world because of Covid-19 becomes more a virtual world.)
- vi. There have been several other collateral gains amidst losses. True, people go through serious adverse effects such as, the loss of jobs and livelihood of millions; growth in domestic violence as rise in the percentage of distress calls indicate; many prisoners being released by which there is an increase in thefts and crimes; and a surge of misinformation, fake news and pornography through internet. And others.

Yet, there have been several not able gains. Parties for weddings and anniversaries that normally had very large number of guests have become much smaller and wiser. With the absence of household helps all family members learn to do some chores at home—our women would like this good thing to continue. Drinking habit of many had stopped as liquor shops are closed—for their sake and of their families, we hope many of them will live free from drinking. People are learning to curtail unnecessary expenses as money is in short supply. Many volunteers have joy and satisfaction of selflessly helping those in dire needs, leaving us examples to follow.

Also, there have been improved hygiene with all the hand washing, baths and better restroom etiquette; quitting the general habits of licking finger as we turn pages of newspaper or currency notes; preference of *Namasthe* greeting over shaking hands; and significantly, much cleaner air and atmosphere everywhere.

As a new world order is emerging post-Covid, we earnestly hope a better world will develop from all this chaos we go through now—in spite of the weakening globalization (except for this global virus), rising populist nationalism and declining democracy globally.

Managing this Crisis for our Gain

It is adversities that make life truly richer and not riches and comforts. Suffering can produce good benefits. For most of us we are living in the worst of times. We need to find the best way to make the most of it. **We should not waste this crisis.**

With “stay-at-home” orders when weekdays and weekends look alike, office and home are merged, Sundays and the other days of the week are identical, and with no strict schedule to follow, what do we do with all the time at hand?

Being driven in life with ‘the urgent’ we failed much too long to understand what is **truly ‘the important’**. What are some of ‘the important’ things?

1. Time to be honest before God—alone in his presence. Our integrity—the coherence between our real inner self and our appearance before others, our claims and our inner fears, our masks/attires and the real persons they cover. Let us take time to reconnect with ourselves, each one asking, “Who am I — who is the real me when nobody is looking except my Lord”.

2. Time to understand what true religion is—When opportunities of corporate worship are closed, we need to hear again, “Where

two or three are gathered together I am in their midst”. Let us make no mistake, it is corporate worship that strengthens and sustains our faith, that is, provided that faith is there.

Without inner religion, religion becomes “opium of people”. Christian faith is primarily an inner reality without which corporate worship and outward rituals become a cop out and escapism from the challenges of a personal bond with God through Christ—“a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim 3:5). Do we shelter ourselves from our spiritual vacuum by joining a crowd of worshippers?

3. Time for our families—In our earliest years of childhood, family was our only world. And in our last years, our world again becomes just our own families. Take time to cherish and nurture each one’s only real world. If our children and grand children grew up never having Sunday church worship, Sunday schools and religious activities, what would their faith be by just observing our lives and listening to our words? Let us ‘reconnect’ with our families, nuclear families and families at large.

4. Time to deepen our relationship with our Lord and strengthen our faith—This is a time we can obey his words, **“Be still and know that I am God.” To deepen our relationship with anyone, it takes time to be together: this is very much true in our relationship with our God. We should** develop a method of systematic study of God’s word, and not casual reading of it as our usual practice, but carefully listening to its message and knowing God closer. Learning the word of God is primarily by obeying it. Also, we need to spend much time in prayer, praying for the many critical needs relating to this pandemic.

5. Time to reach out to others who are aching—The comfort that we receive from “the Father of compassion and God of all comforts” can flow through us to those in trouble (2 Cor 1:3-4). This is a time to serve others through phones and online, while in

a lockdown. Also, there will be opportunities to be of some service to those who cannot move around as we can. There are those who are not working and so without money and means of living. Whatever way we should be God's instruments of help for others, let us be available to him.

6. Time to develop courage and hope to face our mortality.

Death is an absolutely sure thing in life. The Easter event reminds us that this inevitable enemy should be seen as not having the last word. It appears as a snake, but one without any venom. Christ's death and resurrection guarantees our resurrection to an indescribably glorious life forever (1 Cor 15).

God's Power, Presence And Protection

The context of the very familiar Psalm 91 must have been some unusual disaster and pestilence. The metaphor used is of baby birds finding shelter under the wings of their mother bird. God is one who is very present with those who suffer. His protection is promised because of his faithfulness and love. From under his wings we get power to face tragedies. Engulfing the reality of our suffering is the greater reality of the loving presence and protection of God.

The very name of our Lord 'Immanuel' assures us that he stands with us in our pains and gives us his peace even when we do not understand what is happening to us and why. The book of Job does not answer the problem of suffering, but it tells us where to go when we suffer—and have a renewed vision of God eclipsing our crises, and hear his voice.

Fear is only natural in circumstances of crises. But our faith in our Lord should conquer our fear. Our faith is that the almighty hands of God uphold us. "Underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut 33:27). The hands that created the world to start with, the hands that did marvelous miracles, the hands that stilled the

storms in the Galilean sea, the hands that fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes, the hands that healed the sick and raised the dead—those hands are around us and under us.

Conclusion

We live in a broken and messy world. But this is God's world. What is he up to, we should not be presumptuous to assume. Granted that the mess is created by us, our help should come from outside of us. Finally, are we learning that we cannot play the part of God?

We cannot afford to have a world of power without principles, governance without accountability, knowledge without the wisdom to use it, science without compassion, and relationships without self-sacrifice. When will we learn, if not in this crisis, that life is very fragile, and that a person without God is only an animal that lives, eats, reproduces and dies?

When this pandemic is leveling all of us globally, nationally and locally, we need to learn, how painfully it might be, that finally we are all mere humans, one interdependent people needing every one, small and great, to make our life together possible.

If we do not relearn this lesson this time, we have 'wasted' this crisis and have lost a big chance of becoming humans as God intended us to be—reconnected in mutual justice and selfless love to the Almighty and to one another regardless of nationality, gender, religion and class. God has provided a way for this in and through Jesus Christ, if only unconditionally we submit to him as our Savior and owner, and receive his embrace.

Oh, our Sovereign God! Have mercy on us and help us to totally surrender our lives to you and to obediently respond to your offer of "life in its fullness". Amen!

(This article was written in April, 2020)

Women and the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Feminist Reflection

Limatula Longkumer*

“... every pandemic has a gender dimension. There is no gender-neutral pandemic, and this one (Covid-19) is no different. Women are affected not just by the virus or the disease, but by the circumstances surrounding it.”¹

Introduction

“The Coronavirus does not discriminate”² anyone, and it can infect and kill everyone – young and old, the rich and the poor that it does not respect race, sex, and colour. (This is the statement in the initial report of the outbreak of the Covid-19 but this assumption has changed later seeing the reality). Indeed, the virus does not spare anyone or any country, but the impact of coronavirus differs according to race, colour, gender, caste, socio-economic and political status of the people that the virus has affected differently. The world is still struggling to contain the COVID-19 pandemic despite the discovery of the vaccines. It has killed millions of people globally, and millions of people are infected and affected by the virus. It has disrupted humans’ activities, and many are left with grief and loss. It also brought the world’s biggest lockdown, forcing all the people to be shut indoors for more than a year. It has created immense suffering, mental traumas, severe economic crises, and the loss of precious human lives. It also created new normal lifestyles where many of our regular activities were turned upside down. Many countries have discovered vaccines, and all the countries started vaccinations, though there are reports of minor side effects.

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¹Phumzile Mlambo-Ngeuka, Executive Director of UN Women “New York Times”, August 9, 2020 (accessed on 20th September, 2020).

²The UN Report - “COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together” April 20, 2020 (accessed on September 22, 2020).

On the other hand, this pandemic also brought healing to the creation when all humans' activities come to a halt. It rejuvenated the earth with fresh air, a cleaner environment, cleaner water, partially recovers ozone layers, a joy ride for animals to roam around freely on the roads and highways, in Oceania without humans' interruptions! This also indicates that the outbreak of the virus is related to human activities or it may also be human-made virus that God's creation is destroyed by human greediness! It has disrupted the balance of the eco-system.

The Covid-19 experience varies from context to context and from people to people. The pandemic is a spotlight that illuminates underlying problems – economic inequality, racism, casteism, and patriarchy.³ The worst sufferers are migrant workers, and their plight was pathetic everywhere. There was no work for daily wagers and stranded with no transport to go home during the lockdown. Out of desperation, millions of migrant workers in India walked home hundreds and thousands of kilometers without food and water during the lockdown. Some people died while walking due to hunger and dehydration; some women gave birth after a 900 km journey on foot, by lorry/trucks,⁴ some were killed in car accidents, ran over by trains, etc. The most affected people in the pandemic are the marginalized people like migrant workers, Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis, poor, women and children, persons with disabilities, etc.

Women are affected by this covid-19 pandemic badly. Women of all diversities bear the brunt of this crisis as they face multiple and intersecting discrimination, exclusion and violence.⁵ In this paper, the impact of the Covid-19 on women from a gender perspective is examined briefly.

³Mothy Varkey, *Church and Diakonia in the Age of COVID-19* (Delhi: ISPCK & CWM, 2020), xxiii.

⁴“The Times of India”, May 16, 2020.

⁵<https://apwld.org/covid-19-highlights-the-failure-of-neoliberal-capitalism-we-need-feminist-global-solidarity/> (accessed on 6/7/2020)

Women's Experiences In The Covid -19 Pandemic

Few areas of experiences of women are mentioned here for our reflection:

1. Women in the Frontline Workers

Globally, women make up the majority of workers in the health and social sector.⁶ According to the W.H.O report, 70 percent of the global health force is women, doctors, and especially nurses are mostly women, and their risk of infection is higher.⁷ Millions of women worldwide are part of the essential workforce of Covid-19; they are the frontlines health workers, the care givers who are taking care of the Covid-19 patients and battling with coronavirus. They work 24x7 a day in the hospital, care centres, and the red zone working like robots, yet many are underpaid. They are mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. They need special attention not only for access to personal protective equipment (PPE) but for the safety of their personal health and mental wellness. But as per the news reports from around the world, these frontline workers are over worked, overstressed, and tired while trying to save human lives, even sacrificing their lives. Some female doctors and nurses died by suicide due to work pressure and depression (including male doctors and nurses). Many frontline health workers are dying from the virus, and so, the security, better facilities, and protection of women health workers is a serious concern to be addressed urgently. Even in India, many doctors and nurses have died from the virus.

2. Race and Gender on the Covid-19 Deaths

No doubt, the Covid-19 attacks everybody whether rich or poor, white or black, yellow or brown in colour, high or low caste;

⁶unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/compilation-women-in-the-front-lines-of-covid-response, April 28, 2020, accessed on 20/5/2020.

⁷“Women and COVID-19: Five Things Government Can Do Now”, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-women-and-covid-19-governments-actions-by-ded-bhatia> , accessed on 20/5/2020.

people in the first or developing countries without any discrimination. It is a global pandemic, and people from all walks of life are falling ill seriously and dying. Surprisingly, the virus is having starkly different effects on different groups of people. It is affecting men and women differently that in the death rates men are dying more than women. This is a shocking mystery, and there is no accurate answer to this mystery. Why and how it happens? For example, as per the report in the US, “twice as many men have been dying from the virus as women,” “69% of all coronavirus deaths across western Europe have been male.”⁸ Similarly, in many countries, even in Asia, more men are dying than women. The impact of this death ratio is that many women become widows, losing their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. As a result, more responsibilities have come upon women, that their burdens are doubled.

Why are more men dying? One possible reason given is that it might be due to gender-based lifestyle choices. “There are important behavioural differences between the sexes, for example, smoking, drinking which affects the level of pre-existing diseases such as heart disease, chronic lung disease, liver, and cancer.”⁹ But this is just an assumption which may also be true to some extent. These have a massive impact on the outcome of infections such as coronavirus.

In the US and Europe, the disease killed more coloured people like black, Hispanic, and Asian races and poor people. There is a disparity in death rates (race and sex). How mortality rates differ by sex, age, and race? The difference between black, white, and Asian/Pacific islanders. Even in India, many older adults are dying

⁸“Covid-19 has profoundly different outcomes for men and women – and not just in terms of their health. For a virus that infects people indiscriminately, why does gender have such an effect?”, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-women>. Accessed on 21/5/2020.

⁹<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-women>, accessed on 20/5/2020.

with comorbidities. Poor people are infected and dying on a large scale, which indicates that the ones in the margins are suffering this most in in this pandemic.

3. Socio-economic Impact on Women

Covid-19 brought tremendous impact on the socio-economic life of the people, but it is more so for women and migrant workers. The majority of the women in Asia/India work in private and unorganized sectors like agriculture, domestic, home-based, and street vendors who have no access to social security and protection.¹⁰ Industries like travel, tourism, restaurants, and food production have very high women workers, but most of these sectors were closed down due to lockdown, so many women lost their jobs. It has severely affected their income and struggle to maintain their daily food and sustenance. Women also constitute a large percentage of the informal economy in informal markets and agriculture worldwide,¹¹ like farming and small vegetable vendors. In both developed and developing economies, many informal sector jobs like—domestic workers and caregivers are mostly done by women who typically lack health insurance and have no social safety net to fall back on. Women are at a higher risk of losing their jobs and facing re-entering the labour force in the post-Covid-19.¹² Re-employment in the post-covid-19 is also extremely difficult for many women. Daily wagers were affected badly due to complete shut down of the workplaces.

Impact of Covid-19 on Dalits and Tribals

Indian society is caste-based. The Dalits, Tribals and Adivasis are badly affected as they are economically exploited, socially

¹⁰“COVID-19 Highlights the Failure of Neoliberal Capitalism: We Need Feminist Global Solidarity”, <https://apmld.org/covid-19-highlights-the-failure-of-neoliberal-capitalism-we-need-feminist-global-solidarity/> March 25,2020 (accessed 5/12/2020)

¹¹“Women and COVID-19: Five Things Government Can Do Now”,

¹²“Why COVID-19 Response Needs to Focus on Women Globally?” (access on 30/11/2020)

ostracized, politically powerless, and remain as daily wagers and migrants, living in abject poverty, inadequate housing, illiteracy, and health hazards. The Covid-19 has further intensified the misery of vulnerable communities. There are reports of refusal to eat or touch the food cooked by Dalits in the quarantine centers. There are stories of marginalization and discrimination of Dalits and Tribals in containment zones and quarantine centres. People from Northeast India faced extreme discrimination during lockdown who were called “china virus,” “chinky people,” and asked to “go back to China,” . There were incidents of physical assaults and threats too. In some cities, Northeast people were not allowed to enter the markets, lockdown by the landlords, or forced to vacate the rented flats, abused in the work places, in the city streets. It is a serious racial discrimination faced by tribal people in many cities in India.

4. Gendered Care Work

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, care and nurture have become more obviously essential for the survival of many. Globally women shoulder seven times more care work at home than men. Care works include child care and elderly, sick people, and household chores. Thus, traditional gendered roles as women caregivers have not changed, and Covid-19 lockdown has aggravated more work for the women.¹³ With the movement restrictions and the closure of schools, more workload for women and girls at home. In the absence of adequate support for care services at homes, patriarchal gendered norms are being reinforced by the Covid-19. For working mothers in the formal sectors, lockdown introduced Work From Home (WFH), which created a greater burden for women. Women are more stressed in balancing between office work and care work at home.¹⁴ Covid-

¹³Lilly Peak, “The Call for a New Subject: Gender and the Covid-19 Pandemic”, in <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/11/the-call-for-a-new-subject-gender-and-the-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed on 18/11/2020).

¹⁴Suze G. Berkhout & Lisa Richardson, “Identity, Politics, and the Pandemic: Why is COVID-19 a Disaster for Feminism(s)?”, HPLS, Springer online, 48 (accessed on 25/11/2020).

19 has increased more care work for women, which has led to increased depression level in women.

5. Women and Online Education

Women make up the majority of teachers around the world, although men are usually in charge.¹⁵ So also, in India, the majority of the teachers in the schools are women than men. Many teachers caught up with online education suddenly unprepared. As schools close and turn to remote teaching, teachers face pressure to work overtime to transfer their courses online. So it demands more work for the teachers to provide instructions to students, develop new strategies to reach those with special needs or limited internet and network connectivity. This is in addition to often shouldering the primary responsibility at homes and overseeing their own children's education. During the pandemic, children are at home and attend classes online like home schooling, and so the mothers literally become their teachers. This is an additional strain on women. In rural places, uneducated mothers cannot teach their children, let alone learning coupled with digital divides.

Due to the digital divide, especially in rural areas, many children are deprived of attending schools this year. Many rural children who relied on schools mid-day meals struggle to access their daily food. Many girls from poor homes cannot participate in remote learning due to lack of facilities like mobile phones, laptops and household chores.¹⁶ In contexts where the tools are available, boys are more likely to have them. These disparities contribute to widening the gender gap in digital skills and will have long term effects on gender and education equality.

6. Sexual and Reproductive Health

Shifting resources toward addressing Covid-19 has disrupted other essential health services, and this has affected women a lot,

¹⁵Kristy Kelly, "Covid-19 Requires an Intersectional Feminist Policy Response", 116.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

particularly reproductive, maternity, and sexual health services for women and girls. Pregnant women, women with disabilities, and those rural women living in remote villages left with no primary health services, are vulnerable with high risk. Women may find it hard to access much needed maternal health services, particularly in rural places.

7. Gender-based Violence

The UN General Secretary referred to gender-based violence as the “shadow pandemic.”¹⁷ The Covid-19 pandemic has increased domestic violence. Women and girls experience high rates of sexual violence, physical and emotional abuse due to stay-at-home orders and quarantines. Besides, loss of jobs and income, poverty, isolation, and social distancing contribute to victim-blaming, exploitation of social division, abuses, and harassment of women. Children are also vulnerable at home due to financial stress. Transgender communities are being impacted as physical distancing policies restrict people’s mobility based on heteronormative binary constructions of gender and associated norms.

Home is unfortunately not a safe space for everyone. One of the most heart-breaking adverse effects of self-quarantine has been the abuse of women at home. There are many reports of a surge in domestic violence cases during the lockdown in many countries. In India, the National Commission for Women (NCW) has raised an alert about an increasing number of domestic violence cases since the national lockdown began.¹⁸ This is another area where we need to seriously work to liberate women from violence.

¹⁷Cited by Kristy Kelly, “COVID-19 Requires an Intersectional Feminist Policy Response,” in *Social Problems in the Age of COVID-19*, p. 115. (accessed on 5/12/2020).

¹⁸Kanta Singh, “Why COVID-19 Response Needs to Focus on Women Globally,” in April 15, 2020, (accessed on 12/11/2020).

8. Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, which is called “modern-day slavery,” has increased in the pandemic, and it has amplified impact on vulnerable, and marginalized people. The economic impact of Covid-19 and job loss, sexual violence at homes, and abject poverty are some of the factors of easy prey for trafficking. Homelessness, food crisis, and severe economic meltdown in the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified human trafficking.¹⁹ The Covid-19 pandemic has created circumstances that may increase the risk of trafficking, inhibit identifying those who are trafficked and those who survive trafficking and make it harder to deliver comprehensive services to support survivors’ recovery. India- Nepal border and India-Bangladesh border are identified as trafficking routes to other countries during this Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰ Due to lockdown, rescue operations and nurturing of trafficking could not continue. Traffickers took advantage of lockdown and economic meltdown as an opportunity to intensify trafficking. Social media and relief works are used as a mechanism to traffick by traffickers.

A Feminist Response To Covid-19

The impact of the Covid-19 on women indicates that tremendous injustices are happening to women. Despite feminist theology and the women’s liberation movement advocating women’s empowerment and justice, injustices against women are manifested everywhere. The limited gain on gender equality and women’s rights over the decades is in danger of being undone during the pandemic. The Covid-19 is a gendered nature of the new disease, and the trends indicate that it is already deepening pre-existing inequalities for women, which are amplifying the pandemic’s impact on the overall security of women and girls. Patriarchy,

¹⁹Jonathan Todres, JD & Angela Diaz, MD, “COVID-19 and Human Trafficking- the Amplifies Impact on Vulnerable Populations,” *2020 American Medical Association* , 61 (access on 12/06/2020).

²⁰November 26, 2020: study.soas.ac.uk/indo-nepal-border-human-trafficking-persists-amid-pandemic. (accessed on 10/12/2020).

gender, caste, racism, and rigid male structures are manifested more clearly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 crisis makes us to rethink, reorganize and subvert unequal gender configurations that are not emancipatory. A feminist response to the Covid-19 should catalyze action that will build more equal societies for the future.²¹ It is also an opportunity to critically look into feminism and feminist theology in India.

Are feminism and feminist theology a failure? As theological institutions and churches, we need to re-look the way we are promoting gender justice in the churches and theological education. Is there something wrong with our present approach(es) and methodology(ies) of doing feminist theology? I feel that we need to retrospect and introspect on doing feminist theology in India and reconstruct our approach and methodology in a more effective way. I should say that feminist theology has not penetrated in the grassroots of the communities except in the intellectual level. Though feminist theology is integrated in the theological curriculum, it seems to me that it has not penetrated concretely in the grassroots level of the churches and society. We need to examine why it is not happening.

I also feel that the understanding of the Church as *ekklesia* needs liberation in India. It is caged or shut due to patriarchal theology, male chauvinism, and the caste system in India. The Church is very hierarchical, rigid, and more of a power structure than a caring and inclusive community. We need to decolonise the word *ekklesia* through our critical theological engagement, pulpit ministry, and re-reading of the Bible from justice perspective. In other words, the structure of the Church and ministry has to be transformed first.

The Church is very exclusive. Women and marginalized communities are not integrated fully in the Church. We need to work hard to develop a democratic and inclusive community of the Church. This needs to be reflected in our theological education

²¹Kristy Kelly, "Covid-19 Requires an Intersectional Feminist Policy Response," p. 112.

system, church ministry, and doing mission. Do we need to develop a “theology of life for all”? How do we create a holistic and transformative spirituality and life-style in our churches? How can we as church address injustices, poverty, political and economic issue of marginalised people? Critically need to assess our existing ministry for holistic growth. During lockdown, many churches in India participated in charitable work, which is very noteworthy, but my concern here is lifelong holistic and total ministry of the Church for transformative action is still lacking.

Few suggestions are listed here to promote gender justice in the context of Covid-19:

1. Address Inequality

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic deepened inequality for women and marginalized people. The urgent need is to commit ourselves to address structural, systemic, and endemic inequalities by critiquing patriarchy, gender, caste, race, and cultures in Indian society, including the Church. It is a fact that inequality is deeply rooted in our socio-political, economic, and cultural systems. More innovative programmes on gender sensitivity for critical awareness and actions are needed at present to eradicate inequality.

Despite feminist theology advocating for gender justice in India, injustices still prevail in the pastoral ministry, mission, and theological education system. Theoretically, we have been talking a lot about gender justice in the classrooms, seminars, and workshops, but it has not penetrated fully in the Church and ministry. Theologically, we need to advocate and educate the communities on gender justice issues. At the same time, public awareness on the gender issue has to be carried out at all levels.

2. Gender-responsive Pandemic Control Policies

Women and girls require specific needs, care, security, and this has to be promoted in the policy decisions. The covid-19 pandemic shows the vulnerability of women and girls at homes and society at large. Violence at homes, trafficking issue, women in the frontline

workers and their health issues, food crisis and shelter, economic poverty and financial crunch, migrant labourers, the increase of workload at homes for women and girls during pandemic are serious concerns. Women and girls have suffered a lot during the pandemic. Therefore, different policies should be formulated to respond to their specific needs, provide adequate facilities and caring system. Need to design gender-transformative policies and monitor the implementation process. There are many good laws for women in India, but the implementation processes are weak and inadequate. We need to lobby for good policies as well as effective implantation processes for women.

3. Shared Care in the Family

Women's workload during pandemic has increased. Undoubtedly, parenting in the pandemic has also shown fathers sharing responsibilities with spouses in the family. Single parents suffered the most. Jessica DeGroot, quality of life theorist and founder of "ThirdPath Institute," introduced "shared Care", a radical unlearning of social conditioning, honest sharing of domestic work, and emotional labour between partners so that both may thrive at home and work, and remain healthy and happy. It talks about removing gender as a determinant of who does more care work but allows couples to honestly chart out goals, equally share responsibility and increase gratitude.²² This is a welcome approach for all. It will certainly lead to advocating gender justice in society and also affirms that gender justice education starts at homes by sharing the responsibilities of the family members. The covid-19 teaches us to promote the "Shared care" system urgently in India.

4. Women as Leaders with Equal Representation in Decision Makings

Women's leadership in any sector needs a thorough critiquing that it is still male centred both in the Church and larger society except in some corporate companies. Unless women are put in the centre of decision making, injustice in leadership sharing for

²²Jessica DeGroot, "ThirdPath Institute", thirdpath.org.

women will continue and women's issues will be sidelined. This is another area where lots of work has to be done. There is a need to transform democratic and participatory leadership structures in the Church and society. Leadership sharing should be based on ability and qualifications but not on the basis of gender.

5. Health is a Justice Issue

COVID-19 points out clearly the poor healthcare system worldwide because no country is equipped medically to face this pandemic. All the countries spend more money on defence - military, procurements of arms and ammunitions, but too little money is spent on health care which is life-saving facilities. As per the latest report, India is on the 3rd top biggest defence spending country in the world, next to the USA and China. Last year (2020) India's defence budget was 4,71,378 crores -that is 15.49% of the total budget (US\$ 65.86 billions), whereas the healthcare budget was only 67,484 crores for the entire nation. According to the report, govt. of India budget for healthcare was 1.6% GDP last year, which is one of the lowest in the world. This year (2021) budget is more or less the same budget like last year. More money is spent on security and defence – for killing humans; but for saving people, less amount is allocated, which is not fair. The Covid-19 should be a turning point to invest seriously in healthcare facilities.

Every citizen of India must have access to basic health care system. Covid-19 has clearly shown that our Public Health infrastructure is pathetic, which must be fortified, mental health issues must be taken seriously, including women's mental health needs to be a priority. In 2000, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that gender to be a critical determinant of mental health and mental illness. They said that “gender determines the differential power and control men and women have over the socio-economic determinants of their mental health and lives”.²³ Therefore, gender-sensitive deployment of health care and facilities must be taken seriously.

²³Swarnima Bhattacharya, “What Covid-19 Teaches Us About Women's Mental Health” *Times of India* , April 11, 2020.

In India, we have many Churches' hospitals, and primary health care centres run by the churchess. Are they poor people-friendly hospitals or money-making business? What is the mandate of the medical mission in India? It is high time to reflect critically on Christian mission hospitals. The right to health is a fundamental right of all citizens. It is about equal distribution of healthcare facilities, making them accessible and affordable for all people. The present health disparities between the poor and rich, rural and urban, are due to human-made unjust social systems and structures, corruption, and mismanagement. This can be prevented or eliminated through human interventions by developing honesty, sincerity, transparency, and good governance. Covid-19 should be a lesson to transform the health care system in India including women's healthcare.

6. Women Empowerment Programme

We are aware that many women are engaged with caring, hospitality sectors, and small-scale business or informal or part-time jobs and farming. Many women lost their job during the covid-19 pandemic due to lockdown. We need to provide training and workshops to develop their own small scale business and enterprenourships to establish self-reliance project. Unless the economic independence is built up strongly and stand on their own feet, discrimination and exploitation will continue. Therefore, short and long terms economic upliftment development programmes need to be initiated to establish self support and self sufficiency.

Many women are heavily engaged in agriculture as producers, processors, marketers, and informal traders. Better farming facilities and food preservation training should be provided to them. Along with it food security and preservations should be taught in the grassroots level. Food security and economic system affects men, women, boys and girls differently. Therefore, women and girls should be educated in this area for better farming and food security.

7. Network and Collaboration

Women's issues are diverse and complicated. We need collaborative works with different groups to achieve justice for all. It has social, political, cultural, religious and economic dimensions. Thus, many women's issues are interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional, so we need collaboration and networking with many groups. Church women should collaborate with National Commission (NCW) for women and other NGOs. At the same time, unitedly women should stand together for women's struggles and justice issues.

Conclusion

In this article, I have briefly reflected at the impact of Covid-19 on women in general, particularly from Indian women's perspective. Gender discrimination has accelerated during the pandemic, and women in every walks of life have suffered in every aspect. It is a serious issue and it is high time that we need to proactively work together for the cause of justice. We need to critically examine the existing feminist theology and theological education system and seriously promote gender justice. There is a serious need to critically analyze the dynamics of gender, caste, race and patriarchy in our Indian society and work out in such a way to eliminate totally the root causes of injustices. Finally, few suggestions are given for the theological institutions, churches and larger communities to ponder upon to promote gender justice in our society.

Human Sufferings and the Gift of Lament: A Meditation on Lamentations 1-2

Chanreiso Lungleng*

Introduction

The pandemic, especially, the second wave of Covid-19 hit us very hard, even worse than the first one. It affected every individual. Some of us and our family members and friends caught the virus and recovered and some are still recovering. Sadly, some of us have lost our dear ones. It is a troubling thought since this evil disease hits people indiscriminately, both the godly and the ungodly. It is even more disturbing because Covid-19 appears to kill good people while bad people seem to be unaffected at all. The adverse effect of lockdown is felt by school-going children as well as university students. Our children face difficulty socialising. The rate of domestic violence went up during lockdown. This is just to name a few.

How do you process such physical and emotional turmoil caused by this pandemic? Many Christians respond with fear, anger, anxiety, denial of reality—seeking explanation through conspiracy theories—and so on. Christian love is overcome with suspicion and fear. Many Christians respond with bitterness, resentment and despair as the Covid-19 takes its toll. Many young people resort to drugs, alcohol, and sex or pornography to escape the physical and emotional trouble. How do you respond personally? How do you respond as a family and as a church? Let us meditate on the book of Lamentations to help us navigate through this strange time. For a time, such as this, God has given his people the gift of lament in order to process the problem of human pain and suffering.

When our son Jared came out of his mother's womb, the first thing he did was cry. Nobody taught him how to cry. As he took his first

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breath under this fallen world, it was his first protest. His life begins with a cry. For everyone born into this broken world, crying is the first response. It is simply what it means to be a human. While to cry is human, to lament is Christian. Lament, in short, is an honest cry of a hurting heart to God. The Bible has many laments, like Psalms 10, 13, 22, 77, and one whole book called Lamentations. Biblical lament is a gift from God to the church, to process the weight of the brokenness of this world.

Historical context of Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is a memorial to the destruction of Jerusalem around 586 BCE. This is one of the most devastating events for the people of Israel in biblical history. The temple in Jerusalem—the very symbol of Israel’s existence—was desecrated and reduced to rubbles. All the holy utensils had been carried away. Hundreds upon hundreds were killed, those who survived the war were led away with fishhooks, uprooting them from their homes and deporting them to foreign countries. Only the poorest of the poor were left to stagger from place to place to survive.

In remembrance of this great devastation, the book of Lamentations was written. In this situation, Jeremiah, the author of the book could only cry to God. He (a representative of the suffering people) recounts the desperate condition of the city and the people. Their pain is expressed through poetry. The first four chapters are acrostic poems, capturing the intensity of pain and emotion of the people of Judah. Chapter 5 has 22 verses but not an acrostic poem, most likely, indicating the messiness pain create in people’s life. As sombre as the title of the book sounds, the book also provides hope to the suffering people.

What Does It Mean To Lament?

Throughout the century, the people of God turned to lament psalms and the book of Lamentations during terrible times. People used this book to voice their pain through the words of laments. Sadly, the church has forgotten to respond to human suffering with lament. One of the reasons is not knowing what lament is and what God

intends to instruct His people about himself and human response to suffering through lament songs. It is to this aspect of the book that I will seek to address in this meditation.

To Lament is to Honestly Pour out Ourselves before God

Firstly, to lament is to pour yourselves out honestly before God. It is to speak with God, telling him what is happening in your lives as it is. Not that God does not know, but just to tell him what you feel and how you feel. The book begins with the word ‘how’, and in the Hebrew Bible, the book is aptly called ‘how’. The word ‘how’ not only describes the extent of the disaster but also expresses shock—how could this happen? Lamentations 1-2 is also an acrostic poem, meaning each verse begins with the Hebrew letters consecutively. The first verse begins with ‘aleph’ and the last verse has ‘taw’. The pattern conveys the totality of the destruction of Jerusalem. Everything is destroyed. The poem describes the A-Z of their affliction, their pain is full. Nothing more can be added to it.

Note also the desperate situation of the people in this chapter. Jerusalem had no one to comfort her. It is repeated several times in chapter 1. Verse 2, ‘She has none to comfort her.’ Verse 7, ‘there was none to help her’. Verse 9, ‘She has no comforter’. Verse 16, ‘for a comforter is far from me’. Verse 17, ‘there is none to comfort her’. Verse 21, ‘there is no one to comfort me’. Everyone has deserted Jerusalem. All her lovers and friends have deserted her. They have dealt with her treacherously. They have become their enemies. Even God seems to have rejected Judah. In fact, the Lord has summoned an assembly against her. He has commanded against Jacob that his neighbours should be his enemies. The Lord has become like an enemy (2:5).

But then over and over again, the worshipper (representing Jerusalem) cries out, ‘O LORD, behold my affliction’ (v. 9), ‘Look, O LORD, and see, for I am despised’ (v. 11), ‘Look, O LORD, for I am in distress’ (v. 20). Look, O LORD, as see! With whom you have dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should the priest and the prophet be

killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? (2:20). If the Lord had brought this calamity upon Israel, why did the people cry out to him? Only because God sees and understands the pain. Only God will listen to the mumblings and rumblings of his people. It is like a child running to their parent. Like a little child running to his father even as he disciplines him. When everyone turns against you, and even when God seems far away from you, you can bring all your complaints, frustrations, disappointments to God. When you suffer, do not suppress it within you but bring them all to God. Nobody understands you the way God understands you. During the pandemic, everyone has his/her own trouble and does not seem to have time for you, but God does. Tell him honestly what is happening to you. This is what it means to lament.

Lament is definitely better than gossiping among friends. It is definitely a better response than pitying yourself. Have you got any troubles? Run to God in lament. It is a gift from him to you to process the brokenness you experience.

To Lament is to Acknowledge God's Holiness and the Seriousness of Sin

Secondly, to lament is to recognise God's holiness and the seriousness of sin and its consequences. God does not tolerate sin. He is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). The exile is a testimony to the holiness of God. Several times, Jeremiah acknowledged that the calamity had come upon them because of the multitude of their transgressions. It is the Lord who has afflicted them. Sin has caused this disaster. Lamentations 1:8-9 read, 'Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away. Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore, her fall is terrible' (ESV). The nature of their sin is not specified, but indications are that Israel worshipped other gods, forsaking their God. Moreover, they had switched from their dependence on God to their alliance with neighbouring countries. As a result, the Lord has given them over to their enemies.

A city that was once full of people is now deserted. Their princes have now become slaves. The enemies have completely overtaken Jerusalem. She has become a laughing stock. All who once honoured her now despise her. Her nakedness has been exposed; she has become filthy. All the young men and women have gone into captivity. Their priest and elders are dying because of starvation. In short, the people of Jerusalem suffered because of their sins.

This is not to say that every negative circumstance or all sufferings that you experience is directly connected to a specific sin in your life. Mark Vroegop, in his book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, cautions against connecting every calamity to our bad choice. We do make bad choices, and God does discipline those whom he loves. But we have to be careful not to oversimplify the situation. At the same time, it would be a mistake to diminish the connection between the fallen state of the world and your pain. Paul says, ‘the wages of sin is death’. The effect of our collective sin is the groaning of the creation under this brokenness (Rom 8:22). Christians must understand that beneath every painful experience is the reality of sin. Without sin, there would be no lament.

Our Lord Jesus, when he heard the news that Lazarus had died, and when he saw Mary weeping, he was deeply moved and greatly troubled. Then John 11:35 reads, ‘And he wept’. Our Lord Jesus wept, not because he was unable to raise Lazarus from the dead but because of what sin had done to humanity, bringing death and pain in the family.

Look around what sin has done to you in your family, church, society and the country. A father has stopped talking to his sons; a daughter does not want to speak to her mother anymore. Some of you have lost your dear ones, leaving a hole in our hearts forever. Someone has lost a dear husband, father, trusted friend and brother. Many of your friends may be suffering from terminal sicknesses. The Covid-19 has wreaked havoc on Indian economy. Many have lost their jobs. Many in the private sector are living on a reduced salary, barely managing their homes. Do you feel

what is going on? Without sin, none of these would have happened to you. You are not personally responsible for all of these, but do you see what sin has done to this world? One of the reasons the church does not lament anymore is because we think sin and its effects are normal. We think it is normal for us to die anyway. We can't do anything about it. Well, the book of Lamentations is a reminder to all of us, what sin has done to God's beautiful creation is not normal at all.

If any of you are struggling due to sickness, broken relationship, online studies, inability to visit your families or bereavement, cry out to God telling what is happening to you. Tell God what sin has done to his beautiful creation and earnestly pray for the restoration of the pristine creation order as it was in the garden of Eden. Cry out to him to come fast; pray for the speedy second coming of Christ.

If you know that you are suffering as a consequence of a particular sin or a bad choice. Come to God and lament. When you lament over the effects of sin, you tend not to repeat the same sin. Without it, you are prone to forget and repeat the sins of the past. Lamentation is a gift to you in this sense. A church without lament is a sign that it has grown cold toward sin and its effects. The book of Lamentation is a memorial to Jerusalem's destruction so that Israel does not repeat the same sin again.

To Lament is to Look Forward to the Hope of Restoration

Lamenting over the brokenness of this world also points forward to the hope of restoration. This leads to our third and final point, to lament is to vindicate God's righteousness. Jeremiah is fully aware that Judah deserved the punishment. He goes a step further to acknowledge that the exile is keeping in line with the righteousness of God. He says in Lam 1:18, 'The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his words' (ESV). Way back in Lev 18:28, Moses had warned the people of Israel that 'the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.' Deuteronomy 28: 49-52 read, 'The LORD will bring a nation against

you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. They shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the LORD your God has given you' (ESV). What has happened to Jerusalem is in accordance with the warnings he had said would come upon them if they break God's covenantal obligations. The exile affirms the truthfulness of God's words.

The survivors of the Babylonian invasion knew that they suffered because of their sins and that God was right in his actions. Still, they have no one to turn to except this righteous God. God's righteousness is their only hope. If God has punished Israel according to his warning, this righteous God will also deal with them according to his promise.

When God answers his people with awesome deeds of righteousness, their lands will abound in water, crops and flocks, and the valleys will shout for joy and sing (Ps 65:9-13). When God acts in righteousness, we find deliverance from blood-guiltiness, granting us salvation. Because of this, the Psalmist proclaims, 'O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness' (Ps 51:14). The righteousness of God is the only hope for the restoration of God's people. His righteousness implies that justice will be done to the Babylonians for their high-handedness.

Paul speaks of the righteousness of God in Rom 1:17—the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. In Christ's death, God's righteous character is revealed and thereby saving sinners like us. To lament is to affirm God's righteousness.

Lament is a song that we sing as long as we live in this fallen world. The people of God lamented over the destruction of Jerusalem. But we also know that there will be no lament in the

New Jerusalem. Revelation 21:4 gives us a glorious picture of our future, ‘He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’

Conclusion

Mean while, lament is a gift from God to us. Through lament, we respond to human pain and suffering. In lament, we bare ourselves before God. If you are hurt, pour out your pain before him. He listens. But don’t stop there, remember the brokenness of this world is a consequence of sin, mourn over sin and its consequences. Finally, the brokenness we experience is not the end, look to this righteous God, who in Christ has paid the ultimate price for sin and its consequence. Look forward to a day when our bodies will experience no pain. Meanwhile, let us lament. It is a gift from God to reinforce our hope in God.

Thriving in Silence: Some Challenges and Supposed Growth

Bethel G. Zhimo*

Change is never a comfortable affair. It makes us uncomfortable and naturally our first response to it is resistance. It is a biological, sociological, psychological, economic and political fact of life and we see the entire creation constantly going through change. All change is somewhat threatening whether be it destructive change or constructive change.¹ But change also signifies growth and its significance cannot be denied. The pandemic and its aftermath has changed the entire world's perception of learning, working and coping with life challenges. For the past seventeen months, we have been struggling with the changes that took place in our lives and by now we have somehow embraced those changes. Children's school and classes going online, parents and young professionals working from home, home delivery of food items as well as household goods have all become the highlight of this pandemic. And while we felt quite suffocating when the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, we have somehow tuned ourselves to the changed and changing situation now.

The changes which came with the pandemic was a forced one and we had no other way than to embrace it and be wise about handling the entire situation. During this time, we have lost so many of our loved ones, some great leaders and mission workers. And yet, life has to go on and we are to keep embracing the changes that comes in our lives, whether it is by choice or forced by circumstances. In this light, I wish to highlight some challenges and supposed growth of missionaries/ mission workers/organizations² during this time of pandemic.

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¹Harold Dollar, "St. Luke's Missiology- A Cross- Cultural Challenge", (California: William Carey Library, 1996) 37

²Most of the reflections are based on the activities of India Missions Association, Hyderabad.

In Limbo: Missionaries who were forced to return from the Mission Field

Throughout the Bible, we read stories of people on the move, be it the wise men from the East (Matthew 2) or Cain who was forced to move after killing his brother (Genesis 4: 14). Abraham describes himself as a wanderer and a stranger (Genesis 23:4) and in fact the only piece of land he owned was his burial place. Moses was on the run and upon his return he wandered in the wilderness for forty years with the people of Israel. Paul was constantly on the move planting churches and networking which is famously known as Paul's missionary journey. As an infant, Jesus' parents had to flee with him to escape the wrath of Herod and his order of killing every infant boy under the age of two years.

While some people willfully choose to move to follow God, many others move involuntarily as a result of war, famine and some other massive or inescapable problem in their country.³ Sadly, forcible displacements took place in the past two years when a good number of missionaries had to return. Missionary life is uncertain by nature. However the complete chaos caused by Covid-19 means many missionaries have no idea when they will be able to return to their place of service. Amidst such dilemma, it is to be noted that unexpected changes often leave us open to stagnancy or aimlessness in our walk with the Lord⁴ and we need to look out for this change which may go unnoticed and cause greater damage.

A Case Study

A young couple working as missionaries in Cambodia had to come

³Mark Russell and Daniel Ryumugabe, "Migration, Displacement and the Kingdom of God," <https://lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles-php/1100/03-2009> ,(Accessed on 29thOctober, 2021)

⁴Samuel Brittain, "How to Pray for Missionaries displaced by COVID- 19," <https://christianindex.org/pray-for-missionaries-displaced-by-Covid-19> (Accessed on 29th October, 2021).

back to Nagaland from their mission field because of the pandemic in 2020. In Cambodia, they were involved with House Fellowship, and Bible Study with the university students. The house church had a handful of members who needed a constant push and encouragement. When lockdown was imposed all over the world and there was no sign of immediate return back to the mission field, online fellowship became the only option. Sadly, despite the efforts of the missionaries trying to be in touch with those handful of believers, they lost contact owing to many difficulties and factors. And back at home, they were faced with another problem of neither being here nor there. Thankfully, the sending body was quite supportive and reassigned another responsibility for them in Nagaland only. This re-assignment of course came with its own baggage of change and adjustments.

This is just one story and we do not know how many had to go through same struggles and counter the dilemma of being stagnant or aimless. It was a silent period for many mission workers and organizations which provoked some skeptics to put on their judging hat. But thankfully there were those who discerned the unwanted changes and became a source of encouragement. It is in this line of thought that the silent years of Jesus Christ before he embraced the public ministry rises to the occasion of encouraging and preparing the missionaries who were silent or mission work which came to a halt for some time.

Growth in Silent Years-Growth amidst the Lockdown

The concluding lines of the infancy narrative in the Gospel according to Luke shows how Jesus subjected himself to the laws of human development. The record does not say much but few verses which talks of his growth and development before stepping into the public ministry is enough to show that Jesus was content with an obscure and humble home. He had no trouble being subjected to parental guidance and authority for thirty years, which

makes him a winning example of filial piety and obedience.⁵ Luke alone includes a typical biographical childhood cameo which foreshadows the adult. In the words of Paul S. Minear “The first two chapters of the Gospel set the stage for all subsequent speeches and actions.”⁶ All growth is silent and it is visible to others most of the time. Luke 2: 40 and 52 records this silent growth in the life of Jesus as a human-*Jesus grew* (NIV), *Jesus kept increasing* (NASB) and four fundamental area of growth is revealed.

Mental growth- in Wisdom

The reference to wisdom has to do with a growth in Jesus’ insight as the word used here is *sunesei* which speaks of ‘understanding’ that is able to penetrate to the heart of an issue. The same usage of the term is also seen in Isaiah 11:2 and I Chronicles 22: 12. Jesus is not portrayed as God’s wisdom, as He will be later (Luke 11: 49- 51), but He is seen as endowed with wisdom. The increase of Jesus’ wisdom is real and effected by means whereby He had to learn from others- careful home training, the natural beauties of the neighbourhood of Nazareth, the Scriptures, the annual journey to Jerusalem (Luke 2: 41) and the prayerful communion with His heavenly father.⁷ These were some of His actions which continued even after embracing the public ministry, which suggests that His foundation was strongly laid at home. One may also take note that the wise are regarded with respect, taking their seat among the great, even if they are poor. The audience’s amazement in Luke 2: 47 shows this kind of respect for the quality of Jesus’ insight.

⁵H.M.Grout, “A Pattern Childhood and Youth,”

<https://www.biblehub.com/app.htm> (Accessed on October, 20 21).

⁶Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus- An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007) 232

⁷J.J.VanOosterzee, *Christ’s Growth in Wisdom*,

<https://www.biblehub.com/app.htm>, (Accessed in October, 2021)

Jesus grew in wisdom which was deepened with years by the ordinary channels of instruction, study and thought as is evident from the faithful Jewish household of his earthly parents. It is to be noted that discipline of a well ordered home makes way for a person's refined character. A striking characteristic of our Lord, from the first moment of His public ministry onward, is His reverence for and familiarity with the Scriptures.⁸ When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness right after His baptism (Luke 4: 1- 13), His weapon was the Scriptures; against the emptiness of Pharisical learning and Sadducean skepticism, He countered them with the right understanding of Scriptures.

The past two years has made us wiser as mission workers or as a mission organization in facing life challenges. When everything came to a halt in the past seventeen months, we had to pause and rethink on ways of doing mission. A good time was spend in reading, reflecting and retrospecting how far we have come as mission workers or an organization. It has also provoked our thinking to how far we may go for the building and extension of God's kingdom.

Words and ideas are not so easily distorted once written down. When it is important to have accurate records of communication, the usual and wise custom in many cultures is to insist on it being written down. We may speak whatever we want, but once we have to write we become more careful. Good writing causes both the writer and the reader to think more precisely and deeply.⁹ We have read and seen many articles and books which were written and published during the past two years. This is one significant area of ministry which has made commendable progress during the silent time.

⁸T.D.Woosley, *The Early Years of Christ*, <https://www.biblehub.com/app.htm>, (Accessed in October, 2021)

⁹Gerry Davey, "*Literature in Missions and Church Development*" in *Global Passion- Making George Verwer 's Contribution to World Mission*, edited by David Greenlee, (Hyderabad: Authentic Books, 2014) 149.

Physical Growth- *in Stature*

The term here translated ‘years’ suggests more than just advancing age. Reputation, maturity and stature are involved in the growth and development of an individual which were all critical to the place of a Mediterranean male in society. This description, borrowed from I Samuel 2: 26 presents an almost programmatic statement in Luke’s assessment of Jesus. The one of lowly birth, whose ascribed honor states warranted no such statement in the eyes of the culture, is attested by both God and human beings.¹⁰ Stature here addresses the growth in physical stature and such a note of physical growth for a major figure is not unusual. It is amazing to note how naturally Luke pictures Jesus’ growth-his terms for Jesus change from one pericope to the next-*brephos*(unborn or a new born baby) in 2: 16; *paidion* (a young child) in 2: 40; *pais*(child, boy) in 2: 43 and finally just His name *Iesous*(Jesus) in 2: 52.¹¹

One of the obvious growth we saw in others were babies who were born during the lockdown. When the lockdown restriction eased and gatherings became possible with proper SOP, we saw these babies running around. But besides this obvious growth, we could see people becoming more conscious of one’s food habits, physical fitness and more urgency to seek medical help whenever necessary. In terms of reaching out to people in need, one of the concerns which became prominent was a healthy diet for those who were COVID-19 positive. Generous donors came forward to help with maintaining healthy diet for those who were less fortunate to have and maintain one.

Spiritual Growth- *in favor with God*

The phrase “the favor of God was upon him” in verse 40 conveys

¹⁰Malina- Rohrbaugh, 1992: 299, cited in Herman Hendrick, *The Third Gospel for the Third World- Volume one: Preface and Infancy Narrative (Luke 1: 1- 2: 52)*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 266.

¹¹Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1: 1- 9: 50- Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1994) 274

a more passive sense than does “he increased in divine and human favor” in verse 52. We may take note that the movement in verse 40 is from God to Jesus, whereas the movement in verse 52 is more from Jesus to God and human beings. This is again appropriate at a point where Jesus has become for the first time an independent agent in the narrative.¹² One of the striking characteristics as pointed earlier was the reverence and familiarity which Jesus had with Scriptures. No doubt, His study and understanding of the Word in His human nature strengthened His relationship with our heavenly Father. A right relationship with God began at home and in the instructions He received from His earthly parents. One may also note that the reference to ‘grace’ here has to do with moral growth and favorable perception (Proverbs 3: 3).

Over the past few months, we have witnessed a volcano of webinars, recorded sermons and live preaching on different digital platforms. And while there may be some disagreements and disadvantages, one cannot deny that many have also come to know the Word of God better and found enough time to study and reflect upon it. The uncertainty and hopelessness of the prevailing circumstances has thrown us on our knees before His throne of Grace. We have started repairing and renewing our relationship with God as an individual as well as an organization.

We have also seen a considerable increase in number of Prayer time/fellowship/day being organized every now and then. And while this may not prove that we are growing in the Lord, it shows the effort made by different individuals and mission organizations. The only thing we could do during those times of uncertainty and hopelessness was to whisper a prayer for the bereaved family and the ones who were hospitalized. Prayer has been restored to its former place of importance and power.

Social Growth- *in favor with Men*

The addition of “in human favor” depicts Jesus as one who has

¹²Herman Hendrick, *The Third Gospel for the Third World*, 266.

entered the public arena and who is becoming increasingly the object of human attention. This is seen in the episode of Jesus sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions when He was just 12 years of age (Luke 2: 46). One may take note that a child cannot grow in favor with man if he sets down his elders, contradicts their views and despises the teachers whom God has set over him.¹³ But it was not so with Jesus who amazed the teachers and elders with His understanding of Scriptures. His insights were simply on a different note leaving the teachers and elders in awe of Him. The growth in favor with men may also be related to the obedience that Jesus show his parents at Nazareth - the son who is obedient and keeps the commandments is assured in Proverbs 3: 4 (*Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man- NIV*).¹⁴

The concluding lines of Luke 2 certainly emphasizes the divine nature of Jesus's nurture and training (esp. verse 49), there is equal emphasis on Jesus's human nature and nurture too. Jesus is developing in wisdom and maturity, progressing in favor with God and humanity. This is the type of language one uses for someone who develops religiously and socially.¹⁵ Traditional theology has stumbled here at what might be taken to undermine the conviction that Jesus was at all times and in all respects utterly without flaw. Luke speaks, rather, out of the conviction that the human maturing process even in perfect form involves not only growth in size but also development in wisdom and in the capacity to execute that which is pleasing both to God and to one's fellow beings.¹⁶ In all aspects of life we see that Jesus was spiritually sound and socially connected.

¹³Charles Kingsley, *Christ's Boyhood*, <https://www.biblehub.com/app.htm> , (Accessed in October, 2021)

¹⁴Herman Hendrick, *The Third Gospel for the Third World*, 266.

¹⁵Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke- Commentaries on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 59.

¹⁶John Nolland, *Luke 1- 9: 20- Word Biblical Commentary*, edited by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker & Ralph P. Martin, (Dallas: Word Book Publisher, 1989) 190

There are too many stories of neighbors becoming strangers overnight and strangers becoming the Good Samaritan to many affected people and bereaved families amidst the pandemic. Changes have taken place in different forms and the effects have varied from person to person. In our desperation to embrace the changes, it has also been a time to reconnect and renew relationships. International conferences became way more convenient where people from different parts of the world could attend online. In the national level, we may take the example of the Annual General Meeting of the IMA which has witnessed a good number of member missions participating in the year 2020 as well as 2021. We might have also become too comfortable with online programs that going back to offline again will take some time and adjustments. Whatever be the case, one may take new approach from time to time and possess a teachable spirit that social growth may be effected.

Conclusion

Missionaries who were called back and in dilemma of starting afresh and adapt new way of doing mission, and organizations whose regular activity has been halted and forced to take a different path during this pandemic may be reminded that preparation for something greater often takes time. It is evident in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ our Lord who took thirty years in preparation before stepping into the public ministry. Some of the activities and involvement of different mission agencies and organizations in the lives of the people amidst the chaos wrought by the pandemic speaks volume. It further shows that there has been immense growth as an individual and as an organization. The silence of many mission workers and ministry has not been in vain but it has been a time of retrospection and preparation for the Lord's ministry in the 'new normal'.

Doors Wide Open: The Response of the Church in Overcoming the Challenges of Pandemic in our Nation!

Bishop Daniel Ponraj*

The Unexpected Corona

The Corona pandemic overtook our nation and the world at the beginning of the year 2020. It is, without a doubt, the worst humanitarian crisis in the last hundred years. There were many not so strange ‘firsts’, like the railway service being suspended. But so many new incidents and rules came through, like mandatory mask wearing, the social distancing rule, the exodus of migrants returning home, the closing of borders, the endless queue of people outside hospitals, and so on. Oxygen, sanitizers, hospital beds, plasma, quarantine centres, standard operating procedures, lockdown, etc. were terms that were becoming the norm. I believe the corona pandemic has impacted every single lives, leaving deep wounds that will stay with us throughout our lifetime. But more so for those who live in poverty, the ones who had no one and nothing to turn to when the storm of Corona ravaged through the land. It left them helpless, leaving them to their fate. Yet in the midst of this unwanted situation, there were many who stood up against the virus and fought to protect what they could. These are heroic stories which have enabled many to survive the Corona pandemic. They are the unsung heroes who exists for real but will never make it the front pages of any newspaper. The ones who helped their neighbours with oxygen tanks, hospital beds, water, food, burials, etc. The acts of these good Samaritans have helped keep our nation together.

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Challenges too many to Count

Challenges were numerous for all those who worked hard to help those in need. I want to share experiences from workers in my agency **Shubh Sandesh Foundation** and also what we learnt from others partners, friends, NGOs, civil society leaders and government agencies. Let me give you a peep into what went on behind the scenes.

The Lockdown: In the third week of March 2020, an announcement was made for a nation-wide lock down. Though there was news of Coronavirus spreading fast in China and other parts of the world, that panic had not yet been felt by common man in our country. The real shock came when the enforcement of the lockdown happened. The morning following the lock down announcement, there was a huge panic in markets. People were forcefully asked to leave, shopkeepers were threatened, some were beaten, and people were asked to stay home. There was a sudden fear. Especially for people living in cities, where everyone lived in dense clusters, it was a state of denial and shock. In the next few days, questions were raised about ways to keep food going. People were frantic. When the first few weeks of survival were being fought through, the second lockdown was announced and that caused a greater alarm.

The first challenge was hunger, especially for daily labourers who worked every day to feed themselves. Suddenly they had no access to food. Some who lived in rural villages had fields and grow crops, had food at home. Many at least had rice, if not vegetables to survive on. It was hard but they survived. But for the ones who lived from hand to mouth, going in the morning in search of work so that they could buy rice for their children to eat in the evening, it was a huge tragedy. When these visuals came on television and information circulated via phones, agencies began to rise up. The biggest challenge was buying rice from food vendors who started

selling their goods at high prices. They also denied digital payment and demanded payment in cash only. And then there were those who sold limited stock. It was crazy. The challenge did not end in the market. After acquiring rice, dal, potatoes (at an exorbitant rate), it was even harder to get the permission from the concerned authorities for distribution to the needy people. The permission was to be obtained at two levels, one for the road from the DTO and the rice distribution part from the SDO. It was not easy.

But after all the multi-level challenges, when the food finally reached the people in need, it was worth. I remember the tears of a mother in the Jharia mines. She carried a child in her arms, while another held her other hand, and two other children holding on to the edge of her saree. After she waited for over two hours in a queue to be first in line, she was elevated when she got her share of the dry ration. When I asked her why she was crying, she said, “For the first time in three weeks, my children will eat the second meal of the day.”

Those days of driving far and wide, meeting families standing in queues, children craving for food, people blessing us as we left are some images that will stay with us forever.

Migrants Returning Home

Unfortunately, another tragedy took place while the pandemic and lockdown were wreaking havoc. Panic arose in the hearts of all migrants and the urge to return home escalated everywhere. Regrettably, it is said that there is no official record of how many migrants returned home. But I believe this is the largest migrant crisis that has occurred in our country, possibly more than what was witnessed during India’s partition. Most of the migrants are from poorer states, like Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, etc., though not limited to them. They feared Corona and the possibility of never returning home. Trains had stopped operating; buses did not run. Taxi services were stopped. Fear was starting to grip

people and was causing needless anxiety and hysteria among entire communities. When the panic began to set in, endless crowds of migrants began to return home. They climbed onto trucks that carried essentials across states, some on cycles that they had purchased from their landlords and some by foot. During these days, many good Samaritans, people who wanted to help, found creative ways to help the people walking on the roads, trying to get home desperately.

The summer heat was beating down on them and there were, sadly, many women and children who accompanied these migrants as they travelled home. On one occasion, I was at NH12, a highway that goes past Dhanbad where I stay, I saw a group of labourers frantically walking on the National Highway. Our team walked up to them and offered them food and water. They did not stop near us as they walked. They willingly accepted our relief but they continue to walk. Out of sympathy, we wanted to give them more food and water so that they would have enough for their journey. But they refused to accept more than what they could carry.

Realization dawned on me that more than the food, they were worried about getting home to their families. I could tell that these labourers were physically strong and were probably tired, but they still went 14 days without work with the harsh sun draining their strength as they walked through multiple states without proper food and water, all to get home. In one instance, we had to open a free slippers store along the highway for people to get replacements for their footwear. I can never forget the two children who stopped by for a pair of slippers. They were traveling to Bihar from Kolkata. Though the slippers were slightly larger than their feet, they desperately wanted them. We gave the slippers to them. The government had arranged buses for the migrants to return home, and so we ran a bus for passengers to get to the bus stand. Thousands of migrants got to these bus stands with the assistance of volunteers. They got home faster and safer. I congratulate the Jharkhand

government for the extraordinary bus services provided for migrants from Dhanbad city.

Quarantine Centres

When the migrants got home, a rule was enforced that they should be kept in quarantine centres for two weeks. They would be tested for the coronavirus and if tested negative, after two weeks of mandatory quarantine, they could go home. This was another nightmare for the migrants. They had travelled thousands of kilometres to get home, fighting through hell, and now, when they were just a few kilometres from home, they were not allowed to be together with their loved ones. It was a horror for the families who were waiting anxiously for their return. Most quarantine centres were not ready to house the migrants. Many schools and other government and private buildings were converted to serve this need. But even after all these efforts, these buildings were not suitable enough. People suffered. It was especially difficult for the women and children. The government did their very best and they worked overtime, but working without a precedent was not exactly smart. It was tough.

I remember visiting a quarantine centre where a six-month old pregnant woman was staying. She had not eaten for over twenty-four hours and did not have water to drink. The school building where they were quarantined did not even have water. A water tanker was called in to provide water. But it was delayed. My teammates ran to our car and brought our water bottles and gave it to the woman. She was so relieved. Her husband could not stop thanking us. We requested the magistrate-in-charge for the woman to be transferred to a facility that was closer to the government hospital so that she could get the best help possible. Later in the evening, we found that she was given a room in the nearby hospital. These are fortunate stories that give us great joy. But there are others who were not so fortunate and had to suffer a great deal.

Our team came together to visit over 55 quarantine centres, support the government staff, provide masks, toiletries, encouragement, counselling, assistance with RTPCR reports, etc. Our encounters with people have always encouraged us, but makes us feel bad that there was only so much we could do. But the worst of all of this was when entire villages rejected the migrants who were coming home, assuming them to be carriers of the Corona virus. Many needed to get certificates or stamps to prove they were corona free. That one act broke our society, making us reject and hate each other. It was for our survival, but at the cost of losing the ones we love. Does that justify the actions we took to ensure our persistence to live?

Containment Zones

As Corona cases began to increase, containment zones came into the picture. Entire villages, colonies, etc. were locked down. The police, BDO or CO, a medical team and a magistrate supervisor were posted at the exits for these containment zones. Food became scarce and so were some essentials. Containment centres were feared places. Unchecked rumours floated around, planting fear that corona had entered their locality and that their area could be a potential hotspot. People were afraid. Colonies were labelled as corona centres. People were labelled. Hatred was bred. There was fear in the air. I remember one morning walking up to the siren of an ambulance. There was panic all around. People leaned over their balconies to know who would be asked to walk up to the ambulance. After about fifteen minutes, our neighbour friend walked down to the van with his family. He was in his late fifties, and well off in life. Here the entire flat was looking down on him and his family, isolating them as criminals who had brought the corona to their apartments. They were also walking up to the ambulance in shame. I thought to myself, this could have been me and my family. Were we lucky? I called him up after an hour to convey my prayers and support to his family. In five days, he came

home and I assisted him with sanitizing his home. We paid over two thousand rupees for a person to spray sanitizer on the walls, although he was paid by the government for the spraying. Those were difficult days, everyone trying to survive. We assisted with testing those living in containment zones, resourcing food — both cooked and otherwise, encouragement and in opening the gates when it was safe and the quarantine timeline was over for the containment zones. It was not normal to stand up to the enmity, fear and panic that spread like wild fire. Sometimes the reassurance that we provided was the best medicine.

Blood Banks

One of the institutions that came under serious pressure was the medical centres. It is one of the most vital and crucial pillars of public service that every Indian will access multiple times in their life. Corona helped these health care systems seriously toil and increased their capacity. It began with putting extraordinary pressure and publicity on its efficiency, but also served to fill the gaps that existed. Corona caused a huge dip in the blood donations provided by donors. In Dhanbad city alone, it is said that there are three hundred patients who are regular recipients of blood. This includes the patients who are affected by Thalassemia, HIV, pregnancy, emergency, surgery, etc. Corona became a deterrent for the donation of blood, making it impossible for the blood banks to give blood to those who need it regularly. The most vulnerable in our community were at risk. In our partnership with the blood bank, we decided that we had to do something and do it fast. Through our partnership with civil society institutions, we began a campaign for blood donation. It was slow and tough. But in search of help, we ran into a CISF who supported our efforts. They committed to completing the quota of three hundred by asking their jawans to donate. It worked out beautifully. They donated willingly and for the first three months, they crossed the mark. In the peak of the impact of Corona, CISF Jawans stood in for the

lack of donors and provided for the vulnerable. That mobilized many more people from civil society to donate generously. PMCH hospital had enough and more to provide for the vulnerable and regular dependant patients. That blood donation drive continues to this day, week to week.

Plasma Therapy

The second wave hit our country sometime in April- May 2021. It spread rapidly with high potency. That was a time when we began to see people around us gasp for breath, needing immediate hospitalisation, and many lost their lives. There was panic again, this time to save the lives of those who were fighting corona. One of the remedies that doctors suggested was plasma therapy. It was difficult to get plasma for the blood banks. It had to be donated to the blood bank and patients had to make a requisition to receive it. It was not readily available. The district administration asked us to partner with mobilizing donors. It was crazy tough. Blood donation was hard enough, but the idea of plasma donation was way harder, it made people afraid and doubtful. The entire process of donation looked rather complicated and fearful. Mobilizing plasma donors is possibly the hardest thing we had done up till then. We got in touch with all the recovered patients and requested them for donation. Sadly, we got less than three percent to respond. When the donors came into check for eligibility less than one percent qualified. And when the time came to donate, less than one percent were able to donate. It was an uphill task.

The people who passed the initial criteria for donation were a small number and after the blood tests and checks, only a tiny number remained. Alas! On the actual day of donation, some withdrew their contribution. At the peak of the crisis, we touched ninety-four donors, and by the time the curve turned, we crossed over one hundred and twenty. The plasma packets helped patients from across the region. People called from Durgapur, Patna,

Ranchi and all across. One night we stayed up to 2am to help a patient from Ranchi receive the plasma from PMCH hospital. In another case, a seriously ill patient who was a senior Judge received the plasma while in Durgapur and was healed. We believe that at the height of the second wave of the pandemic, plasma donations came as a relief to those who sought after it. Later, the ICMRI discontinued its use in Corona medication. The awareness that we brought about in the concept of donating to save a life is a value that will stay in our communities forever.

In Death

“How people die remains in the memory of those who live on.” This holds true, especially during the times of the pandemic. People died around us. The challenges in death were possibly greater than in illness. There was no place to bury the dead. Corona protocol did not allow the dead to be buried in regular burial grounds and places of burning. The government had selected a common place for cremating the dead. It was painful for family members to fulfil the last rites of their loved ones without honour and memory. Families were not allowed to go to these sites. The greater challenge was faced by the people who were hired to take these bodies and complete the rites. They were not given identity cards for the work they were doing. When they travelled daily to the cremating sites, they were sometimes harassed at the check points. We saw an opportunity to fill the gap. We partnered with the local churches to assist in the burial of the dead. Ambulances were arranged for collecting and transporting the bodies and priests were also hired for the last rites. There was a huge relief as the Churches saw the doors open. We assisted with the first five to teach the Churches how to get it done. The break through with understanding the system gave families hope for giving their loved ones the proper burials they deserved.

The Untold Stories

The list of challenges, tears, valour, and joy cannot be all recorded in paper. Some of the key activities with distributing masks, sanitizers, providing oxygen, helping children in the Covid wards, providing mental health counselling through a hotline, partnering with CMC Vellore to train the doctors, coordinating reports for the district administration, celebrating doctors and nurses day with the Frontline workers, coordinating vaccination. The list goes on. The real heroes are the volunteers who served day in and out to help those in need. They were the angels of God who took on challenges, risking their lives to be of help to those in need. But I believe they have received much more than the ones they served. And most of those rewards are in heaven.

The Spiritual Insight

Shubh Sandesh Foundation is a disciple making agency working in the frontiers where there is no gospel witness. When the corona hit, we asked ourselves what should be our response. Very honestly we did not have to second guess, we were on the road, running 24*7. It was impulsive. We did not have to call a team meeting to ask ourselves if we could ask all our church pastors, ministries, workers to help those who were hurting. Everybody was on it. We channelled all our possible resources and everything we got to help those who were hurting. We opened new avenues for people to give financially, opened new positions for work, and hired more people during the pandemic than we did in the previous three years and so on.

Then I received a personal email asking my conviction, “Why was the disciple making agency involved in Covid relief?” For three nights I could not sleep and I asked myself, “Why was I doing this?” I guess we did not sit down as an agency team and discuss the theology behind it. I was stuck. I asked God. After many days and nights of being lost in this question, “Why is a disciple making

agency involved in Covid relief, as a frontline worker?” I began to read what Jesus did. Jesus throughout His time on this earth went about healing the sick, casting out demons, delivering the accused, raising up the dead, feeding the hungry, and preaching about the kingdom of God. There was no one who came to him with a problem and did not receive a solution. Jesus was on a mission, and the mission was to preach the gospel to the poor, heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are bruised, and to proclaim the year of God’s favour – Luke 4:18.

I believe that the Corona pandemic gave the Church an opportunity to throw open the doors of the church and be the church in the community. Instead of inviting people to Church, it was about taking the church to the community. It was about empowering and sending out our believers to serve. It has always been the mission of the leaders of the church to equip our people to serve – Ephesians 4:12.

We took this mandate rather too seriously and went about our business. We tried to do everything we could, things we never imagined. We failed at some and gained success at many. But even if we failed, we won the hearts of the people we tried to help. That joy of knowing that we did our best in being the heart, hands and feet of Jesus Christ will remain with us forever. Corona may or may not stay, or another pandemic or situation might emerge, but our commitment to be the city on the hill that cannot be hidden will stay forever.

Jai Hind, Jai Yeshua, Jai Masih Ki.

Mission amidst Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities

Vidush Bhandari*

Introduction

We are the COVID-19 generation! The COVID-19 disease caused by the new coronavirus was discovered in December 2019, which dramatically affected people all over the world. This respiratory illness has devastated health and led to economic crises for families, communities, and countries. It forced the world to shut down as the various countries struggled to develop a vaccine to curb its horrific impact. The stress on medical infrastructures for treatment was overwhelming.

The year 2021 turned out to be the most horrifying for India and it can be aptly called “The Year of Death”, as several thousand people gasped to death due to insufficient oxygen supply. The devastating effect of COVID-19 globally compelled Christian Organisations, Churches, and Theological Institutions to “Rethink” and “Reshape” mission strategies in different ways. The question was how to navigate and traverse the Christian Mission during these unprecedented and challenging times?

This article is an attempt to highlight some of the challenges faced by the Christian Missions, with special reference to Theological Institutions, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. It will also share how the COVID-19 Pandemic paved the way for Christian Missions to be creative and innovative in developing strategies for missions.

Challenges amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

Lockdown in Dehradun started on 23rd March 2020 along with the rest of India. With businesses coming to a halt, there was much panic and confusion initially. With several restrictions in place,

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the first few weeks were chaos, panic, and rumours were rampant. For daily wage-earners, there was no means to sustain even a hand-to-mouth existence; those who are better off resorted to panic buying. Even small families had several bags of rice piled up.¹ As simple a commodity as Salt and Milk was out of stock in the shops due to a sudden rise in demand. Among the most affected people due to the travel restrictions imposed were the terminally ill and labourers working in different cities.

In this light, I would like to highlight three challenges that arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact on Community Learning

When the students left Doon Bible College on 20th March 2020, just a month before their graduation service, it not only disturbed the routine of seminary life but also posed several challenging questions. How do we continue training the students effectively? How can we help the students develop their spiritual, ministerial, and community life? When will the situation get back to normal?

One of the most crucial questions for the seminaries amid the lockdown was, “what it means to be a **community of learning** without gathering as a community?” Due to the result of social distancing and the failure to physically gather together, learning, interaction, and fellowship started fading from seminaries.

With the rapid shift to online learning and being unable to conduct physical classes, Theological Institutions scrambled to move courses into remote learning modes. For many Theological Institutions, the shift required developing technological infrastructure, course content, and learning activities appropriate for the digital format from scratch.²

¹Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, “Mission during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Transformation* Vol. 37/4 (2020) 321.

² Evan Hunter, “Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: Moving from Desperation to Hope in Theological Education,” *InSights Journal* Volume 6/1 (November 2020), 22.

Inadequate technological infrastructures and power-cuts hampered some students' online engagement. While some others who could not connect have had to drop courses or postpone completion. The implementation and results of online learning remain significantly uneven.³

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic made us realize the importance of 'Community Living and Learning' when other brothers and sisters are absent on the campus.

Impact on the Economy

COVID-19 posed a great economic challenge to Mission Organisations and Theological Institutions as the world economy faced a global recession. Writing in *The Ecumenical Review*, David Emmanuel Goatley notes that the "COVID-19 will have devastating economic impacts in the poorest countries and regions of the world. Of the 14 global recessions to occur since 1870, the recession connected to the new coronavirus pandemic is predicted to be the fourth deepest and the worst in three-quarters of a century."⁴

The World Bank forecasts, "the global economy will shrink by 5.2% this year [2020]. That would represent the deepest recession since the Second World War [which ended in 1945], with the largest fraction of economies experiencing declines in per capita output since 1870."⁵

It is disheartening to note that more than 85 percent of the global poor reside either in Sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia.⁶ Therefore,

³Evan Hunter, "Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis ...", 22.

⁴David Emmanuel Goatley, "Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic: Insights from the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace," *The Ecumenical Review* Vol. 72/ 4 (Oct 2020) 538.

⁵"COVID-19 to Plunge Global Economy into Worst Recession since World War II," The World Bank, 8 June 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii>, in David Emmanuel Goatley, "Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic," 541.

⁶ Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle (Washington, D.C.: World Bank), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitst>

Goatley observes that “Tragically, the parts of the world with the most economically distressed people and the least financial resources will face the deepest impacts of the new coronavirus.”⁷

Paul Bendor-Samuel points out that “It has been estimated that those suffering from acute hunger globally could double.”⁸ Consequently, COVID-19 has multiplied the vulnerability, marginality, and suffering of people.

Impact on Relationships

The COVID-19 restriction separated families and communities. Four students of Doon Bible College and one faculty member from another state could not go back to their respective homes due to sudden lockdown and travel restrictions. There are many stories to tell of families that were cut off from each other by the restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic. This caused a lot of stress, socially and psychologically.

Many Christians compare the closure of churches to the end of the world and was reminded of Noah’s time when the flood occurred. Others compare this time of restrictions to a time of coming close to God because they fear the end of the world is coming. Still, others ask if God loves us, why did he left us to suffer. Churches are divided on opinions on how to act.⁹

People may experience forsakenness and abandonment when they go through intense suffering. Amid our real experience of God’s absence, God is still very much present with us. While Jesus experienced the agony of the cross and experienced abandonment by God, God was present and made that presence known most clearly in the resurrection of Christ Jesus.¹⁰

⁷David Emmanuel Goatley, “Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic...”, 541.

⁸Paul Bendor-Samuel, “Covid-19, Trends in Global Mission, and Participation in Faithful Witness,” *Transformation* Volume 37, Issue4, (October 2020), 256.

⁹Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, “Mission during the COVID-19 Pandemic”..., 321.

¹⁰David Emmanuel Goatley, “Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic...”, 550.

Similarly, God is with us, and His presence can be made known amid the bleakness of the COVID-19 pandemic through the witness of Churches around the world through its various ministries of evangelism, compassion, empowerment, and advocacy.¹¹

Opportunities amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways. We know that while crises like Covid-19 lead to much suffering, they can also lead to religious change and transformation. In this sense, the COVID-19 crises can be opportunities for ministry and mission. The mission of the Church continues even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, although, it takes innovative form as is obvious from the following points.

Developing a Culture of Sharing

Developing a culture of sharing and cooperation for the greater good will get us through this pandemic. Afia Sun Kim asserts that the sharing culture is inherently missiological and is an expression of Christ's love as missional love of sharing His life with dying humanity.¹² Many churches and Mission organizations saw COVID-19 as an opportunity to extend help to needy people in different ways. The Churches and Christian organizations distributed basic amenities, medical kits, and food items to aggrieved families, as well as, partnered with the government to offer their premises for quarantine centres, etc. Generally, there was a genuine feeling of sympathy towards the needy.¹³

Carol Kingston Smith argues that Christians “have an unrevoked covenant to protect and care for the vulnerable in our communities

¹¹David Emmanuel Goatley, “Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic...”, 550

¹²Afia Sun Kim and Chammah J. Kaunda, “A Mosaic Community Together in the Journey of Faith: NextGen Church as the Embodiment of Christ's Love during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *The Ecumenical Review* Vol. 72/ 4 (Oct 2020), 657.

¹³Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, “Mission during the COVID-19 Pandemic”..., 324.

who are disproportionately and negatively impacted by the effects of the pandemic, including those displaced.”¹⁴ Similarly, Mark R. Gornik shares that “redistribution is a “biblical vision of justice for the poor”; because Christians are the stewards of God’s world, we are called to “work for just relationships in tangible ways, especially through sharing their time, resources, gifts, and skills.”¹⁵ This is a way of experiencing “the miracle of the five loaves and two fishes” (Matt. 14:13-21; John 6:1-14; Luke 9:16). Afia and Kaunda opine that “the church’s authentic solidarity with society and the world is the manifestation of Christ’s love.”¹⁶ Therefore, it must be asserted that the local Christians can be effective by engaging practically in meeting needs where support infrastructure is poor or non-existent.

The pandemic did not change the church’s missional identity but has provided an opportunity to enhance its participation in God’s missional endeavours in the world.

A Time of Spiritual Awakening

The Pandemic became an occasion to **reset our priorities, rejuvenate our spirit, and work towards the restoration of relationships**. It became a time to halt from the busy schedule and spend time with the Lord. As Afia and Kaunda rightly mentioned that “the Pandemic revealed the essence of “Sabbath” for ministry.”¹⁷ Although the Sabbath idea means ‘rest’, the theology of Sabbath demonstrates **a total dependence and trust in God**.

James Krabill’s essay “*COVID-19 in Missiological and Historical Perspective*” describes how the earlier influenza pandemic of 1918–1919, the event most frequently compared to COVID-19

¹⁴Carol Kingston Smith, “Hungry for Good News in Pandemic Times,” *Lausanne Global Analysis* Vol. 9, Issue 5 (September 2020).

¹⁵Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 168.

¹⁶Afia Sun Kim and Chammah J. Kaunda, *A Mosaic Community Together in the Journey of Faith...*, 654.

¹⁷Afia Sun Kim and Chammah J. Kaunda, *A Mosaic Community Together in the Journey of Faith...*, 658

for its similarly worldwide scope led to renewed spiritual vigour in Nigeria and the establishment of several new denominations in West Africa, which remains influential even to this day. Krabill writes, “A surge of interest in spiritual things is precisely what happened in Lagos, Nigeria, during the 1918– 1919 influenza pandemic just over a century ago.”¹⁸

Similarly, as we can witness that due to the COVID-19 Pandemic several prayer groups have been formed that are trying to give spiritual enrichment and nourishment to the people in trauma. In this way, the pandemic has become the occasion to ignite the spiritual fervour of the people.

David Emmanuel Goatley argues that “Churches around the world can make the presence of God known amid the pandemic’s suffering through ministries of care, comfort, and companionship.”¹⁹ He further asserts that “Churches, drawing on the power of the Spirit and the gifts entrusted to people, are called to be salt for the earth, light for the world, and partners in overcoming the deadliest pandemic in a century. This will help to move the world toward reconciliation and solidarity.”²⁰

Consequently, the words of Gladys Mwiti are very apt who said, “when we know that God is with us, sees the storm we are in, and knows our pain, we can approach him with our tears, fears, and doubts.”²¹ According to her, the spiritual discipline goes hand-in-hand with practicing the disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, and worship. Scripture reveals that God’s best work is often done in people who have distanced themselves from society for some time.

¹⁸ Benjamin L Hartley, Robert A Danielson, & James R Krabill, “COVID-19 in Missiological and Historical Perspective,” *Missiology: An International Review* Vol. 49/ 1 (2021), 6–20.

¹⁹David Emmanuel Goatley, *Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic...*, 551.

²⁰David Emmanuel Goatley, *Ministering at the Margins in a Time of Pandemic...*, 552.

²¹ Gladys Mwiti, “Building Hope and Resilience in the Covid-19 Storm,” *Lausanne Global Analysis* Vol. 10, Issues 1 (January 2021).

Think of the Prophet Elijah finding deep intimacy in a still small voice in his cave of loneliness (1 Kings 19:11-13). Think of Jesus finding intimate fellowship with the Father during his 40 days' wilderness fasting (Mark 1:12-13).²²

Covid-19 became an occasion for us to move away from all forms of distractions and come to a place of seclusion to hear God's voice once more.

A Time to Manifest God's Salvific Love to the Dying World

The core vision and mission of the Church and theological institution have been significantly revealed during the Pandemic. It has become clear that the very purpose and the core identity of any mission organisation, including theological institutions, is to manifest God's saving love to the hurting and ailing society. The theological institutions are using various opportunities for discipleship, whereby the students are empowered and equipped for God's mission by embracing, loving, and sharing in the life of those suffering due to the COVID-19. The Pandemic should become an opportunity to reveal God's salvific love in a tangible way towards dying human beings, and as a duty to walk along with the suffering people.

A viral video on social media tells the heroic story of a farmer in a village in India who is willing to sacrifice himself to save his neighbours, especially from Covid-19. He turned his motorbike into an ambulance to get the sick to the clinic. In the end, he set up a medical centre in his village. Does this action make the church even more courageous in giving itself for the salvation of many people?

Our faith invites us to respond to this pandemic creatively and uniquely, born of God's love, compassion, and self-giving. Let us choose to expand our compassion and be bearers of hope amid pain and suffering. Only this way will we change this story of pain

²² Global Sisters Report, "Let us be bearers of hope in the midst of pain and suffering," <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/coronavirus/column/let-us-be-bearers-hope-midst-pain-and-suffering> (accessed 06 December 2021).

and suffering to be one of **compassion, communion, and salvation**.²³

Mission organisations around the world can make the presence of God known amid the pandemic's suffering through sharing the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ in word and deed.

Conclusion

Participation in God's mission is about living not for self but Christ's love. Afia and Kaunda aptly summarise the Mission of the churches in the following words: "The Churches that have understood mission as participation in God's love for the world are churches that are missional at the core of their very being, with mission woven into every fibre of the church's vision."²⁴ However, the Churches must be inventive and creative in this critical time so that they can be incarnational in new and safe ways.

Just like any other Mission Organisations, COVID-19 Pandemic provided opportunities to theological institutions, to get actively involved in practical ministry. Getting out of the comfort of the classroom into the mission field to take care of the suffering society. The goal of theological institutions should be to train people for more innovative pastoral applications that they may work towards the upliftment of the poor, needy, and destitute.

We must take time to understand the signs of the times, become bearers of hope, practice holistic self-care, create caring communities, and learn to speak out words of complete trust and dependence on the promises of the compassionate and loving God, Who says: ***"For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you."*** (Isaiah 41: 13)

²³Global Sisters Report, "Let us be bearers of hope in the midst of pain and suffering."

²⁴Afia Sun Kim and Chammah J. Kaunda, "A Mosaic Community Together in the Journey of Faith...", 655.

Rituals and Ceremonies in Dilemma: Some Challenges in the Light of the Pandemic

Meyikumzuk Ozukum*

Introduction

The pandemic has caused untold miseries and created havoc in the lives of people across the globe. It has claimed many of our loved and close ones. We have attended too many online funeral and memorial services. The virus even grabbed from us the opportunity for the one last ride or the last look at the face of the once close friend, leader, colleague, spouse, relative and so on. Amidst the many heart-breaking scenes we saw and experienced in the past year and a half, there is one which troubled me a lot.

In the absence of a minister at the burial site, a brave young man in desperation pronounced the last prayer for his deceased father just before the burial. As the mother mourned the demise of her beloved husband, the son in his early twenties read a passage from the Bible, said a brief prayer with hardly anybody around them because of the lockdown in the light of the Covid situation. I could see that the son was not a pastor or someone from a ministerial background, but with no ministers around (as per the SOP laid down by the government), he stepped in to give a proper farewell to his father. I do not intend to judge anyone and I am also aware that we had to follow rules and regulations and religiously follow the SOP. But too many incidents of horror and unwanted inhumane acts happened when the second wave of pandemic hit the world and particularly our nation India. In the light of such incidents, this paper is an attempt to understand the significance of ritual and ceremonies in our lives.

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Understanding Rituals And Ceremonies

Rituals and Ceremonies are two words that are often used interchangeably when it comes to the understanding of their meanings and connotations. A ritual refers to certain actions performed for their symbolic value. And it can be performed by a single individual or a group of individuals, but a ceremony is performed with the involvement of several people on a special occasion.¹

Rituals

A ritual (also called a rite) is any patterned, repeated, predictable action. Secular rituals include a high school graduation ceremony, a family dinner, or singing the national anthem before a sporting event. We might also put forms of greeting in the category of ritual.² Rituals are not accompanied by performances or celebrations for that matter. At the same time, they include, atonement and purification rites and worship rites. It involves rules and regulations. The purpose of rituals differ according to the society and the religious beliefs, and it is necessary to understand the religious system operating behind such beliefs and practices.

Ceremonies

The purpose of ceremonies is to bring people together on a specific occasion. In other words, a ceremony is a rite of passage in the life of a human being. Thus, it involves the performance of rites such as birthday, graduation, marriage, retirement, puberty, burial and baptism. It is interesting to note that ceremonies sometimes refer to celebration of events as in the case of coronation of a King, victory after a battle, inauguration of an elected president, annual festival of a community and so

¹<https://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-rituals-and-vs-ceremonies/> (Accessed on 6th October 2021).

²Brian M. Howell & Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2011), 188.

on.³ Ceremonies may be featured by celebrations or performances. These performances include dance, music, procession, theatre etc. Ceremonies involve a process and they are characterized by the pronouncement of declarations or oaths, such as ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’, ‘I declare the games open,’ ‘I swear to serve and defend the nation.’

Importance of Rituals and Ceremonies

Rituals and Ceremonies are as old as recorded human history. The act of ceremony and rituals has been following us through the ages. No matter which religion, culture or ethnicity we belong to, every group of humanity has their own traditions, ritualistic practices and specific ceremonies to create distinctiveness in the ordinary routine.⁴ Rituals train us to see the world in a certain way. Beds, chairs, and sofas are meant for sleeping and sitting, and they are not trampolines for children to jump and summersault. Knives, forks, and spoons should convey the message that they are meant to bring food to our mouths. It is not to be used as weapons against our siblings. Children do not automatically or naturally know these things, they must be taught. Most of that teaching occurs by ritual: by watching others perform the ritual and by imitating them. By saluting the flag, kneeling down in church, sitting (relatively) quietly in a classroom while the teacher is speaking, by simply dressing a certain way each morning, ritual and ceremonies re-create a world that we have been trained to re-create. In fact, we re-create that world so thoroughly that it becomes second nature to us; we cease to see it as created and start to see it as natural.⁵

Identity within Community: Sense of Purpose and Discipline

Rituals are often markers or catalysts for energetic shifts. It also assists in renewal of self, support connection within community

³<https://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-rituals-and-vs-ceremonies/> (Accessed on 6/10/21).

⁴Why Ceremonies and Rituals are still Important Today, <https://theconsciousclub.com/articles> (Accessed on 5/10/21).

⁵Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbols and Rituals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.

and keep tradition alive in a conscious way. On many levels, rituals help us become more in tune with what is truly meaningful; that which is of so much importance it stands the test of time.⁶ Rituals and ceremonies help us mark important moments in our lives such as the celebration of wedding anniversaries. It reminds the couple of their wedding vows and their commitment to each other on that particular day when they came together in holy matrimony, to seal their commitment of everlasting love for each other in an act of ceremonial rite. They establish importance and meaning within a communal framework. They have lasting importance, because they provide a link to other members in the family and to past generations. Rituals and public ceremonies provide individuals and communities with memories that feed and create identities.⁷ Without these indicators, our daily, weekly and yearly cycles would be boring. More importantly, we would find ourselves rootless, without a defined and celebrated past.

It does not matter whether its practices are politically right or otherwise, but by nature, human beings as so called ‘social animal’ tend to show inclination towards one’s own custom and behavioural patterns groomed by the society they are living within. Rituals give the events we experience in our lives meaning, and our lives themselves a sense of purpose. Because a ritual requires preparation and thoughtfulness, they help us shift from “to-do” mode to “into doing” whatever may be required for the completion of chosen ritual experience.

Role and Significance of Rituals and Ceremonies

According to Charles H. Kraft, two basic functions are indicated by the terms “rites of passage” and rites of intensification/consolidation.”⁸ Culture provides for their people “proper”

⁶Sophie Miller, what-are-rituals, <https://www.gaia.com/article/> (Accessed on 5/10/21).

⁷Norma Joseph, The Importance of Ritual and Ceremony, <https://www.cjnews.com/perspectives/opinions/importance-ritual-ceremony>, (Accessed on 09/10/21).

⁸Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 208.

things to do whenever there is a transition from one stage of life to another or whenever an actual or potential crisis comes along. If what is intended is a safe passage from one stage to another, the ceremony or other ritual activity supports that passage. If what is intended is supported and strengthening within a situation does not necessarily involve transition, a ritual designed to intensify relationships within the community and between the people and the supernatural powers is provided. And yet, many rituals serve both functions.⁹

Rites of Passage and Rites of Intensification/Consolidation

Kraft cites Van Gennep who noted the rites of passage as that crucial times in the life of the individual and the society such as birth, puberty, marriage, movement from one place to another, movement from one status to another, death, and so on. There are often quite elaborate rituals, such as naming ceremonies, circumcision rites, initiation rites, wedding ceremonies, and funeral rites.¹⁰ This process may occur in a single ritual or over an extended period of time in the form of many rituals.

On the other hand, rites of Intensification/Consolidation are focussed more on the needs of the group than of the individual. Indeed, many ceremonies that function as rites of the passage for individuals serve as rites of intensification for the group (e.g., weddings, initiations). In addition to these, however, there are times of social crisis, in which other ceremonies are important. On the other hand, at what are usually less crucial times, rites of intensification or consolidation take place through worship services, reunions of families, friends or school mates, political rallies and so on.¹¹

⁹Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness...*, 208.

¹⁰Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness...*, 208-209.

¹¹ Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness...*, 209.

Life-Cycle Rites

S.D. Ponraj mentions that tribals in India are not Hindus, but animistic in their faith, which is influenced by different religions to varying degrees. Animism or primal religion is not a single religion and every tribe has its own religion. However, there are certain common characteristics that are found in all tribal religions.¹² Somehow people believe that their life-cycles are governed by the rituals and ceremonial rites they perform to appease the spirits.

When it comes to rituals and ceremonies, any kind of relationship regardless of its status cannot ignore the silent fact that there exist an aura of ceremonial rites and ritualistic activity involved in the process which also defines the commitment and status of their relationship. Just like our daily life-cycle is surrounded by the chores and 'things to do' list or events from the time we wake up in the morning until we go back to sleep at night, we also think and make decisions at the same time that involves the process of rituals on a daily basis. Every where everyone faces the question of the meaning of human life which is marked by important transitions in life with rituals for such events as birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death. These rites often show us the people's most significant assumptions about the nature and destiny of human beings and their place in the world.

Christians very often put emphasis on spiritual tone by quoting phrase like 'Christianity is not a religion, but it is a relationship' in trying to convey the meaning that to follow Christ we do not need a set of ritualistic order and moralities to reach God like the people of other religious faith in their practices do. According to Colossians 2: 12 and 2 Corinthians 5: 21, God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Our sin separates us from His presence, and sin must be punished (Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; 23:33). But, because God loves us, He took our punishment upon Himself. All we must do is accept God's gift of salvation through

¹² S.Devasagayam Ponraj, *An Introduction to Missionary Anthropology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2004),105.

faith (Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Grace is God’s blessing on the undeserving. The grace-based relationship between God and man is the foundation of Christianity and the antithesis of religion. In this sense, we may rightly declare that Christianity is a relationship, but we are still liable to carry out the process of ritual and ceremonies that gives us the meaning and a sense of belongingness for our identity in Christ.

Power Structures in Rituals and Ceremonies

Rituals mark the many stages of maturation within groups and societies and also delineate the power structures. The chief minister of a state is not the Chief Minister until he or she undergoes an inauguration ceremony. A CEO of Christian organization or a bishop is not considered a bishop until she or he undergoes a consecration. Some sort of ceremony of this kind marks most leadership roles, although not all such ceremonies actually enact what they ritualize. In ancient Roman society the move to a new rank or role in society that is, to a new *ordo*—was marked by a ceremony called an *ordinatio*.¹³ In our society, most groups from governments to churches “ordain” their leaders in a ceremony that marks their entrance into a new level of responsibility and service to the community. Oath taking ceremonies always follow certain portfolio declaration during the process of forming a new government as well.

Ritual and Ceremonies in Marriage

Marriage is a union of two families, witnessed by and accepted by the larger community, for the purposes of procreation and enrichment. It is a very public act, an act of community.¹⁴ In fact, it is most fundamentally the act that celebrates the continuation of the community: the hope that the community will continue in a future generation. In most societies, marriage is the central ritual of life. It rearranges the social order by taking one or both partners from the parental home. Marriages establishes a family and speaks

¹³Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbols and Rituals...*, 28.

¹⁴Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbols and Rituals...*, 29.

of fertility and children, and it often is associated with deep religious meanings.¹⁵

In a Marriage ceremony, before the wedding ceremony, the man and women are single and expected by society to participate in life in terms of that status and the roles expected of it. However, after the ceremony the status and role expected of the couple changes dramatically in a very short time which also signifies the Rites of Passage.

Death and Funerals

The death of an individual might be regarded as the ultimate crisis in the life of an individual, it is as well a crisis for the entire group, particularly if the group is small. The survivors must at the same time, readjust themselves to the loss of someone to whom they were emotionally tied. Funerary ceremonies, then can be regarded as rites of intensification that permit the living to express in non-disruptive ways their sadness over the death, and that provide for social readjustment.¹⁶ The rituals surrounding death, however, are not just to accommodate the dead person. Such rituals are also meant to comfort and reassure the living. The communities, such rituals assert, continue despite the changed status of the dead person within that community. Remembrance of the dead reassures the living that they, too, will be remembered and be included as part of the community when they face their own death. Most fundamentally, the rituals and symbols surrounding death reassure the living that death has meaning and therefore death cannot negate the meaning of life.¹⁷

In the Naga customary tradition, there is a sensible practice of giving respect to the family of the bereaved family regardless of one's tribe or community. It may not amount to ritual but there is a saying that goes, "You do not need an invitation to visit the

¹⁵Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2004), 179.

¹⁶Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness...*, 209.

¹⁷Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbols and Rituals...*, 31.

home of any deceased.” While we go to birthdays and weddings upon invitations only, in Nagaland it is also an undocumented customary understanding of everybody to attend funerals in whichever locality one may be residing as a mark of respect, or good Samaritan deeds often motivated by one’s own dutiful initiation. But in the past one year and a half, we bid farewell to many of our loved and close ones without seeing or participating in the last rites.

Mission Challenges

Certainly, our need for a tangible ceremony and ritual involvement in an information-based digital culture is not as dynamic as they use to be in the past. Human ancestors beyond geographical boundaries or ethnicity has held ceremonies to pray for success in hunting, fertility and good weather for the harvest. The rituals gave them structure in a world they could not comprehend. Today, we just need to take a look at our smartphones and know it’s going to rain tomorrow, track our fertility via an app and keep track of our physical activities etc. Everything is accessible and explainable for us, but that also takes a lot of the magic of life away.¹⁸ We become too individualistic and sense of common brotherhood/sisterhood meaning gets lost and confined within our four walls. We draw plenty of borderline and no trespasses signs in our personal life.

Moreover, it becomes even difficult to approach such people with gospel because they simply reject any make-believe intruders and refuses to entertain casual talk or fellowships. And amidst such disheartening scenario, the pandemic happened and turned our world upside down, pushing us to become more exclusive. After forceful isolation and complete shutdown from neighbours, church and other social gatherings, the sense of fellowship and being with one another rang loud in our ears.

¹⁸Why Ceremonies and Rituals are still important today, <https://theconsciousclub.com/articles> (Accessed on 5/10/21).

Lack of Decent Burial

Contrary to our ancestors we lack one very important thing that ceremonies and rituals provide. An element that is crucial not only for our personal happiness but also for the maintenance of a healthy community. Rituals connect us deeply to ourselves and to the higher source that gives all life. It gives us the comfort of feeling we belong somewhere, of engaging with a community. Ceremony creates unity instead of separation and shows us how we are all longing for and striving for the same things in life.

There are too many heart-breaking stories and pathetic plights which came to light during the peak of pandemic throughout the world. Irrespective of race or religion, the pandemic went wild like inferno annihilating everywhere it went during the past two years. There were many instances where pastors, missionaries and evangelist could not attend the funeral rites of their own church members due to many reasons and SOP applied as well. The burial/cremation was taken over by health personnel and there were a couple of cases where the dead body could not be placed even in a coffin. We are also aware that countless number of selfless-frontline workers from the medical fraternity lost their lives fighting the pandemic in the process of saving the lives of others. It was overwhelming to see and witness those kinds of love in action through humanity even at the peak of the pandemic.

And yet, there were also instances where many hospital authorities had to insist on the relatives of the deceased to take the bodies away for immediate disposal upon declaring the patient death for reasons best known to them. But it sounded unfair to the bereaved families who had just lost a dear father, a mother, a spouse or siblings and so on. There are heart-breaking account of people who were left without a choice but to dispose the bodies even in the absence of the loved ones or close relatives and friends without a proper funeral rite. It did not matter whether it was midnight or daytime. Tearful farewells and heart wrenching scene happened every day and not a day passed by without hearing of someone's demise.

Stigma Related Issues

Church members, one's own community members and relatives or friends in the same locality started avoiding the sick or the family of the deceased in the midst of the pandemic due to stigma related fear. In the past years and practices, it was considered the highest respect for someone to visit a person who was sick, lay hands on that person and pray for them. This kind of courtesy vanished into thin air with the spread of virus, and it was valid to think so. But at the same time, there were cases where neighbours even stopped saying 'hello' just because the person came in contact with a COVID- 19 positive patient.

Exaggerated Preaching on the Cause of COVID-19

Looking at the missiological task as a responsible role of being the bridge between people of other religious faith and Bible believing Christians, we also need to understand the meaning of our own Christian identity first of all in observing rituals and ceremonial rites or ministering ordinances. "Identity is not to be visualised as of an isolated community but as a process of relating the gospel to other faiths and not looking into the possibilities of complementarity of building on whatsoever is good".¹⁹ A couple of preachers and teachers immediately jumped into the wagon of preaching 'repentance' and blaming the humankind for exploiting the nature and how nature is taking its revenge, which is also true to some extent. But at the end of the day, the word of God reminds us that the fall of humankind in Genesis caused the perfect created world to become an imperfect world with all kinds of corruption and distortion.

NT Wright in his recent work²⁰ talks about the shortest verse John 11: 35 which says, "Jesus wept." When Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died", Jesus

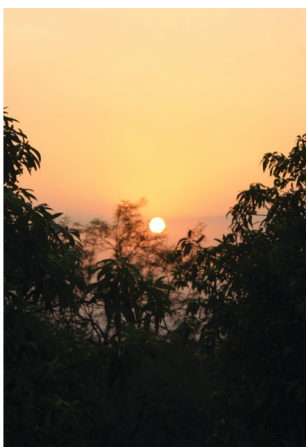
¹⁹Mark T.B. Laing, *The Indian Church in Context: Her Emergence, Growth and Mission* (Delhi: Cambridge Press, 2002), 205.

²⁰N.T.Wright, *God and the Pandemic- A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, (Zondervan Reflective, 2020)

did not condemn her saying that it is because of sin. There were also people standing by who said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11: 37- NIV). Jesus did not preach to them or condemn them of their unbelief but He wept and went on to raise Lazarus from the dead. No condemnation, no admonition, no hypocritical teaching, no superficial preaching, He simply wept. And in his weeping, he left us an example to follow.

Conclusion

The role and significance of ritual and ceremonies does have important place in the lives of any individual or group in any society. We cannot ignore the fact that from birth to death, rituals and ceremonies goes parallel with our daily lives and the decisions that we make. Whether we choose to respond or suppress it is a matter of choice, but it is also our dutiful responsibilities as people of God to incorporate the right understanding of those symbolic meanings it represents while remaining in tune with the infallible biblical theology to reach out to people in need of guidance and mentoring task for souls who are broken and needy in every aspect of life to start afresh. I quote Bible teacher and author Max Lucado who said, “We are wounded, worried and weary” on being asked to respond on the global uncertainty during the raging pandemic. But, he also added that in the middle of all these anxiety and depression where statistics are off the chart and in the midst of an uphill battle, we still find God at work, changing lives, and redeeming people.



Happy New Year 2022

MAY THIS NEW YEAR BE A TIME OF HEALING AND RESTORATION

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