



Ministry After Pandemic

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So much has changed in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. But we know that the Word of the Lord endures forever, and that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ. And so too for those outside the church, who have a foundation of sand: With pillars of only government, and science, and medicine — apart from the Gospel — their world has been shaken also. Opportunity abounds then for ministry, to serve both our congregations and our communities. This Bible study, using biblical themes, will help congregations to assess the needs of their members and communities in order to best serve them following the recent pandemic, tensions and unrest. Of course, it goes without saying that what will always be needed most is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that alone can heal our nation, bring peace and give hope. However, Christ also speaks of loving our neighbor through acts of mercy as we bear witness.

WHERE TO BEGIN

A good biblical theme to start with is the beginning of the Christian church as seen in Acts chapters 2–4. Notice the pattern of fellowship around Word and Sacrament ministry, human care for the least, witness to unbelievers, and building up of a community. When identifying new ministries in the aftermath of pandemic, it is important to do so as a community of believers and as corporate neighbors of the community where God has placed you. Therefore, collaboration with others is helpful in planning and identifying how the church can love their neighbor.

The church sees, even in the least of these, that we are all created in the image of God and have capacity to serve. Those who are in need are not to be seen as problems needing solutions, but as answers to the issues facing the community, given all of the assets in the community that already exist. This means helping to lift people out of their circumstances rather than simply offering initial aid which might be needed for the short term. And ultimately through witness and mercy, it is about the breaking of the bread and shared prayers as we gather together in God's house as they did in the book of Acts. It is about giving more than temporal shelter but a heavenly home, food for the body and also the bread of life, water for thirst and also the wells that give salvation, clothes for the body and also the garment for the eternal wedding banquet. It is very difficult to explain to someone that God loves them while sidestepping their very real physical needs.

Questions:

- › How do we put first things first, without neglecting care for the whole person?
- › Why should you identify actual needs by listening rather than prescribing them?
- › How can we be more enterprising in our mercy to lift people up, rather than leaving them in need?

WHAT TO DO AFTER TRAGEDY, DIASPORA (SCATTERING) AND EXILE

The Bible is filled with national and even global tragedies, and with God's judgment upon the earth. We might think these would lead not only to repentance, but also to despair. And yet these tragedies are always followed by a promise: entering the Promised Land after wandering in the wilderness, the dove returning as a sign of peace after the Flood, Pentecost and the speaking of many languages after the Tower of Babel, the exiles brought back to rebuild after calling upon God. After tragedies have occurred, look at the patriarchs who must re-establish their lives. What is the first thing they do when they get to their destination? They establish an altar and they call upon the Lord, in their public witness to the world around them. So too, God's people were dislocated from earthly homes throughout Scripture through conquests or persecution. And yet God used this to scatter not only His people, but also His Word. While in exile, God's people were not just to bide their time, but to be the best citizens possible as a witness to God even to those who persecuted them.

The recent lockdowns and social distancing restrictions have caused the church to seek new ways to reach their neighbors as individual Christians have been scattered. Many congregations have suffered mightily in the aftermath of crisis, but, like Nehemiah, new mission work can take place long after the exile has ended.

Questions:

- › What types of outreach opportunities did this pandemic uncover for your congregation, that you might serve others as good citizens and resident aliens in the world, among even the most marginalized?
- › What new areas have you seen where an altar can be established to call on the Lord, where others, maybe new people groups, are not hearing the pure Gospel?
- › How can you continue these new outreach methods in the future, virtually or in person?

THEY WILL KNOW US BY OUR LOVE

A pandemic such as the coronavirus certainly brings about new stressors, and, to be sure, it can bring out the best and the worst in humanity. Hoarding up or pouring out. Coming together or tearing apart. People from all walks of life were "alone together," bound by shared experience or a common cause. On the other hand, complete polarization arose across every demographic.

But such polarization should not have a place in the Christian church. Jesus often speaks of, and prays for, unity of His disciples. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20–21). Christ says that people will believe because they will see the only thing that can unite humanity: the unity of the church in Christ, a unity which only comes from the Prince of Peace, the union of Baptism and Communion.

Questions:

- › How can this be a time of strengthening rather than division?
- › How will the world recognize the unity in diversity of your congregation?
- › How can this be a time of reconciliation and planning to welcome others even more?

PROPHETS SENT TO HOSTILE MISSION FIELDS

Looking at the book of Jonah, we see a reluctant prophet who does not wish to enter a city that is hostile to his people. But our witness and outreach includes even those who are hostile to the Christian church. Jonah knew that the Ninevites had persecuted the Israelites and what it would mean to them if God relented from His wrath. He knew that God was just and merciful and that the proclamation of repentance could lead to forgiveness. And yet here we see that Jonah is sent because there are so many lost souls.

As we are sent to love our neighbor and be a witness, we remember God calling us also to preach repentance and forgiveness, because in our nation there are millions upon millions who are lost. We are to pray for our enemies and show mercy even to those who hate us, just as God has been merciful to us. Consider the fact that vast numbers of those who have been deemed among the “nones” (those with no religious affiliation) have been opening their Bibles during this time, as God has gotten their attention. And even some atheists have been wanting prayer. The only question is, who will teach them to pray? And yet, Christ told us that we would be persecuted even when we do good and help others. Remember Joseph in Egypt: betrayed, persecuted, slandered, even wrongfully imprisoned. But still, when the famine came, Joseph opened up the storehouse to rescue even those who did him the most harm, saying, “What you meant for evil, God used it for good.”

Questions:

- › Read through Romans 12:9–21. How do we overcome evil with good?
- › How can we show hospitality and live peaceably?
- › How do we treat our enemies or deal with their evil against us?

AS YOU HAVE DONE IT TO THE LEAST OF THESE

When considering how we might show love to our neighbor, it would seem quite natural to look to the Final Judgment in Matthew 25 as it speaks to caring for those in need. Hungry — feed. Thirsty — give drink. Stranger — welcome. Naked — clothe. Imprisoned — visit. Congregations can certainly be creative about how best to meet these needs.

And consider the fact that all of these social ills will only be intensified in the aftermath of pandemic. For example, whether it is an addict in recovery, a teenager with anxiety or an elderly person suffering from depression, isolation will only magnify these problems. So too, domestic violence, child abuse, unemployment and poverty are all worsened by these stressors. And those most affected will be the ones already in the margins, those who depend on low wages from jobs that are vulnerable to being eliminated, or who were already facing homelessness. With that said, here are some opportunities and needs you might seek to address:

Human Care Ministries

- Disaster response to meet immediate needs
- Unemployment/community development
- Addiction/substance abuse
- Domestic violence/child abuse
- Homelessness/housing
- Divorce/marriage
- Psychological first aid to process grief and trauma

Witness & Outreach

- Being a welcoming church when the doors are open to the public
- Rebuilding the mission through new starts
- Visiting those in isolation

Again, these ministries should be considered in collaboration with others, as you seek to determine how best to serve your neighbor in love. In addition to these, there will also be immediate emergency needs to be met like food, clothes, drink and shelter. However, work to avoid creating relationships based on single transactions that lead to dependency. Instead work towards long-term relationships that seek to get people back on their feet.

Instead of looking upon those in need as second-class citizens, welcome them into the church. Think of how those in need are looked upon throughout Scripture. Notice how Job's friends looked down on him, seeking to discover what he had done to deserve his fate, or how the Pharisees looked down on Jesus for showing mercy to the sinful woman of the city, or how Jesus' own disciples asked after tragedy or disability, "Who sinned?" It makes no difference why the pandemic has hit some harder than others. What matters is that we respond to each person in light of their dignity as a child of God. In the text of Matthew 25, and it is not us who are the savior, it is the very least who are paralleled with Jesus: "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" "The King" — this means that no matter how lowly someone may be, we should treat them as royalty.

Questions:

- › Read Luke 14:15–24. Who is invited when the more "desirable" guests decline the invitation? Who do the less desirable guests represent in their society? Why would they have been excluded? Why does the master make it a point that they are not excluded?
- › In what ways can you show mercy to the marginalized and treat them with dignity? As you wrestle with the question of what to do, how can you focus on the more important question of how you have loved?
- › In what ways can you go into the dark alleys and mean streets and give the Master's invitation to His banquet?