

Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative
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'Scripture, Church and Home in a time of crisis'.

Introduction: The global Impact of Covid-19

It is now an understatement that the novel-corona virus (Covid-19) has had significant global impact on all spheres of life, including homes, public institutions, economies, politics as well as the Church.

- COVID-19 has increased human suffering, undermined economies and left more people vulnerable in recent history as never before.
- Millions of people have been affected with significant loss of life, displacement and by some account nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods. In many parts of the world, daily paid workers and various other vulnerable are yet to fully understand what is going on, not to talk of how to respond to their immediate needs which the crisis has **exacerbated**.

Today most Christians know that the idea that people in Christ should have an easy-going smooth life without troubles is a misconception. Like most other people we also have our share of everyday irritations, uncertainties and challenges that amount to pressure points.

I. All Scripture is given by the inspiration of God

As people of faith in God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we affirm that 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...' (2 Timothy 3:16)

We also know that the Holy Scripture address all of life, hence we can rely on them as God's authoritative word concerning all situations and circumstances, including what we consider times of normally or times of crisis.

Scripture speaks to ALL of life

Regarding the people of God, the Holy Scriptures did not just address what life should be in tabernacle, temple or synagogue worship and service, but all issues of life. The Living God is as concerned for the life of the Church not only when gathered but also when scattered by various realities of existence.

God's concern for life outside places of worship is reflected in the attention given to various spheres of engagement. In the Old Testament God demonstrated as much interest in how our governance, agriculture, architecture, industry, marketing etc. should be done as he was for temple worship. There were sacred guidelines for international relations, social engagement, treatment of vulnerable people, strangers of foreigners and, in fact all aspects of life, including those we often categories as secular today! God was (and is) as concerned with

how grain was measured in the market as he was with how the tabernacle was to be constructed. As part of environmental concern, Deuteronomy 23:12-13 gives instructions on toilet protocols. This is to emphasize that the Church, gathered or scattered, is under God's watchful eyes and care.

2. Some Reflection on Antecedents for the Church

When God chose Israel to be light to other nations, the religious life of the nation revolved around the temple, and it was a significant point of convergence for relationship with God and with fellow human beings. We cannot underestimate the significance of that.

Yet, when crisis came and the temple was invaded, even when God's people were scattered into exile, worship and relationship both with God and with fellow human beings did not collapse. The exilic period called for a different way of worship and lifestyle that still bore witness to Yahweh! Significant lessons for us there as the dispersal provided new opportunities for the exiles to re-affirm their faith in Yahweh! And to point others to him.

We find that those in exile, like Daniel and his friends in Babylon, continued their faithful worship and service to Yahweh even outside the perimeters or boundaries of familiar grounds of worship. God said to them:

And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace, you will have peace. **8**For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. **9**For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 29: 7-9)

Likewise, in the New Testament we read of the church gathered and the church scattered in a time of crisis:

As important as the temple and synagogues were, our Lord Jesus spent most of his ministry life outside those buildings and much more serving and ministering where the rubber meets the road in the everydayness of life!

Covid has reminded us that the Church is not just the building.

When we read Acts 2:42-47, we see the heat picture of the Church gathered in devotion to the Word of God, in prayer, in meeting together regularly, breaking bread together and sharing all things in common. We read of the significant growth as more people came to Faith.

Yet by the time we read Acts 8, we come across a crisis and scattering where, besides Stephen being stoned to death and Saul consenting to that, we read further in Acts 8:2 "... *On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria.* **2** *Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him.* **3** *Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.*

The Church that was once gathered in place became scattered. However, both persecution and the scattering did not muzzle the church for we are further told, in verse 4-8:

So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. 6 The crowds were all paying attention to what Philip said, as they listened and saw the signs he was performing. 7 For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed, and lame were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.

This is a testimony of hope that crisis or pandemics should not necessarily define or destroy the Church. Rather Church should define her missional response to whatever challenges are in a holistic way. Wherever they went, they continued to share the gospel with people.

We have perhaps been guilty of putting more emphasis on the 'Church gathered' than the church scattered. Since the Church gathered meets in buildings that are dedicated to for that purpose and considered sacred, it is not surprising that there was so much lament for not being able to gather in the season of near or complete lockdown in various parts of the world. Yet, the reality in in pre-covid season is that those who belong to church as the body of Christ spent more time outside the physical facilities that we call church.

In my part of the world, rather give up all other things that constitute church, such as worship, singing, prayer, fellowship or even communion- just to mention a few, we became creative in refusing to let the Covid lockdown, lock down other essential realities of our being in Christ and in His world. So, when my own local church asked if we could observe the holy sacrament of the Eucharist or Lord's supper, I said 'why not.' Afterall, believers in the early church were sad to have broken bread together from house to house. The only difference is that we can only see those homes virtually in different locations rather than gathered. That did not reduce the significance of participating in the Eucharist. I urged everyone to set apart the element and the wine to be used and consecrate it a day before the worship service. It felt rather awkward at the beginning, but we soon got used to it. As we did that, we affirmed that the blood of Jesus that was shed for us and that binds us together is more powerful than any pandemic. The communion of the saints are well placed under our Lord's declaration, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

3. The Home:

Covid-19 has also reminded us of the significant place of the home in the life, worship and service of the Church. The home has always been the cradle of the church. Even when we meet as church, we all still return to a place we call home. That is where most of life happens! It is where relationships happen. While homes were affected in various ways by the pandemic, they could not be locked down like several other things.

The home has always had a place in life, worship and service. This has been so before the current pandemic and one dares say it shall continue to be so until Christ's return. In the earliest days of the church, the church met regularly in homes. Home was where families and worshipping communities met to pray. It was in homes that hospitality was experienced, and the Faith shared with neighbours and immediate communities. Several homes also kept treasured icons essential for their religious memory and witness.

Paul the Apostle wrote in I Corinthians 16:19, "The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings." Similarly in Colossians 4:15, we read, "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to

Nympha and the church in her house.” Several other texts showed that homes could provide places for the Church to meet, and this is especially relevant to current situations in which church life as we knew it may take a long while to be restored.

4. Times of crisis: How Then should we live?

Scripture also has accounts of times of crisis including but not limited to political and economic instability, famine, drought and situations of injustice. The question to us therefore is how do we live and serve in the times we live in?

Times of crisis call us to be Missional in Engaging with all spheres of Life.

Going beyond the old paradigm of unhealthy dichotomy between evangelism and social action the book *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, (Edited by Cathy Ross) sums up what Christian mission entails in what has been referred to as the ‘Five Marks of Mission’:

- to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom,
- to teach baptize and nurture new believers,
- to respond to human need by loving service,
- to seek to transform unjust structures of society and
- to strive to serve the integrity of creation, sustain and renew the life of the earth

There is little doubt that these five marks embody what evangelism and global engagement involves. As Ross suggests, the five marks ‘form a good working basis for holistic approach to mission’ However, how are we doing?

- to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, ✓
- to teach baptize and nurture new believers, ✓
- to respond to human need by loving service, -?
- to seek to transform unjust structures of society -?
- to strive to serve the integrity of creation, sustain and renew the life of the earth -?

The Church in our context obviously does well with the first two but there are much more grounds to be covered in the remaining aspect of holistic response to human need in a time of crisis.

For example, when it comes to responding to human need by loving service or working proactively to transform unjust structures of society we have much more to do. In this covid season we have many people that are ‘left behind.’

Those ‘left behind in my part of the world include pastors and evangelists in rural communities who have no idea of what we call zoom o have virtual services or meetings. Even for those who have mobile phones, there may not be electricity supply to charge the phones.

Likewise, while many parts of the world have had their doses of the vaccine, including boosters for some, other parts of the world, like mine, are still waiting to receive their first jab due to the politics and corruption of distribution and access.

Those ‘left behind’ include people whose prayer is no longer just ‘give us this day our daily bread’ but also ‘give us this day, our daily portion of oxygen’ for survival, especially where ventilators and oxygen have gained exploitative commercial value at the expense of the poor

and other vulnerable people. We've talked about homes but there are still those who neither have churches nor homes to resort to. This calls for greater collaboration within and beyond Church for more intentional response to various needs of vulnerable people.

As people of God rooted in the Holy Scriptures, who affirm the sovereignty of God over all of life and who know that Christ assures he will build his church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; our watch word should be 'do not be afraid' and our task is to continue to be the Church, gathered or scattered, faithfully tending the flock entrusted to us and meeting human needs for the common good.