

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# In Such a Time as This: Surviving with COVID-19

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*Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.*  
(Joel 1:2-3)

We are passing through a very strange and extraordinary time—the global pandemic of COVID-19, a once-in-a-century global health crisis. It has caused unparalleled vulnerability. This invisible enemy, the corona virus, is adversely affecting all spheres of life on our planet. It has thrown us into experiences of unbearable pain and agony. I myself, together with my colleagues, students, their family members, along with millions of others, were greatly impacted by this dangerous disaster. We helplessly watched the loss of several precious lives from our own families and the circle of close friends. It has been more than a pandemic for us. According to the conspiracy theory it is a *plandemic*.<sup>1</sup> Some have called it a *Planetdemic*.

Every season of trials may serve as a test of governance, and as the test of our competence. Much more than a crisis, this pandemic leaves behind some outstanding residues and remnants. Extraordinary communities are emerging through disasters. The pre-COVID-19 world is gone, replaced by a “new normal.” The new landscape calls for both flexibility and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church. Churches must adapt; they must ask themselves questions about the implications for being church in this “new normal” context. The church may understand that this is a once-in-a-century opportunity to shape the world and the



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church the way God wants them to be. This article is an attempt to share some of the observations and reflections about the mission and ministry of the church during this new normal period.

### **Lamentations: People's and God's**

In times of crisis, we often find it easier to identify with the psalmist, “I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!” (Ps 31:13). We, too, keep hearing of the “terror on every side,” due to the corona-virus pandemic. “Those who see me on the street flee from me” (Ps 31:11).

“Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;” Psalm 6 prays, “Heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled.” “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?” asks Psalm 10 sadly. “Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?” And so, it goes on: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps 13:1). And such cries are more terrifying when we hear Jesus Himself quoting Psalm 22 in His agony on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The mystery of the biblical story is that *God also laments*. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in this world. That is not the picture we get in the Bible. God was grieved to His heart, over the violent wickedness of His human creatures. He was overwhelmed when His own bride, the people of Israel, turned away from Him. And when God came back to His people in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus. The Bible portrays God as one who weeps in the human tragedies. St. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as *groaning* within us, as we ourselves groan with the pain of the whole creation.

The ancient doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to recognize the One God in the tears of Jesus and the anguish of the Spirit. We are not able to understand properly God's weeping still today. All biblical pandemics were predicted earlier; God gave warnings to people to correct their ways. Is it possible that in the present pandemic there were no such warnings, or is it that people were unprepared to listen? God knows all there is to know. That means God's knowledge is total. In addition to infinite understanding, God claims to be the “Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev 22:13). This implies that He has complete knowledge of all things, past, present, and future and has no need to learn from anybody else. He already knows how everything will end. Yes, God is in control of everything, and He is omnipotent. That He knows everything does not mean that He predestined everything.

It is not part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what is happening and why it is happening. We are not capable of understanding all the mysterious ways of God. That kind of understanding is not even needed. In fact, it *is* part of the Christian vocation *not to be able* to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we ourselves lament. Even in our self-isolation, the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope, and new wisdom for the leaders.

### **Age of the New Normal**

The COVID-19 pandemic made tremendous changes in the world. It has created a historical divide or critical separation of our lives as being pre-COVID or post-COVID. We are not in a post-COVID yet; we are with COVID, in a “COVIDian age.” Things are not yet normal. This period will continue indecisively. We need to have a new lifestyle to cope with COVID. We are in a new normal period. *Normality* will not have the same definition as before. Now we are faced with revisiting the definition of *normal*. New normal is a description of the current situation and the social customs, etc., that is different from what has been experienced or done before but is expected to become usual or typical.

The new normal situation requires the church to renew its vision, theology, and mission. The ministry of Jesus Christ was a new normal, preparing people as a kingdom community over and against the discourse of massive oppression by both the Roman Empire and Jewish religious structures. Here church need to continue its corrective witnessing in a corruptive world. In all possibility, the pandemic might leave behind a lot of residual leftovers apart from present calamities that are mostly reported by media. In the post-pandemic era, we are going to meet different lasting impacts.

### **New Ecclesiological Vision**

In many parts of the world all religious gatherings were banned, and churches were closed due to the lock down and social distancing policy. The closure of churches during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown has forced Christian churches to “do church” differently and to re-imagine the future of the church. No more traditional worship was taking place. The elderly people had to be away from the churches even on Sundays. Church functions were limited with strict COVID Protocol. This virus is forcing us to re-imagine our understanding about the church. As William Dreyer observes, “The actual crisis of the church is not only to be found in external circumstances and influences but is primarily a question of the church not being able to ‘be church’.”<sup>2</sup> This precisely is the crisis the church is facing now with an invisible virus. Is the church being a mere building to close and open? Are worship services being the essential service and the ultimate expression of diakonia? The churches do

not need to *open* because churches never should be *closed* in the first place. The church is *ecclesia*, a community of the faithful, a people's assembly. *Going to the church* differs from *being* the church. In these days church is regaining its meaning not as an institution but as people. How much money is spent to construct huge church buildings that most of the time are not in use. The new coronavirus places a challenge on the institutional understanding of the church. Here we are challenged to revisit our understanding of the invisible church:

The invisible church (ecclesia invisible) is composed of all those who have been reached by the Word of God and have responded in faith, wherever they may be. According to Luther this is the true church. It has no head other than Christ. The risen Christ operates through the Word in the power of the Spirit. No human being can grant or deny access to this fellowship. The power of the new life of Christ flows into the members and through the members into the world.<sup>3</sup>

While remaining true to the classic marks of the church (one, holy, catholic, apostolic), we are now forced to focus on the missional nature of the church. God's mission comes first, then the church. As Bevans and Schroeder remind us: "mission . . . is prior to the church and is constitutive of its very existence" and then "as mission takes shape so does the Church."<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 also calls us to reimagine the idea of church as community. The call to community is central to the Christian faith and practice. The very notion of community is established in the Godhead; God is community (Trinity), and the church (ekklesia) refers to a community whether it is a local church, a citywide church, or the universal church.

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God works with community and whenever God does work with individuals, he sends them right back into community. The future church will be decided by relationships. The church will increasingly exist as a community rather than a meeting place once-a-week. A missionary church is relational because it is a community of faith, and it is governed by a "relational ecclesiology." The church is not primarily a place of refuge, but a community of people on pilgrimage.

Pastors once encouraged the worshippers to "come to church" and made members feel guilty if they were not attending church. Now the plea is "please join us on . . . such electronic platform." Another welcome sign is the move from organized artificial performance in sacred buildings to returning to the essence of the church, the homes; that is, a church in each home. The electronic medium has created opportunities for

people to “wander” and experiment. People who travel can easily church shop these days. On television, channel flipping has become a new norm for seekers looking for spiritual empowerment. The elderly Christians who are mostly locked in homes are enjoying the charismatic channels one by one and nowadays they are somewhat hooked on it. They have even started to criticize the mainline churches and their traditional way of liturgical worship. Modern Christian youths are also very happy with the change. They need not go to church, but they can attend digital worship as they like, while sitting at the dining table with their breakfast. How this shift is going to affect the future church is uncertain. However, people realize that they can have access to the living God without an institutionalized church. This is a welcome change. This new ecclesiology is a gift of this season.

### **New Theological Perspective**

In this era of crisis, we are trying to understand our faith through the lens of the pandemic and vice versa. Human struggles help us understand the deeper meaning of the faith we believe, teach, and confess. In a crisis we don't wait for God to act, but we move ahead with the hope which God has put in us. People ask why a crisis happens. Others are asking, “where is God in all this?” For them there is no God. If there is a loving and caring God, why does he allow this type of disaster to happen? Others, including some Christians, have no doubt that God is punishing the world for the cruel sins like abortion and for homosexuality and the like. Is God punishing all people this way because of such sins some people commit? Asking such type of questions is meaningless. Is God so far removed from the world? As Martha and Mary said: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*” (Jn 11:21, 32). Others quote 1 Pt 4:17 and say, “*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.*”

God is mysteriously hidden; but He continues to reveal Himself in the suffering servant, Jesus Christ. Those who preach a theology of glory and advocate the gospel of prosperity are now hiding behind the curtain. They do not have a clear answer for such a crisis as the pandemic. It is time for us to look deeply into the theology of the cross. And it is also the time to distinguish God's proper work and His alien work. We have no social distancing from Jesus Christ upon whom we lay our foundation (1 Cor 3:11). For none can lay a new foundation other than that which is laid in Jesus Christ. This is the theology which the natural person cannot accept because it looks like nonsense to him. These things are of the spirit of God. Spiritual people evaluate everything with the wisdom of God. They are subject to no one else (1 Cor 2:14–15),

With the psalmist we plead, “*But I trust in you, O LORD. . . My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies*” (Ps 31:15). An ancient Chinese saying (from Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War*) explains the key to victory against any enemy: “*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred*

*battles.*” By knowing our enemy and knowing ourselves as Christians we can respond to any crisis intelligently and appropriately as the people of God.

How do we approach the current crisis? The apostle Paul was in a dark, perhaps wet and dirty, prison cell. Look at Paul’s letter to the Colossian church. Even during struggles he was thankful to God that the gospel was advancing (Col 1:3–8). From a prison, the great apostle wrote, “*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (Phil 1:21). A Christ-centered and gospel-centered life is undisturbed, but joyful, and sees each day as an opportunity to live to the glory of God. Coronavirus has created for us a new awareness of a God who is gracious and compassionate.

In such a time as this, a new theological awareness about the theology of mission of the church also needs to be noted. COVID-19 has the added opportunities for making the church more accessible, not only to those who are its members, but to all people. COVID-19 has opened the eyes of the churches to the realities of the sufferings in the world and moved churches to orient ministries towards the ideals of the kingdom of God rather than the narrow focus of the church on itself. In India, the COVID-19 infections and related deaths rapidly increased, many millions of people have lost jobs, thousands of businesses have closed or are going bankrupt, and millions of people are starving. What is the mission of the church in such a context? It is encouraging to hear inspirational stories of how many churches, against all the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown rules, are supplying food, counselling, prayers, and other kinds of ministries to the suffering masses. In word and deed, they hold out hope and peace in these troubled and difficult times. The church needs to show a faithful presence among the ordinary, common people. Faithful presence means, taking our bodies, our location, and our community very seriously, as seriously as God in Christ took them. Faithful presence invites us to act on the belief that God is giving us what we need to be formed as disciples within our location. Faithful presence shows a specific kind of existence in all the places that Christians find themselves—and in such a way that it upholds the honesty and harmony of Christian faith.

The church affirms its integrity and faithfulness to the Gospel when it takes up the struggles and sufferings of the world, when it favors the poor, and when it joins with God in turning to the world to establish justice, peace, and the fullness of life for all people and creation. David Bosch reminds us that mission is God’s “yes” to the world “submitted in the conviction that there is continuity between the reign of God, the mission of the church, and justice, peace, and wholeness in society, and that salvation also has to do with what happens to people in this world.”<sup>5</sup>

During this time of COVID-19, churches should become centers for solidarity, networks of compassion, empathy, healing, and emotional support in the face of sickness, fear, pain, and hunger. Against this background, Christian theology must be

intimately connected with Christian life, and the church must share the sufferings of this present time with the whole creation. In every age it must find its Christian identity afresh.

The church must restore the power to be a powerhouse of love, peace, and unity among believers. The interconnected and interdependent character of the church as the body of Christ enables it to have deep solidarity with the victims in all situations. Once again the church has become the salt and light of the earth. The church must raise its prophetic voice and speak against the conventional norms and social practices that work against the plan of God for people's lives.

The virus also helps us to cross over the rigid denominational boundaries. In a crisis like the pandemic, the churches' material resources and premises such as auditoriums, schools, colleges, hostels were converted as temporary hospitals and quarantine centers for the use of the public. Most of the churches opened community kitchens. Church became a public place and were able to do public witness. Instead of waiting for people to come to the church, the church began to move towards people. This new approach is really a notable change.

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### **New Perspective in Ministry**

Extraordinary situations demand extraordinary imaginations and initiatives. Christian ministers are reimagining their vocation in contextually relevant ways that could enable battling COVID-19 and its effects in our communities and congregational life. How one can be a relevant Christian minister in this context? Practically, pastors began to use community kitchens as their pulpit, sick beds as their altar, started "worship on wheels" meeting people outside the church buildings, offering nurture and pastoral care through digital alternatives. Dramas and divine comedies in the name of God were stopped. Spiritual consumerism, ecstasy, and the like have fallen into their lowest ebb. Festivals, pilgrimages, and other meaningless ceremonies were stopped at least temporarily. A new way opened to have a renewed, personal relationship directly with God. Intermediaries like faith healers, miracle workers, and convention preachers are going out of business. COVID-19 has resulted in the strengthening of the concept of the priesthood of all believers. God in Jesus Christ has become more personal and meaningful for most Christians.



## Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has forced churches into shifting and rethinking some of their long-held theological views and practices. The virus has provided a window of opportunity to reimagine a new theology for the church, which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, rules, and rites but being God's transforming presence in the world.

The closure of churches during the coronavirus pandemic has forced churches to function in new ways, remaining open to the world and being church, (often in ways against which we have formerly battled). COVID-19 has reaffirmed that the church does not live within walls; it is the people of God, who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, live and long for God's reign in the world. The kingdom or reign of God is the primary missional perspective of the church as we continue to pray for and work towards God's justice, peace, righteousness, and love on earth. The church is a sign, symbol, and pointer to that kingdom as it is called out of the world and sent into the world to be the presence of God. In this way it will become manifest that the church not only proclaims the gospel, but it is also part of the Good News. What the coronavirus has done is to call the church and the world to trust in God alone.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Undeniably, there are people who believe it is the worst human-made disaster.

<sup>2</sup> Wim A Dreyer, "The Real Crisis of the Church," *Theological Studies* 7(3), 2015,1.

<sup>3</sup> Klaus Nuernberger, *Martin Luther's Message for Us Today* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2005), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology for Mission Today*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 13.

<sup>5</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 11.