

Commentary: Lessons from the ancient church for the present crisis

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In the second and third centuries, two different pandemics swept the ancient Roman world.

Many Roman cities were densely populated—by some estimates ancient Rome was three times more densely populated per square mile than modern-day New York City—which made them perfect breeding grounds for communicable diseases. And, of course, the Roman world lacked what modern medicine has taught us about microbiology and epidemiology.

The most reliable estimates suggest somewhere between one quarter and one third of the Roman Empire perished in the second century epidemic alone.

When the pandemics hit, the wealthy and powerful were able to survive far more easily. They had the resources to sequester themselves at home or, even better, to relocate to the country where they were not surrounded on all sides by the sick and dying. They didn't know exactly what was causing people to die, but they knew staying behind likely meant death, and getting away likely meant living. So, they left.

Those who stayed

One obscure religious cult, however, seemed to defy the odds. There were all kinds of bizarre rumors about this particular cult: strange initiation rites, political subversion, cannibalism, just to name a few.

But when the pandemics hit, they not only stayed in the cities, they also survived in larger numbers than the surrounding population. The members of this obscure religious cult had a name for themselves; they called themselves “Christians.”

The leaders of the early church saw what took place in their midst in miraculous terms, and if you believe miracles are possible—and I do—then you can’t completely discount that idea.

It’s just as likely, however, that what those early Christians did without realizing it was make small contributions to the health and well-being of those around them.

Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, said many Christians “took charge of the sick, attending to their every need, and ministering to them in the name of Christ.”

Such care started a virtuous cycle. Simple kindnesses like a cold cloth on a feverish forehead or food provided to people too weak to feed themselves meant those people survived in greater numbers.

The combination of Christians surviving in larger numbers drew more people into the circle of care who also survived in larger numbers. Many then became followers of Jesus, both as a result of the kindness they could explain and their survival, which lacking a medical explanation seemed miraculous.

Seeing those affected most

I’ve been wondering lately what a virtuous cycle for the 21st century church might look like in the midst of this pandemic.

I watched the press conference for Governor Andrew Cuomo recently. New York’s location at the epicenter of the pandemic has given them a sadly

high but statistically deep look at just who this pandemic is hitting the hardest. Just like the plagues of history, we can see this one also is hitting many of the most vulnerable among us.

As the statistics flash across our television screens, patterns emerge. The pandemic is hitting the poor harder—the homeless and the working poor who don't have the luxury of staying home and doing their work from the comfort of their living room on a laptop like I do. It's hitting senior citizens harder—nursing homes are in the highest risk categories—and it's hitting minorities harder, particularly black and Latino populations.

Being like those who stayed

I currently am serving as the Transition Pastor for a congregation, and we are having the same conversations as your church about when we might return to worship, something we all want, and something we all need.

I think the most important thing we can do to worship God isn't to gather in a building—as much as I want to—but to proclaim by our words and actions, “Jesus is Lord.” The early church did that, not by asking other people to risk their lives so they could continue to worship, but by risking their own lives to care for the sick, many of whom were among the most vulnerable populations of that day and time.

What would it look like for us to risk what matters to us to bring life to those at risk?

[First Baptist Lee's Summit](#) is located about 20 miles outside Kansas City, Mo. Like a lot of churches, they started having conversations about the challenges the pandemic was creating for them. But they also recognized the most important thing for them to do in this moment wasn't to hunker down into preservation mode but is to proclaim by their actions, “Jesus is Lord.”

So, on March 22, their second Sunday of online-only worship, they decided to give away half of everything they received that week to their neighbors who were being impacted by the coronavirus.

They gave half of receipts to a local nonprofit who helps the poorest of the poor in their community and the other half to employees of shops, restaurants and bars in their community who already were experiencing lost wages.

Imagine you're a bartender, and the owner comes in and hands you a check and tells you, "It's from the Baptist church down the street." I bet that'll get your attention.

In the way God leads us

I am not going to criticize you if your church decides to start gathering again sooner rather than later. I do wonder, however, if a socially distanced congregation that can't hug or linger after worship is over really is the most powerful proof that the church is being the church.

I'm not hearing people complain about not spending more time in the building. I am hearing everyone—Christians and non-Christians alike—talk about the loss of connection.

People need to be seen and heard and loved. As terrible as this pandemic is, the witness of history is that the church truly being the church is exactly what the world needs in a moment like this.

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To learn more about how the Center for Healthy Churches is helping churches thrive, visit them at www.chchurches.org or contact Matt

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