

Prayer Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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In this article we look at how the COVID-19 crisis has awakened awareness of the many things out of human control and that it has prompted people to search for spiritual comfort. Web analytics confirm this. Internet-mediated spirituality is booming. Prayer movements are growing. Missions must move likewise, and engage in concerted prayer and intercession for the gospel to spread supernaturally to a world in crisis and in need of the peace that only Christ can offer..

A global pandemic makes the world sit up; it catches all of our attention. For some it has produced panic, fear, disruption, multiple losses of earning, livelihood, lives, separation from loved ones, loss of travel, cancellation of valued meetings and plans and produced isolation, family violence, hunger and uncertainty. For others it's brought an oasis of peace, rest, blessed time with family, a welcome reset on priorities, time to hear and appreciate creation, smaller online gatherings for Bible study and reflection (rather than impersonal mega gatherings) and time to seek God.

1. Prayer Surging

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a 50 per cent surge in online searches for prayer as people turn to religion to cope with feelings of anxiety and hopelessness¹. Online prayer meetings with thousands, sometimes millions, of people joining together at the same time on multiple platforms have never been seen before in such numbers and frequency.

God's people are crying out for mercy, for renewal, restoration and revival. The connectivity provided for those with internet access has given a voice to many who previously would have unlikely been able to join global gatherings, certainly not on this scale, for months on end. There has been an increase in prayer for specific mission movements and for the multiplication of disciple making movements – including the persecuted and geographically isolated.

2. Good News Spreading

Fear and uncertainty have ploughed the ground in people's hearts to ask the big questions of life. This, together with acts of kindness and love, such as distributing food and clean water, has provided new platforms to share about Jesus' love and compassion. New discipleship small-groups are springing up in "dark and hostile" parts of the globe.

At the heart of the gospel is the call to be restored into our right relationship with God, our Father, through Jesus, to be brought into God's family and establish His

Kingdom values on earth, as it is in heaven. Being family has echoed with an increased resonance during the pandemic. The need and desire for unity in the body of Christ, for mutual collaboration, for serving and preferring the other (including agency or organisation), has been magnified.

In many parts of the world where the gospel has not yet been proclaimed, or is very limited in access to the majority of the population, it is in families and small local communities where the *good news* is being received. Just as in the book of Acts, households (e.g. Cornelius, Lydia) are believing and following Jesus with immediate baptisms. Imams and community leaders are witnessing the power of the gospel as believers take risks and cross cultural barriers to demonstrate Jesus' love for the community. For example, newly arrived believers in one village offered to bury six men who died from COVID-19. The village Imam gave his permission. As the dead men were carried through the village, Psalms were read aloud and prayer offered in Jesus' name. Families of those 6 men chose to follow Jesus and many in the village were saved.

3. Beliefs Shaken

At the heart of intercession for mission is the desire to see God's Kingdom come on earth—for nations and peoples to become obedient to Jesus. Often the barriers to this are cultural, as Christianity is understood as an outsider's religion, or there are barriers of idols (where something else is considered more important or trustworthy than God).



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The pandemic is shaking long held beliefs, causing doubts about what and who is trustworthy and deserving of worship. In Western nations the surge in prayer and online church attendance may be partially due to the shaking of security in health provision, employment and financial stability, and the stark reality that death is only a breath away².

Prayer is a vital part of life for the public, with just under half of UK adults (44%) saying they pray. Among those who pray a third (33%) say that they have prayed since the COVID-19 lockdown because they believe it makes a difference³. A third (34%) of UK adults aged 18-34 say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown (on the radio, live on TV, on demand or streamed online).

4. Missions Shifting

Those who are praying regularly for missions (especially those concerned for the making of disciples and the gospel to be proclaimed in all nations) are sensing shifts in the following arenas in the coming months and years:

- The **role of all generations and families** in praying for the lost and witnessing to others. I am reminded of a word shared at the World Prayer Assembly in Jakarta in May 2012: *the picture of an arrow*. The arrowhead represents the youth who will see the advance of the gospel into all peoples and places. Attached and bound onto the arrow by twine are the children. The shaft of the arrow represents adults supporting the children and youth. The feather at the end represents wise seasoned seniors bringing direction and perspective.
- An underlying shift toward regional, national, and local communities and citywide whole-of-life mission, i.e. **indigenous mission work**. If travel becomes more expensive and restricted there will be incentive to gather at local, national and regional levels. This has the potential benefits of more leaders to be able to attend gatherings, local languages used which would give wider access to leaders in that location and increased relevance to the cultural dynamics involved with sharing the Gospel in that part of the world.
- A **greater dependence and seeking of God's face for the next steps**. Listening to God and asking Him to speak to his people, both individually and as a group is becoming more widespread. *Prayer is critical to all missions strategies*. We are humble servants called to serve in God's mission and His ways are not our ways. There is a sense of uncertainty, of not having travelled this way before,



which leads to increased reliance on the Holy Spirit's direction and instruction.

- **Prayer movements and networks linking in intentional collaboration** with mission agencies and mission movements. Prayer is not an external add-on to a mission agency. It is central to the leadership's direction and strategy. The Moravian movement is regularly cited as an example of prayer and mission together.
- **Changes in church life**. Many are meeting in smaller online groups, which after lockdowns are lifted could become home churches. Leadership is decentralised and there is greater personal and community discipleship. The small group model is flexible, doesn't require buildings, budgets or maintenance. Groups can quickly multiply. This model is shifting the role of church leadership to facilitation and coaching roles, rather than preaching to a passive crowd. It's also raising questions around financial models and giving to missions.
- The **role of online media** as a wider platform for engagement in discipleship—online united prayer meetings, smaller group prayer and discipleship meetings, and accessibility for those who are searching to find an online community to belong to.
- **Pioneering trans-cultural mission work** so that the Gospel can reach peoples and places with little access to the Gospel, without sufficient numbers of nearby culture believers.⁴ Prayer is the "first domino" to see a people group turn to Jesus. Identifying spiritual strongholds, historical offences and divisions, and roots of idolatry, and establishing Christ-worshipping communities are works of the Holy Spirit ignited through prayer. Many experience dreams and visions of a man in shining robes. This requires a follower of Jesus to explain, to the one who received the revelation, who the man in the vision is. This was the case with Cornelius in Acts 10:30-32.
- **Prayer fuelling communication**. Communication is the glue to any relationship with God or people. Yet how people communicate and experience friendship varies throughout the world. A heart connection is commonly valued in communication; how is this established? Many have experienced deepening heart connections through prayer. This bond can go beyond just communicating factual information and meeting together in person.
- **Changes in financial models for mission**. Short term mission trips and global gatherings could be

affected by increased travel costs and restrictions. Stewardship of funds and a sense of responsibility for creation care may impact short-term trips. Innovation and new models will arise to meet the new challenges; this will include more focus on local, sustainable business models for mission.

- **Lasting economic impact of the pandemic.** This will be felt for years to come. Hunger, unemployment, shifts in the job market, migration, and control of resources will all impact missions. *The pandemic has shone a beam on the injustices and inequality in our world.*

By Prayer

The COVID-19 pandemic is providing an opportunity for a reset and repositioning of the Bride of Christ: to grow in listening dependency on the Holy Spirit for our next steps and plans; to choose to prefer one other with humility and servant-hearted collaboration.

Jesus teaches us to keep in step with the Holy Spirit. Our pace is important. With virtual communication increasing, we need discernment and discipline to navigate the overload of information and opportunities.

This is a pivotal moment in history to see a great harvest of people come to worship and follow Jesus. The virus has accelerated what was already happening and increased a hunger to know the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Footnotes:

1. In March 2020, the share of Google searches for prayer surged to the highest level ever recorded, surpassing all other major events that otherwise call for prayer, such as Christmas, Easter and Ramadan, analysis has revealed. Kelly-Linden, J., 2020. *Pandemic Prompts Surge in Interest in Prayer, Google Data Show*. The Telegraph. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/pandemic-prompts-surge-interest-prayer-google-data-show/> [Accessed May 29, 2020].

2. Lang, M. & Pegna, T., *Many Brits Look to Faith During Lockdown*. Tearfund. Available at: https://www.tearfund.org/en/media/press_releases/many_brits_look_to_faith_during_lockdown/ [Accessed May 29, 2020].

Similar shakings are reported in the USA as well: Shellnutt, K., 2020. *When God Closes a Church Door, He Opens a Browser Window*. News & Reporting. Available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/march/online-church-attendance-covid-19-streaming-video-app.html> [Accessed May 29, 2020].

3. According to a new nationwide poll of 2,101 UK adults by Savanta ComRes for Christian relief & development agency Tearfund. Sourced from Lang and Pegna see footnote 2 above.

4. Lewis, R., *The Remaining Peoples With no Chance to Hear About Jesus*. Mission Frontiers. Available at: <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-remaining-peoples-with-no-chance-to-hear-about-jesus> [Accessed May 29, 2020].