



Leading the Church Beyond the Pandemic

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My primary purpose in this article is to discuss how the Church can respond to needs and engage meaningfully in the midst of this life-threatening pandemic that has swept the whole world. More precisely, my intention is to understand how the Church as the body of Christ should respond to crisis situations and lead communities to resilience. My response to this question is born out of our actual experience and encounter with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, I hope my presentation will be more practical and realistic than theoretical.

As you may know, the Philippines has been the worst hit by the coronavirus in Southeast Asia. While other Asian countries are slowly recovering from this global pandemic, the Philippines is still reeling from its devastating effects (in late 2020). The number of people getting infected by COVID-19 is still escalating, and the situation seems to be out of control. Budgets are getting depleted and the Philippine government is running out of funds to fight

against the spread of the virus. Prolonged lockdowns, community quarantines, and travel restrictions have paralyzed the Philippine economy and resulted in closure of businesses and loss of jobs and earnings.

The domino effects of this all-time low economic condition in our country are felt everywhere, and our churches are no exception. The devastating economic impact of the pandemic has greatly hampered our operations and ministries. Our churches and member institutions are forced to make contingency plans and implement cost-cutting measures to lessen the impact of these economic woes, and in the process many of our plans and commitments have been compromised.

Indeed, life in this most troubled and trying time is characterized by brokenness. People are feeling the pain of isolation, of losing their jobs, and for some the loss of their loved ones. The massive and terrible impact of the pandemic has led us to a heightened awareness of our human vulnerability and brokenness. It has made us more conscious of the undeniable reality that finitude, dependency, and vulnerability are part of our being human and there are situations in life that are way beyond our human control.

Given the precarious state and condition of our country and the world, what must we do as a church called by God to become light and salt of the earth? How can we meaningfully address emerging issues and concerns such as the “new normal” that confront our churches today? Let me suggest a few things that we as a church can do in this time of pandemic and beyond:

First and foremost, as a church, we must accept and embrace the reality of our own brokenness and vulnerability. In a culture that is characterized by the dream of control and predictability, vulnerability must be avoided. Prevailing cultural values tell us that the ideal human being is independent, self-sufficient, and invulnerable. Security in that sense is defined as the opposite of vulnerability. This perceived invulnerability seems to influence the way we Christians think and do things in the church. We tend to avoid negative thoughts and emotions associated to vulnerability because they are a threat to our security and human existence. We even use religious language to suppress or deny them. As much as possible, we want to paint the church as perfect and invulnerable. This ethic of invulnerability, however, runs the risk of detaching itself from human reality. It runs counter to our faith conviction that is grounded in both our biblical heritage and in our daily experiences of vulnerability. In fact, “we understand spirituality in the context of our humanity”⁶⁰ and unless we are able to connect to our humanness, we cannot

⁶⁰ Herman A. Moldez, Senior Pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Quezon City and General Secretary of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Reflection on Psalm 34:17-20, “Close to the Brokenhearted” during the CPBC Hour Online Worship, October 3, 2020.

sympathize and identify ourselves with the vulnerable other – those who are weak, poor, and suffering.

The Gospels depict the vulnerability of Jesus as pivotal to the fulfillment of his redemptive mission in the world. From his birth to his crucifixion, Jesus is portrayed as vulnerable, and this vulnerability is understood not as a weakness but as strength – not as defeat but as victory. Jesus’s victory was won not by virtue of using his heavenly power to dominate and control, but by virtue of his humble act of allowing himself to be human and to identify with the sufferings of those he came to save.

Looking at Jesus as our model, we are reminded that we are called to share in the sufferings of people around us, opening ourselves in this encounter to our own vulnerability and mortality.

This is what it means to walk with Christ and to live out our faith in God. An ethic of shared vulnerability enhances our sense of responsibility and accountability at all levels: in our personal dealings, in the family, in congregations, organizations, the local community, and the larger society as a whole. Vulnerability is not a lamentable reality, but the basic precondition of a responsible, meaningful, and productive life. It paves the way for the church to stand on street corners in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the weak, and the suffering.

My hope is that this shared sense of vulnerability can inform our ethical thinking and mission activities towards strengthening the spirit of interdependence, mutual accountability, and redeeming love for all humankind. Keeping close to the central message of the Gospel and not yielding to the pressures and temptations of the powers of this world, the Church should be a principle contributor in reaching this goal.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities for us to rethink and reconsider our usual way of doing things as a church. The pandemic is creating new realities, new relationships, new concepts, and new ways of thinking and doing things. It is drastically changing our missional context, and we are challenged to think “outside of the box.” Whether we like it or not, “this world-wide phenomenon becomes a new condition or reality that exposes both the inadequacies and strengths of many of our churches, leadership, and ministries. The global Church, therefore, is obliged to reorient her ways of life and reframe her ministerial leadership style.”⁶¹ Changes, innovations,

⁶¹ Notes from Joshua Zonita, Professor, Systematic Theology at Central Philippine University, Jaro, Iloilo City, Philippines.

readjustments and restructuring of our methods and approaches to doing missions are necessary and welcome.

The critical 21st century challenge for the Church in this time of pandemic is how to deal with the formation of virtual Christianity wherein personal presence, considered essential to its life and ministry, is lacking and where interaction is realized through non-physical media platforms. Considering the gravity of the impact of the pandemic, one thing that our churches should develop is a clear and relevant vision and mission statement that incorporates disaster preparedness strategies. In this way, our churches will be more proactive in responding to calamities that may come at any time. This is vital for human existence and survival and, therefore, the church should give substantial attention to it.

Third, this global pandemic accentuates the call for unity and collaboration among and between different churches and organizations. To survive and go beyond this pandemic, we must affirm and acknowledge our interdependence and our need to unite and cooperate to achieve a common goal. As members of one body –the body of Christ – we are endowed with different gifts, and yet we are guided and inspired by the same Spirit to do God’s work. Building up the body of Christ requires cooperation rather than competition. Paul admonished this in Ephesians 4:1-3. This time of crisis should make us aware of the importance of living together in unity because our chances of survival as human beings and as a church will depend so much on our ability to unite and work together towards a common cause. There may be times when misunderstandings and disagreements occur among us. Like branches on a tree, our lives may grow in different directions, yet our roots remain as one. We are a people belonging to God, and in him we are one.

Lastly, we journey together, and as we do God’s mission in the world, we remember God is with us. God is active in our lives and is responsive to our needs and to our prayers. And so, we should not despair in the face of adversities but look to God to work for good even in the worst of circumstances. The Bible presents a loving and caring God who dwells with us, making his home among his people. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is an especially powerful symbol of God’s presence among his pilgrim people on earth.

God’s people are sojourners in the land, thus they are uniquely placed to understand and identify themselves with the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. The Church, for that matter, is among mankind as God’s tent of meeting, sharing in mankind’s joys and hopes, anxieties and sufferings. It stands with every man and woman of every place and time, to bring them the good news of the kingdom of God. Yes, in spite of our brokenness, we can be

a blessing to the world. As a community and as members of God's household, we live with confidence in the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus! We believe that no pandemic, no illness or disease, nothing done by us and nothing done to us, not even death itself, can break God's solidarity with us and with all creation (Romans 8:38-39).

For Discussion and Reflection

1. How do you accept and embrace the reality of your own brokenness and vulnerability?
2. What are some new ways for us to do things as a global Church and within your specific church community?
3. How can we show unity and collaboration with other Christians?
4. Where do you best see God with us in this pandemic?



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