



Witness

600 Shaftesbury Blvd
Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4
T: 204-888-6781
F: 204-831-5675
E: witness@mennonitechurch.ca
W: www.mennonitechurch.ca
Toll-free: 1-866-888-6785

**Canadian Council of Churches
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**Presentation by Janet Plenert
Executive Secretary
Mennonite Church Canada Witness**

A Theological Framework for the involvement of the church in emergency preparedness.

In the years 165 and 251, two terrible epidemics struck the Roman Empire. During both, a third of the population was decimated.

In his commentary on Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians, William Barclay writes that many people in the city Carthage, "threw out the bodies of their dead and fled in terror. " But Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, "gathered his congregation together and set them to burying the dead and nursing the sick in the plague-stricken city, and by doing so, at the risk of their lives, they saved the city from destruction and desolation."

The way Christians in Carthage, and throughout the Empire, selflessly cared for the sick and the dying left a powerful impression on their non-Christian neighbours. For sociologist Rodney Stark, the way they showed care and compassion helps explain how the new Christian faith went from a rag-tag group of people after Christ's death and resurrection to being the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

In his book, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force*, Stark concludes that one important factor in the rise of Christianity was the way the early Christians responded to the two terrible epidemics. The way Christians cared for the sick and the dying, and the way they put into practice the Christian principle of mutual aid, enhanced the young faith's reputation and helped to cement the rise of Christianity.

Says Stark: "To cities filled with homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity

provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.”

Like those Christians who lived so long ago, Christians today are also called to respond to emergencies, be they natural disaster, the effects of acts of terror, epidemics, or pandemics. Many health care experts, such as the World Health Organization, say that a pandemic is inevitable. When a major pandemic hit Canada in 1918, 50,000 Canadians died. The Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that the next pandemic will kill between 11,000 to 58,000 Canadians and that 2.1 million to five million Canadians will get sick.

What is the calling of the church in response to such emergencies? Are we simply a collection of individuals and responsible citizens, and thus will act as any other good citizen of this country? I am thankful Christians do not have a monopoly on good deeds, but I do believe that the body of Christ has a specific, profound and deep identity and vocation, and it is by exploring this that we see that the church must respond to emergencies.

We should respond because we believe that God created human beings in God’s own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26).

God endowed us with intrinsic worth and dignity, and the capacities of choice and responsibility to care for creation but also to care for one another. Thus, because we are all created in the image of God, we are to treat each other and our neighbours, whether they are healthy or sick, with dignity and compassion.

We should respond because we are the people of God.

We are called by God to live out God’s creation intention as a people, to become a visible sign of God’s reign, to seek God’s wellness and peace and demonstrate it here and now as a sign for all of the kingdom that is coming. During a pandemic, congregations—and all of humanity—will face enormous challenges. And with the challenges there will be an even greater opportunity for the church to model kingdom care and leadership as a community, for the broader communities in which we are located. An emergency or pandemic will be yet another tangible way to shrink the gap between reflection and action, as we witness restorative people building values to Christian and non-Christian alike.

We should respond because we are Christ’s disciples.

Jesus called his disciples to experience the rule of the Kingdom of God, and then led them into encounters with extreme human need in order to offer compassion, healing and restoration. The story of the Samaritan who interrupted his journey to provide care for the man left beaten and injured by the roadside is a paradigm for a Christian response to those who have been stricken by a pandemic disease or other such emergency. The love of God compels in us the love of neighbour, especially the one in greatest need. (Luke 10: 25-37) And in the gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus teaching, healing and preparing his disciples, and then sending them out to do likewise. (Matt 25:34-40).

We should respond because we have been entrusted with the Holy Spirit (John 20:19-23)

We are the SENT people of God. We do not only send those we chose to send, but as the church, we have already been SENT by God, and empowered with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus appeared to his disciples after he had died, he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... Receive the Holy Spirit." We do not only send out missionaries to far away places, but rather, every follower of Jesus IS ALREADY SENT by God, as a part of the body of Christ, as a witness to the healing and reconciling and resurrection power of God. We are ALL sent to be peace makers, to offer healing, hope and to bring reconciliation where there was formerly division. We are all called to turn to the stranger, the alien and model the overflowing love and forgiveness that we have experienced through God. We ARE the living, visible, very real and all too human presence of God here in our local community. And if we do not step up to the plate in a time of emergency or pandemic, and take the lead in ministering selflessly as Jesus did, then we have not fully understood our calling as a people.

This next point may sound odd. And perhaps it is. The church should respond in times of emergency, because the church IS, and because the church is present.

For those of us who have spent years listening to, and working with, churches and people in other countries, it should strike a resonant cord. It was a Colombian church leader who pointed this out to me.

- 1) the church is the ONLY institution of any kind - government, non-government, for profit, or non-profit - the ONLY institution that is found in EVERY 'rincon', every nook and cranny, every corner, of society.
- 2) The church is the only body that goes into a community to engage that community, that DOESNT have an exit strategy. Business, government and para-church agencies and even foreign mission agencies will all begin work in a community and in their business plan is a plan to end that work and leave.

The church, however, is OF the community, FOR the community, BY the community, it IS the community. So while projects will come and go, businesses will open and close, government services will be funded and then not, it is the deeply rooted, local, contextual, profetic, discerning, community building people of God that will continue to live, and BE and witness to the transforming power of the healing and reconciling Lord Jesus, and they will do so right where they are. If a massive, networked crisis relief effort is needed, anywhere, the church should be front and centre.

As a Mennonite among you, I can say that Christians who are Mennonite should respond to an emergency or pandemic, because our "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective" presents a basis for a pandemic response.

The Mennonite "Confession of Faith" describes the calling of the church to express the compassionate reign of God: *"The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Jesus Christ in life . . . daring hospitality to all . . . called to live and minister as Christ lived and ministered in the world. The church is called to witness to the reign of God by embodying in Jesus' way in its own life . . . to be channel of God's healing."*

(p. 42) Therefore, the love and compassion of God should flow “through the church” (Ephesians 3:10), giving healing and hope to all, and especially those in crisis.

And finally, we should respond because intuitively we know, that as the church, we are called to be followers of Jesus Christ so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world. We cannot be faithful to our vocation as disciples of Christ, if we fail to actively engage the context in which we live. When the context around us changes, the church must adapt and respond so that it continues to make visible the relevant and critical reign of God in a way that is poignant and understandable. The opportunity to be faithful in the time of an emergency requires Christians to be clear of who we are as disciples, and clear about what our calling is in the world. If we are the hands and feet of Christ in the world today, if we are blessed with different gifts for the purpose of building up the body of Christ until ALL of us come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph 4), then it is incumbent on this same body to fulfill our vocation and use our gifts in the way that will most honor and glorify God in making the kingdom just that bit more visible today, here on earth.

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

Note:

This paper drew heavily on original work by Sven Erikson, Janet Plenert and John Longhurst prepared for the web site below.

A Web site with a variety of information and guidance for congregations is available at www.churchpandemicresources.ca

An introductory 9 min video that introduces congregations to the topic of Pandemic planning is easily accessible via a link on this web site.