

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES OF NEW ZEALAND

Rongopai

FOLLOWING JESUS IN A COVID-19 WORLD

Digital Open Doors

Pandemic Wisdom From Christian History

Samoan Seniors Dance Their Way Through Lockdown





VOLUME 11

Rongopai is the magazine of the Christian Community Churches of New Zealand Trust.

www.cccnz.nz

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FOLLOWING JESUS IN A COVID-19 WORLD



SOPHIA SINCLAIR
CCCNZ COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

We all know the world has changed—so much that it seems cliché to mention it.

But it has. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted our global society in ways we're only just coming to terms with.

I write this the day after learning Auckland is back in Level 3, and the rest of the country in Level 2. How familiar we've all become with levels, restrictions, navigating new protocol, facing changing circumstances, and balancing uncertainty with hope!

Distracted by scaffolding

At a recent staff retreat we gathered around and reflected on ways we saw God at work during lockdown. I was struck afresh by how God continues to work out his purposes in ways we least expect.

Oswald Chambers writes that we are often so focused on the importance of our own work for the Lord that we fail to see God's larger, grander purpose. Chambers describes our work as 'scaffolding' in comparison with God's compelling plan to reconcile people from every tribe, tongue and language to himself, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for us to see our scaffolding for what it really is, and to catch a glimpse of God's will at work in the world? For many the pandemic has forced us to re-think community, programs, discipleship, family habits...

Lament and remember

Psalm 102 is a psalm of lament, a prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and is crying out to God. I wonder how many of us have felt this way in the past six months?

“Lament is something of a lost art in a culture that demands positive thinking only, but consider the Psalms—God’s Word to us, God’s words for us to use to speak in all of life’s realities.”

Have you felt inadequate to care for the weighty needs of your family, church or community? Have you been burdened with grief or sickness? Have you felt helpless looking at our world and the roiling mess of politics, relationships and circumstances?

In your affliction, have you cried out to our God?

Lament is something of a lost art in a culture that demands positive thinking only, but consider the Psalms—God’s Word to us, God’s words for us to use to speak in all of life’s realities.

As the writer of this Psalm cries out in his suffering, he glorifies God as he reminds himself—and us—of who God is: “...you, O LORD, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations.” God is Almighty, seated on the throne. Steadfast.

The Psalmist reflects on his own transient nature; “My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass.” And the fleeting reality of this world: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain...”

But God

In a world that is changing, groaning, fighting, perishing... God remains the same. Eternal. Holy. The King on the throne.

In his anguish, the psalmist remembers who God is, and calls us to remember too.

“Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the LORD”

Let us reflect on who God is, what he has done, and what he is doing, and praise him.

In this issue of Rongopai we’re asking: What does it look like to follow Jesus Christ as Lord in a COVID-19 world? Where have we seen God at work during this season? What are we learning? What parts of our scaffolding will we change, keep or flex now we’ve been reminded of what God is building? How do we continue to share the good news of the death and resurrection

of Jesus in a world where social norms are rapidly shifting and needs of our communities growing?

As we lament and cry out, let us remember our God who is on the throne:

Our God, who brings healing and restoration.

Our God, who bled and died for our sins.

Our God, who defeated death and is risen.

Our God, who pours out his Holy Spirit.

Our God, who equips us for good works in every season.

Our God, who was, and is, and is to come.

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DIGITAL OPEN DOORS



MARYANNE WARDLAW
RONGOPAI WRITER

On 19 March, Northgate Community Church in Hamilton posted an update on its website saying that, due to world-wide changes, “the Government have outlawed any indoor meetings greater than 100 people. This means that Northgate Community Church will now close our worship services on Sundays until further notice.”

When the COVID-19 outbreak mutated from a headline news story to a local threat, Kiwi congregations had just days to reimagine most of their regular activities. But unlike previous generations who have weathered plagues, we didn’t have to isolate socially while distancing physically.

“Like many churches, we had no online presence except a website and Facebook group,” said Paul Collins, Northgate’s pastor. He knew that to serve the more than 200 people who regularly attend, that would have change. Within weeks, the church has its own YouTube channel with regularly posted videos and dozens of subscribers.

Around the country, congregations and study groups discovered the pros and cons of tools like Zoom, Facebook Live, Vimeo and YouTube. In some cases they haven’t simply adapted, but found new opportunities for outreach and discipleship.

One aspect of Northgate’s virtual services is a high rate of people from outside the church joining in virtually. When Paul began looking at YouTube’s analytics, it made for interesting reading. Among the stats: 25% of viewers don’t even live in New Zealand. One possible explanation is that more than 20 nationalities are represented in the congregation, naturally connecting it with communities around the world. Canada is among the top viewing nations, and the church is home to some Canadians, so word of the digital services may have spread organically.

One of the Northgate’s strengths is that a variety of people are involved in running the Sunday services, so that carried over to virtual church. They recorded their contributions on phones and computers, sent the files

to Paul, and he put it all together. He said it was a learning curve, but it became normal to start in on a Thursday afternoon, digitally preparing the weekly service.

“We’re asking ourselves, ‘Do we stay online?’ We probably will,” Paul said. “It’s good to get God’s word out beyond just ourselves.”

Nick Goodwin, Associate Pastor at Raleigh Street Christian Centre in Cambridge, has chaired the church’s COVID-19 response team. He said that they’ve had intentions to be more structured with their pastoral care and service planning, but lockdown forced them into action.

“This has been a disruptor,” he said. “We’re structuring operations so that we’re in touch with members regularly. And the Sunday service team created for lockdown will carry on.”

Karl Udy attends Northcross Community Church and oversees Tandem Ministries’ digital communications. He said that the pandemic has highlighted the tools that need to be adopted more widely and the improvements that should be fast-tracked. “A lot of these things were pushed forward because—while there were solutions out there that were available—it wasn’t until we got to this point where we were hurting that we realised we needed to make these changes.”

This necessity has already been the mother of invention in places where Sunday gatherings have never been straightforward.

“There are parts of the Church that have been operating under these sorts of restrictions for a long time,” Karl said. “You go to the Middle East, and they’ve been doing church online for years. You go to the outback of Australia, where you’d have to drive six hours to get to church—you don’t drive six hours to get to church. Especially in the persecuted church, it’s the way they’ve been doing things for years.”

This disruption in the way we “do church” has opened virtual doors for people who, for whatever reason, have difficulty crossing the physical threshold.

At Auckland Bible Church in Greenlane, church administrator Diane McClymont said she knew some people who find it difficult to make it to church were regularly joining in the Sunday morning Zoom sessions. She also knows of one couple who have never attended in person, despite their children often coming with the grandparents. In lockdown, the couple attended virtually with their children.

ABC’s leased premises at the Parenting Place sat empty while about 70 households logged into Zoom each

“This disruption in the way we ‘do church’ has opened virtual doors for people who, for whatever reason, have difficulty crossing the physical threshold.”

Sunday morning. They listened to an introductory worship song while watching each other get comfortable in front of laptops and TVs. A live welcome and prerecorded congregational prayer followed, and then several minutes for everyone to chat with others in randomly selected breakout groups. The prerecorded sermon, which appeared on ABC’s YouTube channel a few days earlier, streamed during the Zoom meetings. Some weeks, communion followed the sermon and participants supplied their own elements.

Karl said that for Christians—following the incarnate God, Jesus Christ—being physically present is central to much of our own lives and ministries. However, it is equally true, he said, that “digital is also part of God’s creation.” Some parts of discipleship and relationships are more difficult at a distance, but digital tools make other parts easier.

“This is why Paul wrote letters,” Karl pointed out, “but in his letters he says, ‘I long to be with you!’ We’ve got that tension we’re dealing with here. We would not have those letters if he’d done everything in person.”

At The Anchor in Whitby, Pastor Darryl Ward said that people who weren’t involved in small groups are now receiving weekly calls. “One of the really beautiful things to come out of this... is that our pastoral care team have drawn in more people,” he said. “Now that the reach is broadened, there’s a strong mood for us to continue doing online services.”

It takes sensitivity to run services that include pastoral prayers for individuals while broadcasting to the entire internet, but Darryl said that they’re figuring out how to do that well.

Along with Sunday services and pastoral care, churches had to get creative with community outreach. In some cases, courses such as Christianity Explored and Alpha have been able to carry on.

“Many churches were in the midst of running their Alphas when COVID happened,” said Zelda Robertson,

“I’m hoping that this is a wake-up call to the church to think about how what they do on a Sunday morning in a service introduces barriers that they may not be aware of.”

National Director of Alpha New Zealand. “I was so encouraged by these churches and their Alpha leaders persevering through their own limitations and lack of knowledge of the online space. God opened the doors. Some guests did not return, but for many a good 80% of their guests remained and wanted to finish.”

Those churches combined forces and created “one big online Alpha,” which Zelda said has helped grow volunteer teams and attendance. “Nothing can stop God from reaching the lost.”

In Paeroa, local connections are strong but church options are limited. Pastor Bill Tissingh, at Paeroa Bible Chapel, was surprised to see teachers and neighbours viewing his sermons on Facebook Live. On a pre-lockdown Sunday morning, they might have 100 people in attendance; online, at least as many were viewing, and the views continued to tick up. A month on from Easter, more than 900 people had checked out that morning’s service.

They aren’t the kind of videos you’d expect to go viral—much of the content is live streamed and the rest is recorded by people on phones and laptops playing music, praying for their church community, leading communion. However, this inclusion of many people from the congregation may actually encourage the church’s neighbours to tune in. Bill himself is highly involved in the community. He’s on a school board, chairs the college board, teaches Bible in Schools, and serves as a chaplain. These real-life connections may be translating to virtual opportunities.

Dr Stephen Garner, academic dean and senior lecturer in theology at Laidlaw College, said that lockdown has also given the wider church community a chance to be more empathetic.

“The experience of not being able to physically access the gathered community is the experience of many people anyway in the church,” he said—“those with disabilities, those who are unwell or unable to physically enter the church, those with English as a second or third language. I’m hoping that this is a wake-up call to the church to think about how what they do on a Sunday morning in a service introduces barriers that they may not be aware of.”

On the flip side, lockdown’s all-virtual environment highlighted the fact that some people don’t have internet access, either by choice or circumstantially. They are being increasingly excluded as communication and community adopts digital tools.

Stephen’s background is in both theology and computer science, so he’s been following this year’s intersection of church and technology with interest. Much of what he’s seen has encouraged him.

“The response of church communities has been driven in the first instance by pragmatism,” he said, “but increasingly, signs of creativity, empowerment of different members of these communities, and attention to rhythms of life are beginning to emerge.”

The big question now is how these new experiences will shape churches’ activities and priorities in the future.

“We want to take what we’ve learned from our experience of having to do church digitally, and say, ‘What things from here do we want to keep?’” Stephen said. “There are some things that, if we’re looking hard, make us better. Even if it’s just for those half dozen people for whom getting to church isn’t easy.”

Karl also sees long-term benefits coming from this short-term challenge. “I wonder if one of the reasons God has allowed this to happen has been to grow the church in its digital capability,” he said.

“If, at the end of this, the only difference is that now everybody knows how to use Zoom, then it’s an opportunity wasted. There are changes that needed to happen that people have been sitting on for a long time.”

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STUDENT MINISTRY IN A PHYSICALLY DISTANT WORLD



For those in student ministry at The University of Waikato, 2020 got off to a particularly good start. But after students had been back on campus for barely two weeks, laying those relational foundations came to a screeching halt.

“You rely on the start of each year to make new connections and see who’s interested,” said Nick Goodwin. He’s a staff worker with Tertiary Students Christian Fellowship in Waikato, part of his role as Associate Pastor at Raleigh Street Christian Centre in Cambridge. “That’s been more difficult this year.”

In Christian groups at tertiary institutions around the country, lockdown didn’t just impact group activities but also the ability to make contact with first-year students, plan events like Easter retreats and outreach, and prepare students to fill the shoes of outgoing leaders.

Students’ weekly gatherings continued, but with the same virtual twist that most of our work and social lives took.

Initially the five student leaders of TSCF Hamilton hosted Bible studies via Facebook Live, but the meetings lost something with the lack of interaction. They quickly ended up on Zoom. There, they could all see each other and gather in smaller breakout groups for discussions and activities.

Luke McDowall, who attends Hillcrest Chapel, is in his fourth year studying computer science at the University of Waikato. He is part of the group and helped lead it in 2019. For the students already

involved in campus ministry, he thinks that one of the main challenges has been to fully connect when you’re physically distant.

“It’s harder to be engaged online; there are more distractions,” he said. I’ve personally found that a bit harder, staying engaged in the Bible studies.”

On the plus side, he said that virtual meetings often had a good turnout because students had clearer schedules. Geography was also no barrier. The Hamilton group even combined with students from TSCF’s two groups in Tauranga during lockdown.

“It was quite nice getting to know them more,” Luke said. “Last year we had a camp with them at the beginning of the year, but this year camp got cancelled.”

Their main online event was a weekly study in Colossians. Nadine Liddle, who is a member of Raleigh Street, is also on staff with TSCF. She joined the online studies and was impressed by how well the students adapted. The basic plan is to read the passage together, then student leaders hosted breakout groups of three or four to discuss questions relating to it. Those conversations lasted 45 minutes to an hour.

“It feels so quick, because the discussions have been really good,” Nadine said. “They’ve really upped their game on asking open-ended questions.”

When they return to the larger group and share what they’ve talked about, it sparks more discussion. The meetings can run more than two hours.

“I thought that people wouldn’t want to be on a Zoom study that long, but people are really into it,” Nadine said.

A prayer closed out the official meetings, and Nadine said that more people joined in than she anticipated.

Nick has also observed this trend. “I’ve been really pleased to see the emphasis on prayer growing... It’s in a big group, praying for one another. I don’t know why it’s taken root in this time, in this format, but people are keen to pray.”

After the meetings, some students continued to hang out for online games. Their social nights, which fall on every third week, became a virtual games night using jackbox.tv.

Student groups around the country have also been creative with the way they've connected on social media, such as one in Lincoln starting a "Testimony Tuesday" in an existing Facebook group.

For staff workers, lockdown made discipleship of students who were already involved to more straightforward, but hindered new connections. For Nick, a normal week used to involve one-to-one Bible studies with several students and meeting up with students who aren't involved with the student group or who are curious about Christianity.

Without the routine and randomness of campus life, "things have been more focused and a lot simpler," Nick said. His one-to-one meetings moved to Zoom in the first semester, but opportunities to make new connections with students or follow up with those on the fringes evaporated.

At an organisational level, student ministries have also had to reimagine or defer training and evangelistic events.

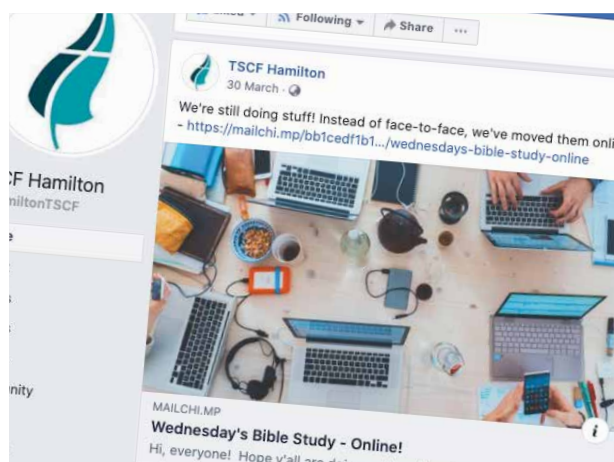
TSCF's annual conference, planned for Queenstown in early July, went virtual. The typical five days together with 70 or 80 students has been replaced by three days of online seminars, prayer times and offline activities. More students will be able to participate without the time and cost involved in physical attendance, however student ministries are losing opportunities to foster friendships and welcome people who aren't already part of groups.

Student Life, which is Tandem's ministry for university outreach, had planned to gather students from across the Pacific in July. By mid-March, Tandem's leadership started coming to terms with the fact that they wouldn't be able to host 600 students in Fiji.

"It was a once-in-ten-years sort of conference," said Karl Udy, Tandem's Digital Strategies Director and part of Northcross Church in Auckland. As conference plans collided with the spread of the virus, "very quickly it became very real."

TSCF groups in both Waikato and Dunedin had planned performances of the Mark Drama, a live presentation of the entire gospel that is making its way around the country. Plans for that will have to be revisited: "I think the best thing for the next semester is to do the meat and potatoes, to stick to the basics and train up more leaders for 2021," Nick said.

This break in groups' semester-to-semester flow may hold opportunities, Nick said, despite the challenge of not being able to pass the baton cleanly from old student leaders. "In some ways, it's quite good to sweep



away some of the old culture and just start fresh, and think, 'How do we want to rebuild? What's this going to look like in the future?'"

The disruption has already highlighted new ways to approach ministry. Last year, Nick was regularly meeting with a Chinese lecturer who was in New Zealand on exchange. The man was curious about Christianity, so they read through the gospel of Mark together. The lecturer returned to China in October, with no regular communication since.

"It didn't really occur to me that this isn't the end of talking to each other," Nick said. "This opens your eyes to the fact that it's quite possible to do things like this online. I've had some really good online studies with students."

Brian Wachter, who is an elder at Auckland Bible Church and works with the Navigators at the University of Auckland, also sees new opportunities to use technology. The Navigators began an online prayer time for students nationally, meeting several times a day. It had a high level of participation, and Brian expects that some form of that will carry on.

"I'm pretty Zoomed out, but significant growth and connection is still happening through that," he said. "This has normalised online video connection. I don't think it's going to be considered weird anymore; it's just another way to connect."

Story by Maryanne Wardlaw.

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DANCING THROUGH LOCKDOWN

For 10 weeks there was no singing, dancing or feasting on Thursdays at LifeChurch in Manurewa, South Auckland. When New Zealand went into lockdown on March 26, the 20 or so seniors who usually filled the meeting hall with music and laughter faced an indefinite separation from their friends.

But like most meetings in the days of COVID-19, the seniors' gathering quickly evolved into twice-weekly Zoom meetings.

"We learned something new," Tina Chang said of the video calls. "Growing up in Samoa, we didn't have anything like this."

Tina has been part of the group since it began about four years ago, and she now coordinates it. She said that two members bought laptops just so that they could continue meeting. A snippet of one session that Pastor Lui Ponifasio posted to Facebook shows Tina playing her ukulele in one window while members dance to the music in a dozen other windows.

"One of the highlights of my lockdown ... was our Zoom meetings with the seniors twice a week," Lui wrote online. "The focus was to keep them occupied, active, feed the mind with little games and projects, conversation on a range of topics, sharing from the Bible, telling stories of their younger days." He also encouraged them to pray together, write poems about pandemic life, and become more comfortable with technology.

They needed no help singing or laughing together.

Lui said that setting the meetings up was both challenging and encouraging. Many of them needed help to make the transition; some had never been on the internet before. Those who live with multiple generations had an advantage, as they were able to get help and borrow devices from digital natives. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Lui would log in an hour before the start time to troubleshoot for people. When he opened the meeting room half an hour later, there would already be people waiting to start.

"It was hilarious to see everyone interacting, just blown away that technology let them see each other," Lui said. He was amused by couples fighting over putting their microphone on mute and by random sounds like background conversations or the odd flush of a toilet.

Alongside the laughter, serious community building continued. The members supported each other through a death in the group, raising money for the family. They also invited friends to join the virtual gatherings and others found out about it online. Despite the distance, the lively group grew.

Finally, on June 4, LifeChurch's doors opened for them again. It was a cool, grey morning, and the hall at the front of the building filled with bright dresses, walkers, oven trays brimming with food, and ukuleles.



Half a dozen Samoan Bibles sat in front of their owners around a wide square of plastic trestle tables.

“There’s no physical distancing here,” Lui commented as the friends reunited.

When everyone had finished catching up and settled into their seats, one of the men opened with a Bible passage in Samoan. Then introductions began. Because a number of people were new, most people spoke for several minutes, sharing not just current details but some of their life stories and family connections. The speeches were regularly punctuated with hilarity.

“She’s saying the reason she came along is to find someone,” my neighbour translated to this Palagi in a whisper while laughter echoed off the walls. Fa’ivalu Aiolupotea smiled as the woman who was speaking patted the arm of the gentleman next to her. “He is single,” Fa’ivalu added with raised eyebrows. “His wife died—oh, two years ago?”

And so “finding someone” became the running joke. After another gentleman cracked up the room with that gag, Fa’ivalu nodded towards a woman at another table who was giggling.

“That’s his wife,” she explained.

One of the newer members expressed thanks for people’s care for him and his wife. They live in Samoa, but are staying in Auckland to support a daughter who has medical needs. In this group, they found a community.

After more than an hour and 24 introductions, Lui shared a bit more about the group and church.

“He’s saying that the name of the churches people attend isn’t important to him; it’s the faith,” Fa’ivalu relayed. She herself attends a different church, and

became part of the group thanks to the invitation of her late husband’s cousin. One of the newcomers, who Fa’ivalu recognised from the community, is Mormon.

Before lunch, Lui took the floor to share a message from the Bible, and for 20 minutes the room was still apart from nodding heads, scribbling pens and turning pages.

The stillness contrasted with the exercise time. Everyone got to their feet, even those who could barely shuffle without a walker, and they moved whatever still moved to a solid beat. More mellow tunes flowed afterwards as lunch was served, but while they filed past the tables of food some continued to bust out a dancey shuffle.

They love to dance, and they love to sing. During the down time, several women and their ukuleles serenaded the room, with others adding their voices and swaying in their seats. After lunch, traditional percussion sticks joined the ukuleles, the energy increased, and a couple of women began dancing inside the square of tables. In one corner most of the men—who were outnumbered two-to-one—spread out a set of dominoes and began play with serious faces. At another table, four women began a game of cards.

Meanwhile the volunteers, who included two of Lui’s daughters, cleaned away the platters of taro, coconut fish, chicken and chocolate birthday cake. To make these weekly meetings possible, the LifeChurch community opens the doors before 10am. The seniors stay until at least 2pm.

“They like to get out of the house,” Tina said, even though it is quite an effort for those who are less mobile.

Lui recognises that the effort is too much for some, particularly over winter. So he is making plans to offer more training to help seniors stay connected virtually, and LifeChurch has applied for funding from the Ministry of Social Development to buy iPads for those who need them. Since family members have returned to work, some who were joining in online now don’t have ready access to devices.

Nothing can fully replace gatherings like this weekly social oasis. However, the hope is that, whatever the weather or the lockdown level, these seniors will continue to make music.

Story and photos by Maryanne Wardlaw.

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WHERE DO YOU PUT YOUR TRUST?

Pandemic Insights from Christian History



DAN TYLER

PASTOR OF BIRKENHEAD COMMUNITY CHURCH

Stressful situations are brilliant at unveiling what people believe deep down, what we care most about and where we ultimately place our trust.

It is said that there are no atheists in ‘fox holes’. The terror of falling artillery, a rampaging terrorist, or even the inexorable march of a virus has the effect of laying our priorities bare. In a bizarre experience of dark irony, the virus that caused us to buy up all the masks has the effect of stripping us of the masks we have worn for the longest time.

It strikes me that the pandemic of the virus known as COVID-19 is one such stressful situation. Consider for a moment how people have talked about the virus. The virus is a political issue, an economic crisis, a sporting disaster and even, according to some sensationalist media, the beginning of the apocalypse.

In fact, almost every story I’ve read in the last few days has been about the virus and yet almost no mention has been made of the actual people who are sick. If I was a socialist before, I’m now a louder and more angry socialist. If I was a capitalist before, I’m now a louder and more angry capitalist. In the midst of a crisis, we become more selfish and try to identify someone to blame. Surely there is a better way?

But this is not the first or the worst health crisis the world or the church has ever known. Not even close. I wonder if this has made you think of how earlier Christians responded to what would have been known as ‘pestilence’ or plague. It has certainly caused me to think, to pull down some of the duster books in my library and read again with fresh eyes.

Eusebius, writing in the 4th Century in reference to a recent plague, talks of Christians “alone in the midst

of this terrible calamity proved by visible deeds their sympathy and humanity”

Even earlier, Dionysius of Alexandria writing to Hierax, another bishop in Egypt, contrasted the pagan response to a different plague: “at the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled... but do what they might they found it difficult to escape” with the Christian response “many in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead... the best of our brothers lost their lives in this way... in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

This is really more astonishing and more relevant than we would like to contemplate. Imagine our churches losing a generation of older men and women who have been following Jesus since before the Cold War—who have been preaching the gospel from the pulpits and in Sunday Schools for years—because they lost their lives in nursing and caring for victims of this virus... it is very close to home.

For the cynical amongst us, there is really no reason to doubt Dionysius’ words. He is writing to a church to commend them for the sacrifice they have made within the past year. He is not writing fake news or even hagiography, his goal is simply to say that he knows what they have been through and to encourage them to continue in the faith.

With even more confidence we can consider the words of a pagan emperor as Christianity is exploding under him without his blessing “when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by our priests, the impious Christians observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence... these impious Christians support not only their poor but ours as well!”

“Almost every story I’ve read in the last few days has been about the virus and yet almost no mention has been made of the actual people who are sick.”

When Paul writes in Colossians that he fills up in his body that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions he is referring to this sort of behaviour. The behaviour that takes the perfect finished work of Christ and makes it imminent, real, personal and tangible. As Christians lay their lives down for one another the gospel story is seen in technicolour and God is glorified through us.

Another early Christian leader, called Tertullian, writes in his defence of the faith "it is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of opponents" even as Jesus first said "they will know you are my disciples by your love for each other."

As the formally agnostic sociologist, Rodney Stark, wrote: "at a time when all other faiths were called to question, Christianity offered explanation and comfort. Even more important, Christian doctrine provided a prescription for action. That is, the Christian way appeared to work." He subsequently became a Christian.

The prescription for action provided by the Christian faith in the Roman Empire is the same prescription for action that speaks to us today. As churches we need to put our faith into action by loving the people most affected by the virus. I would consider that running

errands for those most at risk, checking in with people over the phone and honouring healthcare workers in our number to only be the start of honouring our forefathers who have carried "around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

This doesn't call Christians to recklessness and certainly not for behaviour that puts other people's health at risk—far from it—but it reminds us of something: there is nothing that can happen to you that relieves you from the responsibility to love one another. To consider others more highly than yourself is the highest calling of a disciple of Jesus.

Plagues, terrorism and tragedy of every kind create an environment in which racism becomes excused, selfishness becomes acceptable and people become statistics. Christians must stand—alone if necessary—in sharp relief from this. Loving the foreigner, serving the other and seeing the person not the statistic.

This is a stressful situation. Let it reveal our deep trust in Jesus.

Contact Dan Tyler: dan@bcc.org.nz



AMBASSADORS TOGETHER

CCCNZ Communications Manager Sophia Sinclair caught up with Murray Stevenson to chat about his new role as Missions Ambassador for GC3—Global Connections in Mission.

You've been involved with pastoral ministry and in cross-cultural mission work for a number of years, what will this new role involve?

I'll be liaising with churches and their missions teams to promote the work of GC3, and cross-cultural mission generally, seeking to help churches re-engage with mission in diverse ways and work together with GC3 mission partners to bring the gospel to the forefront.

My aim is to spend time with churches and individuals, pointing to the proclamation of the gospel message itself, and the saving faith we have in Christ, and why it's still good news today—whether we're overseas or here in New Zealand.

Representing GC3 is a privilege because our people and our organisation prioritise God's call to represent Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). Carrying his good news to all the world through intentional, cross-cultural mission is of first importance—we are ambassadors together.

You mentioned the diversity of ways to engage with mission, what are some practical ways GC3 supports churches to do this?

There is great diversity in our movement, and this is reflected in the ways churches engage with global mission. Many churches are serving local and global communities in a variety of practical ways. Wherever we are serving practically, we must have a way for the gospel to be clearly proclaimed, I'm hoping to encourage churches in this.

A key part of my role will involve introducing people to GC3 and what it offers. A significant privilege is telling the stories of what God is doing overseas, so that others can also be encouraged and engage with what is happening.

One area where GC3 provides help for churches is supporting the transfer of funds, especially in countries where there are barriers, to make sure money is going to the right people in the right place.

The coronavirus pandemic must have had a big impact on mission partners all over the world, how are things going?

Over the last month I've been writing to missionary partners individually. I've sent about 150 letters or notes during this time. Every country has been impacted by COVID-19.

31% of our mission partners are back home in New Zealand because of circumstances like border closures, or uncertainty.

The most severely affected are team mission projects and short-term mission engagements, many of which have ceased or been cancelled.

Many ministries with a strong electronic or literature element have continued, albeit with some difficulties! I would hope that we don't go back to some modes of operation and that we are able to continue appropriate use of video technology where beneficial.

Ministries that are driven by local believers—where mission partners have invested in developing indigenous leadership—continue to flourish. This is really good news and a helpful reminder that this model supports the growth of the Church.

I've been asking our mission partners: "Who are the partners you're working with?" "Who are the key people you are partnering with?" "Who will become the drivers of what is happening in their local context?" We want to work ourselves out of a job, because someone else is capably trained and supported to do it!

What encouragement would you have for people in our movement?

Life looks different now, in the midst of the pandemic, but the gospel message is still exactly the same. Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Take courage, as you look again at the message of the gospel, knowing that it has not changed and will sustain your work for Jesus.

Get in touch with Murray: ambassador@gc3.org.nz

Murray and Joy Stevenson are a part of Clark Road Chapel in Whangarei. They've been involved with cross-cultural ministry for a number of years, serving in France and The Republic of Congo. They have also served in pastoral ministry in part-time and full-time capacities in New Zealand.



GOD'S WORD IS NOT CHAINED



GRAHAM ASHBY
GRAHAM AND WANDA ASHBY MINISTRIES

Recently I had the most intriguing conversation with a Christian prison guard. He revealed that prior to the national lockdown mandate, all prison staff were informed to prepare for reactions and maybe even rebellion in the New Zealand prisons. Authorities believed that lockdown would give the prison communities an excuse to challenge the minimal staff and revolt against the imposing orders for their confinement without family visiting or other privileges ceasing.

The prison establishment prepared and braced themselves for some serious protest, but ultimately it never eventuated. My friend recently asked one of the inmates why this reaction never happened. The inmate divulged the thinking within the prisoner community.

Firstly, overall, there was complete acceptance that this was the right decision by the government in order to keep their families safe. Unable to be with their families because of their incarceration, they were grateful that a national lockdown meant that their loved ones were protected and secure in their own homes. Despite

their own difficult isolation, they did not want to 'rock the boat' and jeopardise the security of their families.

Secondly, the prisoners in permanent lockdown were comforted by knowing that all New Zealanders were experiencing a type of 'lockdown' that they endure every day. They felt that with all New Zealanders being ordered to stay at home, a new understanding and appreciation of the conditions that prisoners live in would be educational to the New Zealand public.

Thirdly, they remained calm and grateful that their daily needs were being met and were thankful that guards were considered as essential workers to care for them. They acknowledged that the guards had families of their own and probably wanted to be at home with their loved ones. The prisoners respected the sacrifices that guards made on their behalf.

Finally, with no prison chaplains allowed into the prisons during the lockdown period, inmates who had become Christians stepped up and spiritually cared for other prisoners. This 'internal' ministry by prisoners has strengthened the respect and hope that

“I was particularly encouraged to learn that Christian prisoners had risen to address the pastoral needs within their confinement and had ministered to their own with God’s Word and with acts of love.”

the Christian message has within the walls of the New Zealand prisons.

This warmed my heart greatly and I was delighted to hear that so many positives came out of such a negative situation. I was particularly encouraged to learn that Christian prisoners had risen to address the pastoral needs within their confinement and had ministered to their own with God’s Word and with acts of love. Clearly, as Paul in prison wrote, “God’s Word is not chained” (2 Tim. 2:9).

I spoke with another prison ministry volunteer and he shared this story with me:

“This was my first time volunteering since the lifting of the lockdown and I had prayed that the Holy Spirit would send men with open ears to hear and minds to understand the gospel message. God answers prayer in amazing ways.

“I had just entered the first unit and set up to prepare for services when the first man arrived. He immediately expressed his delight in seeing me, he introduced himself and said he had had been waiting for me as he wanted to be saved.

“As we were the only ones in the room, we discussed what he understood by salvation and I explained that it was a serious matter and God could see his heart and know his thinking. Further talking convinced me that he understood and was serious. We then prayed, him going first. Again, there was further evidence that he was serious.

“At that time a second man came in and introduced himself and we went into the message I had prepared. After I had finished the second man asked about salvation. After much discussion he then told me he had a sister who was a Christian and he wanted to talk with her as he realised it was a serious step he was about to take.

“We then finished the first man, now a new believer, walked with me to the unit gate and I continued to talk about how to grow as a Christian. He then expressed that he felt a great weight had been lifted off him and that he was so happy.

“I then went to the second unit I had been allotted. A number of men whom I knew very well arrived for services along with a new man. We sang a number of hymns then I presented the message. At the end I asked for any questions and was asked if we could each pray in closing.

“But before we could pray the new man asked if he could be saved. After asking what he was meaning, again I was assured that this man was serious and understood what it was he was asking. He asked to pray first which he did along with the other men who were there and we finished.

“I know that both the Church and individuals were praying for God to work in a mighty way and God answered those prayers. Praise God!”

May we never forget the power of God’s Spirit when men and women arise with his Word to minister to those who feel trapped, fearful and isolated. Let us keep praying that the many prisoners who were exposed to the Christian witness will soon respond to the hope, peace and forgiveness that can be found in Christ our Saviour.

And let us take a moment or two to pray for all chaplains and the volunteers who so faithfully serve in the prison ministries here in New Zealand. The evidence suggests they are highly respected and valued. With our prayers added, may they see eternal rewards for their labours.

**Contact Graham & Wanda: graham@gaministry.co.nz
www.gaministry.co.nz, 03 44 888 01 or 021 05 888 07**

Graham and Wanda Ashby have been involved in a travelling ministry throughout New Zealand and internationally for over 34 years. Graham is a passionate Bible preacher and teacher; speaking at churches, conferences, seminars, men and women’s meetings, youth camps and children’s outreaches. Graham and Wanda are committed to serving the CCCNZ movement.



THANKS FOR JOINING TOGETHER IN PRAYER

NATIONAL PRAYER GATHERING



A MOVEMENT THAT PRAYS

Over Lockdown we noticed God powerfully at work among his people, calling them to prayer, repentance and praise. More than before, people were keen to get together via Zoom and in homes to pray.

Prayer Coordinator Jackie Millar and Events and Promotions Manager Hannah Munro organised a number of nationwide and regional Prayer Gatherings, held virtually over Zoom. What a joy to see people gather together with a renewed zeal for praying together.

The desire to meet face-to-face to pray sparked plans for Prayer Gatherings all over New Zealand. If the Lord allows, these events will be taking place over the next few months, will you consider joining us?

All details: www.cccnz.nz/regional-prayer-gatherings

Otago/Southland

Caversham Community Church

10am

19 September

Canterbury

Rutland Street Church

4pm

20 September

Auckland

Howick Community Church

6pm

18 October



To talk all things prayer, please get in touch with Jackie Millar, CCCNZ Prayer Coordinator: jackiemillar@cccnz.nz

SERVING YOU



PRAYER

Jackie Millar

Supporting churches and ministries in a flourishing prayer life



WORSHIP

Yvonne Heng

Supporting and encouraging churches in their music and worship ministry



PASTORLINK

Kerry Rickard

Growing a network of pastors supporting pastors



EVENTS

Hannah Munro

Coordinating and promoting CCCNZ events around New Zealand



CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Julie McKinnon

Supporting and resourcing parents and leaders to disciple children and their families



TRAINING & SCHOLARSHIPS

Rob Morton

Supporting churches and individuals to pursue ministry training



YOUTH

Murray Brown

Supporting local youth ministries through training, coaching and resourcing



AUCKLAND COMMUNITY

Lui Ponifasio

Connecting, mobilising and enabling churches for church planting across Auckland



RESOURCING

Danielle Diprose

Health and Safety, Financial Reporting, Compliance, Employment and Cost Saving Resources



COMMUNICATIONS

Sophia Sinclair

Communications, Rongopai magazine, newsletters, social media and website

LOOKING FOR FURTHER SUPPORT?

As we write this we're heading back into higher levels as the resurgence of COVID-19 hits.

If you're looking for a refresher on ideas, sample plans and protocols, or some support for ministry, our COVID-19 resources page remains live on our website, with a link from the home page: www.cccnz.nz

