

The Response of Christians and Churches in India to COVID-19

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C OVID-19 has left a sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and fear in all communities around the world. Jesus's words on the separation that can come between the members of a family (cf. Luke 12:52–53) eerily apply to various situations where contracting this disease brings the fear of being disowned by your very own. At the end of 2020, India had the second largest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, after the United States. A glimmer of hope lies in the discovery of a truly effective vaccine that would control this disease, but will it be able to protect people from new strains of the virus found in the United Kingdom and South Africa? In a situation like this, we need to reaffirm God's sovereignty and his care for his creation and for his church. In this reflection, we will look at the response of the church in India to the pandemic. Before we do that, it is important to grasp certain basics about India.

India is a complex population of 1.3 billion. It is a multicultural, multi-religious, and multilingual people living in twenty-eight states and eight union territories, divided roughly according to some major languages of the land. Christianity is largely a minority religion (officially 2.3%), but there are two states where Christians are the majority. However, their populations are relatively small. The response to COVID-19 in the states where

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Christians are numerous, Mizoram and Nagaland in the North-East, has been very different from that in most other parts where they are a minority. There is also one state, Kerala, where Syrian Orthodox Christians, though not in the majority, have a long history and considerable influence in society. These churches and their affiliates have been articulate in their responses to the pandemic. This shows that we cannot expect a uniform response from Christians and the church throughout India to COVID-19, but we can trace a general response.

“You are the salt of the earth. ... You are the light of the world.” (Matt 5:13–14 NIV)

Christians are generally known throughout India for their contribution to the country in three areas: education, health, and social advancement. Their role in providing health care and social uplift became especially prominent in the months after the outbreak of the pandemic. In many cases, the church assisted the government by becoming an avenue for social awareness. The social action and development organizations in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Protestant churches emerged as leaders in the early stages of the epidemic. One outstanding example of their contribution was during the lockdowns in assisting migrant workers stranded in the main cities, some of them hundreds or more than a thousand kilometers away from their villages, by providing temporary shelter and food and making arrangements to send them to their homes. They even extended help after the workers reached their villages. Leading among these development organizations were Caritas of the RCC and the Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief (EFICOR).

Christian hospitals in India played a crucial role in the wake of the epidemic. Both Vellore Christian Hospital in South India and Ludhiana Christian Hospital in North India took active roles at both national and international levels by being specialists and hosting webinars on COVID-19 in addition to creating awareness of the epidemic in their respective localities. Furthermore, other Christian hospitals under the umbrella of the Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA) and a number of independent mission hospitals throughout the land had a significant impact in various states by continuing their ministry of healing and compassion, providing basic necessities for the poor, and in general taking initiatives in public health to assist the government in the massive task at hand. World Vision focused on creating awareness among children by counseling them on the dangers of the disease and how to take preventive action. This contribution of the Christian hospitals and development organizations was recognized

when several institutions and individuals were honored for their exceptional contributions in the fight against COVID-19. In short, Christians fully cooperated with the government both in contributing funds and assisting in different ways.

Particularly during lockdowns, local churches took steps to comfort and encourage their congregations. In one case, where members of an ethnic Christian community wished to return to their home state during the lockdown when train and bus services were disrupted, their pastor obtained special permission to send them by arranging private transportation in buses on a journey lasting more than two days. Pastors were a source of comfort through online preaching and regularly visiting congregation members when possible to ensure they were safe and had food supplies. As one young pastor put it, we had online sermons, online Bible studies, and online visitation and counseling.

Of particular interest is the case of one pastor who contracted COVID-19 and was isolated in a special ward. Amidst all the depression of the fellow patients, he could keep his spirits high by trusting in the Lord and knowing that whether in life or in death he was safe with the Lord. Since his discharge from the hospital, he has been a vibrant messenger of the hope that Christ has to offer.

Preach the Word;
be prepared in season and out of season;
correct, rebuke and encourage—
with great patience and careful instruction. (2 Tim 4:2 NIV)

The church responded to the epidemic by taking a proactive attitude in ministering to the emotional and physical needs of congregations. One difficulty was that of weekend lockdowns, which meant that Christians could not meet on Sunday. To overcome this, a vigorous online ministry was initiated with sermons appropriate for the pandemic context. Platforms such as YouTube and Zoom were used extensively. Almost all sermons preached during those months made reference to COVID-19. Some sermons were specifically focused on the pandemic, as their titles reveal: “God Will Rescue You from the Pandemic”; “Mizos and the Pandemic”; and “Pandemic, Famine, and Earthquake.” These sermons were followed by the believers who needed all the comfort they could receive. Several pastors and ruling elders uploaded sermons on social media to encourage the people. The pastors comforted them from God’s Word. In some parts of the country where Christians are numerous, the church took leadership in giving instructions on how to cooperate in order to prevent the spread of the disease. It would

not be an exaggeration to say that almost every sermon preached during the alarming rise in the number of cases had a call to repentance and words of comfort and hope.

Now I want you to know ...
that what has happened to me
has actually served to advance the gospel. (Phil 1:12)

The church in India can identify with Paul's sentiments. It seemed to us like we were in prison when every weekend a lockdown would mean that we could not gather together. However, this seeming "thorn in the flesh" (cf. 2 Cor 12:7), which evoked a response from the church, is the biggest take-away for Christians in India. Instead of being discouraged and giving up, the church adapted to the new situation by seizing various media platforms to communicate with its members. A well-known Christian radio network, which had hitherto only aired messages on radio, additionally used Zoom to minister to its constituency, which grew exponentially since the broadcasts were now reaching a wider audience, live and with video. One church uses Zoom to reach a greater audience in their denomination with meetings *every* day in the mornings and evenings that are heard by their friends in India and abroad. They could never have done this earlier as scheduled physical meetings had numerous limitations. In many ways, the lockdowns and restrictions on meeting together have resulted in greater witness and strengthening of the churches.

Seminaries that needed help from visiting teachers abroad and other parts of the land now have them teach online without having to go through the red tape associated with such things as visas. Though we do hope for a day when things return to normal and students will be on campus, COVID-19 has opened future possibilities for online lectures that would help us benefit from the best scholars available abroad.

All this is not to say that the changes introduced during the pandemic are without problems. There are issues with connectivity during online lectures, sermons, and Bible studies. Students often tell us of power failures, losing connectivity, and poor reception during classes. Sometimes, the teachers themselves faced these problems, which affected the whole class. Some churches have uploaded their services to YouTube, which enables church members to watch the service at any time. Paramount among the objections is that church meetings became impersonal. This was particularly felt in the churches in India, but without doubt it is felt to some degree worldwide.

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced was with our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Almost every online attempt to celebrate this essential part of our communion with the Lord is fraught with difficulties. Should we practice what the early church did when the local bishop would consecrate and break the bread and send a piece to be mixed with the bread in each of the churches in his parish (a practice called *fragmentum*)? Who should administer the sacraments? Would there be enough elders to administer the sacrament in various places? These are only some of the questions that need to be considered.

To conclude, amidst the pandemic we can affirm that God is in control over the affairs of the world. Pandemics will come and leave in their wake untold suffering and fear. We need to listen to what God is saying to us. And to know this we need to read his Word with anticipation. Perhaps this will move us from fear to faith, and from hopelessness to hopefulness. May the Lord be glorified!