

Missions in the Post-Pandemic Era: Challenges and Opportunities in the New Normal

Esther X. Yang

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with records of the World Health Organization, the COVID 19 pandemic has infected over 762 million, and has been the cause of death for over 6.8 million worldwide. Out of this large picture, several hundred ordained bishops and ministers from the Church of God denomination (Cleveland, TN) have passed from this deadly pandemic in the past three years. These deaths are not strangers, but close coworkers and fellow missionaries, dedicated ministers, and anointed preachers in the field. The Church of God has considered these lives as a major loss toward the work of the mission field, where the “harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:38).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges and opportunities in the post pandemic normal so that it might be a helpful and practical application. In order to do so, I intend to layout the five characteristics of the new post-pandemic normal, then I will lay out challenges and opportunities as it relates to those on the missions field. The five areas of examination are: mental health, caregiver burnout, education, behavioral and social changes, and economic stress. After outlining the major characteristics, I will explore the main obstacles and opportunities on the mission field and present practical tips for ministers.

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

To see the challenges and opportunities of the new normal, we will look at the characteristics that have shifted our world, post pandemic. According to the University of Alabama in Birmingham, the pandemic has shifted our attention to the field of mental health (UAB, 2022). The increase of deaths and widespread social isolation has brought on or at least exposed tremendous cases of depression, insomnia, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among all age groups. Furthermore, many families and friends were not able to grieve in typical ways as they were barred from seeing the loved ones in their final hours. Those left behind in a wake of grieving were often left to grieve alone.

The isolation and grief caused major challenges as those in traditional ministerial and medical roles could not practice as they normally do. Hospital chaplains were often prohibited from physical visits. Pastors with congregants in the hospital could not do their usual visits, and many churches and Christian funeral homes struggled with issues of capacity and

availability.

Gospel minded Christians consider the growing awareness of mental health as an opportunity for the Church at large to take action and heal a broken world. This focus on mental health presents an opportunity for missionaries to show care when people need it most, or are at their most vulnerable stages.

CAREGIVER BURNOUT

The subject of caregiver burnout applies to both medical staff as well as ministerial staff. The pressure both in the demands and the amount of clients or congregants overwhelms caregivers to the point of exhaustion. Stress, depression, insufficient rest, spiritual dryness, loss of motivation, feelings of isolation, sensitivity to temptation, and disengagement or lack of compassion to those one serves are all characteristics of burnout we have seen over the recent years. Burnout can be physical, spiritual, relational or emotional.

Regarding the opportunities from caregiver burnout, there is great potential for missions workers to change their focus to ministries of recovery and retreat for weary souls. Whether silent retreats, specific conferences, or even off-site pilgrimages, these acts of spiritual rest can provide great nourishment for those who have experienced burnout.

The major challenge for missions and church ministry regarding caregiver burnout is prevention and recovery. Kevin Halloran with Word Partners offered salient tips on how to reduce this ministry burnout (Word Partners, 2020). He recommended that one spend increase time in prayer and Scripture reading, focus on the positive, participate in energizing activities, cut off draining relationships and find ways to express gratitude. The best suggestion the author offers is to regain lost vision for ministry. I believe this is the most crucial key because without this vision, nothing more can be accomplished. As Matthew 11: 28-30 advises, those who are weary, can find their true rest in their faith in Christ. Furthermore,

I Corinthians 15:58 advises believers to be “steadfast and un-moveable” because one’s work and service for the Lord is never in vain.

Regarding the opportunities from caregiver burnout, there is great potential for missions workers to change their focus to ministries of recovery and retreat for weary souls. Whether silent retreats, specific conferences, or even off-site pilgrimages, these acts of spiritual rest can provide great nourishment for those who have experienced burnout. By seeking these opportunities of recovery and retreat, one should look for chances to cooperate with other businesses and organizations to enlarge their scope of impact.

EDUCATION BARRIERS

The pandemic has brought on significant educational challenges as many young and adult learners shifted toward online learning. Since March of 2020, most schools in America shifted immediately in person classes to online presence and digital communication, even if schools and institutions were not ready to give such quality education. Similarly, the Church at large had to adjust to online services and Facebook Live streaming Church events.

For many who are not technologically savvy, learning through screens and computers presents a major challenge, especially for older generations. For those that did grow up in the digital age, relying on technology, rather than face to face interactions makes it harder to sense and speculate what another person might be needing. Many people, especially ministers, rely on interpersonal interactions to be able to minister at their best because they can use facial expressions, body language, tone and inflection to determine what a person might need at that moment.

While online education presents quite a few challenges and can be exhausting for many, it also offers a great opportunity to reach far more people than could ever have attended in person events. The advantage of online education and ministry is the ever increasing, almost limitless scope of those that can be reached. Furthermore, this also highlights a new and different demographic to reach, as people who are more technologically inclined can access online events or participate in online learning, whether synchronous or asynchronous. Online ministry expands far beyond a set location or time—ministers and missionaries are able to connect with people half a world away, with the touch of their fingertips. The shifts in learning and technology can span a wide range for different types of learners, as many ministers have employed “hybrid” services in churches where congregants can choose physical or virtual attendance. In short, a move toward online education forces the church and its workers to adapt to a new age, and to develop new skills for reaching the lost, whether video streaming, internet chat systems, and social networks.

David Royall recommends many practical suggestions for running hybrid churches, which can

also be used for hybrid missions (Royall, 2023). He recommends presenting the mission first; because ministries can often change and adapt, churches must hold to their mission and core values as the times and modes change. Secondly, he recommends for churches to “set out a digital welcome mat” and think of the digital world as its own congregation. The physical and virtual congregation should both be taken seriously. Lastly, he suggests that churches should be open to experiment by focusing on connection and trying new methods of outreach and worship. As the old saying goes, the last words of a dying church are, “We never did it that way before!” There are endless possibilities for engagement, as long as the purpose remains the same, the methodology can change.

BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES

The pandemic restrictions such as social distancing, long periods of quarantine, and mask wearing have subsequently weakened social ties that have impacted communication and trust in society. Overall, there is less understanding and trust between individuals. The Church and the mission field was not exempt from these changes, and the downsides of the social and behavioral changes within society present a huge challenge when spreading the Gospel. Communication between leaders, pastors, ministry teams and their local congregations as well as the relationships between missionaries and their nationals has deteriorated the trust between groups, especially between ethnic and cultural boundaries. This decline in trust, which is the foundation for non Christians to be open to receiving the Gospel, has grown among across social groups in the wake of an atmosphere of mis-information and anger.

According to Dr. Hong Yang, there five foundational factors to building the crucial foundation of trust: test, time, trajectory, transparency, truth. Any activity (Yang, 2013) or sharing of faith requires truth and honesty between parties, and without this transparency, a missionary will lose social and personal credibility. When a missionary is on the field, those receiving their message are not only learning to trust the one sharing the Gospel, but also, in many ways, they are “testing” the message, and it’s deliverer. Furthermore, trust must be built over time, and the longer time a person has embedded themselves within a community, the more the trust increases.

These behavioral and social changes of an atmosphere of mistrust has, however, created more opportunities. The pandemic has forced missionaries to adjust, be flexible, and adapt to different situations and social behaviors. These re-strategizing means that missionaries must think of new ways to engage. If missionaries can employ activities and engage in a way that help build trust, whether conventional or

non-conventional ways, their mission will succeed. There is a well-known Chinese adage by Lao-Ze, which says, "If you tell me, I will forget. If you show me, I will remember. If you involve me, I will learn." This is the heart of readjusting to build more trust in a post-pandemic society.

THE YO-YO ECONOMY

Out of all the changes the pandemic has created, the economic landscape has arguably rocked the global landscape the most. Not only has the pandemic affected the American economy, but worldwide trade, production, and distribution at large. In the present atmosphere of 2023, the aftermath of the pandemic brought about an economic recession of progress and drastic inflation of prices. While job growth two to three years out of the height of the pandemic has not stagnated, the price and cost of living has caused tremendous challenges for the average home, and for missionaries.

Missionaries face struggle from both sides: the donor base and incoming missions giving have fluctuated based on the average national salary, also the outgoing costs for upkeep and travel has increased greatly for missionaries. Regarding the donor base, inflation, shut downs, and changes or losses of jobs has effected the regular giving of households to missions and non profit work. Families under financial stress or survival mode choose to cut donations and non-essentials to make ends meet. Missionaries also cannot operate with the same budget pre-pandemic, even if there were no changes to the giving. For example, a missionary to China could purchase a ticket for \$1000 before the pandemic, however, since the People's Republic of China changed their policies regarding foreign visits and blocked previously granted visas, the average cost of a ticket increased to \$4000 to \$7500 at its peak. This travel cost only reflects the international plane ticket, not to mention the increase in domestic travel from city to city.

The dramatic changes to the economy during and after the pandemic have impacted missionaries negatively, however, there are opportunities. The unstable economy causes believers to rethink the things we treasure and bring the sayings of Jesus to reality—"store your treasures in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy, and thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be" (Matthew 6: 19-20). The economic struggles allows us to prioritize and reprioritize what means the most to us. Those on the mission field grow in authenticity in discipleship and faith that God will provide. Working in the mission field is not about converting the non-believers but about making disciples for Jesus who are solid in character.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic was unexpected, and brought on

hardships no one foresaw. In the darkness and struggle, the church can find light and hope. This essay briefly focused on five categories of change: mental health, caregiver burnout, education, social and behavioral changes, and economic stress. These topics only reflect a few of the major post-pandemic realities, there are many more unlisted. This essay has explored many of the challenges that the church faces in adaption, but also has discussed the opportunities these realities bring. As missionaries continue to share the Gospel and return the field, my prayer is that those who serve continue to receive revelation from the Holy Spirit on engagement and opportunity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY SOURCES

- Halloran, Kevin. (Jan20, 2020). "Christian Ministry Burnout: Prevention, Signs, Statistics and Recovery." www.worldpartners.org/resources/christian-ministry-burnout-prevention-signs-statistics-and-recovery/
- Royall, David. (Jan 2023). "5 Strategies for Running An Effective Hybrid Church." WWW. Pushpay.com/hybrid-church/ (
- Sanou, Doubaker; Josh Dietrich & Tyler Kern (Fall 2022). "Towards A Post-Pandemic Mission." WWW.digitalcommons.andrews.University of Alabama at Birmingham. "How the Covid-19 Pandemic Changed Society." (Mar 2020). www.uah.edu/news/youcanuse/hem12697/howthecovid-19pandemicchangedsociety.
- Yang, Hong. Life Lessons: Winning the Victory, (2013, PP. 93-98). Pathway Press, Cleveland, TN.



Esther Yang
estherxyang@yahoo.com

Esther Yang was born and raised in China. She studied in Henan University and graduated with her Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Lee University in Tennessee. She also obtained her MA and MDiv from the Pentecostal Theological Seminary, and later finished Doctor of Ministry in from Ashland Theological Seminary in Ohio. As an ordained minister of the Church of God, she is a missionary, evangelist, and educator. For the past 34 years she has been working in the mission field with her husband Dr. Hong Yang. Together they have traveled to over 100 countries preaching in various churches and teaching in conventions, bible schools and seminaries. She specializes in ministerial training, counseling, and leadership development.