

SARS Outbreak Puts Canadian Charismatic Church in Quarantine

Members of a charismatic Catholic community in Toronto contracted the disease, resulting in one death

The SARS epidemic that took the lives of 36 Canadians also affected the Christian community in Toronto, putting a 500-strong charismatic group in quarantine.

Members of the Filipino charismatic group Bukas-Loob Sa Diyos (BLD) became infected with the deadly disease after some of them visited a funeral home following the death of the father of a church member, who was not known at that stage to have succumbed to SARS.

The man's son was hospitalized the following day with SARS-like symptoms, and 75 other members of the group who had visited the funeral home went into voluntary quarantine.

When similar symptoms began appearing about one week later in others from BLD who had not been at the funeral home, Toronto Public Health officials asked all 500 Toronto members of the group plus their families to go into quarantine over the Easter weekend.

"For such a small community, it's been really rough. It was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Dr. Elizabeth Rea, a doctor working on the outbreak. "The encouragement and support these people gave to one another was truly impressive, and they cooperated very well with public health."

During quarantine, the group suffered discrimination from some medical facilities, which posted signs saying, "If you are a member of the BLD community, do not enter." One BLD mother said classmates of BLD members' children were phoning and telling the quarantined children they were going to die. A morning radio-show host described group members as "enemies of the people."

Belle Escano, one of BLD Toronto's founding members, said despite the slander, the quarantine became a rich time of communion with God over Holy Week and Easter.

"We were blessed and honored that the Lord chose us to be beside Him during Holy Week. Usually we're so busy trying to reach people for the Lord," she told Charisma. "I know that our community will emerge stronger and more cohesive than ever because of this experience."

Escano said members kept in touch with one another by telephone, praying, encouraging and even singing praises.

Founded in 1983 in Manila, Philippines, the BLD movement—whose name means "open in spirit to God"—has spread to several other countries, including Canada. Most of the 650 Canadian members are in the Toronto area.

Each member attends his or her own local church and joins with other BLD members for prayer meetings and outreach to the community. Under the umbrella of the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, BLD Toronto is an active member of the archdiocese's charismatic renewal ministry.

“Our main charismatic expression is the way we worship, in spirit and in abandonment. This is where we receive the anointing of the Lord for our apostolates, and our worship together bonds us,” Escano said. “We ... speak in tongues, rest in the Spirit and have the gift of healing for emotions and relationships. Many marriages and families have been restored here—we give ministry for healing of life’s hurts.”

In China, where more than 250 have died, the SARS epidemic has made people “much more open to the gospel than ever before,” according Paul Hattaway, director of Asia Harvest in Chiang Mai, Thailand. “It is fair to estimate that tens of thousands are being born again every day since SARS broke out,” he said.

Meanwhile thousands of others have turned to the occult for protection from SARS, burning incense, lighting firecrackers and drinking special potions, the Associated Press reported. “Their fear of infection has been used by sorcerers to have them rely on superstition instead of science,” one Chinese newspaper reported.

Some Chinese churches produced gospel literature pointing people to “the Great Physician,” Hattaway said. Meanwhile many Chinese Christians believe that the outbreak is a judgment from God, he said, because it was traced to Foshan in Guangdong province.

Hattaway described the city as “one of the most famous Buddhist strongholds in southern China,” drawing thousands of visitors yearly who worship Buddha and tour ancient temples and monasteries. Additionally, Hattaway said, Chinese church leaders say President Hu Jintao is a professing Buddhist who has used his influence to enable the rebuilding of ancient Buddhist sites in Anhui province.

In Singapore, where an Assemblies of God pastor died of SARS after going to the hospital to pray for someone with the condition, church attendance reportedly dropped. Some churches placed scanners at their entrances to check people's temperatures as they arrived.

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