

Missionary to China: How Christians Are Responding to Dangerous COVID-19

At the time of this writing, this coronavirus, now classified as COVID-19, has officially resulted in over 60,000 proven infections with more than 1,300 deaths. The true numbers are without a doubt much more, as many have died at home and no report was made to the authorities, and the numbers will probably exponentially increase before it is brought under control.

In Hong Kong, while there have been 50 proven infections with only one death to date, the whole city is on lockdown and probably over 99% are wearing face masks in public places including church meetings. The borders to China have been effectively closed and everyone coming from China, including HK citizens, must be quarantined for two weeks; all schools have been canceled; and all civil servants and many in other professions such as those working with banks work from home.

There has been panic buying and illegal price increases of face masks, which are in short supply, and other items such as toilet paper, sanitary items and even rice. These are not in short supply, but fake news and false rumors resulted in panic buying.

But for the church, this has been a blessing in disguise, and a great opportunity to pray and spread the gospel. There have been many citywide prayer meetings in which Christians from all groups and different denominations gather to pray and worship, thus resulting in more unity. Prayer meetings in most churches are much better attended than previously.

Many Christians and local churches are using this as an opportunity to help many in the panicking society, and to

share Christ with others. Several weeks ago, when face masks were in short supply in Wuhan, many Christians were on the street freely distributing them to the people with a gospel message and prayers for the people.

Revival Christian Church has a ministry to provide free-of-charge small bottles of disinfectant alcohol, which are in short stock in the stores, and through this, share the gospel with the people in our district.

While many other churches canceled their services last Sunday, RCC had services as normal. But the temperature of everyone was checked at the door, and the whole congregation wore face masks. The attendance was actually higher than normal as many from churches that had closed the meetings came. There was a record of over 1,900 who watched on Facebook live. When the altar call was given, in both services, dozens came forward to rededicate their lives to the Lord, to accept Christ and receive healing.

This is an exact repeat of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic in 2003, which killed 774 worldwide and 299 in Hong Kong. At that time SARS resulted in a massive economic depression to the Hong Kong economy, property and stock market crash, massive unemployment, yet revival in the church. Due to the fear of possible death resulting from infection by the virus, many came to church and became Christians. It is possible this will be repeated in this COVID-19 epidemic.

SARS began in China but spread to Hong Kong through a massive cover-up on the part of the Chinese authorities. History has repeated itself, and one of the headlines in our local newspapers is "Coronavirus: hundreds in China sign petition for free speech."

These hundreds are leading intellectuals and academics, many in the medical profession, and they are taking a great risk to their careers and personal freedom by openly signing petitions

calling for free speech. Their petition was to the National People's Congress, which listed five demands, including one to protect people's rights to freedom of expression.

Tsinghua University sociologist Guo Yuhua said, "If the warnings were heard much earlier, this outbreak wouldn't have got to the state of no return." (From South China Morning Post's Feb. 12 article "Coronavirus: Li Wenliang's death prompts academics to challenge Beijing on freedom of speech.")

This relates to the death of Li Wenliang, the doctor who was reprimanded by the police for trying to warn people about the virus outbreak last December. Within a few hours of his death there were nearly 2 million entries on the Chinese social media Weibo calling for freedom of speech and tens of thousands expressed their views that the government owes Dr. Li an apology. All of these millions of comments were quickly censored and removed. But the fact remains that in both SARS and COVID-19, some Chinese authorities have put social stability over the welfare and health of the people.

In this case, many officials in Wuhan and other parts of Hubei Province who mishandled the crisis have been dismissed from their posts. While nobody can be sure of the future, we can pray that this devastating epidemic will result in more freedoms to the people, including the freedom to share the gospel message.

Only time will tell if this will happen, but we know now the churches in Wuhan and Hong Kong and possibly other places are rising up to meet the challenge through God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. We have testimonies of Christians in Wuhan who were affected with the virus receiving healing through prayer. Even more exciting, we have heard that many previously lukewarm believers have renewed their lives and devotion to the Lord.

Unbelieving Chinese will see the lack of fear, and joy, peace

and confidence in the lives of believers. Coupled with practical gospel outreach programs—such as providing free face masks and disinfectant alcohol to the people—many will come to know the Lord.

We are all quoting and standing on the promise of Psalms 91:5-6: “You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day; nor of the pestilence that pursues in darkness, nor of the destruction that strikes at noonday.”

Chinese language, which looks difficult and complicated, is shorter and more concise in use than many European languages. This is in part due to the use of idioms, which are four to eight characters (Chinese words) that will describe a complicated situation or philosophy that might take a few sentences or paragraphs to describe in European languages such as English.

One of these is 天灾人祸 , which can be translated “Natural disaster, human calamity.” This covers all major problems in the world. For example, genocide, wars, evil governments and so on would be “human calamity.” Earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions and hurricanes are usually classified as natural disasters. However, the two are often related.

For example, many believe the wasteful use of natural resources with little or no regard for environmental factors might lead to global warming, which results in the melting of glaciers and the flooding of and eventual destruction of some islands, increased serious devastation from hurricanes and so forth.

The Chinese characters for “crisis” are 危机, pronounced *wei-ji*. The first character means danger, and the second is opportunity. Through the danger to life itself from the COVID-19 virus, the church has an opportunity through prayer and gifts of healing to bring healing to the sick. Many will

see that Christians will be protected from the virus, and those infected will be healed. The gospel will be preached! And we pray this will all result in more freedoms in China whereby the whole nation can eventually be evangelized, and Christ will return (Matt. 24:14). {eo}

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