

Instead of Fighting About COVID, Let's Mourn for Its Victims

Some people deny that this pandemic is real. I have friends who died from it.

Last month I attended the funeral of a true Christian hero, Beatríz López. She was a brave evangelist and church-planter who preached the gospel in her native Cuba in spite of opposition from the government. She became the first woman to serve as a bishop in her denomination, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church.

Beatríz was only 58. She died in a Florida hospital on Aug. 18 after battling COVID for more than two weeks. Her two sons, ages 25 and 36, are still in mourning – along with multiple congregations in Cuba who miss their beloved spiritual mother.

This week another pastor I know, Vaughn Allen Clark from Dublin, Georgia, died after fighting the virus. And a few months ago, I lost two other friends to COVID – Moisés Gonzalez and Claudia Cupido, both pastors in Mexico.

As of this week, more than 4.7 million people have died from COVID. An estimated 676,000 of those have been in the United States. Yet from the beginning of this pandemic, I've listened to Christians argue about the virus from every angle:

- Some believe the virus was cooked up in a Chinese lab as a biological weapon;
- Some say health experts are exaggerating the numbers;
- Some say the virus is a hoax and that it's really not deadly;

– Some believe the COVID vaccine is a sinister plot to kill us all.

I usually keep my mouth shut when people share their conspiracy theories and political views. None of us really know what is behind the curtain. I certainly don't trust all the "experts" because: 1) they don't agree with each other, and 2) the "science" of this virus is not conclusive.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 seems to have a mind of its own as it morphs into different strains. And while some people have little reaction to it (my 93-year-old mother got it and had no symptoms), other people get very sick and die after they are infected, even if they wore masks and stayed in isolation.

What bothers me most is when people deny the virus is real. Maybe they don't know anyone who got sick? I do. I've seen families, as well as churches, devastated by the loss the pandemic has caused.

Consider the Church of God in Christ, one of the largest African-American denominations in this country. The numbers of COGIC leaders who have died since March 2020 is beyond astounding. Those deaths include Bishop Phillip A. Brooks (who was second in command in the church), Michigan bishops Robert E. Smith Sr. and Robert L. Harris and countless other pastors. Observers wonder how COGIC will navigate its future with so many of its leaders gone.

The same is true all over the world. In countries such as Malawi, India or the Philippines, huge numbers of ministry leaders died from COVID, even when their churches were in quarantine. In January of this year, evangelist Stephen Lungu succumbed to the disease at age 79; he was known as "the Billy Graham of Africa."

In Nepal, where Christianity is a minority faith, 130 pastors had died of COVID by July 2021. One Nepali leader told *Christianity Today* in June: "In the month of May, pastors were

dying almost every day. I have never seen something like that.”

My plea is that we would show some kindness, especially to the families of loved ones who died from the virus. If someone you know was a casualty of this disease, now is not the time to share your opinions about mask mandates, antibodies, vaccines, Dr. Fauci or the greedy motives of pharmaceutical companies.

Nor is it the time to ask, “Were they vaccinated?” Instead, offer your heartfelt condolences. Say a kind word. Share the family’s pain instead of causing more pain with your insensitivity.

The world is experiencing a global tragedy. Thankfully this is not as bad as the Black Death or the Spanish Flu. But millions of people in 2020 and 2021 have buried parents, children, spouses, brothers, sisters, friends and pastors.

Ratna Sajja, pastor of Messiah Fellowship in Vijaywada, India, says it has been difficult to watch so many Christians die of COVID during the past 20 months. “We are grieving for the countless believers and pastors who have lost their lives,” Sajja says. “I believe COVID has tested the commitment of our faith.”

We must trust the Lord in the midst of this crisis. We have been stressed out because of ventilators, fevers, inflamed lungs, quarantines, socially distanced funerals and endless political arguments. Yet we have also been reminded that there is an eternity on the other side of this broken, disease-filled world.

Let’s embrace this moment, even though we don’t understand it. While we mourn the deaths of our brothers and sisters in Christ, let’s hold on to faith, knowing that God can cause all things – even a pandemic – to work together for our good.

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