

Pray for the Nations Suffering in This Lockdown

Americans living in their comfortable suburbs are quick to scold people for not staying indoors during the COVID-19 pandemic. We work from home on our expensive laptops, buy our essential items on Amazon, order in pizza and wear designer masks—and then condemn people who want to venture back to “nonessential jobs” because they can’t pay their rent.

I understand we need to be careful about spreading the virus. But I wish smug Americans could understand how this forced quarantine is affecting people in developing countries. A dose of reality might make us more sympathetic and a lot less self-righteous.

This past week, I raised almost \$10,000 from donors to send to church leaders in eight countries where the lockdown has triggered unimaginable suffering. In some of these countries, people can’t practice social distancing because 10 people live in one small room. Villagers make their daily wages selling food or other items in the streets—and now they are told they can’t go outside. Meanwhile, hospitals and clinics in these countries don’t have COVID-19 test kits, ventilators or even masks or other protective gear for health care workers.

I talked to friends in Uganda, Pakistan, India, Guatemala, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania, and all gave me the same story: They are suffering.

—“Many people started getting hungry in the very early days of the lockdown,” says Mondli Myeza, who pastors His Church in Durban, South Africa. “They were living hand-to-mouth prior to the crisis. Many households have lost all income,” he says, adding that domestic violence has increased.

—Robert Kaahwa, a pastor in Masindi, Uganda, says the lockdown

in his country has been unbelievably harsh even though there has only been one reported case of COVID-19 in his city. Cars are not allowed on roads. Kaahwa is trying to feed destitute families in his community, even though he struggles to feed his wife, two children and the 12 people who are currently living in his house because they got stranded when the lockdown began eight weeks ago.

—"The economy is collapsing," adds Ugandan evangelist Medad Birungi, who is based in Kampala. "People have lost their jobs, businesses are closed and it has left people very poor," he said, noting that women have been dying in childbirth because they can't get transportation to clinics. "The government has added two more weeks to the quarantine, so it is going to be terrible. Many families are going to starve," Birungi added.

—Kelechi Okengwu, a leader in the Assemblies of God in Nigeria, says forcing people who live in slums to shelter in place may actually be spreading the virus. But people are afraid to venture outside because security officers have at times been violent with those who disobey quarantine orders. The BBC reported that security forces killed 18 Nigerians in April. "There is so much fear that without divine help, Nigeria may be the next epicenter of the virus," Okengwu said.

—There have only been a small number of COVID-19 cases in the small African nation of Malawi, with just three deaths. But the president called for a 21-day lockdown, and this sent the nation over the edge. "Some people would rather die from the coronavirus than to die from hunger," says pastor Tony Mkamanga from Mzuzu. "Others have locked themselves in their homes for the fear of COVID-19." Because Malawi is so poor, there are only four hospitals in the entire country where people can be tested for the virus.

—The nation of Kenya was already dealing with a devastating locust plague before the virus crisis began. Now the nation is

on lockdown, even though there have been only 24 deaths from COVID-19. Pastor Elijah Wafula, from the city of Moi's Bridge, near the Uganda border, says three people have already died from police beatings after the lockdown began. Says Wafula: "Many people are saying they can't sit and die in the house of hunger. They would rather die of coronavirus." Starvation is a real possibility because people can't sell anything in the markets, and poor farmers are prevented from going into their own fields to tend to crops, Wafula added.

—"We are going through a time of calamity," says Pastor Fredy de Mata from Estanzuela, Guatemala. He notes that more than 70% of Guatemalans depend on street vending or other limited businesses, but most of those jobs are shut down now by the lockdown. "People are living right now in fear and panic, and they are losing hope of a tomorrow," he says.

—Berrings Mlambya, a Pentecostal pastor in Iringa, Tanzania, describes COVID-19 as a terrifying storm. "It is as if everyone is strangled half to death," he said. In a nation where most people normally live on less than \$1 a day, the lockdown is a death sentence. "It is now a miracle to see a quarter of a dollar. There is no way to express our anxieties—we just pray, 'Lord Jesus, save us!'" Mlambya says.

I hear Americans complaining that their stimulus check hasn't yet arrived, or that certain items are hard to find on Walmart shelves. Please remember that the rest of the world doesn't live in our comfortable bubble.

Pray for nations where a lockdown is creating a starvation crisis. And consider adopting a church overseas and helping to feed people who are falling through the cracks during this global catastrophe. COVID-19 has had a terrible impact on our country, but the impact on poor nations is unimaginable. {eo}