

‘We prepared for the wrong pathogen’: Questions for Strategic Adaptation in Mission in a Post-Covid 19 World

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Abstract

This article considers the global missiological implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author looks at the way forward through the lens of the four questions raised by Martin Luther King in a parallel period of crisis in 1967-1968. Within the missiological context of a post-Covid-19 world, this article explores in turn the questions “Where are we?”, “Where do we go from here?”, “Who are we?”, and “Who are we meant to be?” This article is the first in a four-part series. It is followed in this journal issue by two responses from the Global South, and concluded by the author’s rejoinder.

Key words: plague, pandemic, Post-Covid 19, Missio Dei, global mission, strategic adaptation, Great Commission, Martin Luther King

While it may be presumptuous to include ‘post-COVID 19 World’ in the title of an article written in late October of 2021, it is not presumptuous to engage in hope for a better global future. Lockdowns in nations or cities continue while vaccine rollouts also continue with wide disparity regionally. Some easing has begun and pockets of normality are beginning to be felt in some nations. Is it possible that the time has come to ask questions about the future? Questions related to how will the Global Church¹ continue to engage in Missio Dei,² the mission of God, in a post-Covid 19 world? According to mission scholar and historian David Bosch, the Missio Dei or mission (singular) ‘enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people.’ Missions (plural) refers to the missionary activities and ventures of the Church, its various forms and strategies.³ Both the divine and human dimensions of the Church in mission will be included in this article.

This article will focus on four questions related to strategic adaptation in global mission following the last eighteen months of a pandemic that has resulted in over five million dead so far and 246 million cases. Almost seven billion doses of vaccine have been given out.⁴ This has been the deadliest global health event since the Great Influenza of 1918-1921, a once in a hundred years calamity that some predicted in recent decades would happen again.⁵ So was the world prepared? According to former Federal Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb, writing specifically about the USA context: ‘We’ve known that we were long overdue for such an event. COVID was a devastating global calamity, but it could have been a lot worse. Odds are the

¹ When ‘Church’ is capitalized in this paper I am referring to the Global Body in all its diversity including Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox expressions. For individual or local expressions the word ‘churches’ will be used.

² A resource for understanding more of the global *Missio Dei* is by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (1991). For a discussion of the mission of God and missions specifically, see pg. 10.

³ Bosch (1991:10)

⁴ According to the tracker at the Johns Hopkins website, www.coronavirus.jhu.edu, accessed 10-29-21.

⁵ Perhaps the most comprehensive history of the Great Influenza of 1918-1921 is by John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza* (2004). Barry notably writes a work of history, but also has salient comments on potential pandemics in the future, including what turned out to be COVID-19.

next pandemic will be. And odds are that it will be caused by something that we don't fully expect.'⁶ Just a few lines later he writes: 'We prepared for the wrong pathogen.'

In the global mission context of the third decade of the 21st century, new challenges await. Some produced or accelerated by the pandemic, others that would have transpired irregardless. Strategic adaptation is not only needed for the Global Church, but required. This will require new answers to familiar questions that will generate creative ways and perhaps surprising solutions.

In a recent book by Fuller Seminary faculty Tod Bolsinger on leadership in an uncertain future, Bolsinger identifies the problem of 'imaginative gridlock'. This can happen when uncertainty and change is faced with familiar paradigms and normative solutions that worked before. As the world emerges from the pandemic, what will stay the same? What will change? Bolsinger suggests that an important response is to ask questions in order to 'reframe the future'.⁷

Asking questions builds an 'adaptive capacity' that is a 'crucial leadership element for a changing world'.⁸ It also enables a breaking out of 'institutional isomorphism' that Bolsinger defines as organizations that 'simply mimic the structure and assumptions of other organizations around them'.⁹ One of the effects of the pandemic was isolation both personal and societal. Though mitigated to some degree by the exponential growth of communication on platforms like Zoom¹⁰, this isolation still deeply affected how churches engaged in mission both in their own neighborhood or the ends of the earth.

In the comment earlier in this article by Scott Gottlieb: 'We prepared for the wrong pathogen', he acknowledges the problems of preparation leading up to the events of early 2020. Writing of the United States, he states: 'There were dangerous gaps in preparedness'¹¹ with a lack of stockpiles available. He writes also that there was needed 'a more coordinated national response and stronger surveillance at the outset' and this would have 'given a better outcome'.¹²

Each nation faced its own challenges in a lack of preparation or lack of co-ordination to fight this pandemic. It is not in the scope or purpose of this article to discuss the political and religious dilemmas that continue to be a struggle with vaccine rollout resistance or mandate fights occurring in several nations presently. This article will specifically involve the implications for global mission in adaptive challenges and resulting preparation for these continuing or new contexts. Those implications involve of course both local, national and international dimensions for churches wherever they are.

Of course, the lack of preparation and strategic adaptation to this present pandemic is not new. As Gottlieb notes, three previous epidemics had 'swept the globe over the past century'¹³ though none rose to the pandemic level in terms of number of cases and deaths. Gottlieb agrees with Barry that the 1918-1921 pandemic, also called the 'Spanish flu', had similar issues to

⁶ Gottlieb, *Uncontrolled Spread* (2021:395)

⁷ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains* (2015: 208)

⁸ :90

⁹ :201

¹⁰ According to the stat tracker backlinko, the Zoom mobile app was downloaded 485 million times in 2020. The number of annual meeting minutes hosted on Zoom is now over 3.3 trillion, and 45 billion minutes of webinars are hosted now every year. From January 2020, right before the pandemic started, the annual meeting minutes went up from 101 billion to 2.6 trillion in April, 2020. See www.backlinko.com, accessed 10-29-21.

¹¹ Gottlieb (2021:388)

¹² :10

¹³ :180

COVID-19 in that nations were unprepared and poorly equipped to face it. There were also similar political struggles as faced in some nations with the USA President Wilson refusing to acknowledge there was a plague happening, and indeed may have gotten it himself in the 1919 Versailles post-war conference.¹⁴ Of course the crippling effects of World War I contributed to this lack of preparedness.¹⁵

In 2005, then US President Bush read the recently published book by John M. Barry on the 1918-1921 pandemic and told his Assistant for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Fran Townsend: ‘This happens every 100 years, we need a national strategy’.¹⁶ Yet still in the next fifteen years little was done on a strategy or having the needed stockpiles of ventilators, protective masks, swabs and other supplies. The lack of preparedness was due in part to a lack of foresight, a failure of imagination of what could really happen in the future, a lack of asking critical questions. These issues will be explored more related to global mission in this paper.

The four questions used in this paper as a framework are very simple and yet in that simplicity provide greater space to consider important implications for adaptations in mission strategy and implementation to reframe the future. They were first formulated by Dr. Martin Luther King in another time of global change of 1967-1968, when China faced cultural revolution under Mao, the United States and its allies were getting deeper into the Vietnam war, and racial conflict and student protests gripped many of the Western democracies.

King had gone away for several weeks in the fall of 1967 to reflect on the state of the civil rights movement where he was giving leadership, as well as his deepening involvement as a voice of protest against the war in Vietnam. The book that emerged from this time of deep reflection, his last, would only be published by his widow Coretta Scott King after his assassination eight months later in April, 1968.¹⁷

For Martin Luther King, the months before his untimely death were a time of going deeper to try and look into the future of the nation and civil rights movement. In this thought-provoking book, he asks four questions used in this article in a very different context. King’s context in terms of societal unrest and change in many nations was similar to what has resulted from the global pandemic.

The first two questions dealt with present and future context, and the second two the deeper places needing to be probed carefully. King was not only a reformer, but a reflective question asker. In asking these questions, and being self-aware of mistakes he was making personally or failures of the movement, he found a grace to go deeper. But in this grace, he also opened himself up to disappointment after disappointment, and fought the specter of unfulfilled expectations and bitterness until the end of his life. Questions like these probe the past, present and future identity of the Global Church’s mission and can lead to honest examination of gaps, failures as well as successes.

¹⁴ Barry (2004: 383-388). Barry believes that Wilson’s health was deeply compromised due to his bout with influenza, leading perhaps just a few months later to a crippling stroke, the effects of which he would carry the rest of his Presidency and life.

¹⁵ Barry (2004: 192)

¹⁶ Gottlieb (2021:180)

¹⁷ King, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1968)

Where are we at?

This first question enables a taking stock of present reality. At the time of this writing in late 2021, the pandemic is still raging in some areas and abating in others. Vaccine distribution is happening at very different rates in regions and nations. The word ‘plague’ was first used by Galen in 210 C.E. and comes from the Greek word to ‘strike a blow’. It was first used in English in the 14th century to describe what became known in Europe as the ‘Black Death’, most likely an outbreak of bubonic plague that originated in Central Asia or western China.¹⁸

As John Froude writes in a recent book on the history of global pandemics, plagues ‘don’t travel, they ride’.¹⁹ Global pandemics, like in 2020-2021, have traveled on ‘hosts’ whether animal or human and often on the trade/transport routes of the day. They spread ‘at the speed of the available transport’.²⁰ With COVID-19, the available transport was often the airplane, which increased exponentially the possibility through global travel of the plague’s spread. In the 14th century, likely avenues of spread from Asia to Europe were through the centuries old land and sea routes of the Silk Road(s).²¹ A likely way it spread was through the Mongol armies moving west across Asia toward Europe.²²

However specifically spread, the pandemic of the 14th century ravaged Europe, killing perhaps up to fifty million which was close to a third to half the population at the time.²³ But in Asia it may have been many more. Primary evidence for at least several Asian Christians killed by most likely the same plague comes from cemetery gravestones near Lake Issykkul in the area of modern Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia. Three inscriptions with the years 1338 and 1339 state that deaths happened due to plague. This could correspond to the pandemic’s beginning before or during the spread to Europe.²⁴

But with the continued global threat of variants in the present pandemic alongside vaccine distribution, the present challenges and opportunities of the Church also endure. Where are we at? Still over 2 billion people on earth have not heard the Gospel, with by one estimate 81% of them not even having a Christian friend.²⁵ Even with the accelerating availability during COVID of internet resources including the Bible in mother tongue and translation for seekers globally in the Muslim world and other unreached areas, more ‘friends’ are needed to embody that Gospel and disciple those responding. This needs to happen through continued mission movements from all over the world as well as local church witness in neighborhoods where existing.

The present reality also includes a global shift in the Church and from where mission movements are coming from. As Philip Jenkins asserts, ‘the center of gravity in the Christian world

¹⁸ Froude, *Plagued: Pandemics from the Black Death to COVID-19 and Beyond* (2021:2)

¹⁹ : 2

²⁰ : 222

²¹ The term Silk Road is often used in the singular, yet actually there were many crisscrossing routes across Asia and Europe, both on the land but also on the sea. That is why I have added the plural to the phrase above.

²² Furtado, (Ed.), *Plague, Pestilence and Pandemic: Voices from History* (2021:56)

²³ Froude, (2021:25)

²⁴ Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: A Church on Fire* (1928:225). For the reference to the graves mentioning plague as cause of death, Stewart gives a figure of 25 million dead in Europe from the Black Death, or about one quarter of the population. No estimates for number of deaths in Asia. Moffett in *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol.1*, also mentions the Christian cemeteries from near Bishkek, but does not refer specifically to the plague inscriptions (1998: 483).

²⁵ See the article by Johnson and Tieszen, ‘Personal Contact: The sine qua non of Twenty-first Century Christian Mission’, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, October 2007, pg. 494-502.

has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia and Latin America.²⁶ In 1900, North America and Europe had 82% of the world's Christian population. But in 2005, that had decreased to 39%, with Asia, Africa and Latin America increasing to 60%. Some estimates are that by 2050 the 60% will increase to 71%.²⁷

It is of course unclear how a continuing pandemic, or new versions, will affect global travel or national economies. Yet no matter what, the mandate of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 continues for the Global Church. That will most likely continue to be done through multiplied avenues of online expression, but also needs to have those mission witnesses/friends that will embody the Gospel in word and deed.

As Dr. King asked this question in the fall of 1967, he weighed honestly the progress of the civil rights movement in the United States, but also where the nation was at as it fought the divisive and costly Vietnam war. Asking this question today entering 2022, following almost two years of isolation, pain and struggle, yet also a period of history that holds glimmers of a new world connected in new ways, may yield fresh answers or old answers to accomplish ongoing mission imperatives.

Are we disappointed with the Church in mission or the progress of hopes and dreams to reach those who have not heard the Gospel, or see followers of Jesus motivated and trained that can help transform their societies? Often the first step in change is to be self-aware of where we are at presently. Facing our lives or Church or organization or nation with eyes that commit to not hide the scars and blemishes but also be open to hope in new ways.

Where do we go from here?

So much of the future related to the pandemic is still uncertain as this article is written. There is perhaps general agreement that this will not be the last human health event of this severity. Scott Gottlieb writes: 'It is likely that the next pandemic will indeed be from a new strain of influenza, and it will be a lot worse than COVID-19. However, we need to be prepared for the unknown.'²⁸ An aspect of this present pandemic crucial to Global mission was the lockdowns of nations and disruption or cessation of trade routes. What could happen in the future? Gottlieb writes: 'COVID normalized nations shutting down borders. When the next outbreak emerges, we can expect nations to act swiftly to impose strict travel controls.'²⁹ Notice his use of the word 'when' related to the next outbreak, not 'if'.

The Afterword of Barry's 2004 book on 'The Great Influenza' is filled with cautions and warnings about the future that unfortunately has come true in the last eighteen months. As he notes, 'The Department of Homeland Security views pandemic influenza as both the most likely and the most lethal of all threats facing the United States.'³⁰

How fast will vaccines roll out in this nation and globally to bring the world back a bit more towards normal? The subtitle of Martin Luther King's book is 'Chaos or Community'? Are we headed towards more chaos in the years ahead, or more community, perhaps a mixture of online and in person? That could certainly be asked in many nations politically right now: will there be

²⁶ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, (2002: 2)

²⁷ Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, (2009:13)

²⁸ Gottlieb (2021: 254)

²⁹ : 353

³⁰ Barry (2004: 460)

ongoing and continued division and chaos at even a greater level? Or can we see renewed hope for community across political and racial differences?

It seems fairly certain that communication platforms like Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting and others are not going to go away even if the pandemic subsides or disappears. Many companies will continue to have meetings online and avoid travel costs, mission organizations also will most likely do the same. Perhaps it will be a hybrid in the future of online meetings and some in person gatherings. Likewise actual evangelism strategies will continue to be carried on through the internet as has been accelerating in recent years even before COVID struck, with face-to-face contacts sharing the Gospel continuing to happen as well.

As noted in the last section discussing the first question, global demographics of the Church will continue to shift in the years ahead. These changes must help guide strategies and methods into future decades. Continued pandemics or not, as well as environmental changes due to climate change, these shifts seem to be the reality of the future. As mentioned previously in this paper, the center of ‘gravity’ is no longer the West, a returning in some ways to the reality of pre-1500 and the rise of Western colonialism over the past 500 years.

Malaysian-American mission historian and scholar Dr. Soong-Chan Rah focuses this question of ‘Where do we go from here?’ also on the churches of the United States. How does the Church prepare for a nation that by 2050 will have a majority of its citizens non-white, according to some projections?³¹ As Rah writes: ‘A US census report in 2008 reports that minorities, now roughly one-third of the US population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 percent minority in 2050. By 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children.’³²

The new contexts and realities of the coming decades, whether in the US or any nation, will require strategic and creative adaptations leading to transformation of both mental paradigms and attitudes. Tod Bolsinger, in his book of 2015 on leading in the uncharted territories of the future, also recognized the changing reality of demographics and its effect on Church leadership. He writes: ‘Sometime in the 2040’s, the US will become a true ethnic plurality.’³³ But key to adapting into that coming reality will be the need for new ‘mental maps’. To approach where we are going with the same ministry methods, thinking we will have demographics similar to today or the past, may cause a spinning of wheels or worse.

The last two questions King grapples with are even more foundational. It could be argued that if we don't get them right, or take the time to struggle with them in self-awareness, we may not be able to answer the first two adequately.

Who are we?

This is a deeper question related to identity. One that requires deeper sensitivity and attentiveness, deeper honesty. Who are we as a Church now? Who are we as individuals? Is it possible to get back to a deeper understanding of identity, of purpose of mission? Letting go of those behaviors and attitudes that cause us to veer away from who we really are, to follow people or ideas that lead

³¹ Rah (2009:14)

³² :14

³³ Bolsinger (2015: 202)

us into deception or error? Often asking this question takes a time of silence or retreat. Answers may not come quickly or easily. Who are we as the Church engaged in mission?

It can be helpful to look back into history, even in previous times of plague and societal ferment, to see who the Church was in reality when faced with such human need. Church historian Alan Kreider, in his study of the growth of the Church in the first three centuries in the Roman Empire, emphasizes the importance of compassion and mercy evidenced. There were two major plagues during this period, the first the Antonine Plague of 166-72 possibly due to smallpox. Named after a prominent Roman family of the period, it is also called the ‘Galen plague’ after the famous physician who lived through it. Perhaps the most prominent victim of this plague was Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius who died in 180 in Vienna, a few years after the height had passed.³⁴ Some modern estimates say up to five million may have died.

The other major one in the first three centuries of the Church was the Plague of Cyprian 251-70 and attributed to measles.³⁵ While death tolls of the period are imprecise, it could have risen to over one million in the Roman Empire alone. In both plagues, the Church acted with deeds of compassion, providing shelter to those affected even at the cost of personal harm.

Kreider details the responses of leadership of Bishop Cyprian of North Africa based in Carthage in the second plague, who was credited with such visionary and important oversight of efforts to help that the plague is named by some after him! These efforts by the Christians in the Empire, as noted by Kreider, were a continuation of the ‘habits’ that the churches practiced in obedience to Jesus: ‘These deeds not only consciously reaffirmed the Christians habitus; they applied it in new circumstances and intensified it.’³⁶

Bishop Cyprian knew that Christians were being blamed by some for the plague, as they had in the one in the previous century. As Kreider notes, ‘he believed that if they genuinely listened to God, the Christians would respond to the plague in a way that was marked by courage and patience. These, the Bishop said, would constitute the difference between the Christians and those who did not know God.’³⁷ For all the importance of right doctrine and belief, the difference was the living out of love as modeled by Jesus and the continual listening to God’s voice and embodying His word. This was who the Church was, and who it is today. Never a perfect group of people, but a people formed by habits of life that impact the world around them.

The bishop’s biographer, Pontius, gives insight into who Cyprian considered the Church to be in that dark period, and it certainly applies to who we are called to be today. According to Pontius, Cyprian felt the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 gave encouragement to help them in this desperate crisis. As Kreider writes: ‘Drawing on these resources, he urged his people to respond to this time of suffering and danger by imitating God.’³⁸ Central to this was the fact that ‘Cyprian’s flock were deeply schooled in Jesus’ teaching that they were to love their enemies. And Cyprian extended this teaching by applying it to the provision of crisis nursing for our brothers, but not only for our brothers.’³⁹

³⁴ Furtado (2021:25)

³⁵ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (2016: 62)

³⁶ : 65

³⁷ : 66

³⁸ : 67

³⁹ : 67

Another bishop contemporary to Cyprian, Dionysius, writes a powerful tribute to the local Christians who nursed many so sacrificially: ‘Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ.... the best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.’⁴⁰

During the previously mentioned ‘Black Death’ that spread from Asia to Europe in the 1330’s onward, Christians also cared for those around them that were afflicted. In France in 1348, during one period in the area around Paris, over 500 dead a day were being carried in wagons to the local cemetery. The holy sisters of the Carmelite order, ‘having no fear of death, discharged their task to the end with the most perfect gentleness and humility. These sisters were wiped out by death and were replaced more than once; and they now repose in peace with Christ.’⁴¹

This caring for the brothers and sisters but also loving enemies and those outside the Church in times of plague was also true in the Christian East of the Persian Empire and eastward in the early centuries. The monasteries of the Church of the East, often found near the land and sea routes of the Silk Road(s), were places of caring and refuge for the sick and needy. Those sick and needy included not only Christians, but also Muslims and people of other faiths. As Cochrane writes: ‘The monastery was a refuge, a harbor, and a place of repose as well as a place where the hungry are fed and the thirsty nourished. It was also a place where the indigent, sick and afflicted and the feeble are brought to the monastery, and are cured and leave strengthened, in good health.’⁴² This health included not only spirit but body.

Asking the ‘who are we’ question brings up the issue of the unchanging identity of the Church called to engage in mission as ‘imitating God’. The context of the first few centuries of the Church whether in Roman or Persian Empires, or in the centuries since, has included very diverse expressions of the Church from nation to nation or denomination to denomination. Yet the core identity of ‘loving each other’ and ‘loving our enemies’, caring for people with the compassion of Jesus should continue to mark us today. Plagues and pandemics don’t change the character of the Church on earth, they bring out that character as any events of global calamity or local need should.

Who are we meant to be?

What are we called to be? Why are we here on earth? What does our Creator want us to be and do during our short time here on earth? These are deeper questions that arise the deeper we go. Martin Luther King was a man shaped and formed by Christian faith and service arising from it. One of the greatest tragedies of his death at the age of 39 was the fact that we never got to see what he could have become. What prophetic challenges could he have continued to give to this nation and the world? What further service would he have given, even in political leadership? King was not a perfect man. He had flaws and sins and weaknesses like all of the Church. But as his final book shows, he was connecting to the deeper places, knowing he needed to go into retreat and silence to do so.

⁴⁰ Bishop Dionysius quoted in Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996: 82). Stark, a historian/sociologist on the growth of the early Church in the Roman Empire, attributes Christian care for those suffering in events like plague for one of the major reasons for that growth.

⁴¹ Furtado (2021: 58)

⁴² Cochrane, *Monks Across the Sea: Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth Century Asia* (2017: 28)

Asking this question connects us as well to not only what the Church is called to do in mission post-COVID, but what deeper values and identity that doing is generated from. As noted in the last section, the Church in history both East and West has in periods of need served and loved, including those outside its ranks or even enemies. Using again the words of Bishop Cyprian in North Africa, it has ‘imitated God’. The habits of daily faithfulness, trust and patience so cherished by the bishop in his flock will continue to be central to who the Church is meant to be in the future. There will be many new mission strategies created both for online and in person in the coming decades, and that will indeed be part of an adaptation to the new and continued contexts of ministry that present themselves.

But a key component in the ‘who are we meant to be’ question is ‘who do we see ourselves becoming’? The call to ‘imitate God’ and follow the way of Christ is clear from Scripture and also the witness of Christian history, as well as obedience to the leading of the Spirit. But how do we ‘imagine’ that as we consider the future? How do we see mission obedience in light of the continued spiritual need of over two billion unreached, global migration in light of climate change and conflicts over resources, nationalisms and trans-national ideologies and so much more?

Part of the title of this paper is a quote from Dr. Scott Gottlieb, former Food and Drug Administration (FDA) head in the US. He writes: ‘We prepared for the wrong pathogen’.⁴³ At the beginning of his book he warns ‘that we must approach future pandemics with an altogether different mindset.’⁴⁴ It a different mindset, a different imagination that is needed as we look forward in the mission of God, entrusted to and stewarded by the Church on earth. As Bolsinger writes, ‘adaptive capacity is the crucial leadership element for a changing world’ and one of the greatest dangers ‘a failure of imagination.’⁴⁵

Conclusion

As Church and mission leaders, facing an uncertain future, we would do well to heed the warnings that have come to us in this pandemic (and past ones) from how political and societal leaders have responded and led. John Barry, writing particularly about 1918 and calling it a final lesson could have been written today: ‘In 1918 the lies of officials and of the press prevented the terror from becoming concrete. The public could trust nothing and so they knew nothing.’⁴⁶ The need for integrity in the face of such global and national calamity was paramount, as it is today and in the future.

He goes on to write: ‘Those in authority must retain the public’s trust. The way to do that is to distort nothing, to put the best face on nothing, to try and manipulate no one. Lincoln said that first, and best. A leader must make whatever horror exists concrete. Only then will people be able to break it apart.’⁴⁷ Church and mission leaders also need to not distort or put a best face on the future challenges, but rather by bringing hope with actual strategies make those horrors (or something less) concrete and able to be faced and transformed.

Four very simple questions have been raised in this paper, but others continue to arise from this pandemic. As Peter Furtado writes: ‘As a historical rather than a purely epidemiological event, a pandemic is never completely ‘over’, and the questions it raises will re-emerge in coming years

⁴³ Gottlieb (2021: 395)

⁴⁴ : 6

⁴⁵ Bolsinger (2015: 90-91)

⁴⁶ Barry (2004: 462)

⁴⁷ : 462

and decades. We all-scientists, governments, families-will have to find ways to learn the lessons from this one, partly because we can live better than we have in the past, and partly because another pandemic will arrive when we least expect it.⁴⁸

This article has specifically focused on asking questions related to the Church engaged in mission in a post-COVID world. Several times the importance of strategic adaptation to the emerging context has been encouraged. But for mission going into the future, it is not enough to simply strategically adapt to the new context ahead. Rather the Church is called to bring hope of transformation, not only adaptation. This transformation, whether personal or societal, will ultimately not come about due to great and creative strategies, but because of the living out of love, imitating God.

We end with a quote from Reinhold Niebuhr, theologian and public intellectual. He wrote this in 1952, towards the end of a life given to asking deeper questions such as the four above. He asked them in a global context of the uncertainties of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States and the recent rise of Communist China.

'Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.'⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ Furtado (2021: 308)

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (2010: 63), University of Chicago Press

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