

Whether Ebola Or Covid-19 God's People Move Toward, Not Away From, Suffering

Note: The Ebola virus hit West Africa—primarily Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—in 2014. The case-fatality rate (CFR) was 40% (By way of comparison COVID-19's CFR is currently estimated between 2–10%). In August 2014, the World Health Organization reported that 10% of the dead had been healthcare workers.

A summary of a webinar by Shodankeh Johnson and Harry Brown
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2014 and the years that followed were a devastating time for Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. The Ebola outbreak created havoc.

The situation demanded that we come together as a team. This teamwork was not just within the Church, but we also reached out to our neighbors. In Sierra Leone, the majority are Muslims. So together, we investigated the situation critically and concluded that it was a real threat. Once we understood what the virus was all about and how it was transmitted, we did our level best to see how we could contain the virus and how we could educate our people. We did presentations in the churches and in the mosques. We were among the first to alert our people to the danger and how to respond.

We scheduled days of fasting and prayer in the churches and the mosques. We were interceding for the community, and for the nation at large, to stand in the gap between the living and the dead. Where this virus was affecting people, we stepped in because that's how kingdom people think. It's not just, you know, the Lord can protect my family. It's Lord, use this in the community, and help me represent you well to both. Lord, please stop it and restore what has been damaged by it. We were advocating God's people go, not just the second mile, but go really down the road and give themselves to fasting and prayer that Ebola would be checked. We asked them to make it known to their neighbors that they were praying.

Together we encouraged people to trust God, to ask God for healing and deliverance. Despite rumors to the contrary, we were not in denial that Ebola was a real threat. We tried to understand the pattern, the behavior of the disease, how it was transmitted, and how to contain it. We were able to communicate that across the board

with our leaders. Then we started to get to the public to educate people in churches.

This education process was key to controlling the spread of the disease and dealing with the fear factor. Without information, people were responding with tremendous fear—there was extreme fear of getting the disease and dying. So we had people making public service announcements explaining the details of what the condition was and how it spread. We also encouraged people to follow the prevention guidelines and to trust God's ability to save them from this plague.

We had a lot of discussions about customs and habits and realized that we had to make changes. One of the most significant changes was how we bury our dead. When someone dies here, the custom has been that the family washes the body to get it ready for burial. When a Muslim person who died was regarded as an influential person, the family would take that water and wash their children in it. It was believed to pass on to the children some of that outstanding person's spirit and power. This practice accelerated the infection rate. We were able to train people to take steps to protect themselves and the practice was stopped.

We had disciples who delivered masks, gloves and bleach, along with useful hygiene information that helped slow transmission.

We had multiple church-planters scattered in rural communities. We re-commissioned them to distribute public information and organize community service and prayer groups. We really prayed for the nation. We prayed for those in authority. We prayed that God would give them wisdom in how to handle the situation.

We used young people who were involved in drama to put on dramatic presentations about dealing with Ebola and overcoming fear. We also sponsored a songwriting contest that addressed the situation. We encouraged young people to write simple Scripture-based songs about Ebola and about having faith. Then we taught the best songs to people. We also had poetry contests.

The Ebola crisis had an impact on the momentum of the gospel. Historically we were seeing 2000 new churches planted each year using the DMM process. That's an extraordinary number. But, when Ebola hit, that number dropped to around 200. The magnitude of Ebola's impact was to put a virtual stop to people's willingness to engage with others. And the whole idea of Disciple Making Movements is that the gospel spreads through natural networks, and so does Ebola. So we saw a 90% reduction in productivity. Ebola appeared to be dismantling, at least temporarily, those networks.

« We create irresistible influence when we move toward trouble and not away from it. »

When the whole process was over, a lot of people gave their lives to Jesus. Remember that we were working closely together. We saw disciples moving toward trouble and not fleeing from it. Church-planters led the way in

serving the government, serving their neighbors regardless of their religious beliefs. People saw how the Christians responded to the crisis and were persuaded to believe. Most of the people we are working with today came out of that terrible time. They were changed by what they had seen in disciples.

One church-planter was doing some substantial outreach and volunteered with Doctors Without Borders (aka, Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF). Unfortunately he worked closely with an expatriate MSF worker who was sick. Through that person, he also got the disease and died. One guy volunteered to drive an ambulance for MSF. As a result of his frequent contact with the sick, he contracted the disease himself and died.

A lot of our Christ followers were very courageous. Despite seeing fellow disciples die, they stepped up and volunteered. They served as drivers delivering medical supplies and food. They also helped the government by going to outlying communities to carry checks to the locals. In addition to MSF, disciples volunteered to help other NGOs throughout the country.

We did some creative things that helped in reducing the level of fear. We started telling jokes that involved Ebola. We were intentionally trying to help people overcome their fear. One of the jokes was about a guy who was supposed to pay his rent. But because of the crisis he had no money.



Photo by Corporal Paul Shaw/MDO, UK Department for Infectious Disease
[flickr.com/photos/dfid/albums/72157647637203399](https://www.flickr.com/photos/dfid/albums/72157647637203399)
 Waterloo cemetery—one of Freetown's safe burial areas for Ebola victims



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 Chlorine to help decontaminate homes from Ebola.

Then he saw the landlord coming and knew he would be demanding payment. What he did was drape a blanket over his head. He was shaking and said to the landlord, “I’m sorry. But I’ve been sick.” The landlord said, “I’m here for my money.” The tenant told his landlord, “I’m sorry, I have just been diagnosed. I have Ebola. But I have your money here, come and take your money.” Alarmed, the landlord said, “I don’t need my money now. You can pay me later.” And he ran away. So we said, “You no longer have to run away from your landlord because you have no money. He will run away from you.”

Because of the cooperation within our communities, cooperation with the government and NGOs, and because of God’s intervention we saw the spread of Ebola stopped in its tracks.

The fact is that we did not allow our fear of the virus to stop us from trusting God and doing everything, everything we could to be a witness.

God was aware that Ebola would come. He had redemptive purposes he wanted to be worked out. We see some of those results already. The same is true for the COVID-19

pandemic. What lessons can we learn from how God moved in West Africa that apply to our current situation?

Because we believe God is all about building His kingdom and intends to involve every disciple in what He is doing, it makes sense to ask, “God, what do you want me to do?” and “How can I move toward trouble and not away from it?” When we do that, we create irresistible influence. This influence flows out of belief that the kingdom is not exclusive. It’s about everybody and everything.

Obviously, as good members of the community, we need to follow through with government guidelines about social distancing and voluntary isolation. However, there are still plenty of ways disciples can respond. We can donate blood, we can find places to volunteer to deliver food, serve the homeless, etc. We can prayer walk, and as we pass people let them know from a safe distance, “I’m praying the virus would be removed and it wouldn’t affect you.”

So, whatever the crisis, we need to be the people who respond with compassion and courage to the call issued by Jesus, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you.” 