



Prayer Letter

March 2020



Distant Countries, Same World

Chinese New Year 2020 will be unforgettable. Last month, we talked about what it means to Chinese from different places, and how modern Chinese celebrate it. No one could have predicted that this year's New Year festival would become unforgettable because of the Covid-19 virus. Over the past month, this new coronavirus has become a global health crisis.

We had mentioned that the most important thing to do at Chinese New Year is to go home, and for

many years now, Chinese New Year has created the largest migration event on the planet – every year. However, since New Year's Eve this year (January 23rd), following the lockdown of the city of Wuhan, mandatory shutdowns were implemented all over China, preventing that oldest of Chinese New Year traditions -visiting family members.

This lack of neighbourhood visits and the quiet streets made the New Year season seem drab and dull,

and the fight against the virus has turned some Chinese cities into war zones. There has not been a time since the Cultural Revolution when the New Year season has been so tense.

The virus outbreak and city lockdowns have impacted the Chinese church. Sunday services and other gatherings have stopped because people are not permitted to gather together. Some churches in remote areas, with mostly elderly members, are not able to meet. In the cities and churches dominated by young people, they have been able to meet online. In some areas, this lack of meetings has strengthened personal devotions. Some are even writing out Bible passages by hand in order to help them meditate on them. The epidemic has been a public disaster, but brought some unexpected positive changes to the church.

The church has engaged in reflection. Soon after Wuhan was locked down, the Wuhan church prayer union issued a nationwide call for Christians to fast and pray.

From this appeal for prayer, and the response of the church, we have observed the following three trends:

1. In calling for prayer and fasting, the initial challenge was for individual Christians to offer prayers of confession, and reflect on ways they may have offended God. Due to decades of urbanization and economic development, materialism and secularization have been on the increase. Much of society is morally bankrupt, and many have come to the church as a reaction to this corruption in society. They hear God's truth in the church, and find a different quality of life and fellowship. Although these first-generation Christians hate the corruption around them, and know they should live better lives, most of them only have a superficial faith, and simply follow a list of "dos and don'ts" in living out their Christian lives. This virus outbreak has made it possible for more people to reflect on Chinese culture and customs, including food culture, interpersonal relationships, and attitudes to the environment. If this reflection leads to thorough self-examination and repentance, a contemporary, contextualized Chinese theology will emerge.

2. Beginning in the 1980s, when rural China was still very poor, Christians used the down time

Prayer Points

March 2020

1 Please continue to pray for health care professionals, social workers and others involved in coronavirus crisis relief. Pray for God's mercy on all people in need.

2 Pray for patients who are being treated, and those waiting to be treated. Pray that more people will seek and find the Lord during these difficult days. May God grant the gift of eternal life to many.

3 Pray for frontline health care workers. China has ordered a great number of health care workers to be sent to Wuhan from all over the country. They need to adjust to the local climate and food, and face many other challenges. Pray that the Lord will grant them much grace, open the spiritual eyes of unbelievers to seek and find the God of grace.

4 According to news reports, a number of doctors and nurses have died from overwork and exhaustion. Pray for the physical and spiritual health of health care workers.

5 Pray for Christian doctors and nurses who are participating in the relief work in Wuhan. Pray that they will have wisdom from above, and that other medical workers and patients will see God's merciful hands working through them.

6 Pray for families who have lost their loved ones during this epidemic, including the family members of Dr. Li Wenliang. Pray that they can find hope in Christ as they grieve.

7 Dr. Li Wenliang died on this day last month. Many people, both in China and overseas, have made emotional comments concerning Dr. Li's death. Pray for God's mercy on the younger generation of intellectuals; may they have opportunities to encounter God's truth and a good church.

8 Pray for the churches in Wuhan. Sunday services have been stopped and believers meet online. But brothers and sisters in Wuhan are still trying to help people in need out of their love for the Lord. Pray for God's grace to be with them.

9 Please remember pastors in Wuhan churches. As leaders of the church, they are facing more pressures in daily life and ministry because of the epidemic. Pray that the Lord will strengthen them.

10 A huge number of Christian migrant workers are normally dispersed in the factories and construction sites of Wuhan. The epidemic prevented many of these believers from returning to the city after their Chinese New Year holiday. Their churches are ministering to them through online communication. This change demands a lot of adjustment – may God’s grace sustain these churches.

11 Many Wuhan doctors are believers. Their double responsibilities as Christians and medical professionals means that they have opportunities to witness for Christ while serving people in practical ways. May the Lord prosper the work of their hands.

12 As the epidemic has become more serious, many churches, both in Wuhan and many other places, have stopped their Sunday meetings, and improvised methods of worship and fellowship online. But the technology is imperfect and wi-fi coverage is unstable. Pray that believers who are IT professionals

can develop more good software for the church, so that online worship and ministry can be more stable and reliable.

13 This unexpected epidemic might have turned China into a country with the most online churches in the world! Pray that the Lord will continue to guide the church and help them explore new ministry possibilities in the 21st century.

14 The shift from conventional church to online ministry is relatively easy, but it is challenging to produce good online sermons. It is not costly, but when members of the congregation are not onsite they can be easily distracted by other things. Pray that preachers can improve their online preaching so as to hold people’s attention.

15 Preaching and pastoral care can be provided online, but other ministries such as Communion, cannot. Pray for wisdom to solve these problems.

16 The epidemic has provided an opportunity for the church to reflect theologically. For example, other than praying and participating in various meetings, how do Christians demonstrate

their faith in daily life? How can they be better witnesses for Christ? Pray that Chinese believers will develop a contextualized, practical theology as they study the Scriptures with guidance from the Holy Spirit.

17 Many Chinese are contemplating the cause of this terrible epidemic. Pray that Christians will be able to share Bible truths with family members and friends, leading to many finding God during this time of questioning.

18 This epidemic has forced many Chinese to reconsider their appetite for wild animal cuisine. Some Chinese believers have realized that God's decrees apply to all people, and that certain aspects of Chinese culture are harmful or sinful. Although Chinese Christians can be proud of their cultural heritage, they should reject aspects of the culture that are not in accordance with God's laws. Biblical values should take priority over cultural ones. May God use this time of biblical reflection to strengthen His people and His church.

19 Some Chinese believers have started to discuss issues concerning disease and healing.

They observed that the epidemic has revealed not only health problems, but also failings in public management, Chinese culture, nationalist views, and state control. The Bible teaches that all such problems are rooted in our sinful natures, and that we need to repent. Thank God that Chinese believers are reflecting more on these matters due to the epidemic. Pray that unbelievers may also be blessed at this time of reflection.

20 While the epidemic is still raging, the church cannot operate as usual. Chinese missionaries overseas are also impacted. During this difficult time, please also pray for them.

21 Overseas mission activities of Chinese churches has been greatly challenged during the past two years. During this epidemic all planned visits to overseas missionaries have been suspended. Please pray for the physical and spiritual well-being of these Chinese missionaries.

22 Many Christian home-based boarding schools have also had to close. These schools are usually at teachers' homes, providing accommodation for the students. Many students cannot return to their homes in the

countryside because public transportation has stopped. Pray for these young believers in very difficult situations.

23 The epidemic has meant that most schools in China have delayed the start of the new semester. Please particularly pray for students who are preparing to take important exams - for junior or senior high school entrance, or for college entrance.

24 Many Chinese students who are enrolled in overseas schools or universities are also affected by the epidemic. They are having difficulty with traveling and re-enrollment. Pray that the Lord will bless and give peace to these overseas Chinese students.

25 During this epidemic, some countries have evacuated their citizens from Wuhan, and have placed restrictions on travel to and from China. Many important international travels and exchanges have been affected. Let us pray that God will show mercy and that this crisis will end soon.

26 The epidemic has caused increased tension between mainland China and Taiwan. Pray that people on both sides of the

Taiwan Strait will work towards reducing this tension.

27 The epidemic has caused serious damage to China's economy. Unemployment, is increasing and many migrant workers are unable to return to work. Pray for God's sustenance.

28 Due to economic difficulties, some Christian businessmen have had to close their businesses. Pray for God's mercy on many such entrepreneurs in China.

29 The epidemic has given Christians the opportunity to spend more quality time on personal devotions. Pray that the Lord will strengthen believers as they improve their devotional lives.

30 Many medical staff and resources have been sent to Wuhan from all over the country. Patients in other places have been neglected as a consequence. Some retired medical staff are being recalled to work in hospitals. Pray for God's mercy on healthcare workers at this time.

31 As the weather gets warmer, may the Lord bring this disastrous epidemic to an end.

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between agricultural seasons to evangelize, especially during New Year. It was extremely effective, and became a New Year tradition for Christians that has lasted for decades. Even at times of severe persecution, it continued. This year is the first Chinese New Year in forty years with almost no outreach. However, as far as this author knows, the absence of meetings does not mean that the church is inactive. On the contrary, Christians are very active communicating through the Internet and mobile apps. Many are taking the initiative to “visit” relatives and friends virtually, bringing warmth and hope, especially to those who are housebound. Some Christians not only take the initiative to use electronic media to interact with seekers, but also pray and witness online more than ever. So, although the epidemic has prevented people from gathering, at the same time the Internet has made pastoral care and one-on-one discipleship possible. In some cases, cohesion and closeness among church members has actually improved.

3. Chinese Christians are influenced by traditional thinking, and in the

past they have generally taken little interest in social trends and needs. Twelve years ago, after the Sichuan earthquake, Chinese Christians volunteered to do relief work for the first time. They shared the love of Christ with the victims, and many Christian NGOs were established. This year, the virus outbreak has forced Christians to empathize with their neighbours, and, just like the Old Testament prophets, they are praying for their people and their nation, asking God for His mercy and forgiveness.

During the virus outbreak, due to the huge demand for protective gear, many items have been shipped in from overseas. A batch of 20,000 masks and infrared thermometers was sent in from Japan; on the labels the poetic words “Different countries, same world” were written. The main point of this phrase is to emphasize that two countries that are very different are part of the same world. It can also describe the relationship between a Christian and his or her motherland, reminding Christians that it is God who has caused them to live in a certain place. Our primary identity is as citizens of God’s kingdom, but we have a responsibility to care for those around us in our various

homelands. God's desire is that all should be saved, and He does not want anyone to perish. The risen Lord commissioned the church to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth.

During this epidemic, the death of ophthalmologist Dr. Li Wenliang has generated much anger worldwide. If the authorities had heeded his call, the virus might have been better contained. The opportunity to contain the virus was missed, because people wanted the New Year celebrations to go ahead as planned. As a result, Dr. Li Wenliang faced unjust treatment by the authorities and paid the ultimate price. This incident well illustrates different values and attitudes towards life. Some see the people dying as simply numbers. Dr. Li's death made people realize that we cannot think that way; we need to remember that every person is

valuable because they are made by God; also, Jesus sacrificed His life for all. All human beings have the potential to enjoy the salvation that Jesus brought, and all have dignity because they are made in the image of God. Christians should pray for all peoples, share in the Lord's mission and demonstrate the love of Christ.

At the time of writing, Covid-19 is still not contained; no one can predict when this crisis will end. Lantern Festival 2020 has passed, and many are still living in fear due to the epidemic; they need hope. Some are hopeful that the epidemic will end soon, that spring will come and life improve. They hope to emerge from this health crisis as soon as possible. As for the church, it is even more important to share our eternal hope, both locally and around the world.
