

MINISTERING IN A PANDEMIC:  
LEARNING FROM THE APOSTLE IN 1 THESSALONIANS  
Gift Mtukwa, Africa Nazarene University

When COVID 19 hit, it caught most institutions unaware. The church was no exception, churches quickly found innovative ways to minister to people at a distance. This meant either going online, on TV and for some conducting services on parking lots to people tuning in from the comfort of their cars through radio frequencies. In the Kenyan context, as is the case in some majority areas, the use of online services meant that people have to use data to either follow a live service or watch a recorded service. Data services come at a price and not everyone can afford to be online. Some of the church members do not have smart phones. I recently preached on zoom to a middle class to upper class congregation in South Africa and it quickly dawned on me that in my context I could not do that, if I did that it means church will then be for a minority, the elite in my congregation who are the minority. Yet even the efforts that our congregation took which is to use Facebook live, YouTube and WhatsApp audio still left others who do not have the gadgets and or the data to watch the service. The question that arises is can we learn from the New Testament especially Paul on how to do church under these circumstances.

The Apostle Paul was a creative pastor and evangelist. He certainly faced challenges that made it impossible for him to minister to people that he loved. Often, he was thrown out of town before he was able to communicate the gospel and nurture his converts to the extent that he would have liked. So, Paul found himself, separated from his congregations and unable to minister to nurture them in the ways of Christ. So, what did he do or what would Paul do in our situation? Well, Paul prayed for his converts. In 1 Thessalonians he writes to the church stating that “<sup>2</sup> We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention *of you* in our prayers” (1 Thess. 1:2 NAS). Paul even prayed that he would be able to see the Thessalonians with the aim of completing what was lacking in their faith. (1 Thess. 3:10). Not only was Paul the only one to pray, even the church was to be a praying community something which was to be done without ceasing. (1 Thess. 5:17). Even Paul and his colleagues “the pastors” requested that the church prays for them (1 Thess. 5:25 NAS). He certainly knew that the job of growing the church did not depend on him, he had a part to play but the job ultimately belonged to God. Paul entrusted the church to its founder and left the results to him. As a pastor I have often wondered during this pandemic, is the church growing? Are the saints being firmly established in the love of God? Learning from the apostle Paul, I rest assured knowing that the founder of the church cares for his church and even in times as this where we are confronted with the pandemic. So, what should we do at this very moment while separated from our congregations? We should certainly pray for the people of God and since we have not ministered through a pandemic, we should also ask for prayer. A certain level of vulnerability should be allowed, and our congregations will certainly understand.

Secondly, when Paul found himself separated, he wrote letters. The letters were a way to continue discipling the church. Of course, there are things that only his presence could do, for instance, he speaks of completing what is lacking in their faith (1 Thess. 3:10)—this could only be done face to face. Through these letters Paul continued the work he began after founding these communities of faith, that is to nurture the people in the ways of Christ. However, when he

could not be with the church for one reason or another Paul wrote letters. These letters were meant to be read aloud to the saints. Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica “<sup>27</sup> I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.” (1 Thess. 5:27 NAS). The fact that the letters were to be read to all poses a challenge for us who may have the means to get our message to all members of the church especially during a pandemic. In Paul’s case the church could gather and have the letter read to them. In our case we have to find creative ways of ensuring that the message we proclaim reach all people regardless of their economic status. This means that the church may have to invest some of its resources to ensure that that happens. We should not rest until we find ways that ensure that the church in its entirety is involved in worshipping the risen saviour even at a distance.

Thirdly, when Paul ministered to people during a crisis [pandemic in our case] he offered them hope. It is believed that the Thessalonian church had gone through a calamity [pandemic] of sort which had claimed the lives of some of the members.<sup>1</sup> Some within the community began wondering whether those who had died were going to miss out on the resurrection. Paul, then writes to encourage them that the resurrection remains for those who had died and even those who are still living. He writes, “<sup>13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” (1 Thess. 4:13-14 NAS). Paul even encouraged the community members to take up the responsibility of providing comfort to one another (1 Thess 4:18). The pandemic has claimed many people’s lives since it started, the global statistics currently stand [26<sup>th</sup> June 2020] at 484000 deaths and infections at 9.49 million. Ministering through a pandemic such as COVID 19 requires that we offer people hope in the midst of death, assuring them that death does not have the last word. Since Jesus has resurrected so shall we and COVID 19 cannot take that away. It needs to be clear in our proclamation that epidemics and pandemics will have an end.

Fourth, as we minister through a pandemic, it needs to be clear that nothing can replace the ability to gather and worship the risen saviour in one physical place. Even the apostle Paul when he was separated speaks of how he longs to be with his friends. He writes “<sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and *yet* Satan thwarted us.”(1 Thess. 2:18-20 NAS). Paul knew that letters could be an alternative but never a replacement of being together. No matter how good we become at using technology to minister to people, it should never replace the gathering together as the body of Christ. Even though in some areas we should never talk about going back to the “normal”, in this arena we should. We should look forward to being able to meet again and continue to worship God. This is not to say we try to reopen when it is not feasible to do so, we must certainly gather when it is safe to do so, knowing that what we are doing at the moment is the best alternative available to us, which should never become permanent.

---

<sup>1</sup> John M.G. Barclay, “Conflict in Thessalonica,” *Cathol. Biblic. Q.* 55.3 (1993): 515–16. Barclay thinks if these deaths were as a result of their faith, Paul would have made a big deal out of it as it does elsewhere (Phil 2:25-30; Rom 16 16).

The issue of endangering the most vulnerable people to COVID 19 has also been an issue during the pandemic. Some members of the church fit this category either due to age or other diseases they might already have. Pastoral visitations of such people need to be done ensuring that we minimise the risk of putting such people in danger of contracting the diseases should the pastors have it. The apostle undoubtedly did not want to endanger the lives of his converts, he certainly weighed various options and chose the ones that he knew could not endanger his friends. In 1 Thessalonians he sent Timothy whom he refers to as “our brother and God’s fellow worker” for the purpose of strengthening and encouraging them in their faith. It was critical for Paul to know the state of their faith [or faithfulness] during a time of crisis (1 Thess. 3:1-5). He knew quite well that if he showed up in the city of Thessalonica, he would have put the lives of key leaders like Jason at risk who initially had been accused of welcoming these men who have turned the world upside down (Acts 17:7-8). The city authorities needed assurance that Paul was not going to cause more problems, so the “brethren sent Paul and Silas away by night” (Acts 17:10). Paul knew that his presence threatened the very lives [and livelihoods] of these Thessalonians, as such he left the city. This may be difficult for pastors to do, however, with Paul we are in good company. He was self-conflicted for leaving when it mattered the most and he certainly did not want to appear as one of the charlatans who at the first sign of trouble ran away. It needs to be clear that Paul was not concerned so much about himself but for others. In this regard he was acting in cruciform ways as his master Jesus Christ who took up the cross for others. When pastors stay away in order to protect vulnerable people in their congregations, they are doing a good thing and Paul provides a good example.

The way ministry has been done during the pandemic has mostly been one way, at least in my context. The church leaders have been ministering at a distance meaning that we broadcast our message to people at a distance. This has resulted in a one-way church, the saints require ministry so we provide it and in return we get their offerings. This certainly is not sufficient; we need to find ways in which worship is participatory. Yet this is a challenge, the issue of technology makes it very difficult for everyone to participate in worship. Yet we must like Paul find ways to know how the people are doing. Paul says “<sup>6</sup> But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you” (1 Thess. 3:6 NAS). Clearly this was a two-way traffic, Paul communicated, and the Thessalonians communicated back to him. Worship then should be done following this manner where even at a distance we should encourage participation from the people of God. The people of God should not be only recipients of the ministry done by the religious leaders, they should also find ways of participating. Even giving of offerings and tithes has significantly reduced during COVID 19, it is yet to be established whether it is because of economic reasons or other reasons that most churches have had their income significantly reduced. In the Kenyan context mobile money transfer makes it easy for people to give to the church. Banks have come alongside churches to provide ways in which one can give money to the church through their mobile phones straight into the church bank account, yet easy of doing so has not resulted in more giving. We need to ask why that is the case? Do people only give because of social pressure when we are gathered or because they understand that they need to support the work of ministry? The answer to this question could be unsettling.

Paul did not face what we are facing in terms of COVID 19, however, his life and ministry provides an example for us as we do ministry during a pandemic. We certainly need to pray for the people of God and also ask for prayer from them, we need to use technology (Paul used letters in his day), we also need to offer hope to people who are disillusioned by the pandemic and worship needs to be participatory.