

Kingdom Report

Week of 25 July 2020

The Monastery Movement and Rural Development

We have a hunger and unemployment crisis. The city churches can learn from the history of the church from that era that created Western Civilization. And Covid-19 lockdown and closed churches are a good time for new strategy.

We as a church and a nation are facing multiple crises:

- Millions are flocking from rural areas to the big cities looking for work when there is no work.
- Our churches are locked down during this pandemic and church as usual is no longer possible and probably will not be possible for a long time to come.
- Law and order are breaking down, crime is skyrocketing.
- Government finances are drying up and with it the money needed for social grants and all the other critical roles government must perform.

There was another time in the history of the church when we faced this situation, and the church then changed entirely its mission approach and changed history and the world!

In 325 AD Constantine declared Christianity the state religion it seemed the victory was won...the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. Paganism and its temple rituals were banished and all the temples given over to the church. The whole model of the church changed. Meetings were now held in the large ornate temples that were pagan shrines. The church was re-organized into administration units according to roman provinces which were called "dioceses" run by Roman governors now each diocese had a Bishop. Politics and political influence was now the order of the day for Bishops. They were given preferences from Roman governors, wealth, land, a seat at the tables of power.

In short the prosperity of the church was closely aligned with the prosperity of the Roman empire. Rome needed the church to keep the populace docile and obedient...the church needed Rome to provide peace, resources, land, temple properties, finances. Church members were given preference in government posts and Bishops and clerics became a very professional administration along side Roman administration.

The church of the Roman Empire saw this prosperity and favour and blessing as a natural outcome of turning the Roman Empire into the Christian empire of Christ...preach the gospel, make new Christians and prosperity and success is the natural outcome.

This went on for about 100 years....but then the barbarians came! The Vandals, the Gauls, the Franks, the Visigoths....the borders of the Roman empire were overrun. Hadrian had tried to keep the wild Picts in Scotland out by building a wall which was

successful for a while...but you could not build a wall around the whole Roman empire.

The Roman empire by this time was engulfed by enormous public debts, debased currency (monetary inflation) as it tried to pay soldiers and bureaucrats with cheaper money, the welfare system of free bread and entertainment was falling apart, the vast administration system of complex Roman laws was becoming too much to administer.

When the first sacking of Rome took place by the Vandals in 420 AD this was an enormous shock to the Christian church. Where was God? Why was He not protecting us from these vicious ungodly pagans who hated Christ? The whole edifice of a world and society that provided the church with safety, privilege, finances, protection was rapidly falling apart. How can you sustain the elaborate large temple churches that needed constant income from financial offerings to keep going. That needed a functioning Roman economy to provide prosperous Christians who would be generous givers.

As the first Vandal invasions started and spread to north Africa where Augustine was Bishop of Hippo in Libya...as the pagans advanced and chaos erupted and the orderly Roman civilization was falling apart, Augustine wrote his magisterial vision for a church in crisis...The City of God. Forget Rome...it is lost...we need to get a new vision for the New Jerusalem. We need to go into all the world.

The Roman church was happy with their success over 200 years of preaching into all of the Roman empire...mission accomplished now its time to enjoy the good life that comes with peace and prosperity.

Except they forgot to go into all the world as Jesus commanded them...so He sent the world to them with a barbarian invasion of the Roman empire.

But it is what happened next that intrigues me. And here I want to really encourage you to get a New York Times best selling book:

"How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold story of Ireland's heroic role from the fall of Rome to the rise of Medieval Europe". by Thomas Cahill.

This is the great story of the what God did next to change how the church would operate, how it was to reorganize itself away from meetings on a Sunday and hierarchies of clerics and bishops and ceremony...to the great Monastery Movement from 520 AD for 900 years.

In the midst of barbarian invasions and financial chaos and total collapse of law and order....what the Roman legions could not accomplish...to pacify and civilize the barbarian hordes...the new apostolic companies of monks did by creating a new concept of church. Not a building for Sunday morning meetings but a community of people who created a whole community where there was not community. Creating work and food and education where there was not work or food or education. Living celibate lives allowed them to devote all the wealth that their work created to be re-invested into the community instead of using it to care for their families.

These communities created music, art, literature, developed new farming methods, copied scarce manuscripts that they collected to create and preserve knowledge that was dying out from illiterate pagan hordes that loved to burn books for fire starters.

But it wasn't just the power of work and example....there were mighty prophets like St. Columba of Iona who came from Ireland at age 41 with 12 disciples after establishing 41 monasteries there he set up training college 12 miles off the coast of the coast of Scotland and from there proceeded to evangelize the warrior Scots that Rome could not tame and according to his disciple and biographer Bede, he was a prophet who could see visions, he raised the dead, healed the sick, prophesied over kings, told the secrets of men's hearts...in other words this was not what you think of as the Catholic church. This was New Testament apostolic power in action.

However there was a big difference. These apostolic teams of monks did not go out to build traditional churches...they went out to create new communities of Christians with the monastery as the community of believers....a working community. Columba built over 150 monasteries in Scotland. And these Scottish monasteries sent apostolic teams into Europe that established hundreds of monasteries in both England and Europe converting pagan groups into the Christian faith while developing farms, skills training, scripture teaching, literacy training, community development.

We need a monastery movement here in Southern Africa.

Our large urban churches need to get involved with rural development. We are good at mass meetings for evangelism but the people of Southern Africa are starving. Government handouts and social grants are not enough millions are flocking to urban areas looking for non-existent jobs. The horrendous scale of the food crisis in South Africa should galvanise us all into action. The latest research shows that almost half of the country's population went hungry in April, with 47% of households running out of food. That was in the first month of lockdown, and was already a significant deterioration from the pre-Covid-19 'normal', in which hunger was already pervasive, and almost a third of children under five were stunted.

The Covid-19 crisis is not likely to end any time soon. Its aftershocks – unemployment above 50%, global recession and a fiscal crisis – even before the climate emergency, will make this worse. In the face of all this, we are not helpless.

Our city churches are also struggling with a vast unemployment problem. As well as so many of our church members going hungry. There are no jobs for our young people coming out of school. The answer is for churches to band together and obtain rural farms and establish food production along with discipleship training and skills development. The food grown provides income as well as jobs for our unemployed young people.

The large city churches can do a major impact here to solve the problem. One way to achieve this is through church consumer co-operatives. Consumer co-operatives forge direct economic relations between producers and consumers, and harness collective purchasing powers.

South Africa's food system is highly concentrated, with a handful of large, vertically integrated food processors and supermarket conglomerates which dominate the

market and use their gatekeeping powers to squeeze both consumers and producers. The results are unaffordable food prices (that bear little correlation to input costs), declining farm incomes and insurmountable entry barriers to small enterprises.

Although boosted by the Covid-19 crisis, a handful of schemes that link small farmers to suburban households remain limited in their reach. We do not yet have organised groups of consumers buying into relationships with local small-scale farmers, and re-localising food systems. The self-organised solidarity networks spurred by the Covid-19 crisis show us that there are untapped opportunities to do so.

From the start of the lockdown in March, small-scale farmers reported excess food that they could not sell due to loss of markets. At the same time, people in their communities were increasingly desperate for food, having lost income. The contradiction was this: poor people with surplus food, and poor people without food, often in close proximity to one another.

We in the urban churches can leverage our contacts and voting strength to get government and municipalities involved in this program of rural farm development:

- **Local authorities can and must help.** First, provinces and municipalities must protect and expand land available for small-scale and subsistence producers – and ensure that it is accompanied by water. Second, farmers' input costs could be lowered through subsidies and through programmes that incentivise the diversion of food waste from landfills to composting initiatives. Third, collective infrastructure for local sale of produce, including market spaces and storage facilities as well as commercial kitchens will facilitate the expansion of markets and value-added services – such as enabling people without capital to provide catering services. Lastly, bylaws must be revised to promote urban agriculture, local markets, and local processing.
- **Technology can be harnessed.** Box schemes already work via WhatsApp groups. A huge array of mobile apps can provide platforms that support coordination of supply from farmers to buyers, provide transparency and predictability in short, but complex, supply chains involving many actors, such as buying fresh produce from several different farmers.
- **The cultural context matters.** Solidarity in the food system builds on other forms of social connection. Stokvels (savings clubs) are already widespread in South Africa and are used to surmount affordability challenges for year-end purchases. Collectively, substantive buying power already sits with these groups. What if, instead of purchasing staple foods from industrial value chains, they also buy fresh produce from local farmers? And procure from them for weddings and funerals?

All the points above need coordinated strategy from city churches. No one church can do this alone. There is a lot of help available from the Dept. of Agriculture, the Agricultural Research Council and the many farmer coops of the large commercial farmers in South Africa.

Among our commercial farmers you can be sure the majority are committed Christians who would love to work with city churches to give technical advice, provide equipment on loan, provide unused ground for development.

The greatest discipleship development happens in the work environment, not just sitting and listening to sermons. It is terrible not to have the dignity of work, to get up in the morning and have no purpose for the day.

This Covid-19 economic disaster is going to last a long time into the future. There is no quick return to "normal". The great plague of violence across Europe after the fall of Roman order resulted in bands of looters and theft and pillage all across the empire. This is what is happening all across Southern Africa as desperate people seek food and money to buy food and there are no jobs.

Great evangelism meetings are not the answer. The churches of the great monastery movements of those days had the answer. New Christian communities centred around food production, skills training, preaching and teaching, literacy and community.

This will require a new type of Apostolic teams. It will need support from groups of city churches to send out these new pioneers. But we can take the food production in our cities and do a value chain of processing them into higher value processed foods creating factory employment for our city churches.

This is also the new apostolic teams needed to rebuild failed and collapse states like Zimbabwe and other nations in Africa in even worse condition than here in South Africa.

We are in an economic and hunger crisis. We the people of God can solve these crises and extend the Kingdom of God at the same time and create peace and prosperity for our nations as a witness to the world.