

“On Mission Together”

Saskatchewan Conference of MB Churches

Open Letter to the SKMB Family

In response to a statement from the Faith Leaders Working Group distributed this week, I'd like to address some of the sentiments expressed.

First of all, I want to thank the Government of Saskatchewan for opening the kind of liaison with the Faith Leaders Working Group that allows for dialogue and input in the process of determining our province's response to the health situation we face today. I'd also like to thank those who make up the Faith Leaders Working Group for their efforts and investment in the spiritual well-being of the people of our province.

I do, however, differ with the tone and direction of the latest communique. Dialogue can be effective even when our concerns are not given priority over other considerations. Given that we have the highest per capita infection rate in the country (Jan. 13), we need to be assisting in limiting people's physical contact with each other.

The working group has a much wider perspective on overall adherence to the guidelines among the faith groups they represent, but on my observation, there are still a few churches who are doing everything they can to get around existing guidelines. I know that others have a higher level of compliance, but to point out inconsistencies in government communications without acknowledging our own inconsistencies seems unwarranted.

I've read and reread the public health orders as they've come out over the last ten months. The government has been consistent in advising churches to move services online wherever possible. That they have also allowed some limited in-person gatherings is a blessing for which I am very thankful. Indeed, when Manitoba and British Columbia have suspended faith and cultural gatherings, and Toronto has limited attendance to ten, I think a limit of thirty people is a reasonable expectation. Granted, that forces many smaller and most larger churches to meet online, but the same is expected of corporations and institutions of higher education.

I believe A.W. Tozer had a word for our time when he wrote,

“If you burn down the church building and drive away all the people, you have not disturbed Christian worship at all. Keep a Christian from entering the church sanctuary and you have not in the least bit hindered his worship. We carry our sanctuary with us. We never leave it. We do not enter into a building and then commence to worship. If you are not worshiping God on Monday morning, as you worshiped him the day before, perhaps you are not worshiping Him at all.” Taken from, *My Daily Pursuit: Devotions for Every Day*.

I don't believe the guidelines hamper us from providing for the mental and spiritual care of our congregations and communities to the extent expressed in the communique. There are no restrictions on our freedom of association or ability to care for others beyond what's expected of every other citizen.

I believe we can best represent the cause of Christ by being part of the solution to this crisis. The communique notes that we can use “our considerable social capital to promote compliance with health and safety protocols.” Nothing is stopping us from doing that now and in the future. Our facilities and volunteers should be open and available to initiatives bringing healing and protection to the health and well-being of our communities.

In sum, let me close with the communication from one of our churches:

“As a Church, we want to support the people and systems that are made vulnerable by the effects of COVID-19. We want to be part of the solution and reduce events that could spread this virus. We believe that the Church doesn't exist within our walls; the Church is all of us. We believe the Holy Spirit is still within all of us and will continue to work even if we don't gather in person.” - Forest Grove Community Church, Saskatoon

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When we read the letter of Philippians chapter one, we find out that Paul is “in chains for Christ” (1:13) – he is in jail because of his faith. In essence, Paul is facing some serious restrictions on his life and yet he wants us to know that “what has happened to him has actually served to advance the Gospel” (1:12). Paul is writing to the Philippians reminding them that time and time again God uses the trials in our life to advance his purposes. Paul is in chains, but that does not matter. What matters is that the Gospel is advancing.

Paul then writes how some are preaching Christ in a way that might “stir up trouble for me while I am in chains” (1:15ff). Not only is Paul in jail, but some people on the outside are actually trying to make life even harder on him. Paul’s response? It doesn’t matter, “The important thing is ... Christ is preached...And because of this I rejoice, Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (1:18ff). Paul is in chains; some brothers are purposely trying to make life difficult, and yet, he rejoices. Why? Because the Gospel is advancing and Christ is preached.

Paul then debates with himself what the best outcome of his coming trial would be. In truth, the option that is “better by far” is to “depart (die) and be with Christ” (1:20ff). “But it is more necessary for you that I remain ... for your progress and joy in the faith” (progress here is the same Greek word that was translated as advance in v. 12). Paul desires (v. 23) to depart and go to heaven – it is the better option by far. But that does not matter. What matters is that the Philippians have “progress and joy in their faith” (1:25).

As we go through COVID; as we collectively experience the struggles and trials of this season of life; as we face the restrictions we have on our lives (not only us but Christians and non-Christians alike), let us remember that those restrictions ultimately do not matter. What is most important is that the gospel advances, that Christ is preached and that others advance in their faith. I am convinced that God is at work through COVID, and if we actively join him in the advancement of his gospel purposes, we too will be able to rejoice through this trial.

Steven Schmidt

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