

# Editorial

Karl Koop

From 1918 to 1920, an influenza pandemic preyed on millions worldwide. Initial indications of the illness included headaches, fever, back pain, coughing, pneumonia, and sometimes symptoms involving the nervous system leading to palsy and partial paralysis. To combat the virus, health authorities directed the populace to wear face masks, apply disinfectants,

**To combat the virus, health authorities directed the populace to wear facemasks, apply disinfectants, isolate, and limit public gatherings. Not everyone complied.**

isolate, and limit public gatherings. Not everyone complied. Some refused to take the pandemic seriously. Others were hesitant to follow public health directives due to mistrust, fear, or lack of information.

As historian Vanessa Quiring describes in a recent article, a Mennonite community in southern Manitoba refused to follow the rules in part due to “wartime anti-German sentiment from the general public, fear of excessive mod-

ernization, and tensions between the state and the Mennonites concerning the War Measures Act.”<sup>1</sup> The refusal to follow the rules led to some unfortunate circumstances, at least in the Rural Municipality of Hanover where Mennonites “experienced death rates that were significantly higher than that of their non-Mennonite neighbors, and more than twice the national average in Canada.”<sup>2</sup> With no vaccines in view, the world would see some fifty million persons eventually succumb to the disease commonly referred to as the “Spanish Flu.”

In the past year, we have been facing another pandemic that we hope will soon be eradicated through vaccinations. The future may look promising, but in the meantime daily routines have unraveled in extraordinary fashion. Some have managed to stay healthy and survive financial ruin.

---

1 Vanessa Quiring, “Mennonites, Community, and Disease: The Impact of the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic on a Mennonite Community in Manitoba,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 94, no. 3 (July 2020): 300.

2 Quiring, “Mennonites, Community, and Disease,” 279.

Others have not been so fortunate. Businesses have faced insolvency while employees have been let go and forced to live with diminished financial resources. Anxiety levels have risen, and many people have experienced bouts of depression.

We have received comforting assurances from our leaders in church, society, and government that we are all in this together; but as it turns out, on many levels, this has not been the case. Factors such as gender, race, age, income, and conditions in the workplace have disadvantaged

**We have received comforting assurances from our leaders in church, society, and government that we are all in this together; but as it turns out, on many levels, this has not been the case.**

millions of people. To cite one example, figures from Statistics Canada for the summer of 2020 indicate that every non-white racial group was faring substantially worse in employment numbers than white Canadians.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, the pandemic has come with social, economic, and political import.

The pandemic also may be provoking spiritual consequences and triggering changes in the church that will be irreversible. This has happened before.

In late antiquity, during a period of successive plagues—an era that also faced climate change and political disintegration—Pope Gregory initiated an energetic liturgical response that included elaborate ritual processions meant to keep the ravages of the pestilence at bay. As the plagues persisted, Gregory, along with many of his contemporaries, became convinced that the end of the world was imminent. Such a view was further fueled by the downward spiral of Roman leadership, the cooling and increasingly erratic climate, and the starving of the general populace due to harvest failures. In Gregory’s view, this concatenation could only mean that the end was near.

Gregory was not alone in his convictions. Throughout the Middle Ages, intense eschatological expectation was widespread among Christians, Jews, and Muslims.<sup>4</sup> In the early modern period, successive pandemics continued to ravage European populations, giving rise to further speculations about the apocalypse. Many reformers, including Anabap-

3 Patrick Brethour, “We are not all in this together,” *The Globe and Mail* (Prairie Edition), September 12, 2020.

4 Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 249.

tists, assumed that the final judgment was impending. Before long, the church in the West would experience massive upheaval leading to renewal and reformation but also rupture and intractable division.

As we ride the various waves of the current pandemic, along with other crises of our time, we might well ask what impact our current circumstances are having on the spiritual lives of those around us and ourselves. Will the church look the same in a post-pandemic world? No doubt we will see lasting changes in the days ahead. Many of our routines will undergo permanent alteration. The church may experience permanent realignment.

In the pages that follow, there are some references to the current COVID-19 pandemic, but most articles address a wide range of issues

**As we ride the various waves of the current pandemic, we might well ask what impact our current circumstances are having on the spiritual lives of those around us and ourselves.**

that are pertinent to Christians in every age and circumstance. Authors share openly about their personal struggles with illness, their experiences as caregivers, and their encounters as persons involved in pastoral or chaplaincy care. Some address the topic of health as it relates to social, economic, and political concerns. And there are authors who raise questions about how persons with disabilities are treated within the church and society—suggesting that many of us

without disabilities need to radically rethink what it means to have persons with disabilities among us, gifting the church and society with their presence and contributing to our collective well being.

We trust that this issue of *Vision*, with its many layers and textures, will stretch readers' imaginations and lead all toward healing and hope. Be well!

### **About the author**

Karl Koop is professor of history and theology, director of the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry, and Biblical and Theological Studies program coordinator at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba.