

SPRITUAL CARE TEAMS IN A COVID-19 ENVIRONMENT

A Model of Ministry to Empower the Global Church

Dr. Jeff Hammond and his wife Annette are Elders (co-pastors) of Abbalove Church based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Abbalove ministers weekly to over 25,000 Christians at multiple campuses across the nation. In addition to their ministry with Abbalove the Hammonds have established hundreds of special focus small group fellowships and discipleship training centers across the nation.

Dr. Jeff and Annette are from Australia and have served in Indonesia since 1974.

We live in an era where everything is changing. What's "normal" is said to have changed and now we hear references to the "new normal." This term has yet to be clearly defined and means different things to different people. Some see it as a reference to rules of engagement within society. Others as to how the economy, business, governments and even religions will function. Clearly, Covid-19 has ushered in a new era and we all need to find our way, or more correctly, God's way in the new realities we are facing.

In February we began to be aware of the global danger of a corona virus coming from Wuhan, China, called Covid-19. We were still unaware of the full extent of this danger, but there was an underlying concern that this may indeed be a truly global pandemic. Some of our church leaders were also concerned and called for a seminar on the Signs of the End-Times, and in particular, the sign of pandemics that Jesus prophesied would occur prior to His 2nd Coming, as recorded in *Luke 21:11*.

As one of the speakers invited to speak at the seminar, I was increasingly concerned about the US closing borders with several countries and discussions around "social distancing" and even talk that malls, businesses

and churches may be closed down. Where was this going? What impact would this have on the church? Were we prepared to properly care for the sheep if the situation spiraled out of control?

Pondering and praying about these developments my thoughts returned to the World Evangelical Alliance General Assembly held in Jakarta, November 2019 (<https://jakarta2019.org/en/>). I had been invited by Mark McLeod to be a part of the WEA Spiritual Care Team. Honestly, I had no idea what that involved. I was seriously busy with running seminars, mentoring groups, Bible studies and caring for communities ravaged by persecution, and didn't really need to add something extra on to my schedule. Nevertheless, I felt the Lord was saying that I should support the WEA Team, even if I didn't fully know or understand what was involved.

At the start of the General Assembly my wife Annette and I were introduced to the team. They were from Costa Rica, India, Nepal, Australia, USA, Canada and the Philippines. The goal was to pray with and for speakers and delegates of the General Assembly. Each morning, we separated in our small teams to engage delegates in prayer. Annette and I decided to go from table to table as delegates began arriving. We would introduce ourselves to the table and that as members of the Spiritual Care Team we wanted to pray for them that the day would be a really blessed time for them, that they would receive illumination from the Word of God being proclaimed, that they would be refreshed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit and that they would be enriched by the fellowship with brothers and sisters from different nations. It was a special time for us, and we were so encouraged by these prayer times with various delegations. It was an eye-opening experience of a new way to be involved in a conference and to help impart the love and life of Christ.

The experience of the Spiritual Care Team was so empowering that I was determined to implement this concept in our Abbalove conferences and even in our local fellowships. It was an enriching of intercession in the church, only in a more personal and intimate way with a more direct approach and impact. However, returning back into the busy schedule of the church, my desire to implement these teams was pushed back until "an appropriate time". If it was not for the Covid-19 crisis emerging, it may have been pushed back into a vacuum of forgotten projects.

Now that Covid-19 was indeed emerging as a national and global threat, it shook my memory and reminded me of the importance of Spiritual Care Teams that the Lord was impressing on me. At the WEA General Assembly our goal was to make sure that everyone was either prayed with or prayed

for, and this became the basic goal concerning members of our church. This became even more important as the government began announcing social distancing regulations, and crowd gathering restrictions which seriously affected the ability of churches to assemble for services, Bible Study groups, prayer meetings, and for the church's ability to conduct administration and many other organizational activities. These changes came in so fast and many churches were totally unprepared. The same is true of many members of churches who find their comfort, support, strength, fellowship, relationships and way of life in the context of the gatherings of church members. All of a sudden this changed.

Prayerfully considering all the consequences of these developments and very mindful of Christ's statements in *Matthew 25:34-46* that how we treat the least of our brothers and sisters is how we treat Him! It was time for action. The lessons learned from the Spiritual Care Team at the WEA General Assembly now had to be put into action and the need was urgent. No member of the church was to be left alone. Many had been cut off from normal, regular communication. Many did not have internet access. Many were losing their jobs. Some major transportation systems were closed down. Malls were closed. There was a real danger that the vulnerable in the church would be abandoned, not deliberately of course, but we had never been in such a situation like this, and unless a serious effort and strategy was implemented, at the very least these vulnerable brothers and sisters would feel abandoned by the church. I was most concerned that we had to take care of EVERY member of the church. Paul taught this principle in his epistle to the church in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 12:14-24 (NIV),

“Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are

indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are un-presentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it.”

Every member of the church is equally important. Every member is special. We are not to distinguish between members who we may judge to be “prime movers”, “important contributors” etc. In Christ’s eyes we are assessed by our attitude to the “least of these my brothers and sisters” because that’s how we treat Christ!

We discussed all of this within the leadership of the church and committed to give birth to Spiritual Care Teams in every congregation and to make sure that no member was left alone. Our action plan included:

- Every congregation would establish Spiritual Care Teams consisting of the pastoral leaders, elders, small group leaders and other mature believers in the church. Depending on the size of the local congregation several of these Spiritual Care Teams would be established.
- Every Spiritual Care Team would make sure that everyone within the congregation was listed. This includes regular service attendees, those who attended small groups, Bible Studies, community outreach groups, and anyone else who even in the remotest way was connected to the church. This data base would help to make sure that everyone connected to the fellowship and activities of the church, whether they were members or not, would be included in the ministry of making sure that no-one was left alone.
- Every Spiritual Care Team would divide its teams into pairs who would be given a list of contacts to follow-up and it would be their responsibility to make sure that no-one was left alone. It was impressed on them that Christ died for all, and that everyone was an important person in God’s plan and we needed to treat them in the same way. It was now each team’s responsibility:
 - To contact each person in whatever way was possible. For some this would be by internet, telephone or where necessary and possible, by a direct visit to their home.
 - When contact was made, ask the person how they were doing, had they lost their job, were they and their family healthy, did they have sufficient food, and did they have any special needs we could

assist them with. Some had no internet access so could not follow on-line activities, and for these we established a CD or DVD run to distribute copies of on-line activities that they would be able to keep connected with the life of the church fellowship. Every contact was to be assured that they were important to us.

- After establishing their condition, the Spiritual Care Team would share some testimonies and Scripture to encourage them in their faith and to assure them that the whole church was standing with them and that they were not alone and to spend some time praying with them and for them.
- The Spiritual Care Team then arranged a time to meet again trying to make sure that at least once a week someone would contact them and keep them up to date. Our first priority was to meet the needs of our fellow-believers while also keeping an open heart to reach out to those outside of Christ as outlined by Paul in *Galatians 6:9-10*, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”
- The next step then was to take this ministry to their neighbours. Were their neighbours doing fine? Were they provided for? Were they healthy? Did they need help? The purpose of this was to empower the members of the church to be able to reach out and bless their neighbours. We would provide those needs to our members, who in turn would then share them with their neighbours as an opportunity to share the love of Christ.

The implementation of this pastoral strategy, where fully implemented, has created great excitement in the churches as they have seen, not only the maintenance of members but an encouraging increase of new believers. However, some congregations tended to neglect “hard to contact” members, “occasional” members, and “Sunday” members choosing to focus on what they considered to be the “truly committed” members. One reason for this was what they considered to be the “lack of suitable” personnel to do the follow-up work. This indicated a couple of possible problems: (i) a lack of discipling or mentoring of members to be active followers of Christ who can “do the work of ministry” as per *Ephesians 4:12* or (ii) a lack of trust from leaders to release members to do this follow-up ministry fearing a “loss of control”. These situations have been a challenge to our ministry teams to

make sure that these areas where we lack can be attended to so that we can see the same growth in all the churches that we are seeing in the others.

A further development of the Spiritual Care Teams, as explained above, has been the response of our special focus believers realizing that many “neighbours” are suffering during this lockdown period. We developed an additional strategy to make sure that Christ’s love also reached these communities.

- The first step began at the very early stages of the outbreak by visiting communities to clean houses with antiseptic sprays and fluids, both inside and outside the homes.
- A second step was to ask the family if they could be prayed for to protect them during the crisis.
- A third step, a fortnight later, was to revisit these communities to re-clean the houses and to ask about their health, jobs, food supplies etc.
- The fourth step is supplying needy families with their basic supplies and continuing to pray for them that the Lord would watch over them.

The result has been that the Spiritual Care Teams, which initially were to make sure that no church member was left alone and that all were being cared for spiritually and physically, expanded to being Spiritual Care Teams ministering to the whole community. This has been an exciting development in the concept of Spiritual Care Teams where the church can be a light to those in darkness and we can see an aspect of what *John 3:16* declares, “For God so loved the world!”

Over the last three months, across our fellowships we are experiencing an increase in responses to the Gospel and now we are seeing more than 40 people being saved and baptized each week. This is a direct result of mobilizing the congregations to “be” Spiritual Care Teams, caring for the church and for those who are seeking answers in this challenging time.

Dr. Jeff Hammond

Jakarta, Indonesia