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## FIRST-PERSON: How a pandemic 100 years ago ushered in a new era of Baptist giving

by Charles Jones, posted Wednesday, April 08, 2020 (19 days ago)



GAINESVILLE, Ga. (BP) -- Canceling services due to illness is not new to Baptist life. Pandemics, epidemics and weather have all been part of our collective experience. In musty old church minutes, it's not uncommon to see statements like "services canceled due to cholera" -- or typhus or smallpox. John Newton (1732-1790), an early Georgia Baptist pastor and physician, left diaries that included Indian uprisings along with illness as reasons for canceling services.

Possibly the most feared epidemics were those of yellow fever, which periodically swept through the South, emptying cities, towns and villages. Three major outbreaks occurred in 1820, 1854 and 1876.

Joseph G. Binney was the pastor of First Baptist Church Augusta, Ga., in 1854 when a yellow fever epidemic gripped the city. Citizens were already living on edge because of reports of outbreaks in Savannah and Charleston. Within two hours of the first reported yellow fever deaths, the city was all but empty.

The Binneys at home were not aware of what was taking place outside. When they did not arrive at a predetermined location outside the city, someone was sent to fetch them. For the next several months, Binney returned each day to help minister to the sick and dying of the city. Finally, near the end of the epidemic, Binney himself came down with the fever.

None of the earlier epidemics had the impact of the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. It began in the fall of 1918 near the end of World War I. This flu was especially fatal to young people. People woke up feeling fine in the morning only to be dead by nightfall.

It is estimated to have killed as many as 50 million people worldwide, including more than 650,000 lives in the United States, about six times the number of U.S. soldiers who died in WWI. Few older cemeteries across Georgia are without tombstones with dates from the fall and winter of 1918-1919.

Furthermore, after it subsided there was a lingering fear that it would return the following fall and wipe out the entire human race. Few families in America did not know the death of a family member, and certainly everyone knew someone who died of the flu.

The 1918 pandemic impacted the Baptists of the South as worship services were canceled, and the faith of many was tested. The Georgia Baptist Children's Home reported during the November Convention that 194 of the 350 children were ill with the flu.

The Georgia Baptist Convention had been scheduled to be held in Forsyth, but due to the flu there were not enough "host homes" so it was moved to the larger city of Macon. Through 1918, the members of the community housed convention messengers and provided some of their meals in local homes.

Beginning in 1919, messengers were no longer hosted in local homes. Each messenger was responsible for securing his own lodging in what was called the "Pay System." This system forced the Convention to meet in larger communities with adequate hotel space.

Possibly the greatest impact of the 1918 pandemic on Baptist life was on the launch of "The 75 Million Campaign." The argument can be made that the record offering collected in the first year of the campaign in 1919 was in part a response to the pandemic. For people living in fear, giving provided a tangible response, a way to share the Gospel in a world that seemed to be literally dying around them.

The combined missions giving in Georgia for 1918 and 1919 was greater than the previous 10 years combined. After the early record, offerings to the five-year campaign declined. The flu did not return, but the boll weevil expanded its invasion of Georgia's cotton fields. Economic hardship on the farms only deepened in the years following, which was worsened by a general recession across the nation in 1923-24.

Even though the goal fell short of \$75 million, the unified giving was far greater than anything Baptists had experienced before under a competitive society system (each mission entity in competition with the others). Additional debt created in the early days of the campaign loomed over the state conventions, forcing Baptists to reconsider giving methods.

Because of the improved record of overall giving compared to previous years, Baptists adopted what became known as the Cooperative Program in 1925 -- basically single-year extensions of the 75 Million Campaign.

Without the impact of the giving in 1919 following the flu pandemic, Baptists may have returned to a societal approach to missions support.

We do not know how this current pandemic will impact Baptists going forward. We can hope and pray that just as in 1918-19, something good comes from these uncertain days. We pray that people will seek the Lord, and in the spirit of Pastor Binney, be faithful to share the Gospel and take care of each other. And we pray that God will be glorified through His people as we serve faithfully through adversity. We will by God's grace get through this together.

Pastor Binney, by the way, recovered from the yellow fever. In time, he and his wife were able to return to Burma where they had previously served as missionaries before health had forced their return to America. May we be faithful too!

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