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LIVING THEOLOGY: THE SEMINARY AS A QUARANTINE CENTER

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SCHOLARLEADER
INSIGHTS

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The coronavirus pandemic has not spared even a remote place like Nagaland in northeast India, where Oriental Theological Seminary (OTS) is located. When India's government announced a lightning lockdown on March 23, 2020, millions of migrant workers suddenly left large cities for their hometowns. Those from Nagaland who were either studying or earning a living outside Nagaland – about 30,000 people – hurried back.

The government of Nagaland required all returnees to quarantine for 14 days in designated centers, but then the state reeled under the enormous pressure of creating sufficient quarantine facilities for thousands of people, let alone testing and treating everyone. When we learned about this need, we offered OTS's two most significant spaces – the chapel and the administrative complex – to the government as quarantine facilities. Within a fortnight, we had converted our campus into a 100-bed quarantine facility. Soon, we had 82 persons under care.

The decision to convert OTS into a quarantine center was an extraordinary step. Because of fear and stigma against COVID-19, our first hurdle came from OTS well-wishers who thought our decision was impulsive, even foolish. Furthermore, our limited resources and lack of professional training

gave us convincing reasons to opt out of this calling. Most seriously of all, we knew that we were risking ourselves, our families, and even members of the community by inviting exposure to potential infection.

But a willing spirit countered these challenges. We knew that unless OTS and other institutions accepted these risks wisely but boldly, many returnees would have nowhere to stay. Thus, the OTS community sacrificially took turns serving the quarantined. Even 20 stranded students (who had to live on campus because they could not return home while national borders were closed) participated. By sheltering returnees, OTS mirrored Jesus's self-giving.

In the face of the concerns of our well-wishers, the risks, and our need for additional resources like protective equipment and food, our faith in God guided us to serve as a quarantine facility for two reasons.

Theology in Practice

During this pandemic, Jesus Christ was calling our community to become a channel of healing for our society. Our decision to convert OTS into a quarantine facility was guided by our Lord's



OTS staff, including Joshua Lorin (President), with the Nagaland State Transport bus; OTS staff prepare meals for quarantined returnees.

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OTS prepared its chapel as a COVID-19 quarantine space.

command at the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise’” (Luke 10:36-37).

A crisis can create a defining moment. For years, we had been reflecting on the need for faith-based institutions to transform society and to adapt to changing contextual realities. OTS faculty in particular had been discussing, studying, and writing about this need. Yet we had often not dared to take the leap of actually living our theology. This problem shapes many seminaries and churches, where theology and people’s lived experiences are often treated in separate compartments.

The crisis of COVID-19 provided OTS an opportunity to align itself to the experience of isolation, uncertainty, and pain endured by the people around us. We became fully aware of and rooted in the reality of suffering caused by the pandemic – a reality we experienced day-by-day as we set up beds, prepared food, disinfected buildings and gardens, and sought to comfort returnees separated from their family and friends. We responded to returnees’ physical needs and

journeyed with them emotionally into a world now fragmented as a result of the pandemic. Thus, in this season, OTS was able to bridge the gap between taught theology and lived experience.

Seminary as *Ecclesia*

The government’s support did not cover even a quarter of what was needed to run OTS as a quarantine center. Therefore, faculty, staff, and our own families solicited help from our social circles to provide gloves, masks, sanitizer, toiletries, etc. SCHOLARLEADERS and its partners assisted us financially. Churches and villagers from our vicinity provided us with vegetables and dry rations to bolster our food supply. These acts of generosity boosted our morale and showed us God’s hand at work.

At the heart of this collaborative mission was our second conviction. We believe that Jesus was asking us to live out the true ideal of what the Church should be – an *ecclesia*, a community called out, made separate and special by God to channel His consolation to many people. The *ecclesia* is a community open to embracing, supporting, and caring for others.

The COVID-19 lockdown prohibited all public gatherings, including church services. At a time when places of worship remained closed and people had no access to church, OTS provided spiritual care to those sheltering on our campus who might not have been able to access it otherwise.

Though most returnees who quarantined at OTS were Christians (more than 90% of Nagaland’s inhabitants are Christians), we warmly welcomed people of other faiths. Christianity has thrived in Nagaland since the 1870s; specifically, even today, Nagaland’s population has a higher percentage of Baptists (over 75%) than Mississippi in the U.S. (55%). Yet Christians have struggled to preach the Gospel to unbelievers. We fervently pray that God will nurture the seeds planted by our faithful community among those of other faiths.

Furthermore, we pray that OTS’s time as a quarantine facility will impact our students and alumni. The simple act of running OTS as a quarantine center spoke more powerfully than the scores of lectures we give inside our classrooms. In addition, as the only theological institution of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council, we hope that our example challenges the Baptist churches in our region to be *ecclesias*, called-out communities that care for others.

Thus, serving as a quarantine center gave OTS the opportunity to reaffirm our motto, “Being transformed to transform,” in front of believers and unbelievers, students, alumni, and churches alike – and to share the call to “do likewise” with these communities (Luke 10:37).

Fear, Joy, and Mourning

Despite these convictions and the joy that we experienced as we fed and housed returnees, our hearts were heavy as we waited for the results of their COVID-19 tests. We wondered, “What if some of the test results turn out to be positive?” Many people around us attached tremendous stigma to COVID-19. If someone quarantined at OTS tested positive, how would we explain this to our community and to the surrounding villages? And what if some of our front-line workers became infected by the virus? We felt as though we were in

a war zone, about to be attacked at any time by the news of returnees testing positive. We had to wrestle with these fears for several days as we awaited results.

And so, when we were given the news that all 82 tests were negative, we reacted with great joy. Our principal, Dr. Joshua Lorin, exclaimed, “To have all 82 of them testing negative... can only be the work of God. It is a miracle.” God was watching over us, both the OTS community and the returnees.

However, our joy was overshadowed by sorrow. As we were preparing to send off the last five returnees on June 17, 2020, we heard that one of our colleagues had passed away in her sleep. Kesolenuo Suokhrie, Associate Professor of Old Testament at OTS, was pursuing her PhD at Durham University, U.K. (She was supported by the SCHOLARLEADERS *LeaderStudies* program.) As we were celebrating the success of completing OTS’s time as a safe quarantine facility, the news of Keso’s death caught all of us by surprise. Abruptly, the OTS community had to move from a time of courage and celebration into a time of waiting upon the Lord for comfort as we grieved for Keso. The sudden news led us to embrace a faith-journey of silence, sorrow, and questioning.

These are testing times for Christian communities. OTS’s experience demonstrates some of these complexities. Many believers are grieving for family members and friends because of the virus; many are rejoicing at opportunities to serve and seeking to trust God as they sacrifice for Him. Our community at OTS hopes that our actions will inspire other believers around the world to reach out to people beyond the four walls of their church buildings. Despite danger, need, fear, and grief, we hope that Jesus’s people will take up His challenge, “Go and do likewise.”

OTS staff disinfect the grounds around the quarantine area.



Photo credit: Oriental Theological Seminary