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Nathaniel Pockras
Liberty University, njpockras@liberty.edu

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The RP Church and the 1918 Pandemic

Over a century later, congregations are being affected in similar ways

by NATHANIEL POCKRAS

Hopkinton session minutes of May 5, 1919, explaining that, due to the epidemic, the use of individual communion cups was being considered

Quarantine. Wearing a mask. Keeping safer at home. Pandemic. No public worship. Closing and reopening. Many of us think of these far more often than we did a year ago, since we have never experienced anything comparable to COVID-19. But many of us have heard about the great Spanish Flu pandemic at the end of World War I, and we know that a lot of these concepts were important then.

Today, most of our churches are in medium-size cities or suburban areas, with some country churches and few urban churches. The church of 1918 was quite different. Most congregations on the coasts were in urban areas. There were 10 RP congregations and 1,200 members in the Boston, New York, and Philadelphia metro areas. Most of our churches between the Appalachians and the Rockies were in the countryside and small towns.

Currently, in terms of the pandemic, many of the worst-hit areas of the United States have been urban. Rural areas have often been less impacted, but most of our churches in all settings have closed temporarily. Was it the same a century ago?

Session and presbytery minutes from 1918, together with articles in the church paper, the Christian Nation, reveal that the church faced significant challenges, both in rural areas and in large cities. However, the church of 1918 experienced more variations in restrictions than in 2020. This is partly because of how the virus spread, and partially because local governments made most decisions on quarantines, closures, etc.

Many churches couldn’t worship as normal in 1918, but some could. Iowa’s government closed all churches, and Denison, Kan., also reported a state closure. Congregations such as Oakdale, Ill., Jonathan’s Creek, Ohio, and Hetherton (Johannesburg, Mich.) closed for several weeks, as did many in major cities.

Other churches experienced partial closures. Bellefontaine, Ohio, experienced a light first wave, so a quarantine imposed in October was lifted a month later, only to be restored when the disease returned with far greater force. Meetings continued at Beulah, Neb., and York, N.Y., until members started being infected.

Like today, worship at home became important. At Walton, N.Y., the pastor and an elder rotated from home to home, leading small services. Seattle, Wash., reported that “every family in our congregation has had the Light of God’s Word and the precious privilege of family worship.”

What happened in Canada? Regina, S.K., and Winnipeg, M.B., were closed for more than a month, while Almonte, Ont., was able to worship every week.

These small churches made no reports at all: Content, Alb.; Lochiel, Ont.; Barnesville, N.B.; St. John, N.B.; and Cornwallis, N.S.

Unlike in 2020, parts of the north-eastern U.S. had weaker restrictions in 1919. Second Boston RPC planned for Walton, N.Y.’s pastor to assist at their communion; and, when he was quarantined, they proceeded unassisted.

Farther west, travel continued. After future minister C.T. Carson conducted one victim’s funeral at Clarinda, Iowa, on Oct. 7, he found time to conduct another at Bethel, Ill., seven weeks later, just before moving to Colorado to be ordained. Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary student J.F. Carithers was sickened in November while attending the seminary. But his parents were able to travel from Sharon, Iowa, to reach his bedside before his death, and they took his body home for burial.

One aspect familiar to us today was the pandemic’s effect on funerals. Many of us remember that Rev. John Tweed had only a small graveside service after his death in May 2020. The same was true in 1918. Many obituaries in the Christian Nation report small private funerals, whether for A.J. McFarland (the oldest minister of the church), young Carithers, or lesser-known members.

At the same time, some families deemed funerals important enough to risk infection. When Margaret Young of New Castle, Pa., died, the funeral was held at her home, although “several other members of the family were ill at the time with the influenza.”

More than 400 church members were in the military, and Kansas Presbytery...
One of many obituaries in the Christian Nation for Reformed Presbyterian victims of the pandemic.

Guy Buck, of Millville, Pa., died at Great Lakes Training Station, near Chicago, where he had been since July. His death was due to cerebro meningitis, which followed influenza. The young man settled in Sterling, Kan., in 1914. He united with the Reformed Presbyterian Church and was a member of the Young People’s Society and Sabbath School.

In July he enlisted in the navy and went to the Great Lakes station to get his training.

One of many obituaries in the Christian Nation for Reformed Presbyterian victims of the pandemic.