

# The Other Side of COVID-19: Learning Lessons from the Pandemic at Shalom Bible Seminary

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## The Shocks

The COVID-19 pandemic hit India near the end of our academic session. India's sudden lockdown struck Shalom Bible Seminary like a lightning bolt: With few hours to spare, we sent our students scrambling for state and international borders that were soon to close. After great difficulty, they reached home. Safety, looking out for one another's welfare, and trusting our students into God's able hands have new meaning for us after this experience.

"We will wait for normalcy to return," we thought, to conduct final exams for graduates and entrance exams for new candidates. When that did not happen, we resorted to open-book exams. Everything went well. The three finishing groups have "graduated" without a graduation service. For the first time, we outsourced our entrance exams, asking local pastors and alumni to help conduct the exams wherever they were. Candidates were interviewed via Zoom. This process resulted in our highest enrollment ever.

Very soon, we had to prepare to teach online, a new idea. Fortunately, many of our techno-savvy colleagues helped set us up; the ICETE academy courses were a treasure trove of resources; ATA and *ScholarLeaders*, among others, supported us. The efforts have paid off handsomely: Our students are enjoying the novelty, and teachers have taken to the new mode with gusto. Overall, despite drastic changes in the rhythm of life on our campus, Shalom has seen many opportunities during the pandemic that will shape life in the "new normal."

## New Questions

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The pandemic has awakened us to new questions. Christian ministry needs to be given a facelift. How? Our cover has been blown in terms of the need for innovation: When churches get locked down, how should pastors use technology to continue to feed their flocks? And in terms of the need for pointed spiritual guidance: When over-zealous charismatics have taunted the sensible that God will protect his own and that it is fine to continue to gather in large groups, what should believers do? And in terms of recourse to online teaching: When seminaries cannot pursue normal operations, how are they to maintain academic and spiritual formation and integrity?

With the world tottering on the brink of disaster, these issues and many others call Christians to alleviate the suffering besetting societies worldwide. For those of us in theological education in particular, to fail to act during such a crisis would be to renege on our call to serve God and his people, which is the direct domain of theology. Therefore, we must consider: What is God doing in the world today? What is God prompting us to do? How is the Church responding in the present crisis? In answering these questions, our vocation is put into proper perspective.

## New Opportunities to Serve

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Below are a few examples of practical ways that Shalom Bible Seminary and its community in Nagaland sought to address these questions and God's call to service. All these examples highlight how the Church, propelled by theology, can extend God's love and mercy through timely demonstrations of compassion. Many seminaries around the world took similar steps as they addressed the global suffering created by the pandemic.

1. ***Online worship:*** The pandemic restricted church gatherings. Alert pastors improvised other modes of worship, live-streaming sermons online. Likewise, the youth, children's, and women's programs at many churches offered material online for each of these groups. This exercise pushed us to become innovative in video and audio productions in ways that we would not have learned without the pandemic.
2. ***Online counseling:*** The need for Christian ministers to give counseling grew as lockdowns wore on. Pastors offered their services on social media to diffuse fear and depression. Collaborating with NGOs to set up telephone help-lines, Shalom faculty and staff coordinated counselling for people returning to Nagaland from India's major cities, many of whom had suddenly lost jobs and endured difficult travel to reach home. We also guided our students to reach out to their peers using technology.

3. *Distanced ceremonies:* The pandemic restricted big social events in Nagaland. Normally, weddings, baptisms, and funerals are huge social gatherings. So pastors performed weddings, baptisms, and funerals with social distancing. I had the privilege of baptizing 8 teenagers from my local church in a flowing stream using masks, sanitizer, and gloves.
4. *Global fellowship:* International organizations like ICETE, ATA, WEA, Lausanne Movement, ScholarLeaders, and others provided comfort to the weary and disheartened. They organized global virtual prayer meetings, live chats, and webinars for those new to online teaching (Shalom's faculty participated in all these opportunities). Hungry Christians, isolated in their homes and wanting to know God's Word better, eagerly absorbed online resources – Bible study materials, leadership/parenting seminars, and children's entertainment. Shalom's faculty volunteered their services for counselling and prayer on Facebook and WhatsApp.
5. *Frontline humanitarian aid:* Early in the pandemic, governments were caught off-guard. However, individuals, village councils, youth organizations, NGOs, and churches distributed essential goods. Shalom helped our Muslim construction foreman with financial aid for his wife's operation. We also donated food to the poorer sections of our neighborhood and to the quarantine center in our town. Women stitched thousands of masks and other pieces of PPE for free for hospitals and offices.
6. *Quarantine centers:* India's national government sent everyone home from large cities and required that local governments quarantine these returnees. However, local government resources to house those who had to be quarantined soon wore thin. Thus, many churches and volunteer organizations stepped in to house or cook for those in quarantine. Our partner, Oriental Theological Seminary, opened their campus as a quarantine facility. Our own community gave substantial donations toward the upkeep of several quarantine centers.

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## New Lessons for the Future

1. *We learned that God is on the throne and that he is among his people.* God's people need to trust his sovereignty more. As they learn to trust him more, they learn to love one another more. Because some of Shalom's staff are not conversant in English, and because our Sunday vesper services were cancelled, we had to share the Word of God in our online videos in a pidgin dialect known as Nagamese. This way, we continued to encourage one another. At the right time, God also nudged

us to pool our resources to plan online teaching schedules that have worked well. Indeed, the Shalom community grew closer through this crisis.

2. *We learned new ways to find basic resources.* Lockdown restricted procuring regular food, so members of the Shalom community foraged in the jungle for edible vegetables, roots, and herbs. As part of our normal practice, we already operated a piggery, poultry, and vegetable garden. These resources helped to sustain us during lockdown. When the rains began, faculty and staff tilled our seminary garden and harvested beans, maize, pumpkins, potatoes, tomatoes, leeks, pears, pineapples, mangoes, plums, lemons, pomegranates, and peaches. The jungle's bounty and our own agriculture opened our eyes to the richness of God that is available around us.
3. *We learned to tap into latent skills to keep construction projects moving forward.* Lockdowns prevented construction workers from coming to campus for ongoing building projects. We were in the midst of completing a 3-storey building crucial to the launching of our M. Th program this year. Our own staff – skilled in plumbing, carpentry, masonry, and painting – pitched in to enable us to keep up with deadlines.
4. *We learned to use technology to maintain faculty development.* Because of the pandemic, several of our lecturers who were working on PhDs could not proceed. Some, who had planned overseas studies, could not travel. They found consolation in online classes and seminars. Some of our faculty collaborated with other researchers in Northeastern India to devise a webinar, "Christianity, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in Northeast India: A Research Project." Through this project, researchers from tribal Nagaland and Mizoram shared their work.

## **The Other Side of COVID-19: Life and Hope**

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For now, our campus is eerily silent. The loud banter of students and faculty is gone. While still hoping that we might be able to convene our second semester in person by the end of November, we know that may not happen, as reports of a fresh virus spike portend new lockdowns.

But I wonder whether God might have brought about the pandemic to revitalize our community. He has led us in totally new directions to capitalize on our resources, to bank on the support of well-wishers, to trust him, and to walk on. God helping us, we have weathered the pandemic storm for over seven months now. Even if we have to continue online teaching, we now have rich experiences

from which we can draw as we forge ahead, trusting God for sustenance. Our hearts are grateful, and our hope in the future is great. We thank God for leading us faithfully thus far.



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