

Catching a Service Gap in the Early Stage of COVID-19 Pandemic:

A Canadian story about reflecting on a lament during an unprecedented crisis

Philip Yan recounts the devastating story of the PPE crisis in Canada, and the response of a team of believers in organising and delivering large quantities in a short period of time. He sees their enterprise reflecting the prophet Nehemiah's experience, starting with a lament, then a joyful working together and finally a successful result.

How do you feel when there is a looming crisis, and the blaring warning signs are clearly written on the wall, but people are not catching the message? For how long can we stay unaffected in the bubble we create?

COVID-19 is the second pandemic in the 21st century after the SARS outbreak from late 2002 to mid-2003. COVID-19 is even more treacherous and widespread. We watched in the news how the coronavirus epidemic began to explode in Asia in December 2019, and then rapidly made its fierce attacks

across the globe. The damage travels fast with the unrestrained force of the novel virus. Finally, WHO declared it a pandemic in March 2020¹. By the time we felt the intense threat of COVID-19 ravaging all spheres of life, we had wished the preparation for protecting our health and safety had come with foresight, preparedness, and courage.

The chaos cried out loud

As of March 2020, lockdown had become a new lifestyle in many big cities in Canada. The need for wearing a mask in

public was still not enforced, and some healthcare professionals caught working with a mask on even got into trouble, being accused of wasting the mask or promoting fear.

It was an early stage of the pandemic. Mask shortage was a global phenomenon at the time, in particular the N95 and Level 3 masks in demand at healthcare facilities. The daily news of COVID-19 and the need for masks caused an unprecedented public frenzy of stockpiling N95 and Level 3 masks, as well as sanitising and cleaning products.



Personal Protective Equipment

photo: Times of India



Air delivery

Photo: Philip Yan

While many had large inventories of masks of the ‘safest’ kind tucked away, reports on the heart-wrenching situation at healthcare facilities across the country made headlines every day. The crisis of public health kept escalating. The desperate cries for PPE in all healthcare facilities had reached new heights in the news. The irony of our frontline healthcare workers not adequately equipped with PPE hit home.

The lament prompted action

Soon we learned that ordinary citizens did not need the N95 and Level 3 masks which were needed in healthcare facilities. A group of my friends (we are from Toronto, Ontario) decided to tackle the PPE shortage, especially masks. We came from different churches and different lines of work, but we felt the Spirit's prompting to respond to the need – to keep our frontline healthcare providers in Ontario safe in a crisis so that they could save more lives. After a long Zoom meeting, we immediately rearranged our priorities as we put ourselves in an emergency mode for a joint venture – a massive mask drive. There was a tremendous amount of work to spearhead a campaign for mask donation. Overnight, *Mobilizing Masks for Healthcare Providers* was formed².

Our immediate priority was to design a mobile-first website. In our communications we asked donors to send us pictures of the masks they had to ensure that the items were appropriate to healthcare usage. We broadcast the message via personal networks, news on radio, television, local newspapers and social media to raise public awareness. We liaised with the Ontario healthcare network to ascertain the urgent need of masks and PPE items at various facilities. The Asian community was one of our major target groups – Asians were more sensitive to the situation because of their experience of the SARS pandemic and likely to have a good stock of masks. We also solicited donations from businesses who had their own avenues to purchase masks. Donors gave money which enabled us to purchase more masks. In addition, importantly, we needed a charitable organisation to set up a donation system – thanks to Lausanne Movement Canada for their service at short notice. A massive mask drive could not have been possible without service partners, a host of volunteers, and logistics for gathering the goods, warehousing, transportation, and distribution. Clearly God was at work in moving the hearts of many, including the large donations from a local major supermarket, service

donation from the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) who offered their fleet of drivers and vehicles, a pilot who volunteered his personal plane to fly shipments to more remote locations, and two community centres where volunteers sorted donated boxes of masks and PPE items according to the requirement and list of facilities we had contacted.

It took a team of the same mind to get the movement going.

Collective labour of love

We found ways to fill in the service gap when the authority was battling against the crisis. In 15 weeks, our campaign delivered over 560,000 masks plus other PPE items to over 137 different healthcare facilities throughout the province of Ontario. It was a labour of love mobilised by a group of concerned Christians, in partnership with several service providers in the city, supported by many public media channels. The donations were still going strong at the time we closed the drive when the situation was much improved! A word of gratitude from Southlake Regional Health Centre:

"PPE is among some of the most vital and required items at our hospital

today...Not only are you helping protect our staff who are providing care to those with or suspected to have COVID-19, but you are also helping to prevent the spread of the virus in hospital and keep other vulnerable patients safe."

Mission accomplished

This COVID-19 pandemic is a marathon, not a sprint. Our campaign made it past the four-month mark until PPE supplies to healthcare facilities had reached a reasonable level, thanks to the substantial increase in PPE production and shipments.

In July 2020, a much better situation with the general supply of PPE indicated that it was time to close the campaign. Our team saw that we had met our objective for this social mission. We encouraged our donors to support other initiatives for social good.

A kind note from Cornwall Community Hospital:

"Words can't fully express my elation at your team's engagement of our Hospital Foundation to aid local doctors, nurses and staff. Your efforts for us matter. From sourcing essential items to liaising with us for logistics, to your volunteer

pilot's generous journey down to Cornwall, to connecting with our local CAA company, to making this donation a reality – your organization is a shining example of the concept, 'We're all in this together'."

As our campaign champion, Dr. Karen Wang, summarised, *"This was a worthwhile cause, and it made a significant difference to the lives of healthcare workers across the province at the time most needed!"*

A journey of faith and grace

Lament is a powerful drive to propel innovative initiatives. It can galvanise a paradigm shift into action for positive influence in our society. Reflecting on the mask drive campaign, one of our leads, Dr. Zerlina Lim, marvelled, *"Looking back at our journey, I am still in awe at how God orchestrated every step (down to the minute details!) and how our faith, though challenged, grew over those few months!"* When the community responded, it was love and faith in action through the work that everyone contributed. The experience was intense, but we saw divine movement throughout the intense journey – every part was fulfilled in precisely the way it was needed.

Our lament about the healthcare crisis was desperate. But once we had committed by faith into a joint venture, it brought forth a collaborative undertaking that resulted in timely relief. It shows in this message of encouragement,

"Thank you for the hard-working and big-hearted team behind Mobilizing Masks for making this a possibility – we are so grateful for the work you are doing to secure much-needed PPE." – Royal Victoria Regional Health Centre

Dr. Lim's reflection speaks for the rest of us in the team, *"This journey was a reminder of my identity in Christ and a call to pick up my cross daily. There were many moments of self-discovery, lessons in humility and calls to step out of my comfort zone. Through them all, God reminded me that in His sovereignty, He has given me new life as His disciple, and with that comes a calling and an opportunity to love and serve those around me."*

When a collection of believers teams up to do social good, leveraging our skills, experiences and personal networks, we bring the church to bless people outside church walls. Such faith in action is redemptive – in extending grace to all like Jesus did, for example, in his ensuring enough good wine at a



'A collection of believers teams up to do social good'

Photo: Philip Yan

wedding, being a guest of the despised Zacchaeus, or reaching out to the Samaritan woman living in sin. It is faith and faithfulness applied in real life context.

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."
Ephesians 2:10

Inspiration from four portraits of faith-at-work

We are called to be light and salt. Jesus made this clear to us in Matthew 5:13-16:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live out our faith where God places us, including the workplace. The Bible provides us with many stories and examples to learn from. Not until I engaged in this recent social project did I see the similarity of the fourth faith-at-work portrait – in Nehemiah.

Before I dive into a deeper reflection on Nehemiah, let me start by sharing in brief my observation of the first three faith-at-work portraits from my previous studies:

- 1. Joseph, the faithful worker in Egypt.** He represents many workers in an everyday work environment. Dr. Paul Stevens describes Joseph's vocation in a secular situation, as *'in 'full-time ministry' without a specific, existential call of God, yet he is truly living out his calling'*.³
- 2. Daniel, the government chief in Babylon,** had powerful authority but under the public eyes of a corrupted, secular country. Daniel *"managed to walk the tightrope of partial cultural assimilation without religious and moral compromise"*.⁴
- 3. Elijah, the prophet in Israel,** the prophetic voice of his contemporary world, condemned the injustice and evil practices, confronted

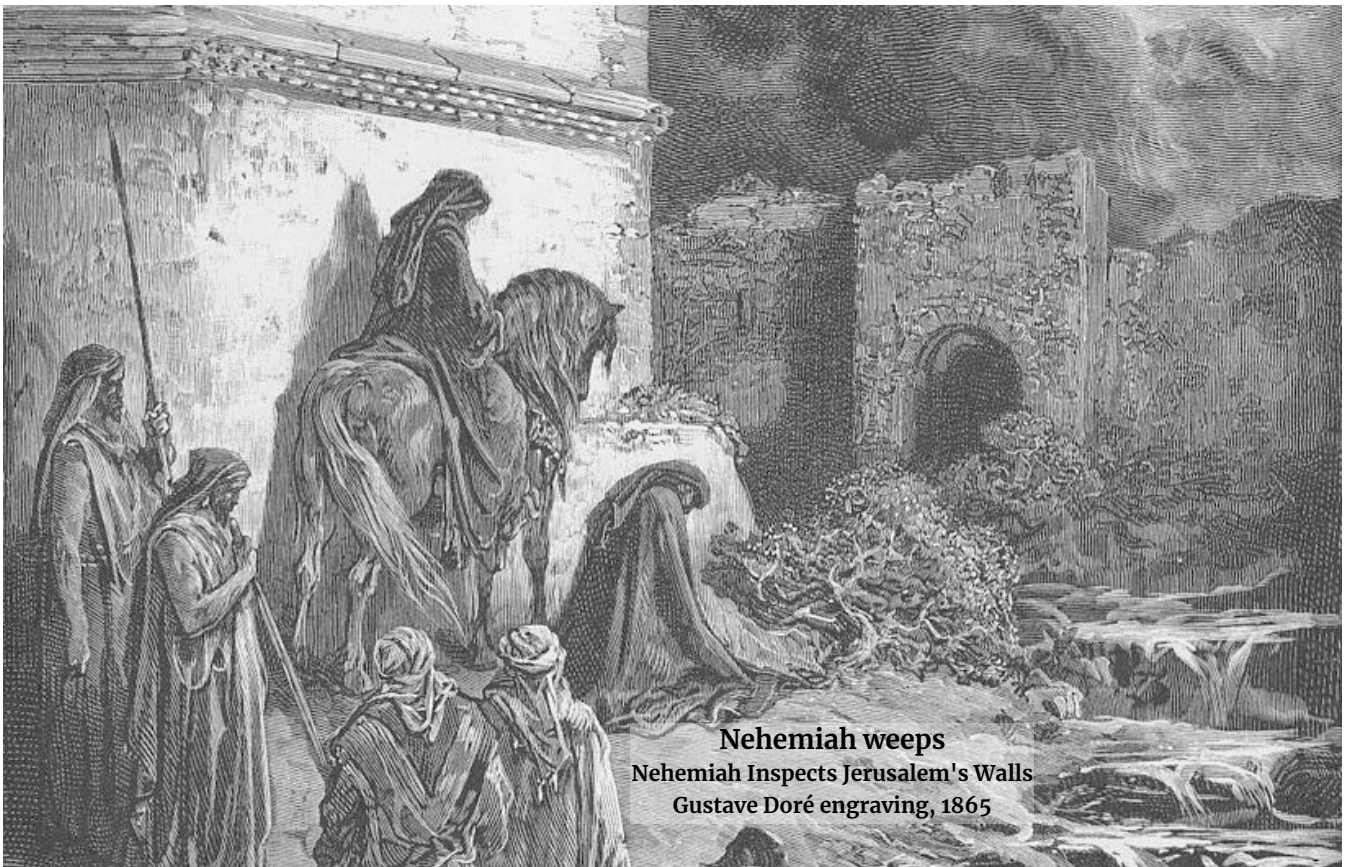
the false religions, and invited people to give allegiance to the true God. There's a picture of integration in God's mission – God revealed to Elijah that he was not the only one in His mission. God had reserved for Himself *'seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal'*.⁵ These seven thousand individuals were outside of Elijah's circle, but they too remained faithful to their identity.

God can fulfill His mission by a prophet or a pastor, an everyday worker, a leader of high authority or even someone like the fourth profile, Nehemiah, who worked like an entrepreneur. Nehemiah ventured into rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem in order to restore the safety of the remnant in a broken city.

How our campaign for mask drive aligns with Nehemiah's mission as a journey in redemptive entrepreneurship

There are five steps in common:

- 1. A lament as a starting point –** Nehemiah mourned for the dire situation of the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem without the protective wall. He was so disturbed, he wept for days.



Nehemiah weeps
Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls
Gustave Doré engraving, 1865

Our mask donation campaign began with the lament that broke our hearts, seeing the perilous state of healthcare facilities and workers without a solution in the critical moment.

2. Bringing the issue to God in prayer – Nehemiah fasted and prayed before the Lord, asking for a favour: to send him as a change agent. As our team discussed at length and prayed together, we asked God to have mercy on those at risk, and we prayed for His favour as we were to start the project without any support, on top of our regular day jobs.

3. Looking for an investor that is bigger than us – Most ventures cannot be successful without support, funding, and leadership beyond immediately available resources. God gave Nehemiah the most powerful support system – the king he was serving under and many government officials. In our mask drive, God gave us many partners with the right set-up for the operation. We had the best logistic fleet of Canadian Automobile Association (CAA)⁶, one of the most trusted roadside assistance organisations, with a large service fleet to help us pick up and deliver mask donations; a volunteer pilot to fly the shipments to some remote locations; 105 Gibson Centre⁷(a community centre); a warehouse; and a group of retired nurses to help classify and sort all masks and PPE to ensure appropriate quality PPE for frontline workers; additionally, the flexible donation

platform and services through the Lausanne Movement Canada office⁸.

4. Building the leadership and volunteers team – Nehemiah would not be able to rebuild the wall if there was no cohesive support system in all levels of leadership and workers. Likewise, the few of us working beyond our regular day-to-day work could not have made it just by ourselves. The campaign was successful because of the leadership in different partners, the volunteers who worked on-site and from home coordinating all details with well-planned logistics. One of the leaders decided to take up the role of an intercessor for this project. She messaged each helper on the project and prayed for them during the entire campaign.

5. Keeping the constant focus amidst crises and distractions – Rebuilding Jerusalem's wall was a massive project. There were challenges, opposition, and distractions. Nehemiah's leadership focused on keeping the production going, improving efficiency with agile practice, and constantly reflecting on what was important. Our campaign leaders did the same. There might

be different opinions, unexpected situations and exhaustion. We met and prayed together to keep the team focused from the beginning to the end.

The mask drive gave me a taste of Nehemiah's experience, though on a much smaller scale. I realised that God could call on His unexpected people to do His mission. The power always comes from Him because He is the

Divine Commander. He can use our knowledge and vocational experience as tools to fulfil His will – His will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). There's no such thing as a greater or lesser ministry in God's kingdom because all lives matter to God, be they inside or outside the church building, for 'God so loved the world...' (John 3:16).

The venture of our mask mobilising project was a unique faith journey. It started with a lament through listening with our hearts and stepping

up by faith. The outcome let us see the safety of many frontline workers being restored, and we experienced God's faithfulness in a challenging time. It was quite an experience of God at work – turning a lament into joy. 🙏🏻

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- 1 <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>
- 2 <https://www.frontlinemasks.ca>
- 3 R. Paul Stevens, *Down-to-earth spirituality: encountering God in the ordinary, boring stuff of life*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2003.
- 4 Daniel and Work, *Theology of Work Project*. <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/daniel>
- 5 Romans 11:4 NIV
- 6 CAA <https://www.caa.ca>
- 7 105 Gibson Centre <https://105gibson.com>
- 8 Lausanne Movement Canada <https://lausannecanada.com>



Philip Yan is the founder of GenesisXD Inc., whose specialty is to use design thinking to help non-profits, associations and churches to build community 24/7 through a mobile app.

Twice a social entrepreneur, Philip led his company to cofound social enterprises that would employ persons with barriers to employment – a recycling company called Red Propeller and an online coffee business, KLINK® Coffee. These journeys helped him understand better how businesses, be they for-profits or non-profits, can be redemptive.