

CARE, LEADERSHIP, AND SELF-RENEWAL IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, it ushered in a prolonged period of uncertainty. Since that day it has appeared that this crisis will be one that ebbs and flows, requiring flexibility, endurance, and no small amount of creativity. A few strategies may help church leaders flourish in uncertain times.

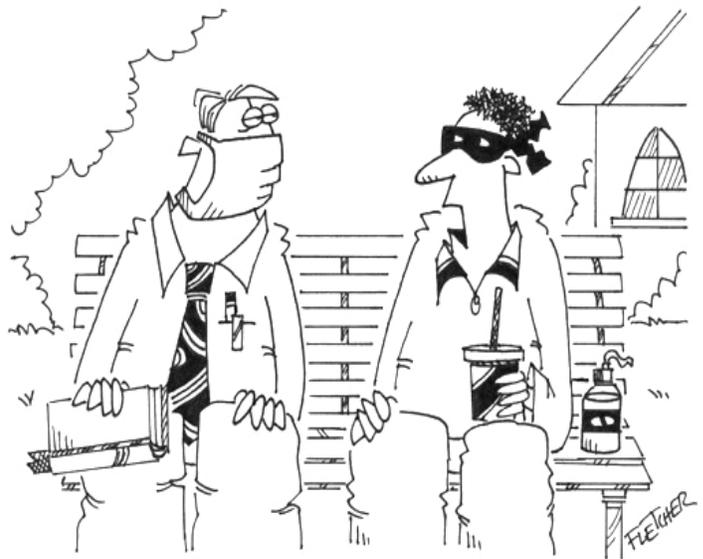
Focus on Caring and Leadership

As a caregiver, attend to personal crises as they emerge. Faced with uncertainty, church or community members may experience crises related to the spread of COVID-19, such as job loss, inability to travel to certain regions, or governmental orders to quarantine. It may evoke feelings of anxiety, helplessness, or despair. If the person is able to learn methods to reduce the anxiety, the crisis may abate, but if it increases, other coping strategies may be tried. If after trial and error, nothing works, and the person feels increasingly out of control, the pastor or a lay caregiver may get a call. Though the crisis may have been sparked by a definite event, it's important for the caregiver to focus attention less on what happened than on how it is being consciously or unconsciously interpreted.

Offer “psychological first aid.” First, make psychological contact by showing respect, listening with genuine interest, and saying or doing something to express empathy with the person. Next, explore the dimensions of the problem (the immediate past and immediate future as it relates the current situation). This kind of exploration may be difficult for someone who feels overwhelmed by powerful emotions but focusing and going deeper may help the person gain some leverage over those emotions. Then discuss together the possible solutions, focusing on what to do next, not long-range answers. Finally, help the person take action. Determine whether the person can

take action independently or needs the caregiver to take action. Or could they do it together?¹

As a leader, attend to community crises by using conflict-management skills. Community crisis can be as challenging as personal distress, and how to handle it is often less clear. Conflict is dynamic, and if unmanaged it can quickly spiral out of control. Susan Carpenter and W.J.D. Kennedy, professional mediators, describe a “spiral of unmanaged conflict.” It begins when community members encounter issues that make them anxious. Sides begin to appear as people form definite opinions and struggle to get accurate information about what's happening. Gradually, positions harden as people talk with those who agree with them rather than those with opposing views. Communication between the opposing sides stops as people become increasingly frustrated and angry and a



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sense of crisis emerges as residents lose hope in their ability to settle the dispute.

When faced with unmanaged conflict, the leader might be tempted by conventional methods such as the quick fix. The leader (a pastor, a community organizer, or a local politician) steps in, asks for the views of all parties, sifts through the material, weighs the trade-offs, and announces an immediate solution. The result is often that several parties to the dispute attack the solution. The leader is then forced to defend the solution or replace it with a new plan, which everyone then attacks, and the cycle continues. Simply examining the problem deeply is not enough. The analysis itself must include many different viewpoints or it will fail.

At this point, alternative conflict management methods prove useful. First, the leader plays the role of facilitator who brings parties together to help determine the best solution. Surprisingly, opening such a process gives the leader more, not less, control over the situation. Second, the leader focuses everyone's attention on addressing the problem itself rather than achieving victory over opponents. Third, all parties are encouraged to meet face-to-face to work out differences, including the people most affected by the decision, some of whom may have lacked a voice in the decision until now. Fourth, the leader invites all parties to work together to shape the process for making the final decision. Finally, decisions are reached by consensus so that the ultimate solution is one that everyone can accept. Though not all will be equally happy with the proposal, the group accepts that it is the best decision.²

Renew

Dealing with crises can be draining, and exhaustion can be a danger. In a book addressing preacher's burnout, Mike Graves offers advice for personal renewal.

- **Go for a walk**, perhaps on a route that is normally driven to work and pay attention to the trees along the way. Take a dog with you, or borrow one.
- **Take a nap**. Change your routine and go to a park or the beach to sleep in the sunshine. You can also read a book to children or grandchildren at naptime and then take a snooze as well.

- **Read a book**. A short story collection or poetry is perfect if pressed for time, but any new discovery after spending a half-day at that much-neglected bookstore in the neighborhood is a lovely way to renew your spirit.
- **Renew a friendship** by calling up a friend on the phone.
- **Play a game** of tennis or dominoes, or a board game, or “play hooky” and enjoy the day alone or with someone else.
- **Listen to music** via radio or streaming or compact disc, or dust off an old instrument and play it.
- **Explore movement** through yoga, the martial arts, swimming, or a bike ride.
- **Enjoy a meal** with family or friends, and do not neglect dessert, remembering that “stressed” spelled backwards is desserts.

Whatever the renewal plan, think of the days and weeks not as blocks of time dedicated either to work or play, but as a single continuum comparable to a Mobius strip, a single path with no border and no edge. Integrate work and play by finding time every day for play and refreshment and taking a playful approach to work whenever possible.³

Love Your Neighbor

Trying to be conscientious, leaders risk personal crisis as they deal with multiple challenges. The commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31, NRSV) suggests a better approach: care for the congregation and the community and the caregiver in equal measure. This way everyone may flourish.

1. David K. Switzer, *Pastoral Care Emergencies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 36-48.

2. Susan L. Carpenter and W.J.D. Kennedy, *Managing Public Disputes: A Practical Guide for Government, Business, and Citizens' Groups* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 11-29.

3. Mike Graves, *The Fully Alive Preacher: Recovering from Homiletical Burnout* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 19-24.