

Pastoring in Viral Times

I met by video with a pastor the other day who told me how exhausted and overwhelmed ministering during this virus crisis has been. He's struggled with figuring out what to do with worship and how to deal with new technologies of streaming and recording; with calling members every day (sometimes 10 phone calls in a day); with doing multiple Zoom meetings most evenings; with worrying about giving and how to keep people giving; and with working from home with small children while his wife also works from home. He lamented that the more he did the more he got "helpful" critiques from church leaders and members to "help" him improve the quality of the videos and streams and his ministry.

I then met with another pastor in a similar sized church who has had the opposite reaction. She talked about how the challenges have been kind of fun. She's been experimenting with recorded worship videos where she's used props, toys, her children, videos from YouTube, and more. She streams a morning prayer time for no longer than 3 minutes each morning, has limited the number of Zoom meetings at night, has set up a home schedule that includes prayer and reading time in the morning and afternoon, has been chatting with other pastors, and limits the number of phone calls she makes each day. She commented how appreciative her congregation has been.

What Seems to Help

These two pastors really exemplify what I'm noticing among the pastors I'm coaching and doing spiritual direction with throughout this crisis. It seems as though there's a continuum of pastoral responses to the crisis. Those doing well share certain attributes:

- **Working on themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually:** Those doing the best are starting with themselves. They've recognized that that they can't lead others to a healthy faith in times of crisis if they aren't being healthy themselves. So, they've emphasized healthy living—making sure they moderately exercise every day; reduce comfort eating and increase healthy eating; take regular breaks for something different; spend time in prayer, reading, and reflection; worked on personal and professional growth, and limited time on the web. No one's perfect in this. They just work on gradually improving each day.
- **Working on their anxieties:** They've focused on admitting how anxious they've been, and then dealt with it by talking with others, taking time to center and calm, and some have sought video counseling (Samaritan is a resource for that). I've suggested to some to create a Meltdown Kit—a box filled with items to help us center when overwhelmed including a sheet with helpful Bible or spiritual quotes, a cross that can be held, a small stuffed animal, or anything else that can help us center and smile.
- **Focusing on what's essential in their role:** It's easy to become burned out by trying to do everything, especially replicating everything we did before the crisis. We can't. Those doing well are focusing on what's most essential to their ministry. For me it's remembering that we are called to be people of hope who point out God's presence in everything. People are getting enough bad news every day. We need to offer good news. Whatever we do, make sure that's what comes through in our videos, streaming or writing; what comes through in our phone calls; and what comes through in our meetings. Perhaps take time to write down in a short phrase what's your essential calling is through this crisis and post it somewhere to remind you.

- **Shooting for authenticity rather than excellence:** Many pastors I've spoken to are frustrated because they think that whatever they do to offer worship has to live up to the standards we're used to on TV. We live in an age of YouTube where people put out so many low-quality, incredibly viral videos. Nobody's looking for high quality. *They're looking for authenticity.* We don't have to be incredibly creative (although it can be fun to try). We simply have to be genuine and come across as trustworthy. They'll forgive you for low production values. And if they don't,... focus on what's essential. For a short video I created to help with this, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=S1zAnZReBX4&feature=emb_logo .
- **Setting clear boundaries and structures to keep burnout at bay:** It's so easy to become overextended as we try to do everything. Those doing the best are those who do what they can and let go of the rest. They've set intentional structures for their days and weeks. One pastor has set a structure both for the day and the week. She created a new home routine that she set with her family. She has set periods for personal time, family time, and church time. She monitors her own energy levels and makes sure she isn't overextending in any one area. She also has set a clear boundary of *my family and me* first, and the church second. I said in response, "Yeah, I recognized a long time ago that I can always find another church, but I can't find another family. And if I do have to find another family it will be 20x worse than finding another church."
- **Adapting by focusing on growing rather than lamenting:** Those I've seen doing the best generally don't spend time lamenting how hard it's been to adapt. They've basically seen this crisis as an opportunity to grow. And with that growth has been an awareness that growth takes time. As one pastor said to me this week, "I know I don't have to be great. I just have to grow. And I know that as long as this crisis lasts, I'll be better at the end than I am now." We need to develop a *growth* mindset instead of a *set* mindset. Many of us want stability and we have a *set* mindset. But in times of crisis we have to adapt, and adaptation takes growth.
- **Getting coaching/spiritual direction:** We are offering a free clergy coaching/spiritual direction session for pastors grappling with how to pastor during the virus crisis on topics ranging from how to deal with it personally, how to help others, how to deal with recording or streaming issues. If you are interested, call **412-741-7430 x1000**.

We're in a really tough time. The Reformed Church televangelist Robert Schuller often said, "Tough times don't last. Tough people do." I've never liked that phrase, but I liked its rhyme. So I've changed it to, "Challenging times don't last, but those who rise to the challenge with Christ do." I hope these have helped you think about how to rise to the challenge.

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