

COVID-19: Pastoral Stress and Adaptation

SYNOPSIS AND REFERENCES

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The multiple layers of stress ministers [clergy and lay] deal with in these volatile and complex times regularly test their adaptive capacities as well as those of their congregations. The short and long-range impact of the COVID-19 crisis intensifies these challenges to a once in a generational level. In this workshop participants will explore the stress and adaptive landscape before us as well as some healthful and faithful ways of traversing it.

The presenter described five types of stress, “personal, secondary, systemic, moral and adaptive” that significantly impact clergy and lay ministers during the COVID-19 epidemic. He emphasized the importance of ministers taking regular inventory and distinguishing among specific types of stress in order to deal with them most adaptively. He made special note of the increase of moral and adaptive stress as a result of this crisis.

The presenter also shared results of a small survey of nineteen clergy and lay ministers focused on what they are experiencing as most *distressing*, *most energizing or positive*, and *most helpful* with respect to the stresses of COVI-19. He described twelve overarching themes that emerged from the respondent’s comments and drew implications for COM’S and CPM’s in their ministries to ministers under their care.

PART ONE

One of the most challenging parts of dealing with stress is identifying its specific sources along with the emotions and reactions that come with it.

Different types of stress and stress responses require different strategies to manage them well.

Hence the importance of reflective practices that help us to understand the nature of our stress in order to make more adaptive choices.

Five types of stress that are important for leaders and helping professionals to consider in dealing with crisis like COVID-19.

Personal or Primary Stress is in reaction to situations of threat, trial or trauma that affect us and those close to us directly.

Secondary Stress is the kind that can come with caring “for others in need” (R. Wicks) or experiencing stress.

Systemic Stress is the kind that results from working with and/or within highly demanding, anxious, strained and/or unhealthful organizational or socio/cultural environments.

For example, in this COVID context: the role systemic economic and social inequities play in the way this virus impacts certain groups of people more than others.

Moral Stress is the kind that results from dealing with situations that seriously test or threaten our core values and sense of integrity.

For example, when people find themselves in no-win situations while desiring and trying to do the right thing---when they feel it is necessary to consider *what is the less bad thing instead*.

Adaptive Stress: All stress tests our adaptive capacities. But the speed and relentlessness with which *adaptive change demands* confront us can become a source of stress in its own right

You are familiar with Heifetz’s work on adaptive work and leadership:

Adaptive work/coping is needed when we find ourselves in “new territory” where previously tested and reliable solutions or ways of coping are no longer reliable.

“Adaptive challenges refer to situations where there are no known solutions to the problem or cases where there are too many solutions but no clear choices...Solutions to this type of challenge usually require people to learn new ways of doing things, change their attitudes, values and norms and adopt an experimental mind-set. “

<http://focusadventure.com/adaptive-challenge-and-the-leadership-challenge/>

When the impacts of extraordinary adaptive challenges ‘pile on’ and must be faced over long periods of time with little relief in sight, adaptive coping capacities can become depleted--sometimes leading to maladaptive and even self-destructive behaviors.

PART TWO

TWELVE THEMES GATHERED FROM A SMALL SURVEY

In preparation for this conversation I turned to the experts who teach me most, and who I believed would respond. Most are members of three on-going clergy groups I lead and others are colleagues whose work I know and trust well. **I asked them to respond to three questions and sorted their responses by themes:**

1. What are you finding most stressful in ways you tend to experience as *distressing*?

- **Adapting to social distancing and the ambiguous role of technology in this process**—especially in situations of uncertain duration and where pastoral presence and sensitivity is needed/expected the most. Respondents described many examples of various stresses related to this theme. It was the most frequent source of distress [especially moral and adaptive stress] cited.
- **Dealing with existential fear, anxiety and uncertainty**—Anxiety is contagious and the base-line level of realistic anxiety is high and stressful for everyone. Ministers are working hard at helping themselves and others process anxiety in healthy instead of maladaptive reactive ways.
- **Dealing with complex grief**—respondents describe dealing with multiple kinds of grief: personal and collective; present and anticipatory. “Grief work is *real* work. It is painful, exhausting and always takes longer than people think it should.” [Fletcher 2019]
- **Financial insecurity ministers and their congregations**—With many congregations already feeling stressed, worries about financial security are intensified because of this crisis.
- **Lack of access to many normal leisure and self-care activities**—restrictions on movement and social distancing significantly limit some activities that respondents depend on for self-care and restoration.
- **Dealing with complex stress and its longer-term impact**: Most are struggling with several sources of stress at the same time making it even harder to sort out and cope. *Notable is the increase in moral and adaptive stress related to COVID-19 challenges.*
- **Meeting the challenges of authentic preaching, bible-study, pastoral theologizing and prophetic messaging in this crisis**--Finding and articulating a meaningful versus apologetic framework for understanding and processing this experience. This often includes upholding necessary tensions between grief-bearing as well as “prophetic criticizing” and “prophetic energizing” [Walter Brueggemann].

2. Since not all stress necessarily leads to *distress*, what are you finding stressful in ways you tend to experience as energizing and/or positive in other ways?

- **Discovering untapped adaptive capacities within ourselves and our congregations**: Despite high levels of distress, respondents also offered impressive examples of ways churches and ministers were surprising themselves with creative and rapid adaptation to technological necessities to which they and their congregations were formerly resistant. Several are already anticipating and reconsidering the role these adaptations will continue to play in their ministries going forward. There is energizing

stress in what one described as,” rising to the challenge of learning new ways to minister.”

- **Sense of participating in a moment of extraordinary historical and social-spiritual significance.** Along the same lines, respondents also spoke of the challenges of authentic preaching, bible-study, pastoral theologizing and prophetic messaging in this crisis as sometimes energizing and inspiring. They are moved by the needs and responses of their congregants as well as people who are tuning in to their services and ministries more often or for the first time. Several people even wondered if there might be another “Great Awakening” born out of this crisis”.

3. What resources are you finding most important/helpful for meeting the stressful challenges above?

- **Connections:** By far the most mentioned resources respondents described were their vital connections with family, friends and other colleagues. Many forms of connection including clergy support groups, Lectio groups, Facebook groups, community emergency response teams, ZOOM gatherings and so on were referred to as well as connections with helping professionals like therapists and clergy coaches. Respondents were also grateful for denominational/judicatory executives and representatives who are reaching out to them in supportive and resourceful ways. Notably, the very technologies that are such a challenge have also become an indispensable tool for maintaining and building vital connections in this crisis
- **Self-care:** Respondents are finding it more important than ever to be intentional about self-care practices during this crisis. They described familiar ones like rest, meditation, prayer, exercise and so on. They also described experimenting with new practices in cases where social distancing has inhibited activities that have been an important part of their self-care regime.
- **Sharing Resources:** Respondents are finding much help and satisfaction in receiving and sharing resources among family, friends and colleagues. Several described how helpful colleagues have been in sharing creative ideas for dealing with the ministry challenges of COVIT-19. Once again, the internet and other communication technologies are playing an important role. Respondents are intelligently selective in their choices of sources and mindful of the dangers of information [and mis-information] overload.

PART 3

Implications for COM's and CPM's

1. **Ask about stress:** Listen well; don't judge. Help ministers sort out the sources/types of stress they are experiencing as well as the emotions that come

with them. Help them identify the coping resources they already possess and the ones they might need to learn or find for more adaptive coping. Remember that complex stress is not a disease. Also, that everyone's stress experience and coping style is as unique as their individual circumstance and story. What might be *distressing* for one might be *exciting and energizing* for another and vice-versa.

2. **Encourage and facilitate vital connections:** Research on resilience shows that the most important single factor is the connections people have with others. This was also by far the most often mentioned resource respondents described. All kinds of connections were mentioned and those between and among their colleagues was near the top.

Many of the best forms of these fit Parker Palmer's definition of "circles of trust":
"...the creation of bounded, safe and trustworthy communal spaces where the soul is welcomed and invited to show up, to speak its truth and to make its claim on the living of our lives"

"The Soul is Shy", presentation at the 2001 Trinity Institute. New York.

Several respondents described ways their presbyteries, dioceses and synods are helping foster resourceful connections among and between church leaders, congregations and judicatories. This should continue to be a major focus of judicatory resourcing especially in places/circumstances where ministers may be most susceptible to isolation.

There may be important revisioning of what it means to be a "connectional church" as a result of this crisis.

3. **Encourage people to reach out for qualified help especially in dealing with complex stress:** The more types of stress people are coping with the more skilled help is needed. Therapists, clergy coaches, physicians and other helping professionals should be lifted up and stigma broken down.
4. **Consider the stress impact and coping styles of lay as well as clergy leaders:** These volunteers are devoted and essential. They are vulnerable to many of the same stress clergy are. Church bodies should be intentional about considering the connectional, developmental and self-care needs of lay as well as clergy leaders.
5. **Consider the stress impact and coping styles of congregations:** Many congregations are feeling stressed and vulnerable already. This crisis will be decisive for some.

The most adaptive congregations will be those that are evolving less leader-dependent and more collaborative, "interdependent leadership cultures". Those that remain most leader-dependent will be most susceptible to distress and reactivity. This is an important moment for churches to be reflective about their

leadership cultures and how to increase their adaptive capacities. Presbyteries and Dioceses should consider how to be helpful in resourcing such explorations.

6. Help leaders help the church and the world exercise foresight with moral/spiritual and adaptive intelligence for dealing with the complex stress demands of the fast and slow phases of this crisis.

This crisis is in its very early phases. Coming phases will have some predictable and unpredictable elements. In addition to the uncertainty, the *fast and slow* dimension of the crisis [it feels like things are happening *too fast and too slow* at the same time] will add to the stress people feel [*adaptive stress plus endurance stress*]. Leaders will be challenged to anticipate and help people face these complexities over long duration.

Seamus Heaney--From "Voices from Lemnos"

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracle
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term."

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7029-human-beings-suffer-they-torture-one-another-they-get-hurt>

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<https://pda.pcusa.org/situation/covid-19/>

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