

Thriving Leadership On Lockdown

H.A. Moldez

The whole world is caught by an unwelcome and overwhelming surprise. One country after the other imposes varying degrees of lockdown to prevent the spread of covid19. Business activities stop. All mode of travels are suspended. Mass gathering becomes dangerous. As Christian leaders, pastors in particular, how are we serving our people?

Some remain busy, others become bored and most bear the situation as long as they can. People still hope for the best that the scourge and scare will soon be over. Still, many worry so much and look so weary. They feel lonely in isolation. How can we serve outside the ministry box?

1. Presence in a distance

Preventive confinement has isolated pastoral leaders from being physically present to serve. The handy option is through virtual presence. Seeing one another online provides some sensory experience. Online meeting provides some comfort. But physical absence also deepens the longing for personal “touch” that Zoom and Facebook can’t just duplicate.

As Christians we don’t just live in the visible and material reality but in the invisible world within the spiritual realm. Spiritual reality transcends physicality. As God’s people we can keep serving despite physical absence if we operate within the Kingdom ministry framework. Thus Paul could make his spiritual presence real in Corinth mediated by the Holy Spirit (1Cor 5:3-4) who unites God’s people as one to commune spirit to spirit.

We relate as the “communion of the saints”, called to serve and share a common life and love that transcends localization. Saints, dead and alive, commune in the spirit by the Holy Spirit flowing in the heart. We usually shake hands without deep sharing of hearts. We have small space to welcome people in our hearts (cf. 2Cor 6:11-13). We sit together but separated by animosity.

Most leaders operate by control based on what they can see and show. But the Kingdom of God works deeper in the invisible reality through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believers’ heart. “The Kingdom of God is within you”, Jesus Christ said (Lk 17:21). Lockdown gives an opportunity to discover being present to one another in the spiritual realm, connecting and communing in the spirit. Since our hearts is the divine sanctuary we can worship together in Spirit and truth (Jn 4:23; Acts 17: 24; 1Cor 3:16). Experiencing God is not measured by statistics. Even just two or three can have a meaningful worship experience (see Matt 18:20).

How do we make our spiritual presence reach the people we serve?

In the 1986 EDSA Revolution we experienced solidarity by locking our arms together to resist advancing tanks and mortars. On a lockdown we extend solidarity with one another, especially with the frontliners, by connecting our human spirits to support and share one another’s sacrifices. In prayer, all of us can be present to inspire hope in this trying time.

Prayer facilitates spiritual presence amidst physical absence. Paul, locked up in prison, experienced the presence of Philippian believers in his heart as he prayed for them (1:3-8). In our church we are spiritually present together through the 24-hour prayer chain. Our people need to seize isolation to stay in solitude to experience God's presence and communion of saints in the spirit.

Spiritual presence is linked by the depth of love-relationship we have. We sense this spiritual connection with our loved ones separated from us by distance or death by remembering them in our hearts. We talk to them in our spirits and celebrate their memories so that despite their absence we feel their presence.

- **Reflect:** In what ways have you experienced the “communion of the saints” with your people? How will you develop the ministry of spiritual presence to care for others?

2. Perspective to persevere

Isolation in time of crisis is dangerous for the soul. Being alone could be a seedbed of wild imagination to grow fear, worry and despair. Most cope by media entertainment to divert loneliness and feeling of losing heart. They forget temporarily but soon they are haunted again. How can they persevere without losing heart?

To help people not to succumb to despair, they must find purpose in suffering. Fredrick Nietzsche said, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find source of meaning in the suffering.” Again, he said, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.” Finding significance in suffering can strengthen life within to sustain a journey passing through the shadow of death.

Through spiritual direction we can guide by interpreting historical event in the light of God's eternal love, power and providential care. Jesus modelled this with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, wondering on what's next since their Messiah was crucified. Jesus explained from the Old Testament that the Messiah's suffering was necessary to enter glory (Lk 24:27-27). The words burnt in their hearts to lift their drooping spirits to dance with joy (32-35).

We must provide divine perspective by sharing God's purpose in suffering to process saint-making. Timely biblical insights to enlarge perspective of suffering will inspire the soul. This is not giving pat answers by spiritualizing complex reality of struggle. Many questions have no answers. It's enough to offer a safe space to let people voice out their doubt and sense of darkness. Listening to their stories will eventually clarify their confusion to see light in darkness.

Reflect: What biblical perspective on suffering and pain you find relevant to guide people in their struggle and to help them feel comforted and confident to move on?

3. Partnership with people

There are times that I feel “useless” but find “useful” in partnership with fellow believers and leaders. Paul experienced it too while placed on “lockdown” in prison for it “has actually served to advance the gospel” (1:12-18). In his last imprisonment awaiting death he realized that John Mark whom he considered useless by deserting him and his team in Pamphylia (Acts 15:38) had become “helpful” to him in his state of “helplessness” (2Tim 4:11)

Every leader struggles to let go of control and become confident of others to serve by their own way. I learned lay-leadership responsibility and initiative as a campus staffworker of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. In those days, the most flourishing campuses were those seldom visited by our few staff workers. We did not take the lead but coached and cared behind the scene. The student-led ministry was the strength of our student movement.

Some pastors think they must call the shot to accelerate church growth. It may work for a while but the ministry suffers when the main pastor is taken away or lock in. During lockdown both clergy and laity are re-discovering the priesthood of all believers. God is ushering a New Reformation in doing and being a church by liberating the laity as partners with God and with the professional ministers to build God’s Kingdom, not religious empire.

In our church the lay people are leading house worship on lockdown. I design a simple program with prepared links for praise songs in YouTube and my video message. Children read the Scripture and share their stories, mothers serve as liturgists and fathers lead small group conversation and benediction. Ordinary people discover the joy and power of lay-leadership.

We also remember those who have lost their daily livelihood. Our members have rallied to share their resources, money and in kind, to augment meager food pack distributed by the local government. Members are caring for one another and their neighbors.

- **Reflect:** How can you better set free the lay people as partners in the ministry? What will the implications of this for the future of the church?

4. Pastoral accompaniment

How can pastors, set aside from the scene of ministry, guide their people navigate the complexity of an uncertain future?

Pastors enjoy preaching to explain the Gospel. It is now tested whether believers are living out the sermons they heard. No matter how important the pulpit ministry is, what believers need is how to experience God as they groan in pain.

How can I accompany the journey of people when I am not with them to walk by their side and work out with them the implications of faith in such a time as this? What a comfort that I am just an under-shepherd of the True Good Shepherd, who is Jesus Christ (1 Pet 45:4; Jn 10:1-18). Jesus said that shepherd-sheep relationship develops a deep knowing to hear and know the voice of the shepherd to follow his leadership. I don’t presume to speak the voice of God. As co-shepherd of

Jesus, I just facilitate the hearing of the still small voice of God as guidance to discern the right choice to make life's decision.

Because I am no longer physically present to preach and teach, our people need to listen more to the voice of God who speaks through the Scripture. I teach them the process of listening to God in a Scripture text but in a non-academic way. I have developed a simple practice to hear God through Contemplative Bible Engagement (CBE). It works in a simple process of **reading** and **reflecting** of the Scripture text and **responding** to pray and practice the spiritual **resonance** of the Spirit deeply stirring the heart. Through meditation spiritual knowledge descends from mind to heart. Every Christian with the Holy Spirit can intuitively hear God speaking in a silent whisper of love. This discipline of listening to the Word is called *lectio divina*, or spiritual reading. I have already many tested contemplative resource materials for personal devotion or small group conversation.

Many people are losing their hearts. If they could hear the voice of God through the words from Scripture speaking in their hearts, they will find strength of soul to sustain a difficult journey. I make myself available for further spiritual direction thru online conversation.

In the confine of our house, I am mentoring people not managing programs. I follow what they post on the Face Book to discern what bothers them to offer spiritual guidance, not by a long talk but simple chat responses to keep them thinking, direct them to God and share life's wisdom and biblical perspective. Our church leaders are also mobilized for soul companionship by calling up church members. Since house visitation is not possible they can visit people's hearts to listen to their concerns, read a bible verse and pray for them.

Reflect: Why is soul companionship important to win the war against covid19? How are you providing care of soul to your people?

5. Proactive leadership

The challenge is not just passing through the crisis of covid19. We must anticipate the fall out of the lock down. Analysts and experts are already predicting the global economic recession that will have tragic implications to working people. After the stressful and traumatic experience of the pestilence, how can they still live? How are we preparing for the post-lockdown ministry?

I have already initiated a conversation to respond to the post-covid19 stress and trauma. We are also launching an online spiritual gift and natural talents survey. A post-covid19 ministry will require natural strengths and spiritual gifts to do an integral mission. The modern Bezalels and Oholiabs must be called to partner with God (Exo 35:30-36:5).

Bill Gates in his Ted Talk in 2015 issued a warning of the coming war, not of missiles but microbes leading to a pandemic corona virus flu. Had the world leaders listened and acted proactively, infection and death could have been minimized.

The covid19 will not last for eternity. It will soon reach its peak, flatten the curve and we live normally again. We will forget the horror we've been through, unaware that something worst may hit us again.

Strategic spiritual leaders must pause now to ponder the bitter lessons of covid19, prepare for its fall out to care for our people and extend the Kingdom of God. We need to stir up creative imagination, innovate ministries and involve all to serve the Lord.

- **Reflection:** What scenario do you anticipate after the covid19 crisis? What are you learning for ministries to move forward strategically to serve the people more effectively?

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This is a simple attempt to serve God and the people entrusted to me in this time of pandemic corona-virus crisis. What I have written today may suddenly change tomorrow. Such is the volatility of the situation that requires constant alertness and attentiveness to God.

What a comfort that in the flux of changing times God remains unchanging. Our Lord is eternal. Historical reality will surprise us but God's sovereign control will sustain us to remain calm and confident to extend the Kingdom of God.

Let me invite others to engage in dialogue so that together we will be able to serve God better and become relevant partners to serve the world live under God.