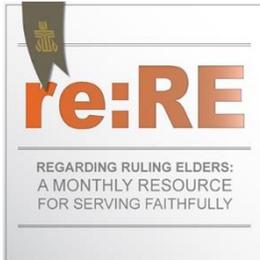


**Regarding Ruling Elders: A Monthly Series for Serving Faithfully
BUT, this article is for us all. Saints!**

Dan Saperstein

Ruling Elders in a Pandemic



“If we suspend our worship and close our doors during this pandemic, how will we continue to be the church?” That is the central question for congregational leaders. How do we build a community of faith when we are separated physically from each other? How do we lead in a crisis? Crises are tests of our faith and leadership. In a crisis, people are prone to act out of fear, not faith. Fear breeds anxiety, which acts like a contagion in the Body of Christ. Like Elijah fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel (1 Kings 19), anxious and fearful churches can develop a “cave mentality,” feeling helpless and alone. Like the Israelites in the

wilderness (Exodus 16), we can be reactive, urging a quick fix rather than adapting and growing through the challenges. Many leaders internalize this anxiety and feed the fears of the people. **But the best leaders are those who manage their own reactivity, compassionately address fears, and model a confident and hopeful trust in God. Here are some important reminders for leading in a crisis.**

Put on your own mask first. The familiar pre-flight warning, “in case of a sudden loss of cabin pressure ...” to put on one’s own mask before trying to help others is a good lesson for leaders. You can’t help others spiritually if you are not taking care of yourself. Practice good physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Take days off, not just from work and church obligations, but also from anxiety - producing news and social media. Pay more attention to spiritual disciplines.

Stay connected. As the song says, “the church is not a building ... the church is a people.” We can stay spiritually close even when socially distant. Pay special attention to those who might feel most isolated: the elderly and infirmed, those who live alone, and those on the other side of the digital divide who might not have access to virtual connections. A hand-written note or a phone call are a means of grace in a digital world.

Communicate! Clear, regular, and honest communication is vital in a crisis, but people have a hard time hearing when they are anxious and fearful. Good leaders listen before they speak. Provide opportunity for people to voice their fears. Being a calm and empathetic listener will almost always diminish anxiety.

Be open to God’s new thing. We are an Easter people! Even amid suffering and grief, God works to bring new life and hope. This could be the time to forge mission partnerships with community agencies and schools; to strengthen your online presence by live-streaming devotionals and prayer gatherings; to develop online giving capability.

Remember who’s in control. Here’s a hint: it’s not you. This is God’s world and God is in control, even in a pandemic. We don’t need to carry the spiritual and emotional burden of “saving the church”—that’s been done already! Leadership is a team sport - so trust the other elders and pastoral leaders, but above all, trust God. Peter urged the persecuted believers in Asia, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6–7).

Leadership in a crisis is an exercise in courageous faith. Angeles Arrien, a cross-cultural anthropologist, teacher, and author, defined courageous leadership in four steps: Show up, Listen, Tell the truth as you see it from your heart, and Let go of the outcome. That’s good advice for us today. God is in control; the Lord will see us through.