

Lessons for COVID-19 from Hurricane Harvey

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Churches around the world must adapt to new realities created by COVID-19. Pastors seeking to shepherd their congregations faithfully through this situation can be at a loss for how to do it.

There is so much change needed, so much unknown and unfamiliar, that our anxieties increase and may keep pastors and the congregations they serve stuck in place.

While listening to my fellow pastors trying to make good decisions for their congregations, I realized all this felt familiar to me. When Hurricane Harvey made a direct hit on my small town, much of what I knew about being a pastor and how to do church suddenly needed to [adapt to new realities](#).

Here's the good news: My church and I made it, and I believe we are better, stronger and healthier than ever.

As a local church pastor, I am a leader in my church and community. How can I lead during this time of radical change so my church and I both survive as we make the necessary changes?

Here are some lessons I learned from being a "hurricane pastor" and from my research in complex adaptive human systems.

Clues from Ephesians

In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul describes how the Holy Spirit works within individuals and within the church to produce maturity and the likeness of

Christ. This Spirit-wrought transformation is both an individual and collective phenomenon.

Individually, each person exercises his or her own spiritual gifts in the church and becomes more mature and Christlike.

Collectively, the members of the church interact and work with one another so the whole church is built up and matures to be more like Jesus.

This gives me clues about my own leadership.

God created transformation

God created transformation and the fragile balance between continuity and change.

God did not design creation to produce creatures in a completed form. We begin as infants who must grow, learn and mature. This pattern is present throughout nature and is seen in the changing of the seasons—birth, growth, productivity, decline, death, renewal, etc.

Individual Christians and churches of which they are a part are responsible for making honest assessments of where they are relative to where God wants them to be.

Systems Theory teaches that movement into the future—or the process of adaptation and transformation—will include both continuity and change. For instance, I did not become an adult overnight, but over time. During that time, I remained familiar to those who knew me; I continued to be me while I was changing.

What this means for my leadership is I should strive to find a healthy balance between continuity and change in my life and church. Too much of one at the expense of the other is not going to help us adapt to be the

people God intends.

It is probably misguided to say everything is different now as a result of the pandemic, and therefore, churches should be different. Some things need to be different, but not everything.

Consider how your church will operate in the coming days. There likely is quite a bit that is new, different and unfamiliar. It is important that we also strive to include many familiar elements, as well. How can you help your church find the balance between continuity and change?

Systems adapt and change

Human systems adapt or change as a result of four possible things: changes outside the system, changes in the people who make up the system, changes in how the people within the system relate to one another, and changes within the purpose of the system as a whole.

It is true that what occurs in my community has some impact on my church. But the greatest transformation within a church will be the result of the people who are a part of that church, how they relate to one another, and what they believe the purpose of that church to be.

A small congregation with an elderly membership and a familiar format for conducting worship and church activities may be resistant to change and slow to adapt. But they still do both.

Aging members naturally become less active and eventually will be absent altogether, either through relocation or death. The church has no choice but to adapt to their absence, the lack of leadership, the lack of giving, the missed fellowship and so on.

The perceived purpose of that church may be to provide a comforting presence in the lives of the members who are experiencing great loss and

are facing their own mortality.

This provides suggestions for specific things I can do to provide leadership. I can clarify the mission of the church continually at this time. I can challenge my members to reflect prayerfully on how God may be transforming their own lives. I can ask questions about how church members and various ministries are relating to one another. I can do what is possible to facilitate better communication and better ways of relating to one another.

Any church will experience true transformation only if the people within the church are transformed, their relationships are transformed, and/or their understanding of the church's mission is transformed.

There is hope in change

There is hope that my church can change because there is hope that I can change.

I want to accept that I cannot control the universe, nor am I the Messiah sent to save everyone. My role is important, to be sure, but there is a limit to its importance.

I can work on what is within my control and release the rest to God. I need to allow God to shape my own life. I cannot control how others do or do not adapt or grow. But I can address my own health and maturity.

At the same time, I can choose to be a consistent presence in the lives of others. If I take my place in my church and community, I bring the changes within me into my relationships.

It may be more helpful for me to stop trying to control the bigger picture and focus instead on my own transformation, my own relationship with Christ, and on the nature of my presence with others.

As I change, my relationships also change. Those changed relationships have the potential to have a wider impact in my church and community. This is a slow, imperfect process. But there is potential over time for a much wider impact.

There is no such thing as a quick fix, only the hard, slow pastoral work of becoming more like Christ over time and helping others to do the same.

Take care of yourself

Take care of yourself, pastor and church leader. Attend to God's presence and activity in your own life. Consistently clarify the purpose of your church during this time. Lead people to reflect on God's presence and activity in their own lives and how they are relating to others. And strive for that elusive balance between continuity and change, because you will need both if you and your church are to survive the current crisis while also making the changes needed at this time.

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