

A Few Lessons Applied

The Rev. Canon Lisa S. Hines, with the Rev. David Peters and the Rev. Tony Clark

As rector of Calvary Episcopal Church, I experienced leading a congregation through the trauma of the 2011 Bastrop wildfires. Like any of you who have led others in times of crisis, I learned lessons that I have carried forward. I offer a few of them below, joining them to lessons learned by the Rev. David Peters and the Rev. Tony Clark in their experiences as military chaplains as well as congregational leaders.

Complex pastoral crises like the novel coronavirus can make us want to run the other way or to bluster our way through the situation by dismissing its challenges. But resisting the moment in which we find ourselves doesn't change it. There's a kind of surrender that must happen before we can be effective as leaders. As we learn from Paul's conversion in Acts, we have to stop kicking against the goads (Acts 26:14). A goad is the long pole that was used to drive oxen forward, what we might call a cattle prod. We are being prodded by the health and economic effects of Covid-19, goaded by our circumstances, to move in directions that are unfamiliar and that may threaten to overwhelm us with a sense of loss. As painful as the moment may be, the only way forward is by responding to it. And we can only respond to it if we accept it as our reality. Until we do, we can find ourselves paralyzed, unable even to articulate and ask for the help that we need or maybe pushed by our resistance into an eddy where we are prevented from entering the current that could carry us forward.

Because you love and care for the people in your care, you want to rescue them from the many heartaches and challenges of the pandemic, and of course, you can't. But there is much you can do.

You can comfort and counsel and point them to community resources, guided perhaps by some of the information offered here but mostly by the relationships you have already established with them and with your surrounding communities.

You can with humility acknowledge your limitations and empower members of the congregation to support and care for one another and for others. By modeling self-care and healthy boundaries, you will free others to do the same.

You can assure your members that they continue to have a place at the table,¹ whether or not they can yet gather around that table in person in safety. You can acknowledge the importance that they and their gifts bring to the congregation, even if those gifts must be offered in new ways.

¹ Thoughts on Reentry, an email conversation among Bishop Doyle, the Rev. David Peters, and the Rev. Tony Clark

You can help lower expectations that things will be “the same” as you begin to gather, or that because things have changed, old problems and tensions will disappear.²

After so much disruption of cherished routines and roles, you can expect tempers to flare over details that have come to symbolize how things *should* be. You can listen and encourage others to listen for the pain and anxiety behind the anger.³ You can offer a safe place, virtual and actual, where they can feel what they feel without fear of rejection and be met with patience and forgiveness.

You can practice vulnerability, being honest with them about your own anxieties and feelings of vulnerability⁴ in this pandemic, for yourselves, your families, your congregations, while framing your collective experiences in the biblical narratives of being called into the wilderness, of scattering and being gathered in, of loss and discovery, of hidden grace and revelation, of suffering and compassion, of death and resurrection. You can remind them that we are in the middle of a story and that God calls us onward despite uncertainty.

You can mourn, leading your people through rituals that name their many losses and you can celebrate, claiming the signs of God’s presence even now.

You can practicing gratitude for God’s mercy and goodness, encouraging one another to respond with acts of mercy and goodness toward others

You can anticipate the coming of Christ into each moment and can claim the hope that lies within you.

² David Peters

³ Tony Clark

⁴ Thoughts on Reentry