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The coronavirus has triggered a multi-dimensional crisis - health, economic, societal - that has interrupted almost every aspect of individual and organizational life. In times of crisis, people look to their leaders. But what does that mean for you?

You may think they're looking to you for answers, but I believe that's only partly true. They're looking for leaders who can embrace a challenging paradox and communicate clearly, even when answers aren't clear.

Brutal Facts AND Prevailing Faith

Lately I've been thinking about the "Stockdale paradox." Not familiar with it? The concept is from Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*. Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking prisoner during the Vietnam War, spending 8 years in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" POW camp after his plane was shot down.

Stockdale told Collins that the key to his survival was that he never lost hope that he would prevail in the end, but he also accepted the brutal reality that he would spend a long time in the most dire conditions. At one point, Collins asked Stockdale, "Who didn't make it out?" (from the POW experience). Stockdale answered, "The optimists." He explained that they were the ones who were convinced that their release from prison was imminent, and he concluded that "they died of a broken heart."

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the perspective of many ministry leaders was "we'll switch to digital for a couple weeks and then get back to normal." But with each passing day, "normal" seems more distant and what we'll "get back to" is more challenging. Perhaps we were being optimists in those early days, but I think we were just ignorant.

Today we need to embrace the Stockdale paradox: "confront the most brutal facts of our current reality" AND "retain faith that we will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties." This may mean admitting that reopening is not just around the corner. It calls for us to be honest that when we gather again, it won't be the same as in the past for quite some time. We may even decide that

it's better to continue with remote ministry than to regather with restrictions such as limited attendance, required masks, closed children's classes and childcare, worship without singing, deep cleaning, and more.

But leaning into the Stockdale paradox also calls for us to proclaim our confidence that God is at work. It challenges us to hold true to our mission even as we're reinventing our practices. It invites us to celebrate the ways that our ministries are continuing and that lives are being changed. And it reminds us that the story of prevailing in the face of overwhelming obstacles is at the core of our faith.

People aren't looking for a Pollyanna leader. They don't want an Eeyore either. They're looking for leaders like Jim Stockdale, who don't sugarcoat the hard truths and yet maintain an unwavering faith that they will prevail. Is that how you're leading?
