



Shepherding from Afar

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Church Extension Plan

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C OVID-19 has brought the globe to a screeching halt while bringing about one of the greatest challenges the church has ever experienced. Expressing care and spiritual oversight has never been more unique and perhaps more simplified. As we race to minister online and as most of us take a crash course in communicating into a camera, I've come to see that the ministry of *the Spirit, by the Spirit* has never been more needed. The props and accessories of a physical building, programs, and even personal presence have all been stripped away from us. Much like a parent who prays for their recently departed college freshman to do well at school and in their walk with God, we are reckoning with the deep sense of "this is really out of my hands now." What has emerged, though, is the realization that this has always been our reality.

This new reality highlights what has always been true — that as pastors, we only have one hope for truly being effective — that is to work in the Spirit, by the power of the Spirit. We have always only had a very limited time with our people every week, and we've continually had to release them back into the crazy, crooked world that pulls at their flesh and their fears. How our people are doing has been reduced to the true state of their walks with God and the true state of our impact on their growth in Christ. Upon the beginning of his Sunday School ministry in Chicago, D.L. Moody observed that he "got the children for one hour in the week while the devil got them all the rest."

"Shepherding from afar" has put a fresh challenge before us, yet has created a new opportunity as caretakers of the flock, to develop our deep dependence on the Lord. Psalm 34:5 states, "Those who look to him will never be put to shame." We Pastors can be assured that the grace and power of Jesus has never been more available to us and our people than right now! The ugliness of the COVID-19 virus may be just the thing to awaken the beauty and power of the Body of Christ. I've always told our people, "Only the Lord can take the worst things and turn them into some of the most wonderful things." This is what I'm believing for all of our staff, our people, and His church at large.

As spiritual leaders, we must get back to depending on the power of the Spirit for all of our

ministry. As I have adjusted to leading primarily from my home, through video and technology-driven communication tools, I have been led to three core focuses of ministry in this season.

Focus One: Shepherd Them in Prayer

There is a faith that we need to operate in right now that firmly believes the Lord is releasing what we are asking for the flock. As we pray for our people, it's as if we are on patrol over their lives. Our prayers are greater than the circumstances they are facing and strong enough to drive back their discouragement and concerns. Hebrews 1:14 shows us that our intercession for their lives will bring about the release of the resources of Heaven over their homes — "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?"

Prayer connects a pastor to his sheep like a mother is connected to her children. There's a God-given sensitivity and intuition that the Spirit places in mothers, allowing them to instinctively sense trouble or need. I keep encouraging our staff and leaders to be sensitive to the impressions of the Lord and to not dismiss the sudden thought or burden for someone in the congregation. When the Spirit prompts, reach out!

My suggestion is to tap into what the Lord had been saying to you, for the church, prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Pray it over the people like never before; war in the spirit for the fulfillment of what has already been revealed. We have been on a faith track as a church; a call to believe God to make us fruitful in every aspect and circumstance of our lives. His word and promise still stands even during a season like this. Psalm 1 says, "Our leaves need not wither...in times like these." Although we have been stripped of what E.M. Bounds called "the lower sources or earthly sources," the higher sources are readily available. Remember, we are distributors not manufacturers. Ministry is always from the Lord, then for the Lord. He has revelation — both old and new — for you and your congregation.

Focus Two: Communicate Deep Care and Great Faith at Every Opportunity

Letting the people know, through the anointing of God, that they are loved and not alone, must

be one of our top priorities. Words of love are words of life and we need to express our love for our people. The Spirit is able to help our hearts reach through the camera and into their homes. Social distancing does not mean emotional distancing, and it certainly does not mean spiritual distancing — and those who are alone need us to express our feelings for them. This is where we use the technology available to us to stay deeply connected. Our team has created a communication schedule to ensure that everyone is being reached out to and cared for as best as possible. It is our spiritual duty and call to “know the condition of our flock” (Proverbs 27:23). The ministry of the Spirit is not hindered by the distance; in fact, what we have discovered is that our reach has actually increased by means of the new ways we are ministering. Practically speaking, if you are like me and don’t feel confident in your communication processes, find inspiration and examples from other churches in the Body of Christ to use as a communication guide and tutor during this time.

Through consistent communication you can also activate the *Priesthood of the believer* in the body. Faith does not sit idly by and fret; faith takes action. We can remind our people that they are the priests of their homes. They can lead them spiritually through daily devotions and by setting an example of what faith in hard times looks like. They can reach out to family, friends, and neighbors and become amazing providers of love and care for those who are in need. We can inspire all of our leaders and volunteers to find ways to care for the flock, making sure none of the sheep are picked off by the enemy. The more we get our people into a place of active faith and ministry, the less worry and fear they walk in.

Focus Three: Set the Example

Someone once told me, “When you’re on a plane and you are experiencing turbulence, keep your eyes on the flight attendants...if they are good, then you are good too.” Well, we are the flight attendants of this current journey, and our example will comfort our people on this bumpy trip. In light of this, the leadership team of our church has determined to keep up what the church is accustomed to doing, such as having our

Tuesday Night Prayer meeting, but filmed from our home. Our small groups are gathering online via video calls, and as our leaders facilitate them, they are leading vibrantly and joyfully — full of the Love of God. We are lifting our hands and singing our songs of praise without all of the support we used to have, but nonetheless with all of the passion of our hearts. Our ministry does not have to be perfect but rather sincere and authentic. People aren’t looking for a show or entertainment; they are looking for strength and connection.

Oftentimes, what is practiced in our corporate gatherings serves not only as an opportunity for God to move in the people’s lives, but also as an example of how our people can grow in their private spiritual walks. The ways in which we worship, or the way we pray, is the way our people will pray at home. The Bible says, “Like priests, like people” (Hosea 4:9). While the challenge of this crisis is that our people see and observe us less, let us make sure that what they see of us is spiritual, impactful, and transferrable to their homes. For example, if you do not have a Prayer Meeting in your church, there has never been a better opportunity to perhaps begin a virtual prayer meeting than right now! Our Intercession Ministry, typically consisting of 30-40 on Friday nights, now sees 200 visitors online in their weekly gathering. What an amazing blessing!

Our people need to see our faith and sense of *rest* in the Lord. My mother used to say (translated from Spanish), “In bad times, good face!” The look and expression of our faces are tangible expressions of faith for our people right now.

Shepherding may feel different than what we are accustomed to. I believe there is an important realignment taking place for us as ministers. Perhaps we are all being reminded that our ministry must first be done in the Spirit and always by the Spirit. ■

Al Toledo is the Lead Pastor of Chicago Tabernacle and the author of *DNA of a Leader*, a personal, spiritual development program to help people become privately healthy and publicly fruitful, found at www.dnaofaleader.org.