SPECIAL EDITION:
Church Leadership in Covid-19

AFM Colleague,

We are going through a pandemic crisis which has and continues to disrupt our social, economic and our church life in an unprecedented way. Covid-19 is characterized as a novel crisis because it is indeed a ‘game changer’ which poses a global threat to all sectors of society.
LEADERSHIP QUALITIES IN A CRISIS
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Crisis are, generally, grouped into two categories, namely the routine and the novel crisis. In routine crises organizations have the ability to put in place plans on how to deal with these, because the risks are known. On the other hand, novel crises are characterized by high level of risks and uncertainties. Plans and processes that may work in a routine crisis are, in most cases, found to be inadequate and sometimes counterproductive.

During times of crises people look up to their leaders for guidance. As we are going through the current Covid-19 pandemic, church members are looking up to their leaders at local, regional, and national levels. For this reason, leaders need to grasp and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic while keeping up hope in their members. They must also ensure that the decisions taken are prudent.

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In this article I would like to highlight some of the leadership qualities we need when we go through crisis moments, such as the current one.

Leadership Agility
The coronavirus pandemic requires leaders that can move with speed without losing their values. They need the ability to process information quickly and promptly decide on the appropriate course of action. This is what the leadership of the AFM did after the declaration of the State of National Disaster and the subsequent National Lockdown. We issued communication on 17 March 2020 to all AFM structures on what they needed to do. Most of the contents of this communication became irrelevant when the national lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020. On 24 March 2020 we updated our 17 March 2020 Covid-19 communication.

Leadership Calmness
In times of crises like coronavirus we need to stay calm, rational, and focused. Many people lose their cool and begin to panic in a time of crisis. This is understandable. However, it is expected that leaders should adopt a posture of calmness. In this way we will be able to reflect and apply our minds towards positive action. How we behave, in front of those we lead, is important. We should count ourselves fortunate in that we are not lacking information about Covid-19. When a decision has been taken on a particular action it must be communicated with clarity.

“How we behave, in front of those we lead, is important.”
LEADERSHIP QUALITIES IN A CRISIS cont.

Leadership Adaptability
By June last year none of us were talking about social distancing, regular washing of hands, sanitizers, and face masks as we do today. One of the lessons learned from the coronavirus is that leaders must be able to embrace necessary behavioral change to avoid a worst-case scenario. Some of the decisions that we took related to adapting or halting some of our liturgical practices such as laying on of hands on the sick and during the dedication of children, the Lord’s Communion, and water baptism. Any behavior that would enhance the risk of infection had to be changed or stopped. Behavioral change is not easy because it requires a mindset change. In isiXhosa we say: “Isiqhelo soyisa ingqondo” which can roughly be translated as “the habit conquers the mind”. Bold decisions must be taken when it comes to changing human behavior.

During Level 5 of the lockdown many pastors resorted to social network platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype and Zoom. These platforms became useful tools for communication and ministry. I have never been to so many virtual meetings and conferences before as I have been during the national lockdown period.

Leadership Empathy
Covid-19 has become a threat to our survival. Some of the questions in the minds of many people are: “Will I be infected? Will I lose my job? What is going to happen to my family?” On the other hand, there are many who have already lost their jobs and many who have lost their loved ones due to the pandemic. Walking alongside people (who are impacted negatively by the virus) with empathy, may make a positive difference in their lives.

OPPORTUNITIES IN A TIME OF CRISIS
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The Bible teaches us that it does not help much if we are weak in time of crisis. In fact, Solomon says that to act with weakness in a crisis is a sign of having very little strength indeed. A crisis is identifiable by some or all of the following components - threat, surprise, urgency and uncertainty. The pandemic brought on us by the novel coronavirus and the disease called Covid-19 can indeed be described as a crisis of catastrophic proportions containing all the above components. It not only challenged the way of life as we knew it, but also our ability to see opportunities in a time of crisis.
Life as we knew it
At the outset it must be said that the church is a place where we find comfort in the presence of the Lord and the believers, the place where our weary souls are restored, our hopes renewed and where we are reminded of 1 Peter 1:7 “That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ”.

We believers are encouraged in the book of Hebrews not to neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but are supposed to encourage one another to meet regularly in the house of the Lord, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near! Going to Church on Sundays and even in the week, have been viewed by believers as their Christian duty. The fellowship and gathering of the saints are no small matter to God’s children and many of us have become used to and comfortable with the way the church functions. In doing so we limited God to fit into our existing paradigms.

Locked down and locked out
When the South African nation went into total lockdown at midnight on 26 March 2020, no one could remain in any zone of life as we knew it. Everyone was unceremoniously evicted from what we were used to and almost overnight the entire world became a strange place. There came an abrupt end to all the things we took for granted. Going to the gym, the hairdresser, and the mall. Popping out for a takeaway meal or going to sit down at your favourite restaurant. Visiting friends and family, attending parties and funerals, even going to church, no more life as we knew it.

The impact on the church
The impact on the local church was felt in a number of ways. As already mentioned, there was the loss of communal worship and fellowship. There was the challenge of adapting to new and strange ways of “doing church”. Not everybody warmed up to receiving sermons via WhatsApp and the other social networks. Besides, not everybody could afford the cost of airtime and data. No more opportunity to take the Lord’s tithe to His own storehouse on Sundays. And how many would take the trouble to tithe in “strange new ways?”. The result - the income of the church was also impacted negatively.

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A biblical lesson
There is a story in the book of Jeremiah 29:4-7 about those who were carried into Babylonian exile. The exiles in Babylon were also overcome by all the elements of a crisis. They also hoped and prayed that the crisis would be over soon. That they will return home quickly. But God advised them differently. Take the longer view, they were told - “Work towards the peace and prosperity of the city where you are”. God gave them instructions to plant their own gardens and live from the produce thereof. To look to the future. The efforts of the present always have an impact on the future. Doing nothing is not an option. But what can be done? How can we build today to secure a sustainable future?
OPPORTUNITIES IN A TIME OF CRISIS cont.

Community involvement and socio-economic opportunities
Pastors and congregations could consider broadening their impact on their surrounding communities by starting socio-economic programs that could create income generating and/or job creation opportunities. Such programs could include Child and Youth Care Centers and Foster Homes, drop-in centers for children, care and support of older persons in institutions and communities, care and support of persons with disabilities, gender-based violence/domestic violence support services and shelters, early childhood development centers, literacy programs, substance abuse institutions and community based programs, poverty alleviation and job creation.

To assist AFM Assemblies the AFM Welfare has extensive experience and tools to provide technical support with the initiating, developing, and providing of programs and projects (especially where funding is required from the Department of Social Development and other sources). The assistance would include guidance on the policy and legal framework, understanding the requirements and the registration process related to both as an NPO (Non-Profit Organization) and as a designated service. Consideration should also be given to partnering with existing NPO’s.

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Conclusion
When Moses stood in front of the Red Sea and the armies of Egypt was behind him, the Lord asked him “What do you have in your hand”. I pray that God will provide creative insight and wisdom on how to apply what He has placed in our hands, to meet the demands we face today and in the future.

THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE
Dr. H.J. Weideman (General Secretary of the AFM of SA) - henri@afm-agrs.org

As church buildings and in-person meetings start to re-open, it becomes increasingly apparent that we are entering a new reality and that there are many things in our everyday lives that are changing, and most probably would never be the same again. This includes the way we think about and have church in the future. Observing the realities in our church country wide, reading what others around the world are saying and after thinking and praying about this, I have a few remarks.

“It is necessary to press the reset button on many aspects of being and having church.”
THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE cont.

It is necessary to press the reset button on many aspects of being and having church. Many assemblies were not able to meet at all during this time. For some, having the church building closed caused the assembly to practically stop functioning. Members did not receive any Spiritual input, and some had no contact with their Pastor or spiritual leaders at all. For many of these assemblies their only source of income was through the offerings that their members physically brought to the meetings and because of the lockdown that stopped.

Although in-person services were closed, some were able to meet online, making use of sermons and songs recorded in the homes of pastors and singers. Some assemblies also used platforms such as Zoom, Facebook and WhatsApp to be in touch with and communicate to their members.

Most Pastors and many members are eager to restart their normal way of having church, but there are a few things we need to think about and a few questions we need to answer for ourselves considering the future:

**What are the important elements of in-person meetings?**
During the first few weeks of the lockdown, assemblies facilitating online church services experienced an increase in attendance. Some reached more people in comparison to the number of people usually attending their in-person services. After about eight weeks many of these churches reported a plateau or even a decline in online attendance.

This corresponds with surveys in the USA where almost half of all churchgoers, after two months of lockdown, did not attend any online church. Digital presence for the church is here to stay, but many people want to go back to an in-person experience in a place of worship and we need to ask ourselves why? What do people get out of an in-person service that they cannot get online? We need to identify those elements and make sure that we strengthen them. In my opinion some of those elements are corporate singing, worshiping and praying together, as well as spending time in fellowship before or after services.

**How can people be reached and ministered to, outside of in-person meetings?**

**Crossing the digital divide:** Many assemblies will have to cross the bridge to digital technology, social media and online presence, to effectively reach their members and to sustainably grow their congregations in the future. The church will prevail, but not every assembly will prevail. I do not fully agree with the notion that churches will become digital organisations with physical expressions. However, I am convinced that pastors and assemblies should take cognisance of and utilise the massive opportunity that digital presence presents to the church - to reach people everywhere. Social media and online platforms create the opportunity to show up in the lives of people every day, not just on Sundays. This opportunity will continue to grow and should become a way of entering the church and not a last refuge for people leaving the church, as it was in the recent past.

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THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE cont.

The future church that really cares about people, especially young people, will care about a digital presence. It is important to know that you do not have to be a big church or have a big budget to have an impact online. You only need to be willing to embrace technology and experiment with the available options.

**On demand availability:** For those assemblies who already developed a digital presence before or during the lockdown, an important opportunity will be to continue and enhance this service. Many churches presented their Sunday service and mid-week meetings as live events, assuming that people who want to access it, will do so exactly when it happens. The most successful digital platforms around are providing their product “on demand” and churches can learn from this. Consider making every in-person Sunday service available in a way that can be accessed by members and “visitors” when it suits them. Furthermore, many pastors and assemblies have years of sermons, sermon series and teachings on MP4 or YouTube videos and should consider making those available on demand.

**Home based spiritual formation:** It is exciting to see that some assemblies are beginning to focus on everyday ministry, and not just on Sunday ministry. Building on the “on demand” availability of sermons, teachings and Bible studies, other services such as new member orientation, spiritual growth- and marriage enrichment courses can be made fully or partially available online.

This can enable individuals to access the material in their own time at home, and only attend the final session/s in-person at the church facility. It will also go a long way in assisting people to assume responsibility for their own spiritual growth, personal discipleship and evangelism.

**What are the key elements and principles of being church?**

Over the last few decades churches have become institutions with entrenched cultures and fixed ways of doing things. Many assemblies have developed an array of departments, ministries and fields of interest. Some have diversified to such an extent, that it is sometimes difficult to readily point out what their core business actually is.

The pandemic has brought us the opportunity, maybe even the necessity to go back to zero-based thinking: Imagining ourselves and our assemblies back at the point before any particular decisions on ministries, departments, assembly culture and -operations were made and to now, in the light of the current circumstances and information available to us, make them again freely.

Being church is about more than what happens within the four walls of church buildings. Homes, neighborhoods and communities are part of our ministry field. One important observation in this regard is to ensure that whilst methods and models will have to change, the mission of an assembly never does.
THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE cont.

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On what should assemblies really be spending money?
Literally overnight the way meetings are conducted became virtual. Indications are that this will become part of the “new normal” and that many staff meetings and even Governing Body meetings of structures on assembly, regional and national level can be done in this way in the future. This can lead to substantial budgetary savings, while assemblies should consider repurposing some of their budget on equipping themselves better for digital engagement and ministry.

Another implication of this is that staff members who have the means, can work virtually. It is a trend that will probably continue in many companies and that assemblies and church staff members can also benefit from. The key issues will be productivity and their availability to give full attention to and focus on their job, even when working from home.

Considering what is really key to being church and what can be considered “nice to haves” is probably one of the important exercises that assemblies will have to do, especially in light of the income of most assemblies being under pressure.

CONCLUSION

As we are passing through different stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, we need to be aware that the re-opening of church buildings and in-person meetings will most probably not have people flocking to the church, at least not yet. Surveys around the world shows that people have different opinions about when they would feel “safe” to gather again. It seems that around 30% of respondents will only return when they can be mask-free at church and 15% said they would only return when there is evidence of low cases, businesses are open, restrictions are lifted, and a vaccine is available. Around 8% said that the opening of restaurants for sit-down customers will be a guideline for them.

As church leaders we should not allow these indications to be emotional let-downs and we should not treat people who are cautious to attend, as though they are not people of faith. One thing is sure: We are entering a new reality and many people, even some leaders, are struggling more deeply than we realise, with the absence of what most people perceived as “normal”.

We need to talk about these things to our family, friends and colleagues. We need to pray and think about it and prepare ourselves for a longer period of disruption than we thought.

Past. M.G. Mahlobo