

# What I Am Learning as I Lead through the COVID-19 Crisis

## 10 Thoughts for Leaders from Rev. Alex Shanks



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**1. Pace yourself.** This is a marathon. We don't have to have it all figured out immediately. Exhaustion won't help anyone. We need to listen to our bodies and be mindful of our own needs. If we don't store up energy, we won't have it when we might really need it.

**2. People who don't normally need pastoral care are going to need it in this moment.** This includes our families and our coworkers. This includes the strong people around you. This includes us. People will internalize and externalize this as traumatic in ways we can't yet see. Go back to some basics. Slow down interactions. Give space for people to process how they are doing. Don't ask people how they feel. Ask people to tell the story about what is happening around them and help them focus on what seems possible as a doable next step. Create a pastoral care team by asking people who have extra time to reach out.

**3. Watch and read things unrelated to this to give your brain a break.** There is only so much social media and news reports we really need to intake. Often, unrelated things give insights we wouldn't have otherwise considered. (Example: The last two nights I watched Angry Birds 2 and The Secret Life of Pets 2 with my nine-year-old daughter. I didn't want to watch them, but she did. They gave me simple life messages about working together, but I had to force myself to really listen and not see them as mindless children movies.)

**4. Don't think the same way you normally think.** Listen to contrarian voices. Really ask the tough questions: Do I need to schedule that meeting in the same way? Does the meeting need to have the same agenda? Do I need to make that phone call or send that email in the same way? Am I really considering other people's realities amid this crisis? Is this a priority anymore?

**5. Balance and simplify the information you receive and give out.** Everyone processes differently. Some people want lots of connection and details and others don't. Keep messaging simple and repeat important things. Organize things so people can choose how detailed they want to go.

**6. Think next step not next five steps.** Think about today and not about next month. Determine the date by which you think you need to have made a decision about something in the future. Communicate that date to others. Creating timelines helps you and others plan and not just worry about all the things you can't control or don't yet know. (Example: Deciding that we will make a decision about annual conference in June no later than April 15th and about worship in April no later than March 27th.)

**7. Read resources you wouldn't normally read.** Read multiple disciplines, from a variety of communities. Think less like a UMC clergy person and educate ourselves about what others outside our "normal" communities are doing/saying. This experience is so widespread that everyone is adapting, and we have a lot to learn even from unexpected places. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. (Example: Yesterday I read an interfaith website for the first time and was really impressed by some of their resources. Later, I found helpful insights from statistical models that business leaders are using.)

**8. Don't make assumptions based on one experience.** When a new experiment fails, don't assume the same kind of experiment will fail the next time. When a new thing is wildly successful, don't assume it will work just as well the next time. This season will involve multiple iterations and prototypes. So much will depend on context and timing. (Example: online meetings and worship)

**9. We don't yet know what the future looks like or how long this will last.** It's impossible to predict. We can't anticipate what will change again tomorrow. We will have to learn as we go. That is what we have done the last two weeks. We will keep doing that again and again. Little by little, we will get through this.

**10. The struggle is real. Grace and resurrection are even 'more real.'** This is challenging and may get much more difficult. Don't minimize what this means or may mean for people. At the same time, as Christians, our current reality and the suffering around us never get the last word. God's comfort, power and resurrection actually do get the last word. How can we think and act theologically in the midst of this crisis? How can we reclaim and reflect the hope that is only found in Christ? How can we give and receive God's abundant grace?

**"If we don't store up energy, we won't have it when we might really need it."**

*After I wrote this and shared with a few people I added one more:*

**People are watching leaders.** They are paying attention to what we are saying and what we are posting. Even more importantly, they are watching what we are doing. Our choices about our own behavior matter more than we think. We should welcome pieces of this new reality as an opportunity to change our behavior, be creative, and learn new things.