

RESOURCES FOR PASTORS MINISTERING DURING THE VIRUS CRISIS

The Rev. N. Graham Standish, PhD, MSW, MDiv, MA



During this coronavirus crisis and its social distancing and sheltering-in-place restrictions, it has become difficult to minister to our members, especially those who live alone and in isolation. The following are suggested ideas and resources for ministering to those in need of spiritual and psychological care.

YOU CARE BEST WHEN YOU CARE FOR YOURSELF:

It is unquestioned that your members need to be cared for, but you do not help your members if you do not first care for yourself and family first. Too many pastors neglect their own health. Suggestions for self-care:

- *Use the crisis to improve your diet and sleep and exercise*—Being stuck indoors and away from work can create the conditions where it's hard to become self-disciplined. It becomes easier to eat comfort and junk foods, drink more soda and alcohol, and get too little sleep while staying up too late. Exercise in whatever way is easiest and best. This simply may mean walking. Whatever you do, make sure you are not developing bad habits that can compromise your own physical health. A great resource for developing strong and healthy habits is *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. This may be the best book on how to change our lives in positive ways by emphasizing the small steps that go into big change.
- *Develop a prayer practice that keeps you up spiritually*—Take time for prayer, devotional time, biblical reading, or reflection. Don't just follow what you've always done. Try something new—a prayer walk, a gratitude walk, imaginative Bible reading (put yourself in the Biblical stories and explore your reactions), spend time in silence, etc... The key is that you cannot take care of others spiritually and emotionally if you neglect yourself. You are your own resource for being there for them.
- *Work on your own relationships*—focus on being positive around others at home, especially as everyone gets cabin fever. Make sure you're watching movies together, playing games, or doing anything that keeps social connection.
- *Work on your own faith over fear*—There's an old saying I just created: "We can only nurture the faith in them we have for ourselves." Make sure you are talking with people who can help you with your anxieties and uncertainties. Both Samaritan and I are here to help with that.
- I've created a short video for pastors called "Pastoring in Unprecedented Times," which you can find at the bottom of our website's facing page at www.samaritancounseling.net.
- I'm available to talk with any pastors in need to talking as you go through this. Simply email me at gstandish@samaritancounseling.net. I will get back to you asap.

Ministering to Members:

Remember that you do not have to be everything for everyone. Small offerings for members can go a very long way. Taking care of people's mental and spiritual health are two sides of the same coin. Caring for one cares for the other. Here are some ideas for what you can do for members:

- If you have online or streaming capabilities through your computer by using a service such as Zoom or Go to Meeting, or even through Facebook, consider *offering a daily Bible study, book study, or devotional study for the duration of the lockdown*. Keep it simple. When doing this, choose passages or resources that address God's presence in difficult times, fostering hope, developing resiliency, and especially the idea that Easter's coming. Keep them focused on God with them now, and away from fear of the future.
- *Create an email to go out to the congregation daily or several times a week that could be titled "Pastoral Thoughts" or something like that where you talk to them about faith, hope, and love. Consider a simple structure—a paragraph with your thoughts, a short inspirational story, and a prayer they can recite. You could also include an inspirational picture.*
- *Enlist members to care for others.* Invite members to become part of a telephone effort to call homebound and elderly or struggling members. You create the list and assign the members for them to call. Create a general script or agenda they can follow where they call members several times a week, ask the how they are doing, engage in small talk, offer to pray for them. If there's a need expressed by the member, have them pass that along to you.
- *Invite members to call you if need be, but as you do make sure you set limits by making it clear that the call needs to be about 15 minutes so that others will be able to call you. That way they are self-limiting, don't burn you out, and make you available for others.*
- *Remember that in times of crisis a little bit actually goes a long way.* During any crisis period, whatever you offer doesn't have to be long and involved to be effective. When talking with struggling members who feel like they are in a crisis, remember also to be pragmatic and pointed in your responses. They don't need to explore things in depth. They need simple guidance that points out that Christ is with them, that Christians have always thrived in difficult times, and that you are there. Give them concrete suggestions on how to relieve their struggle. These don't have to be profound.
- *Pass along Samaritan's phone number for those who feel the need to contact a therapist at 412-741-7430.* All of our therapists are now doing video and telephone therapy and are available immediately to help.