

2021

Leadership in a Pandemic: Grace-Filled Lessons in Unprecedented Times

Marc Jerry

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Marc Jerry (2021) "Leadership in a Pandemic: Grace-Filled Lessons in Unprecedented Times,"
Intersections: Vol. 2021 : No. 53 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2021/iss53/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intersections* by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Leadership in a Pandemic: Grace-Filled Lessons in Unprecedented Times



It has now been just over a year since the severity and impact of the COVID-19 virus sent us scurrying home from our campuses, trying to pivot to remote operations, a concept that was unheard of for most university campuses across North America. Yes, online course delivery is a

growing trend with some institutions (such as Athabasca University, Alberta). But, for most of us, complete remote operations—including financial services, HR, student services and supports, and so forth—seemed unthinkable.

At the time, I was teaching within academic disciplines (economics and leadership) for which traditional teaching methods depend on in-person class interactions (leadership) and on visual graphical explanations (economics). I am of a vintage for whom manually drawing the graphs in class and walking students through them was a fulfilling and effective teaching method, particularly with macroeconomic analysis. Manually drawing graphs—whether by smart board, wireless tablet, whiteboard, or even chalk—created an interactive experience that students craved because of its clarity and in-person nuances. Certainly, I used online learning management systems such as Moodle and Blackboard, which have excellent collaboration tools. Still, I believed that nothing could replace the “magic” of the in-classroom experience.

The inconvenience that I experienced after having to deliver content remotely pales in comparison to what I will describe as the real effects of the pandemic, which I know first-hand as a teacher, pastor, and new college president. I want to summarize some highlights and learnings by briefly answering three questions:

- 1) What have we learned about our community during the pandemic?
- 2) What have we learned about leadership in a long-term crisis?
- 3) What does a “new” normal or “next” normal look like for our institutions post-pandemic?

Community in a Pandemic

As a pastor who is writing this during a pandemic and during Lent, I cannot help but think of time spent in exile, wandering about the wilderness. When we all went home last March, many of us were expecting a couple weeks of a “makeshift” remote operation before returning to campus for business as usual. Now, a full year later, the Canada-United States border remains closed to all nonessential travel, and many post-secondary schools (including mine) are still operating completely remotely.

If the pandemic has emphasized anything for us, it has reiterated how important our call is to care for those around us and to work for justice and peace in God’s world.

The Rev. Dr. Marc Jerry is President of Luther College at the University of Regina and Luther College High School in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

It has reminded us of the value of kindness, both given and received, and the need for sharing grace in all that we do. For Christians, this is a simple measure of the grace we receive in the Spirit-infused waters of baptism.

“The pandemic has reminded us of the value of kindness, both given and received, and the need for sharing grace in all that we do.”

Most importantly, the pandemic has reminded us of how much our university campuses crave community and connection. At Luther College in Regina, all the community-building activities so essential to the niche of our college have been either moved online, offered in a limited way according to the health authority guidelines, or offered not at all. Daily chapel at the high school campus has moved to Zoom. While we cannot gather as we normally would, a silver lining is that now alumni chapel speakers join us electronically from around the world. On the university campus, where no one except essential workers are on campus, weekly chapel and all events of the faith-based programming have been moved online. What we have learned is how important gathering in community will be when it will finally be safe to do so.

Leadership through a Long-Term Crisis

There is also some learning about leadership. Despite being an economist and past professor of strategy and leadership, likely the best preparation for my new role as president in a pandemic has come from my seminary and pastoral training. We are seeing an unusual level of anxiety and PTSD-like effects of the pandemic, even in those of us in relatively privileged and protected positions. People have run out of capacity to manage issues via email—a medium that loses nuances of language and can cause even small problems to explode.

More than anything, what is demanded of leaders at this time is to display a calm, pastoral, listening approach to servant leadership. Our teams need to be reassured, even when there is often no information to be shared or answers to give. Leadership is about looking after those in our care so that, in turn, they can care for our students.

It is also noteworthy that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on women and those in relatively lower income service industries. It has heightened the divide in society around racial issues and income inequality. In March of 2020, our college’s large proportion of students who are single parents suddenly had no childcare options, and their children were learning from home. A pastoral approach to teaching was needed to help those students just trying to cope.

Today, as the pandemic drags on, our employees’ and students’ life-transitions continue. Deaths in families still happen, except one cannot gather for a funeral to grieve. Relationships that were held together by a thread saw the pressures magnified, including a risk of increased domestic violence. Access to internet bandwidth and computers are limited in many homes. Many students who are also parents cannot get university work done until late at night after family members have gone to bed. Student expectations about the quality of online learning have (rightfully) risen as time goes on.

“Leadership is about looking after those in our care so that, in turn, they can care for our students.”

Leadership in a crisis is all about a patient pastoral presence without illusory hope.

The New or Next Normal

True hope, however, does appear to be on the horizon. While vaccinations, particularly here in Canada, have been slow to roll out, they are now rolling out, and with them a new sense of hope. Just as the hope of the gospel propels us out of the darkness into the light, the end of the pandemic will come. There are still more silver linings. In Saskatchewan, Indigenous post-secondary student participation rates are as high as ever, thanks to the flexible delivery options now available. I am hopeful that these kinds of innovations will remain post-pandemic.

There are still lots of issues to resolve even beyond vaccinations. What if an employee refuses to be

vaccinated? How long will physical distancing, mask wearing, and sanitation practices continue—and what *should* continue? The influenza season was virtually nonexistent this past winter because of these procedures. Should some version of them continue in the years ahead?

“There are still more silver linings. In Saskatchewan, Indigenous post-secondary student participation rates are as high as ever, thanks to the flexible delivery options now available.”

As leaders we will also need to be aware and concerned about the long-term sustainability of our institutions and the long-term impacts of the shutdowns on our balance sheets. We will wonder about the recovery of international travel, including the arrival of international students who stay in our dorms and on whom our institutional finances

depend a great deal. To what extent will we continue to offer online delivery? To what extent will our “in-person” model return post-pandemic? At Luther College, the in-person, personal touch has been an important part of our brand and niche as a small college. How much of that will we be able to retain?

At the end of the day, many of these questions are still unanswerable. What I will say is that good leadership is needed to help us to continue focusing on the things we have learned over the past year. They include: kindness, grace, and community. Perhaps our NECU institutions will continue to have a special role to play in the healing of our world. We may continue to produce graduates who have learned how to care for one another and the world around us, and the importance of the true value of kindness, grace, and community.

May the grace of God that sustains us each day refresh and renew us to, in turn, be grace-filled and kind to those around us as we recover. May that action of grace also be a lasting change for the better in the days ahead.

ALL FACULTY, STAFF, AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE INVITED TO ATTEND

This summer's Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference!

(formerly, the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference)

**The NECU-wide gathering will convene virtually,
July 12-15, 2021, 2:00 pm-3:30 pm Eastern Time,
*except the session on July 13th, which will meet 2:00 pm-4:00 pm Eastern Time.***

The theme of the 2021 conference is **Called to Place: Community Responsive Education**. Participants will consider how local landscapes, neighborhoods, events, and people influence the missions, identities, and institutional vocations of our colleges and universities, along with our individual callings related to antiracism within our particular communities.

For information about registration, contact your VLHE Conference campus contact or email Melinda Valverde at melinda.valverde@dca.org.