

HOW TO AVOID THE MALPRACTICE OF MINISTRY

Modern Medicine for Ministry
in a Postpandemic Era

Dr. Jerome E. King



CHAPTER 1

A Miscalculation of the Pandemic

(Mis·cal·cu·la·tion: an error or misjudgment)

Toward a Proper Diagnosis of the Problem

In the initial stages of the coronavirus pandemic, many churches attempted to continue on with ministry as usual, and suddenly we were awakened to the reality that we were now in a new era, the pandemic era. On March 6, a church in Washington State sent out an invitation to 121 members of its choir to participate in their Tuesday, March 10, choir rehearsal.

As they were aware that the epidemic posed some danger, they took several precautionary steps, such as the use of hand sanitizers, distancing measures, and so forth. Upon arrival, sixty-one members of the choir began rearranging their seating and continued with their rehearsal. From 6:30 to 9:00 p.m., they sang, had light refreshments, and engaged in conversations. On March 15, the choir director sent out another email informing the choir that on March 11 or 12, at least six members had developed a fever, and two members had tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. On March 17, twenty-four members reported they had developed influenza-like symptoms. By the time this episode was over, there were thirty-three confirmed and twenty probable cases. Three of the fifty-three cases identified were hospitalized, and two died.

Meanwhile, about 2,500 miles away at a lengthy March 1 service honoring a retiring music minister in Cartersville, Georgia, something similar occurred. According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, at least four people who attended that event, or those in proximity to someone who did, contracted the coronavirus and died.

Epidemiologists studying these and other cases have discovered that churches and choirs create perfect conditions for transmitting the deadly coronavirus. The singing facilitated the spread of respiratory droplets and fomite transmission going deep into the lungs of those in close proximity. The spread of aerosols (which is affected by the loudness of vocalization by super-emitters during speech or singing) over this two-and-a-half-hour period of exposure contributed to the quick deterioration of health and death of senior adults.

Now, in light of the escalating mortality rate exceeding 6,084,000 worldwide, churches can no longer function and conduct services as if they were in the pre-pandemic mode. They should not invite their members to congregate by the hundreds or thousands; doing so not only defies some governors' orders of sheltering in place but also fails to maintain social distancing. With an estimated 340,000 churches in the United States, mostly practicing a polity of local church autonomy, it is likely that there will be some miscalculations in the pandemic response. Parishioners look to their spiritual leaders for how to practice their faith in the midst of a pandemic. Unfortunately, the delay in adjusting to the current realities has led to the loss of life of both leaders and followers who failed to adapt and realize that we are not immune to the global threats that affect the whole of humanity.

One of the problems with continuing to function with business as usual stems from how one views their organization within society. If your view is too shortsighted and centered on what's occurring within your organization, to the neglect of what is happening outside, you have succumbed to a closed system view (as though you can behave isolated from what is going on in the environment around you). The reality is Churches, like all other organizations, exist as open systems. This means that there is an interaction between the church and the society/external environment surrounding it.

The perspective of how systems work provides a general view of how ministries and people are affected by what occurs within and outside of their environments. Churches and other organizations function, similar to our bodies, as interconnected systems. According to medical science, there are eleven major organ systems in the human body, which include the circulatory, respiratory, digestive, excretory, nervous, endocrine, immune, integumentary, skeletal, muscle, and reproductive systems. Identifying the symptoms of dysfunction in a system helps to narrow the focus of a problem and reveal where the breakdown has occurred that affects the health of a patient. Similarly, the symptoms from dysfunction in a church's systems can reveal how the overall organization has become unhealthy and can help us trace the cause of a problem or where there's a potential for malpractice. In this instance, there is a disconnect in a church leader's understanding of how interconnected the church's (particularly the choir members') human resource system is to the surrounding community that has been infected by the coronavirus pandemic. To better understand the reciprocal impact of one's leadership and the environment surrounding them, one need only consider how so many issues within the church now mirror what is happening in the broader community.

As one considers an environmental scan of what is occurring outside their organization, they must view what takes place through the lens of social systems and open systems. The dynamic of the social system's perspective of organizations is that every part affects the whole, and every action has ramifications that echo throughout the organization. With open systems, there is a continuous interaction with the environment. The system and its environment codetermine each other. The open system view of the church explains the interaction between the organization and the external environment surrounding her.

Toward a Proper Prescription for the Problem

The Greek word for *church* is *ekklesia* (ek-klay-SEE-uh), from which we get our English word *ecclesiastical*, referring to things that pertain to the church. The literal meaning is "a called-out assembly." We are a

people called out of the world's way of life by God to live out His way of life in this world, as a special people. We remain in the world, undergoing spiritual transformation to positively influence it. The church is not separate from the community; on the contrary, it is essential that she interacts and even depends on it to survive because she receives resources, exports resources, and continuously opens herself to transactions with the broader community (Richard Daft, *Organizational Theory and Design*, 6th ed., 13). As an open system, the church is dynamic, permeable, and changing to better serve its community (Goldhaber, 49). It must not seal itself off from the environment but adapt to its changes to fulfill its purpose. Even when the environment outside the organization appears to experience only moderate change, the environment and the church have a mutual impact on each other.

One of the problems with the Washington State church's initial pandemic reaction is that, by and large, it was not radically different from its prepandemic behaviors. Consequently, it had a devastating impact on one of its greatest resources, its members. Unfortunately, some churches failed to factor in how one infected person could contaminate so many people in their internal and external environment.

A choir member who came from the outside and was already infected by the coronavirus infected the environment that was perceived to be safe by virtue of their moderate adjustments. By the time they entered the premises, the precautions were too few to reduce the contagion. So instead of the church receiving people from outside and making them better by preparing them to serve others inside and outside, they were being infected by the outside to the detriment of their members. The miscalculation of the dangerous effects of the pandemic and the radical need to adapt to what had changed outside their walls created an environment that facilitated the spread of the infection. The church became a catalyst for the infection to spread beyond its congregation to other parts of the city.

To prevent this from occurring, cities promoted a proven practice that ministries should have adopted. The US Department of Health and Human Services demanded that everyone change their behaviors to reduce the spread of this virus and avoid overwhelming the health care system. The stated practice is known by the phrase *flatten the*

curve. As a measure to slow down the transmission and spread of contagious diseases, research has shown that spacing people by at least six feet, canceling large gatherings, wearing face masks and personal protective equipment, having people work from home, and closing schools significantly slowed the spread of diseases. The model below demonstrates why the curve has to be flattened. We need to take the protective measures recommended to protect ourselves and our neighbors (e.g., handwashing, disinfecting, sanitizing, social distancing). If too many people contract the disease and require medical attention in a short period of time, there are not enough medical staff or facilities to treat every patient. So our government officials signed executive orders limiting gatherings to ten or fewer people.

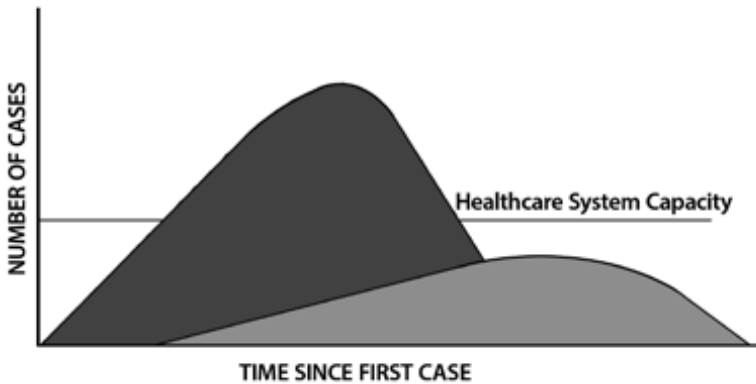


Figure 1. Flattening the Curve

The tragic consequence of the church's misunderstanding of the interdependency between what was occurring outside its doors and the highly contagious nature of the coronavirus is a negative example of how open systems work. The system must be analyzed as a whole to be adequately understood. Between the reception of inputs of resources from the community (e.g. unbelievers) and the output of products into the community (e.g. spiritually transformed believers), the church realizes its value to society. For a ministry to positively impact its community, four essential systematic elements must occur in the

organization: transaction, transformation, regulation, and adaptation. The critical functions consist of the following:

- transaction with the external environment to gain needed inputs and to dispose of outputs (it's the exchange between the organization receiving resources from the outside and adding products back into society);
- transformation of inputs to produce useful outputs (the conversion of resources received from the outside into a product that benefits its customers);
- regulation of system behavior to achieve stable performance (this involves managing the organizational processes to maintain successful productivity); and
- adaptation to the changing conditions (these are the adjustments that an organization makes to respond to the changes affecting their services).

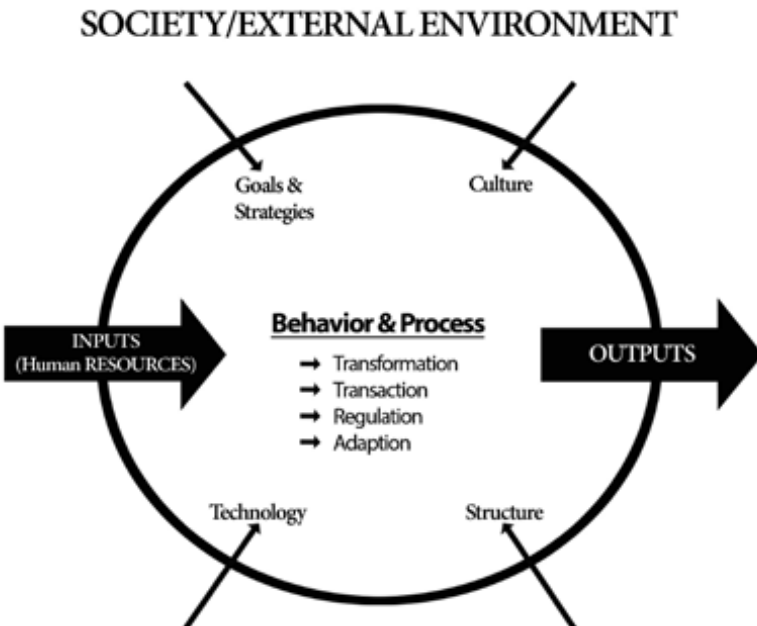


Figure 2. Organization as an Open System
(Diagnosing Organizations, Michael I. Harrison, 29. Used by permission.