

LEADERSHIP DURING A LOCKDOWN: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH IN MAINTAINING CHURCH SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown have been a true test of leadership in different corners of the globe. This paper looks at the leadership approach of the Coptic Church in Egypt during this difficult time. While the Coptic Church has a hierarchical structure, the lockdown opened the way for innovative context-specific responses that varied across communities. This paper utilizes data from a survey of 68 Coptic priests in 48 churches throughout Egypt and nine case studies. The strategies adopted involved the then novel use of digital communication in offering spiritual service and the creation of new social, medical and economic support channels to congregants. The study concludes that organic “quiet” leadership approaches were present during the lockdown in order to continue service and to adapt to the lockdown situation.

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INTRODUCTION

“Leadership is not a thing to hold, but a journey through the winds of time.

It is not a goal to reach but a bending towards the sun.”¹

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown were a historical moment of great intensity and magnitude. The pandemic was not only a medical and economic crisis, but also a psychological crisis due to the decline in people’s wellbeing.² Research has documented how the pandemic impacted some of the factors which have long been considered to have an effect on subjective well-being: income, healthy life expectancy, social support, prevalence of generosity, and freedom of choice.³ This has prompted the need for spiritual and pastoral services in different contexts. The pandemic has placed significant demands on all churches and spiritual leaders, namely through the closure of churches, a high volume of funeral services in many places, loneliness, and the impact of the lockdown. The Coptic Church in Egypt was no exception.

This paper aims to address the approach of the leadership of the Coptic Church in Egypt to service arrangements during the pandemic-induced lockdown. The Coptic Church is one of the oldest churches in the world, established in Egypt after the apostolic visit by St. Mark to Egypt in the first century. In terms of leadership structure, the Coptic Church is governed by a Holy Synod, composed of bishops and archbishops and headed by the Coptic Pope. The Coptic Church places particular emphasis on its history and its contributions to early Christianity, including the introduction of the monastic tradition.⁴ The Church’s history is marked by its separation from the Greco-Roman Byzantine world in the fifth century over theological schisms, and a legacy of subjugation under Arab rule.^{5,6} The Coptic population of modern-day Egypt is estimated at fifteen million.⁷ In recent decades, the Church has built a

¹ M. E. Moore: Leading Toward Excellence ... But Whose Excellence?, *Religious Education*, 118(3), 2023, 181–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2023.2219382>

² H.Zacher – C.W. Rudolph: Individual differences and changes in subjective well-being during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Am. Psychol.* 76(1), 2021, 50–62, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000702>; G. Barsoum – M. Majbouri: COVID-19’s gendered effect on subjective wellbeing in MENA countries. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 2025, 1574.

³ Helliwell et al.: Social environments for world happiness. *World Happiness Rep.* 2020, 13–45, 2020.

⁴ O. Meinardus: *Two thousand years of Coptic Christianity*. American Univ in Cairo Press, 2002.

⁵ Aziz S. Atiya: *The Copts and Christian civilization*. Annual Frederick William Reynolds lecture; 42. Salt Lake City, Utah: Published by the University of Utah Press, 1979.

⁶ Angaelos (Coptic Bishop of the UK): *The Altar in the Midst of Egypt. A Brief Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*. Coptic Orthodox Church Center, Stevenage, U.K., 2000.

⁷ *Egypt Today*. April 29, 2023. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/124041/Pope-Tawadros-II-Number-of-Copts-15-million-in-Egypt>

transnational presence with a large number of Coptic migrant churches in North America, Europe, and elsewhere.⁸

This paper shows that while the Coptic Church has a hierarchical structure, the lockdown opened the way for innovative context-specific responses that varied across communities. The analysis shows that church leaders played a pivotal role in: 1) transitioning to digital platforms for spiritual and pastoral services, including online prayer meetings, Bible studies, and Sunday school classes; 2) expanding community support initiatives, such as food distribution, financial assistance, and medical care for vulnerable parishioners; and 3) maintaining a spiritual connection with parishioners through innovative pastoral care methods, including tele-counseling and online support groups. The study underscores the importance of effective leadership in guiding religious institutions through crises, fostering resilience, and ensuring the continued spiritual and social well-being of their communities. The study concludes that the diversity of the experience and its context-specific nature constituted an organic “quiet”⁹ leadership approach that was clearly manifest during the pandemic lockdown.

The study utilizes data from a survey of 68 Coptic priests in 48 churches throughout Egypt and five case studies. Data was collected using digital technology. As the study progressed, the role of leadership emerged as a significant and unanticipated theme. Leadership within Coptic churches proved to be a central factor in influencing how effectively these communities managed the difficult challenges of the pandemic. Pastoral leaders, clergy, and church administrators were often at the forefront of decision-making, guiding their congregations through a period marked by fear, isolation, and shifting public health mandates. These leaders were tasked with making difficult decisions, such as transitioning to virtual service, implementing safety protocols, and finding ways to maintain spiritual and emotional connections within their communities despite physical distancing. The emergence of leadership as a theme highlights its critical role in fostering resilience and adaptability within the Coptic Church during the pandemic. Leaders had to balance their traditional roles as spiritual guides with new responsibilities as crisis managers and innovators. This involved not only responding to immediate logistical challenges but also addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of congregants, many of whom experienced anxiety, loss, and disconnection.

By documenting the experiences of Coptic churches and recognizing the pivotal role of leadership, this study contributes to a broader understanding

⁸ G. Botros: Religious identity as an historical narrative: Coptic Orthodox immigrant churches and the representation of history. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 19(2), 2006, 174–201; M. Miličić: Rooting the Coptic Diaspora: Mediating Familiarity and Adapting Churches in the Netherlands. *Etnofoor*, 35(2), 2023, 67–83.

⁹ D. Rock: *Quiet leadership*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006.

of how religious institutions can navigate crises and highlights the importance of leadership development tailored to the unique needs of faith-based communities. Regarding leadership, this paper highlights the role of “quiet” leadership¹⁰ during the pandemic. The Coptic Church, though a hierarchical Church, gave its dioceses space to make decisions on opening and closing churches as the situation in each diocese allowed. Additionally, each local church responded to the needs of its congregants in a way that reflected the nature of the local community and its unique capacities.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The following section discusses the conceptual framework of church leadership and how COVID-19 was a true test of leadership. This is followed by a discussion of methodology. The findings of the study are divided into four subsections and are followed by the conclusion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND THE PANDEMIC

The development of leaders in government, business, and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has been the subject of extensive research, resulting in a robust body of knowledge that explores leadership theories, strategies, and practices. However, this depth and breadth of analysis have not been equally applied to the development of pastoral leaders, creating a significant gap in the literature. McKenna, Yost, and Boyd¹¹ argue that while other sectors benefit from well-established frameworks and empirical studies on leadership development, pastoral leadership remains underexplored, despite its critical role in guiding faith communities, fostering spiritual growth, and influencing social and cultural dynamics. This imbalance suggests the need for greater academic attention to the unique challenges and contexts of pastoral leadership, which differ significantly from those in other fields. Addressing this gap could enrich the understanding of leadership development in religious settings and provide more tailored approaches to support pastoral leaders in their multifaceted roles.

This context-specific nature of leadership¹² makes it challenging to directly borrow theories or models from fields like business, government, or nonprofit

¹⁰ Rock: *Quiet leadership*.

¹¹ R.B. McKenna – P.R. Yost – T.N. Boyd: Leadership development and clergy: Understanding the events and lessons that shape pastoral leaders. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 35(3), 2007, 179–189.

¹² E.g. D. Belchetz – K. Leithwood: Successful leadership: does context matter and if so, how?. In *Successful principal leadership in times of change: An international perspective*, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2007, 117–138.

management to apply them in pastoral or religious contexts. Rojas and Alvarez¹³ argue that while these fields share some features, such as the need for vision, influence, and decision-making, their foundational goals, values, and operational dynamics are fundamentally different. For instance, managerial leadership often emphasizes metrics, performance outcomes, and organizational growth, whereas pastoral leadership may prioritize relational depth, spiritual care, and the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership. Leadership and spirituality have often been treated as distinct and independent areas of academic study, with only limited exploration of their interconnectedness. Bindlish, Dutt, and Pardasani¹⁴ highlight this separation, noting that leadership research tends to focus on concepts such as influence, decision-making, organizational effectiveness, and the development of skills and strategies to achieve specific goals. On the other hand, spirituality is generally studied in the context of personal growth, values, inner meaning, and the transcendental dimensions of the human experience.

Barentsen¹⁵ highlights hybrid professionalization in pastoral leadership, with the religious leader acting as entrepreneur, sense-making guide, shaper of culture, and identity artist; this illustrates models of modern and postmodern leadership. Barentsen's hybrid model reflects both modern leadership, with its focus on structure, strategy, and tangible outcomes, and postmodern leadership, which emphasizes adaptability, relational dynamics, and meaning-making. This perspective underscores the unique and complex challenges faced by pastoral leaders, requiring them to blend traditional spiritual responsibilities with the adaptive skills of contemporary leadership. It also calls for a reevaluation of leadership development in religious contexts to prepare leaders for this diverse and dynamic role.

The concept of quiet leadership has gained traction in recent decades¹⁶, with works emphasizing the power of subtle, thoughtful influence rather than loud, directive authority. Badaracco¹⁷ argues that effective leadership is often demonstrated through small, incremental decisions that align with ethical integrity and long-term organizational success. Quiet leaders operate with pragmatism, recognizing the constraints of complex environments and the need for careful,

¹³ R. Rojas – J. Alvarez: *The challenges of pastoral leadership: Concepts and practice*. Author-House, 2012.

¹⁴ P. Bindlish – P. Dutt – R. Pardasani: From growing convergence of spirituality and leadership towards a unified leadership theory. *Journal of spirituality, leadership and management*, 6(1), 2012, 3–23.

¹⁵ J. Barentsen: Practicing religious leadership. In *The Routledge companion to leadership*, Routledge, 2016, 282–299.

¹⁶ E.g. J. Badaracco: *Leading quietly: An unorthodox guide to doing the right thing*. Harvard Business Press, 2002; Rock: *Quiet leadership*; and A. Mahadevia: *Quiet Leader, Loud Results: How Quiet Leaders Drive Outcomes that Speak for Themselves*. Post Hill Press, 2022.

¹⁷ Badaracco: *Leading quietly*.

strategic action.¹⁸ Similarly, Rock¹⁹ underscores the power of encouraging better thinking in others by improving the quality of conversations to create sustainable behavioral change in their teams instead of imposing solutions. This line of research challenges traditional notions of leadership as an extroverted or forceful endeavor, instead positioning it as an exercise in patience, deep listening, and guidance that fosters self-discovery and growth in others. Quiet leadership is, therefore, not about passivity but about thoughtful action, deep engagement, and long-term impact.²⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a surge in research on leadership responses across various sectors that was not matched in the field of religious leadership. There was a notable focus on the study of leadership in politics and government²¹ and in government.²² However, this rich body of research in the fields of politics and government contrasts sharply with the relative scarcity of studies on how leaders in other sectors—such as religious institutions, nonprofit organizations, or smaller community networks—responded to the pandemic. Pastoral leaders, in particular, faced unique challenges during COVID-19, such as maintaining spiritual connections in the absence of physical gatherings, addressing the emotional and psychological toll taken by the pandemic on their communities, and adapting traditional practices to virtual or socially distanced formats. The limited focus on these areas highlights an opportunity for future research to explore how leadership in faith-based and community organizations adapted to the pandemic and the lessons their experiences offer for navigating crises in contextually specific ways. This is but another reflection of the dearth of research on Christian leadership.

Writing during the lockdown, Pillay²³ emphasizes the need for churches to go beyond short-term adjustments and instead embrace long-term transformative practices that enable them to thrive in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing world. Adaptation, as highlighted by Pillay, refers to the capacity of churches to modify their structures, practices, and strategies in response to new challenges, such as the pandemic's disruption of traditional worship formats. Resilience, on the other hand, focuses on the ability of churches to withstand and recover from crises while maintaining their core identity and purpose. Pillay's work challenges churches to view crises not merely as obstacles to overcome but as opportunities to grow, innovate, and better align their

¹⁸ Badaracco: *Leading quietly*.

¹⁹ Rock: *Quiet leadership*.

²⁰ Mahadevia: *Quiet Leader*.

²¹ E.g. S. Wilson: Pandemic leadership: Lessons from New Zealand's approach to COVID-19. *Leadership*, 16(3), 2020, 279–293.

²² E.g. P.H. Huang: Put more women in charge and other leadership lessons from COVID-19. *FIU L. Rev.*, 15, 2021, 353.

²³ J. Pillay: COVID-19 shows the need to make churches more flexible. *Transformation*, 37(4), 2020, 266–275.

missions with the needs of their communities. By emphasizing adaptation and resilience, Pillay shifts the focus from describing what churches did during the pandemic to exploring how they can leverage lessons learned to build a sustainable future. This perspective invites further research into how churches can develop leadership frameworks, community engagement strategies, and organizational models that are better equipped to navigate ongoing and future challenges.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was designed as a descriptive investigation to document the experiences of Coptic churches in navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Its primary goal was to capture how these churches adapted their practices, maintained their communal and spiritual life, and responded to the disruptions brought about by the global health crisis. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the coping mechanisms and strategies employed by the Coptic community during an unprecedented period of uncertainty and change.

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach. Its qualitative component focused on ten case studies with large notable services in the Coptic Church including the Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Service and the Anba Abraam Service along with a number of churches. The quantitative analysis relied on responses from a survey conducted electronically with the help of the Church leadership. Questions focused on spiritual support, social and economic support, and organizational changes. The study was conducted by COPTICAD, one of the research arms of the Coptic Church.²⁴ The questionnaire was distributed with the help of the office of the Papal secretariat. Data was collected virtually in July 2020, at a time when the lockdown's restrictions were first easing.

The final sample included responses from 68 priests, reflecting the experience of 48 Coptic churches in Egypt. The majority of responses came from priests in urban areas (76%), with the rest (24%) coming from rural areas. In terms of geographic distribution, the urban sample was mainly drawn from the governorates of Cairo, Alexandria, and Port Said. The rural sample was drawn from the governorates of Beni Suef, Menya, and Qena. All of them are in Upper Egypt.

²⁴ <https://copticad.institute/>

THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Quiet Leadership at the Top

A close review of the chronology of the lockdown shows that despite the hierarchical nature of the Coptic Church, many decisions were left to the diocesan level, according to the discretion of the designated bishop or metropolitan. As in many other parts of the world, the week of March 21, 2020 was pivotal. On March 21, the Holy Synod's Permanent Committee met and called for churches to be closed for two weeks. Given the dioceses' different natures, with some being urban and others rural, and their varying socio-economic status, a follow-up decision was made on June 27, 2020 to delegate the decision about opening churches to different bishops. As the Pope is responsible for the churches of Cairo and Alexandria, the experiences of the various churches differed significantly. Churches under papal pastoral care re-opened with the exception of Sundays and Fridays – no other services were held. Another example is that of a bishopric where churches were opened on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays with social distancing; Sunday School was resumed. On September 11, 2020, churches in Cairo and Alexandria re-opened, including the weekends.

When strict lockdown resumed later in the year, H. H. Pope Tawadros II closed churches in Cairo and Alexandria, which are directly under his pastoral care, on December 6, 2020. However, and similarly to earlier decisions, the decision regarding the level of strictness of the lockdown was left to the bishops in other dioceses. This delegation of the decision, which stands against the tradition of a hierarchical church, represents the first form of a quiet organic approach to leadership that was manifest during this time of profound uncertainty.

Spirituality Going Digital

A defining characteristic of service during lockdown was the use of digital technology in reaching out to locked down congregants. As shown by Figure-1, 59% of the priests surveyed highlighted the use of technology as an opportunity that was created during the lockdown. In one case study, the priest noted:

21 WhatsApp groups were created for all categories of the church congregants, so we could follow up on them daily. We held a daily competition that included questions from the Bible. A Sunday school activity was held for primary and preparatory school children daily through social media. Additionally, we held an online preaching festival in which the children participated and excelled. They were honored and prizes were distributed to them through the church

(Abu Sefein and Martyr Wanas Church, Madinat Al Salam, Cairo; interview, July, 2020).

Case studies abound with similar quotes of church leaders who leveraged technology to continue the service. This, however, was not an option in villages where internet access is not commonly available, particularly to poor congregants.

The second highlighted issue was labeled as discovering new talent, which referred to efforts to increase the pool of servants to include unconventional groups. The two key groups were primarily drawn from the youth. The first was composed of those who could help with ICT training and support and the second included youth who could help in the delivery of food and basic necessities for those locked down due to illness or need.

The third highlighted opportunity was the updating of the congregation database. Updating the roster of families is a common concern of church leaders given the fact that some families can move in or out of the community. Generally, family registration is made using a paper-based method. A few churches, mainly those in upper-middle-class-areas, could have systems for online registration as shown by the data.

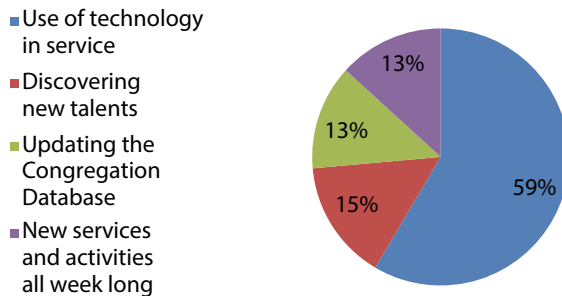


Figure 1. Opportunities Created During Lockdown

Figure 1 indicates that church leaders were keen to highlight the introduction of new services into the congregation. A follow-up question highlights the key newly introduced services. These are shown in Table 1. As multiple answers were allowed, Table 1 shows that 64% highlighted the introduction of remote medical services through volunteer doctors. These doctors provided multiple services that are further highlighted in Table 2. Other newly introduced services included reliance on ICT-savvy youth who could help in setting up new systems (selected by 34% of respondents) or training others (highlighted by 15% of respondents); reliance on youth to take part in the delivery of meals to the sick (selected by 32% of respondents) or to drive sick people to clinics (highlighted by 18% of respondents). Additionally, a quarter of the respondents (26%) viewed meal preparation as a key service for the sick.

Table 1. Types of newly introduced services

Newly Introduced Services	Responses %
Remote medical service through volunteering doctors	64%
ICT-savvy youth helping in setting new systems	34%
Youth taking part in delivery of meals	32%
Meals prepared for people who were sick with COVID-19	26%
Volunteer Drivers to take COVID-19 patients to clinics	18%
ICT-savvy youth training others on technology	15%

Providing medical support to congregants was another key service, to be discussed in more detail below. Summarizing the services offered, the following quote lists all the approaches adopted by one church in the governorate of Bani Suef. The priest notes:

All services continued (during the pandemic) except for Sunday school for the primary and preparatory levels, and there are two priests, the number of families served is 500 families. We had a medical service, where we brought oxygen devices and medicines to quickly deal with patients in the area. The pandemic also allowed for the discovery of new servants, making good use of the tremendous energies of young people (St. Mark's Church, Beba and Fashn District, Beni Suef Diocese).

This quote puts, in a nutshell, the details of the service in one church as its leadership sought to adapt to the pandemic-induced situation. The survey's data also shows that 82% of the participating priests stressed the importance of spiritual pastoral care and prayer meetings using digital technology. One respondent noted in explanation that "prayer is the key to heaven and the door of hope for everyone." Regarding the frequency of prayer meetings, survey data showed that 32% met with the congregation for prayer once a week, while 22% indicated that they met with the congregation for prayer daily (at a fixed time agreed upon). This demonstrates that the church's spiritual focus is on reaching out to congregants, "as one heart to commune with God, fulfilling God's promise that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is in their midst," as one priest put it. Another priest also emphasized the continuous encouragement to pray at all times "because it makes individuals feel the peace of God that fills their hearts to face any crisis."

Given the importance of focusing on children and youth, a large number of priests (87%) reported that their churches continued to provide Sunday School service remotely. This highlights the Church's concern for all age groups and that they did not leave children to face their fears alone during this time. Communication with the served individuals included social media, phone calls,

and conducting “competitions” for Bible studies that were sent to homes, mostly in a digital format as the data shows.

The Service Going Medical

As medical needs were central during the pandemic, the survey tool included questions on the specific services offered by the church servants. An overwhelming 90% of respondents highlighted raising awareness of the pandemic and prevention of its spread. The organization of the service of medical consultation was highlighted by a large majority (68% of church leaders). More technical medical services were also organized, including the provision of support in finding beds for patients in hospitals (mentioned by 44% of respondents) and the task of making oxygen cylinders available to very sick people (mentioned by 32%). This data can be understood in light of the pressure exerted on the healthcare system at the time and the unavailability of services to many people, particularly to those from a lower socio-economic background. Churches and church leaders leveraged all possible resources to support those in need in this difficult time, as shown by Table 2.

Table 2. The Introduction of Medical Services

Service	Responses %
Health education and awareness about the pandemic	90%
Made oxygen cylinders available to patients	32%
Provided medical consultation remotely	68%
House visits	18%
Referred patients to hospitals	44%

These results can be understood in light of the health care situation in the country, which was severely tested by the pandemic.

Addressing the Economic Challenges

The economic impact of the lockdown and the pandemic was felt by many people. Almost all church leaders noted that their churches had to provide temporary financial assistance to people who were economically affected (91%). This was followed by the service of providing guidance and support to find work for those who lost their jobs (highlighted by 37% of respondents). The third approach was to provide food boxes, which was highlighted by 11% of

church leaders. The level of support was naturally determined by the church’s capacity to provide support to these families.

Table 3. Services targeting those economically affected

Service	Number of churches provided
Providing temporary financial assistance	91%
Guidance and assistance in finding a job opportunity	37%
Distributing in-kind assistance “food boxes”	11%

Table 3 highlights the severity of the economic situation during the pandemic. These local churches had to respond to the people’s real needs at a time of great hardship.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: WHAT LEADERSHIP LESSONS
CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE COVID EXPERIENCE?

The leadership approach during the COVID-19 crisis postulated an organic “quiet” leadership approach that was manifest at two levels. At the level of the Pope and the Holy Synod, the decision to open, partially open, or close churches in different dioceses was left to be made by each metropolitan or diocesan bishop based on the local situation. This delegation of the decision allowed for a more localized response to be made to the needs and situations of different congregations. The decisions made at the level of the Pope and the Holy Synod, such as changes in communion methods and adjustments to face-to-face Sunday School meetings, were not uniformly implemented but rather were adapted to the specific contexts of each diocese. This approach acknowledged the diversity of experiences among congregations, allowing bishops to evaluate their local conditions and the needs of their communities.

At the level of the local church, another form of leadership was evident, as marked by a number of characteristics. There was a clearly organic approach to the formulation of service, determined by the talent within the community and the available resources. As is common in the Coptic church, the service relied on the labor of the laity, whether in providing medical care, support to the needy, or support with the adoption of technology. The very unusual nature of these services opened the door for a stronger presence of youth and women. New and innovative services were developed, emphasizing a partnership model within church communities. The empowerment of lay members allowed for a more inclusive participation in the church’s mission and activities. With this

empowerment came new ideas that were closely responsive to the needs of the members of the community.

Rather than centering on a singular leader's role, the services introduced during the pandemic and the initiatives taken in response to it highlighted collaboration among members, fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility.

The experience of the lockdown highlighted the adoption of an organic "quiet" leadership approach within the context of the Coptic church. This form of leadership allowed individuals within the different communities to take the initiative and continue church services in creative ways, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

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