

report 1

Resilience



RESILIENT
LEADERS
PROJECT

The
Seattle
School
OF THEOLOGY
& PSYCHOLOGY

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Executive Summary

The world needs resilient leaders.

The church is in a season of significant transition; no one knows how spiritual communities will gather a decade from now. As a result, the role of pastor holds more ambiguity and strain, and leadership requires additional strengths and skills.

Leaders today must be discerning, responsive, and flexible in order to be able to wisely and creatively face an unknown future. In short: leaders must be resilient.

We set out to make this report to outline what resilience actually is and to begin a discussion on its theological and practical implications for Christian leaders. Our big-picture aim is to support leaders who are seeking to be able to care for their community better through caring for themselves.

Most pastors know themselves to be leaders. Many leaders understand themselves pastorally, whether they work in churches, nonprofits, businesses, or as artists. Because of these interactions, we understand the role of pastor broadly, though not loosely. Throughout this report, we use the terms pastor and leader interchangeably, recognizing the leadership of pastors and the pastoral heart of many leaders.

The people we hope read this report include:

- Pastoral leaders who desire to have a sense of good life while doing good work.
- Supervisors and mentors: the bishops, presbyters, managers who cultivate and support leaders.
- Institutions and helpers who are hoping to aid leaders.

This report includes individual leaders' stories, findings of our recent Resilience for Sustainable Leadership survey, and a theology of resilience — all situated in the context of this moment in the development of the church. As we continue to develop and implement the Resilient Leaders Project, The Seattle School will utilize these findings to inform the project's vision, goals, and strategy.

We look forward to continuing the conversation with you!

Warmly,



Kate Rae Davis



Andrea Sielaff



J. Derek McNeil



The Current Moment

Churches no longer occupy the center of community life.

That's not really news to us at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology; it's a familiar reality. In 2016, Barna Group identified our home city of Seattle as among the least church-ed cities in the United States. This decline in participation of communal forms of Christianity is a national trend: only 31% of Americans attend church at least once a month and indicate that their faith is very important to them.¹

We see pastoral well-being on a scale from dying to thriving.

Leaders who pastor outside the church sometimes feel their faith is suspect and must remain hidden. Many work to find ways to do good for their communities on the fringes of our society's structures, bending expectations of faith communities, nonprofits, and business models in order to creatively respond to their community's needs.

Leaders minister in this complex context with little security that their expression of faith will exist for another generation. The role of pastor, particularly, holds ambiguity in a context that has ambivalent feelings about spirituality. The role is strained in places that don't know or trust the role of the church in their community. Many pastors lack skills in the concrete matters of running a church—a staggering 90% feel they are inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.²

These realities have a cumulative effect. The Barna Group found that 30% of pastors are at risk of burnout. For a point of contrast: while 1 in 3 pastors is at risk, only 1 in 5 business leaders is at risk.

We see pastoral well-being on a scale from dying to thriving. Too many pastors live on the surviving end of that scale. But small shifts in their daily practices could help them move toward resilience.

In the midst of fragmentation, we see opportunity. The shifting spiritual landscape invites a new imagination for faith communities, ministries, and pastoral identity. It calls for a formation process that goes beyond traditional seminary training in order to cultivate resilience in leaders.

While robust intellectual education is needed, leaders are also in need of relational training. Leadership is an interpersonal process, and traditional education — including seminary education — has neglected whole-person formation. The struggles pastors face come from relating to self and to others, to communities and to systems.



“A comprehensive research project, Pew and Pulpit, revealed that many American pastors struggle with the feelings of loneliness, having difficulty establishing deep relationships, and often neglect their physical, spiritual and emotional needs.”³



Some of the struggles that leaders name include:

- Isolation or loneliness
- Lack of conflict management skills
- Tiredness or exhaustion
- Making sense of the suffering and disappointment experienced in their work
- Lack of denominational or structural support, especially for innovation
- Funding and finances (organizational and personal), and the necessity of bi- or tri-vocational work



Listening to Leaders

We started with a question: What are the biggest challenges Christian leaders are facing today, and what would help? Then we sat down to listen.

We listened to the alumni of theology programs of The Seattle School, many of whom understand their work as pastoral even if the word isn't in their job title. We listened to pastors of mainline and evangelical churches and their regional leaders. We listened to pastors who work as non-profit leaders and “not just for profit” mental health centers. We listened to writers, dancers, photographers, and visual artists. We listened to pastors who start breweries that hold meaningful discussion and open yarn stores with vibrant knitting circles.

Regardless of whether they work in churches, non-profits or businesses, we repeatedly heard that leaders are concerned with isolation, exhaustion, and the challenges of responsive innovation amidst shifting structures and culture.

While we were listening to leaders, we were also listening to research focused on thriving leaders. We recognized that the problem of traditional psychology that is overly pathologizing and doesn't foster an imagination for thriving. We also recognized that positive psychology tends to disconnect traits that lead to thriving from the very real challenges and hardships that people face. It can be unintegrated — a resilience that is soulless at best. Meanwhile, exemplars of resilience were telling us that their hardships, sufferings, and failures were just as formative in developing resilience as their strengths and positive practices.

The concerns that leaders named point to a lack of one or more components of resilience.

We decided to lean into the tension between positive psychology frameworks and what our exemplars told us. We set out to develop an authentic understanding of resilience that explores the intimate connection between suffering and strength, backed by positive psychology, trauma-informed psychology, and Christian theology.

Since then, we sent out the Resilience for Sustainable Leadership survey, collecting information about felt needs from 100 Christian leaders in a variety of fields and contexts. We formally interviewed 22 exemplars of resilience in ministry fields to learn how people move beyond surviving towards thriving. We conversed with half a dozen regional leaders to hear what they see coming in the next decade of their church.

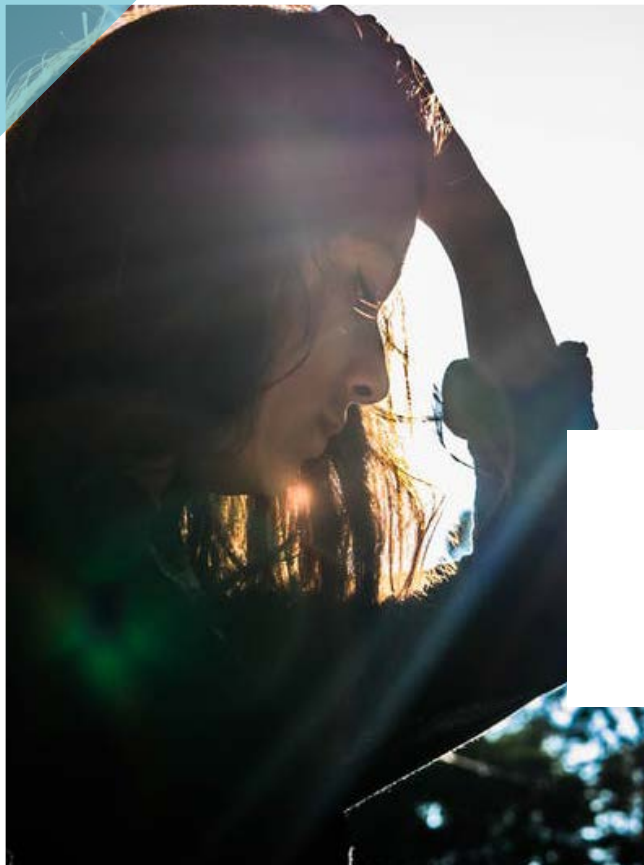
WE'VE RESPONDED IN TWO WAYS

This report, and the ones to follow, share what we've learned about resilience — in all its messy suffering and glorious thriving.

We launched the Resilient Leaders Project, a one-year program in which we'll hear more deeply about leaders' experiences and work with them to restore and deepen resilience.

Listening to leaders and research gave us a direction: resilience strategies, integrated into the holy mundane of leaders' daily lives.





Resilience & Resurrection

Psychological definitions of resilience vary

So from a technical standpoint, resilience is:

- Flexibility of shape/identity
- Ability to withstand external pressure
- Memory of own shape/identity

Resilience was once a technical term, used to measure the elasticity of a material. Resilient items can bend and return to their own shape, withstanding pressure without fracturing. Psychological definitions of resilience vary. Generally, resilience is defined as the ability to withstand and quickly recover from difficult conditions — the “bouncing back” of a rubber ball. Positive psychologists say that resilience is not simply bouncing back, but actually growing stronger, more capable, and even more resilient as a result of the difficulties. It’s more like muscles than rubber: tolerable amounts of stress foster growth.

This same kind of growth can be found in the aftermath of trauma, including acutely traumatic events as well as the ongoing effects of more subtle micro-traumas. In contrast to post-traumatic stress, this mindset is sometimes called **post-traumatic growth**. This is growth that is only possible when beliefs, values, and paradigms are undone by a traumatic event or a significant level of stress.⁴ This is growth that creates positive change in the aftermath of suffering.

Another name for it might be “resurrection.”

Jesus’s experience leading up to and on the cross is perhaps the epitome of traumatic events. He experiences betrayal from his disciple, condemnation from his religious leaders, brutality at the hands of the government authorities. He is sexually humiliated, physically abused, and spiritually forsaken; then he dies.

Days later, he resurrects. When he first sees the disciples, he says “peace be with you” and shows them his wounds. Through Jeremiah, God condemns prophets and priests who “dress the wounds of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace, they say, when there is no peace.’” We would expect that Jesus, who has just suffered the trauma of his own death, might know that there is no peace — and yet that’s exactly the benediction he opens with.

The resurrected Christ models truth about wounds and peace. He shows, without shame, the wounds of the worst thing that ever happened to him. He allows the meaning of the wounds to be manifest in his resurrected life: that transformation can happen after trauma, that wounds do not preclude new life, that resurrection is the way to resilience.

Far from being an insufficient dressing on a serious wound, when Christ says “Peace be with you,” it is an offering of the possibility of peace even after having been wounded.

Post-traumatic growth, the coexistence of peace and woundedness, requires the flexibility to develop new resilience skills—coping strategies—through the new challenges we face.

As children and adolescents, people find ways to cope with difficulties through whatever means they can; those coping strategies help people to survive that context. But sometimes the context changes and the coping strategies don’t, undermining our ability to thrive. We need flexibility to allow meaning to come from our hardships, to listen to our pasts, and to be open to where God is leading us into the future.

JOHN 20:19-20

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side ...



There are three components that we’ve found help to remain resiliently flexible:

1. Peers who offer a community of support;
2. Practices that contribute to health of body, mind, and spirit
3. Purpose in our work that meets meaning in our life’s narrative.

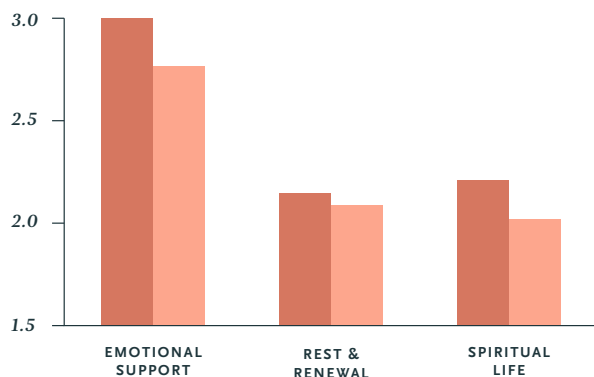
People

Communities of peer support allow leaders to be seen as a complex self — the light and the shadow, the grief and the grace — in a relational space that's free of the unrealistic expectations leaders sometimes feel from the communities they serve. Remaining a part of a group over time is beneficial, even over great distances, because honest feedback requires deep trust that can only be cultivated over time.



When we're in regular relationship with others, we authorize them to:

- Call us back to our “true” or “best” identity, the image of God that we uniquely carry.
- Encourage us in the practices that care for ourselves — and notice when we don't.
- Remind us of the call that got us started in our work and the passion we exhibited in the past.
- Warn us when we're losing our spark for work or exhibiting burnout warning signs.
- Normalize challenges within a field of work.
- Provide perspective and practical interventions on leadership challenges.



KEY (graph, left):

- Peers who expressed high levels of satisfaction
- Peers who did not express high levels of satisfaction

Participating in a small group of peers was correlated with a higher level of satisfaction on all of the domains we assessed: emotional support, rest and renewal, and spiritual life.

[Results presented as weighted averages on a scale of 0-4.]

What leaders shared about the importance of peer community:

Over the last several years, I've had a close bond with a few other pastors and we enjoy a great deal of encouragement and spiritual growth together. We are intentional about asking the good questions: how we were relating to those we serve, how we are listening, how we develop folks as the people that the Lord was leading them to be and not carbon copies of us.

REVEREND ERIC LIKKEL, Pastor at Emmaus Road Christian Reformed Church; Seattle, Washington

One thing I have heard over and over — from leaders at the end of resilient careers — is that you need to have a strong network of friends who are your inner circle, your 'holy of holies.' Resilience is built from the people you have in your life that can speak into your life personally and professionally.

REVEREND JES KAST, Head of Staff at West End Collegiate Church; New York, New York

Theology of Community

Relationship with others is not only beneficial for the leader, it is a theological necessity.

As Roberta Bondi summarizes Dorotheos of Gaza: “Love of God and of other people are so closely related that it is impossible to love God and have contempt for the sins and weaknesses of other people at the same time.” Dorotheos gave the metaphor of a compass used to draw a circle: God is the point at the center and lines from the circle’s edge to the center are people’s lives. To move toward God, we must move from the circumference toward the center. At the same time we move closer to God, we become closer to one another; the closer we are to one another, the closer we are to God.⁵

Peer and mentoring relationships are especially important; they give us tangible experiences of grace.



Generally, peers and mentors are kinder to us about our failings than we are to ourselves, and more celebratory of our successes than we can bear. (That’s why we blush.) And in reciprocating those kindnesses — that grace — to others, perhaps we can learn to internalize that kindness and extend that grace to ourselves.

Without peer community, we can become Lone Rangers: riding alone, relying only on ourselves. Unable to see our own blind spots. Hiding our destructive tendencies, our sins, behind a mask. Feeling lonely and isolated—or numbing the desire for connection.

“Peer groups, in particular, seemed an effective antidote to loneliness. Working in a community of peers seemed to generate trusted friendships.”⁶

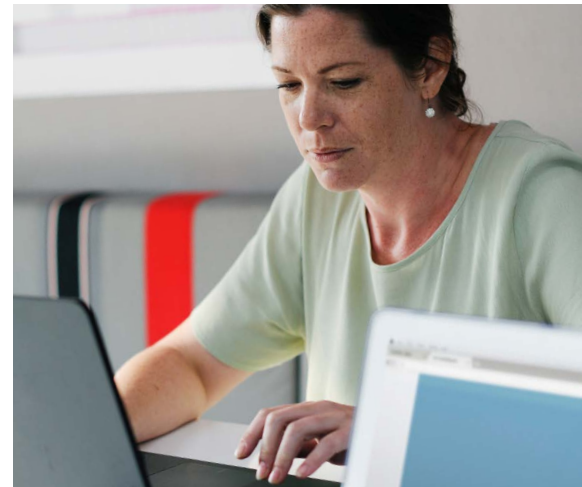


Practices

“It is no coincidence that the root word of whole, health, heal, holy is hale (as in hale and hearty). If we are healed, we become whole; we are hale and hearty; we are holy.”⁷

- Madeleine L'Engle

We used to think of stress as something that was added onto our lives. New research is showing that stress is the norm—meaning we must actively engage in practices of rest and renewal in order to enter a healthy cycle that cultivates wholeness.

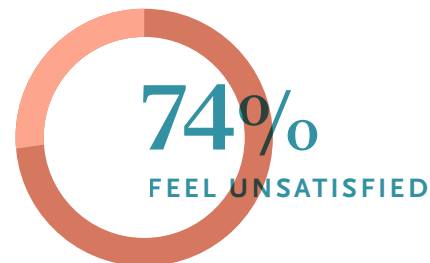


Resilient leaders intentionally practice cycles of rest that grow wholeness. They see that body, soul, and mind are a trinity, each part affecting the others, each part needing care and tending. They see these practices not as selfish self-care, but as key to the sustainability of their good work.

When we regularly engage practices towards wholeness, we experience:

- A deeper sense of our own incarnation; that is, integration of body, mind, and spirit.
- Restored identity, or a remembrance of who we are.
- Healing of previous stress and more capacity for the next stress.
- Deep feelings, both enjoyment in sensory delights and pain that signals a need to shift.
- Space to hear God's call on our lives.
- Differentiation from our context that allows us to reflect and respond with our own values and priorities.
- A reserve of energy to address crises personally or vocationally.

Disengaging from work daily significantly increases life satisfaction, but less than one-third disengage from their work daily. Over half of these leaders asked for help creating work-life balance and taking care of their physical health.



Our Resilient Leaders Survey found that many leaders don't engage in practices that support wholeness. Seventy-four percent of respondents are unsatisfied or concerned about their level of rest and renewal.

What leaders shared about the importance of their health practices:

“I go [to the gym] every day I am at work — otherwise the fear and hard conversations stay in my body. I run, spin, do yoga. I have better emotional capacity and a greater sense of general satisfaction.”

REVEREND JES KAST, Head of Staff at West End Collegiate Church; New York, New York

“Setting aside the morning has been a good thing. In my calendar each morning it says ‘C&C:’ coffee and contemplation. That rhythm is so important — because the need [in ministry] is endless.”

REVEREND BRIAN MOSS, Senior Pastor at Orcas Island Community Church; Orcas Island, Washington

“I have increasingly grown to believe that God speaks to us through our physical bodies, that we are not bifurcated body and spirit but whole beings. We can’t medicate anxiety and stress, or ignore obesity that is happening because we are stress eating, without looking to see if God is communicating to us through our bodies and inviting us into changes. I wasn’t motivated to change by anxiety, migraines, and unhealth as isolated symptoms. But when I saw them as God’s communication — if I was viewing those things as God’s voice — I asked ‘What would he be saying? What would he be inviting me to?’”

REVEREND SUMMER MORHLANG, Pastor at Sanctuary Church; Seattle, WA

Theology of Practice

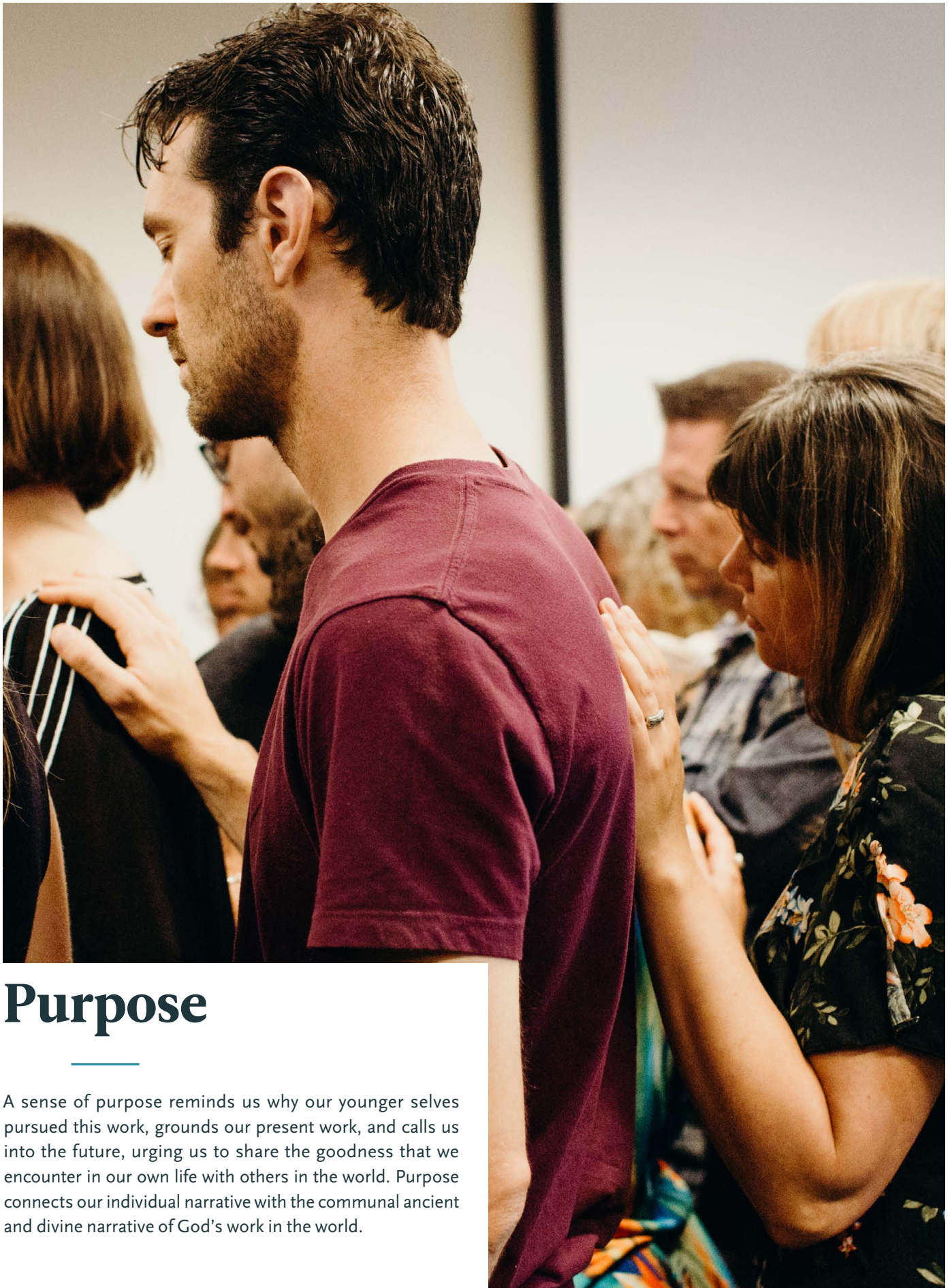
In his culture, Jesus didn’t have the same concerns about eating properly or exercise — have you ever noticed how often he and the disciples are walking? As far as mental health, we can tell that he’s practicing through his scriptural engagement and dialogue, and through his relationships in which he doesn’t shy away from confrontation.

But the gospel authors are intentional to include this fact: Jesus prayed. Mark tells us that Jesus “went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Matthew writes that “he went up a mountainside by himself to pray.” Luke states that “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” So we know that Jesus actively engaged his well-being in a world where there were a multitude of distractions.

He could have been healing more people during that time — curing leprosy and blindness. He could have been feeding the hungry. He could have been performing miracles so that more would know that he was the Son of God. Instead, he chose to take care of himself. We could even go so far as to say he had to take care of his well-being so that he could continue healing, feeding, and evangelizing. Without healthy practices, we become martyrs. Prioritizing everyone and every task above

our own needs — no matter how impossibly huge or insignificantly small. Believing our suffering is beneficial or even necessary or tied to our worth. Giving of ourselves until there is nothing left to give. We hinder our ability to stay in ministry long-term, as remaining in a stress state increases our risk for mental and physical illness. We develop a soul-sickness from neglecting our spiritual lives outside of ministry.





Purpose

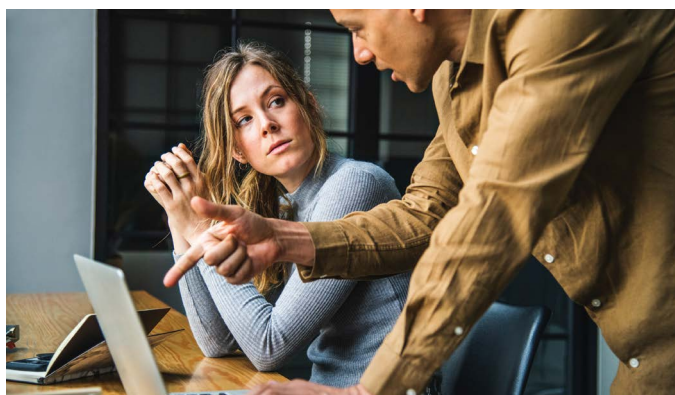
A sense of purpose reminds us why our younger selves pursued this work, grounds our present work, and calls us into the future, urging us to share the goodness that we encounter in our own life with others in the world. Purpose connects our individual narrative with the communal ancient and divine narrative of God's work in the world.

Purpose helps us feel that our work is worth doing even when it is a struggle.

Leaders with a strong sense of calling seek out healthy habits and support in the midst of turmoil. Purpose helps us feel that our work is worth doing even when it is a struggle.

When we have a sense of purpose, we feel:

- Able to imagine a hopeful future
- Participation in God's story and work in the world
- Redemption and blessing from suffering and pain
- Increasing convergence of our gifts and experiences into our unique role
- Endurance for the mundane tasks of our ministry
- Passion and energy; humility and humor



In our Resilient Leaders Survey, 92% of respondents report a clear sense of calling. The minority of people who didn't have a clear sense of calling were less satisfied with their level of rest, emotional support, and personal spiritual lives.

What leaders shared about the importance of purpose:

“[Under intense criticism for my role as a change agent], I was going to quit. Then I realized that this is where I was called to be. One thing that never wavered was the sense of call. If you know that God has called you to a ministry — to the work, the place, the people — and it is confirmed through your gifts, your community of faith and the witness of scripture, then you can do anything. You can walk through any circumstance when following God in that.”

REVEREND BRIAN MOSS, Senior Pastor at Orcas Island Community Church; Orcas Island, Washington

“As my I’ve continued in my faith, I have had enough experience with God that I see him providentially leading in my life so that when I come across the unknown I can infer that that same providence is acting in this unknownness. It’s a deep sense of trust; it gets deeper as every situation requires more trust. God loves me, so even if I am angry or don’t like this place in my life, I can see that this very place is where I am invited into conversation with God.”

SCOTT ERICKSON, Touring Painter, Performance Speaker, and Creative Priest; Portland, Oregon

Theology

God gifts us with ministry, which continues to gift us through forming our character, connecting us deeply to others, and drawing us nearer to the divine. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “Since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.”⁸ Each individual’s calling reflects intimacy with the God who knows our unique story and invites us to participate in that story through ministry. Paul, again, this in his letter to the Galatians: “Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that.”⁹

Resilient purpose means resisting the temptation to see God as our demanding boss who critically evaluates our work from a distance. Jesus insists that we are not his servants but his friends; our work is a co-creation with God. We are not the tipping point for God’s kingdom coming, because God “is not served by human hands, as if God needed anything.”¹⁰ Instead, God animates us with God’s own life and breath, igniting our imagination with a hope that endures.

Without a sense of purpose, we become stuck: we have enough capacity to keep pushing through our workload, but without any real desire to continue. We find ourselves bereft of the imagination to adapt our roles to our gifts, the drive to increase our capacity, the courage to risk.

All leaders will face seasons of significant stress: work or family transitions, death of a loved one, shootings in the neighborhood, terrorism in the country. Without a deep sense of purpose, we find ourselves lacking resolve instead of living into resilience.



**Resilient purpose
means resisting the
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“[Therapeutic] breakthroughs are often marked by a recognition that with openness and gentleness we may experience growth, depth, and an ability to be compassionate in ways that could not have been possible had the terrible events not happened in the first place.”¹¹

– Robert Wicks



Cycles of Resilience

Unsupportive ecosystems need change in order to resource their leaders for long-term ministry.

Resilience is not achieved at a singular point in time; it requires repeatedly choosing to cultivate peer relationships, practices, and purpose. Stress is a reality of this work; resilience is the cyclical discipline that cultivates growth in the midst of stress.

There is no singular entry point to the resilience cycle. Starting to strengthen any component will help you grow in the others. Peer community will help to encourage practices and narrate purpose. Practices will push towards community and make space to discern purpose. Purpose will remind why we need partnerships and ask that we engage practices to support our purpose.

Many practices in themselves create more healthy cycles. For example, getting more sleep helps a person make better nutrition decisions, and good nutrition helps you get more sleep.¹² It doesn't matter where you enter; what matters is that you start.

We also acknowledge that resilience cycles are influenced by ecosystems: some systems support health, some undermine health. This is one reason to focus on resilience — an individual response to stress — rather than thriving, in which systems, cultural influences, and straight-up luck are all at play. Unsupportive ecosystems need change in order to resource their leaders for long-term ministry. Reverend Jessica Ketola, Lead Pastor at The Practicing Church in Shoreline, Washington, has been thinking about how to re-model churches to be sustainable systems: “We will continue to burn ourselves out if we keep using unhealthy systems. I don’t have to pastor a megachurch. We need to have new imagination for what pastoring can be.”

When asked how ecosystems could support their resilience, Resilient Leaders Survey survey participants named the following:



PEERS

- 58% Connecting with mentors
- 49% Finding peer support
- 41% Networking with people in other vocational contexts
- 39% Support and affirmation from their Larger vocational community
- 39% Finding role models for vocations in non-traditional settings



PRACTICES

- 57% Creating work-life balance
- 56% Practicing and prioritizing my own spiritual life
- 54% Taking care of my physical health
- 52% Practicing Sabbath/healthy rest
- 38% Accessing spiritual direction
- 34% Managing personal finances
- 30% Building support from my significant others



PURPOSE

- 49% Fundraising and managing organizational finances
- 44% Dealing with conflict in my vocational context
- 40% Making sense of the suffering and disappointment in my vocation
- 40% Increasing the fit between my position and my personality
- 38% Practicing reflective theology (learning to act on insights into context or relational behaviors)
- 31% Developing a theology of hope (stories that move us beyond brokenness into the hope of God)
- 31% Understanding my own story and how my experience shape how I relate to God, myself, and others



Now What?

Leaders today must be integratively formed, engaging healthy peer relationships, a deep sense of purpose, and practices...

Leaders today must be integratively formed, engaging healthy peer relationships, a deep sense of purpose, and practices that develop all parts of themselves — body, mind, spirit. Education and training must concern the emotional, relational, embodied, vocational, and cultural aspects of a pastor's life if the pastor is to thrive in fragmenting social contexts.

If you're a pastor or leader reading this, we hope you respond by

- Engaging a peer community who understands the challenges of your work and with whom you can be vulnerable
- Developing a sustainable rhythm of practices that support your well-being in body, mind, and spirit
- Continually reviewing, re-narrating, and discerning what God is calling you to in each season of your life.



We hope that denominational, educational, or other supporting organizations respond by

- Resourcing leaders with finances, time, and opportunities for sabbaticals, professional development, or continuing education
- Resourcing leaders to engage their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, such as insurance plans that reward physicals and cover counseling, or offering retreats in which leaders are able to be led
- Cultivating structures to help leaders connect with peers across denominations and fields of work
- Researching and innovating the best ways to support leaders or the church that is becoming in our shifting culture, and partnering with other denominations and institutions seeking to do the same.

Here at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, we are responding through developing the Resilient Leaders Project (RLP). RLP offers a one-year program that aims to cultivate and integrate multiple aspects of well-being — emotional, relational, physical, vocational — in order to deepen resilience in leaders and their organizations. The project is committed to researching what is helpful to restoring Christian leaders' resilience and to sharing our learnings with the graduate programs of The Seattle School and with the world via various media platforms, including research reports like this one.

If you're a member of a Christian community, we hope you respond by

- Recognizing the humanity of your leaders as you set expectations for them
- Cultivating an ecology of support in which communities share well-being for one another.



Questions we're currently engaging include:

- How do leaders learn to read their own lives as stories that reveal God's redemptive narrative?
- What cultural frames strengthen resilience?
- What helps leaders change their daily routine to include resilient practices?
- What helps leaders stay in touch with their desire, creativity, and purpose?
- What tools do leaders need to read the particularities of their context?

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