



the center for
Transforming
Engagement

Effective Small Groups **for Pastors and Christian Leaders:** Building Resilience through Narrative Process Circles

Executive Summary

Christian leadership is often a lonely vocation.

We believe that it doesn't have to be. At the Center for Transforming Engagement, we are working for a world in which Christian leaders — the lay and ordained people in many fields who are motivated by their faith to improve the world — can serve alongside others with transparency, and with assurance that living into their calling allows space for human shortcomings. One of our efforts to achieve that goal is to share our learnings through accessible resources in order to help leaders develop their resilience for ministry.

As we design programs, we ask participants which resources are most important for cultivating their resilience. What do leaders need to feel supported by healthy relationships of mutual kindness? What environments foster changed relationships, or shift relational patterns?

Participants repeatedly named one component of our programs as most transformative: Circles. Circles are a small group format for narrative process work. We followed up with qualitative research to identify (1) the ways Circles impact resilience and (2) how they do so. This report summarizes our learnings about the role of narrative process groups in cultivating pastoral resilience. These learnings focus on the importance of story and relationship.

The structure of this report as a white paper is to add knowledge to the fields of clergy resilience and peer groups in ways that keep it approachable to practitioners and program directors. It includes information about the resilience program of Center for Transforming Engagement, some of the research and theory that undergird the program, and a lot of program alumni's experiences shared in their own words. We end with recommendations for Christian leaders, including pastors, denominational leaders, small group facilitators, theological educators, and clergy wellness program directors.

We hope that these insights lead to greater opportunities for clergy and lay leaders to experience the community and transformation we've witnessed in Circles. It is with gratitude to our program alumni that we offer to you the insights herein: their honesty, transparency, and deep soul work made this report possible.



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Resilient Leaders Project

Section One

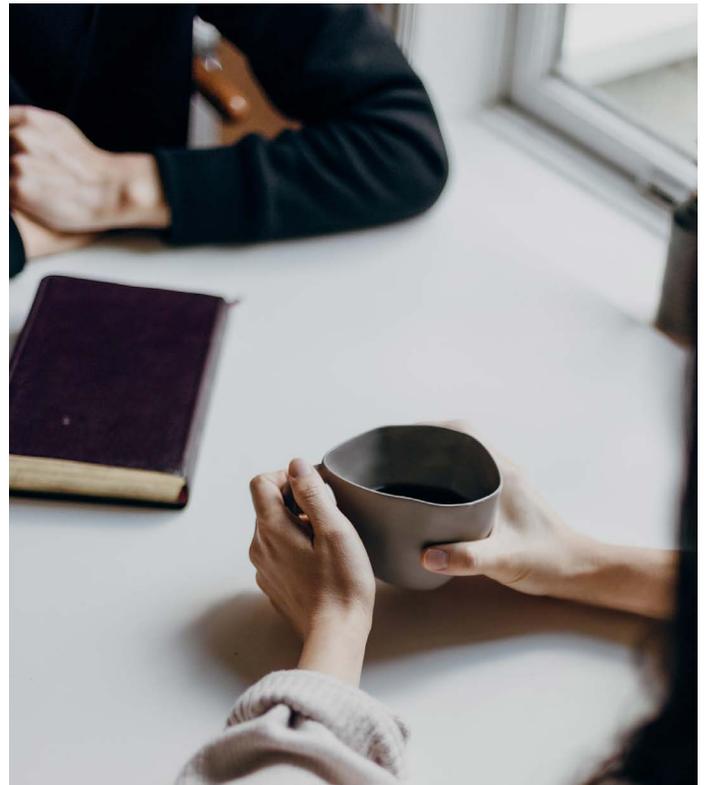
Learning about Resilience

The resilience of Christian leaders was already an active conversation in our institution when Lilly Endowment Inc. invited us to apply for their Thriving in Ministry Initiative. In 2017, they generously funded our proposal to increase pastors' resilience, allowing us to expand our learning and to develop a program that would put theory into practice.

Resilience has been defined in the realm of psychology as the ability to withstand and quickly recover from stress or difficult conditions — akin to the “bouncing back” of a rubber ball, in which it is hit and returns to its previous state. We hold a more nuanced, growth-focused definition: resilience is not simply bouncing back, but actively growing as a result of difficulties by engaging with those painful experiences to make meaning from them. Rather than rubber, we see resilience as more like a muscle that uses tolerable amounts of stress to foster growth.

As we designed the multi-month program, titled Resilient Leaders Project, we started with premises held by our host institution, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. Core to our mission is the understanding that service of God and neighbor starts with transformed relationships — relationship with self, with God, and with others. We developed a tripartite and contextualized [model of resilience](#), which we call 3 P's in Place: People, Practices, Purpose. The program followed this model, with a module of learning for each of the three components of resilience along with continuous small groups. These small groups, called Circles, met multiple times during each 3-day module and once in between each module for an approximate total of 25 hours of group time.

Early cohort evaluation surveys indicated that Circles were the program element that most increased resilience. This wasn't surprising (People is the most important component of resilience), though it did raise a lot of new questions. In what ways are Circles impacting resilience? How are they doing so? What might help other programs and peer groups that share our goal of supporting clergy well-being? To find answers, we interviewed program alumni. Before we share those insights, though, here are some basics on Circles' structure and process, and the research and theory that underlie this approach.



“If there were a stronger word than crucial, fundamental – you would use it to describe Circles. Safety, containment, presence was all in the [Circle] and was so helpful.”

– Resilient Leaders Project participant

Circles: Small Groups Rooted in Story

Circles are not the same as other small group formats such as a book or Bible study, a preaching preparation group, or a pastor's sharing group. Circles are a defined format that follow a process. Experientially, participants tell us they're more emotionally intense. They focus on peeling back the layers to understand not only how you presently relate to God, self, and others — but also why and how you developed those patterns.

Before we gather, each participant is given guidelines to write a story from an early childhood memory. Participants are free to choose any memory from their life while encouraged to consider sharing a story that has marked their life uniquely in its pain. They submit these early so that staff can help them refine their story if needed, and to assure that every member is prepared to contribute when they first gather.

At the first meeting, shortly after introductions, each Circle member reads their story. After sharing, they first receive acknowledgement and gratitude for their vulnerability in sharing. Then they receive guided feedback from other members of the group about the emotions that came up, or what other members noticed about the reader's body language.

Sharing this original story and developing a perspective on life as a story is both the foundation and a touchstone for the rest of the groups' work together. Throughout the program, Circles reflect and share about topics in the Practices module (including defensive coping strategies, stress-rest cycles, differentiation, and triangulation) and Purpose module (job crafting, meaning-making, redemptive narratives, future possible selves). Additional story work comes at the end of



the program, when participants share an “unresolved story” — a challenging circumstance that is active in their current life. Together, they practice meaning-making skills and imagine possibilities.

The story-informed perspective has been developed in many counseling and educational settings as a tool for transformation. In developing the Resilient Leaders Project, we collaborated with The Seattle School's Allender Center to adapt story work into our own growth framework. For the purpose of this report, we'll be using the term “narrative process group” to describe the methodology of Circles. It is based on the idea that our identity emerges from our own personal stories as they interact with the larger story of God in the world. Narrative process groups use stories from individuals' lives to increase self-awareness and awareness of relational style to deepen connection to others and provide ways to see new possibilities.





The Transformative Power of Story in Relationships

Consider the story of the woman with the flow of blood, found in Luke 8. She is physically healed simply by touching Jesus's garment. So why does Jesus ask her, in the midst of a crowd of people who would be appalled to be associated with her, to identify herself and thereby reveal her shameful secret? Perhaps he was intentionally addressing the unhealed dimensions in this woman. Yes, she had been physically healed. But perhaps she could not be relationally healed until she told her story, nor until others heard her story and recognized her as belonging among them. In inviting her to tell her story, Jesus was making a way for her to be restored to the community and to forge a new identity that was not defined by shame. That's the power of story in community: the very things we are most afraid to reveal or explore are the things that heal our relationships with self, God, and others — at the very site of the wound.

We knew that we needed leaders to start their resilience work with sharing stories. The power of life narratives, when explored in a supportive community, transforms people. This is especially (though not exclusively) true for painful stories. For this insight, credit the work of those who have gone before us: the oral and textual authors of biblical narratives, psychologists developing and testing theories, and integrative Christian writers.¹

Posttraumatic growth (or, as we prefer to call it, adversarial growth) has highlighted the power of narrative process work to help people grow in the midst or aftermath of suffering. Researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun and other theorists have used the adversarial growth perspective to understand skills for meaning-making and paths to growth.² Working with the difficult moments of one's life stories is key to resilience.

"As the basis for a sense of identity in adulthood (McAdams, 1996), the life story should not be viewed as just one piece of the complex puzzle of posttraumatic growth...but rather as the fundamental frame that holds the entire puzzle together. Specifically, we assert that posttraumatic growth may be best understood as a process of constructing a narrative understanding of how the self has been positively transformed by the traumatic event and then integrating this transformed sense of self into the identity-defining life story."³

– PALS & MCADAMS, 2004, "The Transformed Self: A Narrative Understanding of Post-Traumatic Growth"

People grow the most from a painful experience when they (1) acknowledge the depth of hurt instead of minimizing it and (2) use agency to create a positive ending for the story, a kind of redemptive narrative.⁴ The path to this kind of growth is deliberative rumination – time set aside to reflect on and explore both the hurt and the possible meaning of our painful experiences.⁵

Deliberative rumination is especially helpful in the context of supportive relationships, as highlighted in Laura Burton's dissertation *Hope as Reclaiming Narrative Agency*.⁶ Burton, a communications specialist, studied how Christian support groups increased life-changing hope in participants. Her findings led her to argue against a "Western individualistic conceptualization of hope" that places "hope solely within the individual. ... Rather than seeing hope as residing in the person, ...I position hope as residing in and through relationships and interactions — it is an ongoing dynamic communicative constructive force." She sees story work done in community as key to transformation: "Narrative is...both a retrospective and prospective sense-making communication activity...that is co-constructed in interaction with others resulting in the construction of identities, social realities, and orientations toward the future."⁷

All of this comes to bear on the wellbeing and resilience of Christian leaders. When the goal of resilience is ongoing growth, then setting aside time to explore and resolve the formative stories of hurt in the past and present is essential to that growth. Christian leaders, who often experience isolation and social constraint in their communities, need to be invited into relational spaces where they have permission to honestly struggle and share their pain in ways that foster growth. This may also impact their congre-

gants and colleagues: we believe that a leader who is growing in community is better prepared to aid others in their growth — which creates more meaningful work and stronger communities.



What Circle Participants Said: Themes from Our Qualitative Research

Having engaged story work through both research and our own experiences, we built Circles to foster growth through a similar process. When we received the feedback that Circles were so important to participants, we were not entirely surprised, but we knew there was more to learn about why and how growth happened. To explore more deeply how Circles helped participants to increase in resilience, we interviewed 6-7 participants from each of three cohorts of Resilient Leaders Project, a total of 19 interviews. Participants were selected for their ability to reflect on and articulate emotional experiences, and for representative diversity. (See Appendix 1 for methodology.)

Our main research question was, how do narrative process groups help Christian leaders increase their resilience? To answer it, we asked program alumni two questions:

- Which elements of resilience are improved by narrative process groups among Christian leaders?
- What elements of narrative process groups contribute to the improvement of resilience?

As we read through transcripts of the interviews, themes emerged — words, phrases and concepts used by multiple participants to articulate the impact of their Circle experience. In sharing these themes, we hope to add to best practices for effective clergy peer groups and to inspire groups facilitators. These themes are arranged by the two sub-questions from the research and are explained in the following sections.

Themes for question 1:

Which elements of resilience are improved by narrative process groups among Christian leaders?

1. Self-Awareness
2. Self-Compassion
3. Leadership Skills
4. Relationships

Themes for question 2:

What elements of narrative process groups contribute to the improvement of resilience?

1. Convener Facilitation
2. “Being With” Stance
3. Story-Based
4. Commonality and Diversity
5. Structural Elements

The participants’ experiences are the heart of this report, and so you’ll find their insights in their own words in the sections below. Names and identifying information are not used within the report per the participants’ consent agreements.



Which elements of resilience are improved by narrative processing groups among Christian leaders?

Section Two

1. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the conscious understanding of and ability to reflect on one's motivations, thoughts, feelings, actions, and impacts on others. The practice of self-awareness has been identified by a number of researchers as key to resilience for Christian leaders. Self-awareness is correlated to spiritual and emotional health, increased satisfaction with ministry, and lower rates of burnout.⁸ In addition, increasing self-awareness can mitigate both narcissistic and workaholic behaviors. One five-year study of pastors found that emotional intelligence, including self-awareness (what they called Emotional Intelligence-Self,) was one an essential aspect of resilience in ministry.⁹ Other studies echo our finding that feedback from peer groups can increase self awareness.¹⁰

Our interviewees noted that their self-awareness was increased as the Circle helped them make connections between what had happened to them in the past and how they relate to people in their ministry now. Several noted that increased self-awareness led to increased agency, as they saw new ways to respond to situations instead of reenacting the past.



“While the ancient myths describe a journey from adversity to altruism in the healer, pastoral care literature focuses on the model of the wounded healer in a positive way. The contemporary psychological literature, however, issues warning of the danger of unhealed wounding. This raises the importance of self-awareness and a commitment to growth in the pastor, because a disregarding of their own woundedness and history of adversity undermines the ministry of pastoral care.”

– Justine Allain-Chapman, *Resilient Pastors: The Role of Adversity in Healing and Growth.*¹¹

“It's a lot about becoming more aware, better informed about how I show up in interactions with others, whether one to one or group or large group leadership. [It's about] how my own stories shape ways that I show up and being able to be more aware of that. Being more free to respond and less compelled to react in my typical ways. Having more freedom to choose other ways of responding.”



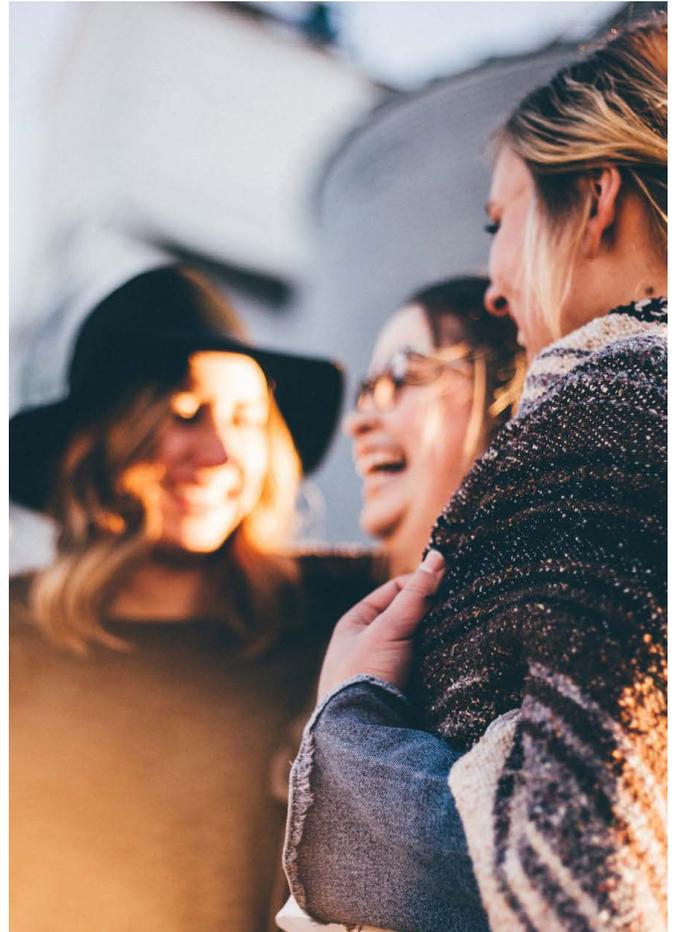
Self-awareness can be healing, as our participants noted: they said that self-awareness helped them let go of past pain and embrace the gifts that arose in the midst of hurt. Another part of this healing is the ability to discern a true self; pastors are often challenged and confused by identities that other people project onto them, and Circles helped them to maintain that true self when challenged.

“Someone in the group shared things their supervisor had told them that were challenging to hear. The group was able to say ‘this is not the truth about you’ which led her to open up more sharing about the boss/employee dynamic. We were able to say to her ‘This is who you are - this is who we’ve seen you to be.’”

“If I index my overall heart, I have both a sense of being settled, and of knowing who I am and what I’m about, and that some of the nagging pain that I’ve carried is diminished and continuing to diminish.”

Self-awareness grew through the feedback that participants received from other group members. By listening to the curiosity and questions of their Circle, participants practiced assessing their own motivations and actions, which will help them to build self-awareness in an ongoing manner. This kind of group feedback also made it less scary for them to initiate asking for interpersonal feedback in the future.

“The things [my Circle] noticed, the things they became curious about, helped me notice things I needed to seek out. I remember one of our Circle [Zoom] calls – someone said ‘I’m curious about this for you.’ I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m curious about that too.’ It produced a desire in me to understand. People pointing things out in my story and connecting it to today was important – ‘Did you notice that...’ That my story does affect how I live now and I hadn’t noticed that.”



2. Self Compassion

Self-compassion, as defined by psychologist Kristen Neff, has three elements:

1. "Self-kindness – being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical
2. Common humanity – perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and
3. Mindfulness – holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them." ¹²

Neff also suggests that self-compassion, as a practice, may protect against destructive rumination, isolation, and narcissism. Among Christian leaders, higher levels of self-compassion correlate with increased ministry satisfaction, lower levels of burnout, and lower levels of emotional exhaustion. ¹³ Perhaps one reason for this correlation is that self-compassion challenges theologies that push pastors toward unhealthy martyrdom. Self-compassion honors the ontological divide between humanity and God: God is God, so you don't have to be. Christ died for human sins, so you don't have to.

Our interviewees noted that their Circles helped them see when they weren't treating themselves with kindness. Often this showed up in moments when a leader had expectations of themselves that they did not have for other humans. Noticing those impossible standards prompted them to practice greater self-compassion.



“The process of having people reflect back during the Circle time, like ‘Do you hear how you’re treating yourself?’ [helped me realize] ‘Oh yeah, I can be kind to myself.’ ”

Participants also shared how the Circle group techniques helped them practice self-compassion on an ongoing basis.

“ [The Circle group] helped me to have grace with myself. I told them how much pressure I put on myself and they would say “Have grace with yourself.” That has helped me so much when things didn’t go according to plan. I would have been much more anxious and much less at peace with my circumstances – and trying to control everything.”

“I think the mindful self compassion piece is really important. There have been occasions including just this week when I reminded myself of that again and practiced compassion towards the parts of myself that tend to get anxious around performance.



3. Leadership Skills

Skills in leadership and management are a key component of resilient ministry. This skillset covers a wide variety of competencies, including systems thinking, ethical use of power, building relational authority, modeling grace, shepherding, managing expectations, healthy vulnerability, and supervising conflict.¹⁴ Few people enter a leadership position with all of those skills, but thankfully, they can be learned. The best context for learning leadership skills is crucible moments that can be reflected on with a supportive community. Growth often comes from making mistakes and then learning from the mistakes.

The necessity of learning in community from hardship explains why our interviewees experienced growth in their leadership skills through Circles. Some participants said that they experienced a different model of leadership in the program, a model that felt more sustainable for them and more true to how they want to lead.

“I think that this program taught me something about leadership that I had never thought of before: that so much of leadership is surrendering control, and I always thought leadership was tightening control.”

Other participants noted that they specifically deepened their relational leadership skills.

“There was conflict in my group in the beginning. Normally I would want to flee from that conflict. To see what it looks like to have rupture and repair – to see that modeled in a way that I could recreate that as a leader – was important. I don’t think we have places where we can see healthy repair of rupture. In church contexts conflict has so much shame in it that there is no repair. If I had this program earlier, I would have been less afraid – and willing to let some things rupture that needed to rupture.”



Several interviewees commented on how the leadership tools they gained through Circles have helped them cultivate resilience day-to-day.

“Narrative processing has been great for me. I would say it was like getting a new tool on my belt, but it was almost like changing out the tool belt for all better tools. I have introduced it in work settings.”

“I would say that I have changed. I feel like the things that knocked me off before pretty easily – the things people would say or me not fulfilling people's expectations or disappointing people – I'm just not as easily knocked off.”

4. Relationships

Mutual relationships are key to resilience in Christian leadership. Too often, leaders live in a relational pattern where they are always the caregiver, creating one-way relationships in which the leader rarely receives care. Some leaders choose that pattern as a way to hide their own broken humanness. Other leaders do so out of social constraint from the perception that people expect them to give care without it being reciprocated. Pastors, in particular, can experience social isolation resulting from the confidential nature of much of their work and from the pressure to uphold their reputation and the reputation of the church in the broader community.

To mitigate this isolation, peer groups have been found to be an important intervention to support clergy resilience. As research professor Matt Bloom writes, “So far, all the data tell us relationships among pastors are vitally important for clergy well-being. ...The degree to which a pastor experiences a sense of belongingness – community, fidelity, and mutuality – with other pastors appears to be one of the most important determinants of that pastor's flourishing.”¹⁵ A review of the effectiveness of pastor peer groups that were a part of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program found that such groups have a significantly positive impact on participants.¹⁶ The participants in Circles experienced strong relational benefits from these peer groups.

“Everyone in the program was looking for those safe spaces. No one had that because we are all leaders. ...[It] might be better that those [Circle] people are far removed – they have a different perspective and you can say things to them that you can't say to people who are in it every day. The gift of community may be the people who want to grow, who are willing to do the work, and they may not necessarily be your peers in your hometown.”



Relationship in Circles supported resilience by normalizing the experiences of Christian leaders and by helping them find commonality in their vulnerable humanity.

“I think sometimes the enemy wants to say ‘Oh this, it's just you’ and so knowing that other people are in that same struggle can help keep me going.”

Alumni noted that the benefits of finding new ways to relate to others in their Circles also positively impacted their relationships outside of the group.

“I'm hugely relational, but I feel like the way I was taught to relate was very dysfunctional. So I feel like now I'm learning how to relate in a Godly way, in a Kingdom-relationship way rather than the way I was brought up or the way it was handed down to me. I think that's the biggest thing.”



What elements of narrative process groups contribute to the improvement of resilience?

Section Three

1. Convener Facilitation

Alumni noted our distinctive facilitation style as a key factor in developing group trust and individual resilience. Conveners do not take the detached stance of a group therapist, nor do they push for people to share more than they wish to. Conveners do not adopt an expert stance of an educator. Instead, conveners function similarly to participants, reflecting on their own life and leadership and processing their own growth in resilience alongside participants, while also tending to boundaries and task. In each group, it is the convener who first shares and receives feedback on their early childhood story. In doing so, they model appropriate sharing and interaction while removing perceived distance between them and participants. When groups regather, conveners share personal life updates alongside other group members and engage content as it currently relates to their life — even when it's their fourth time engaging the content, they find new perspectives on themselves.

This facilitation style models for participants how to engage in vulnerable ways, but above and beyond that, it is intended to create a relationship with the group that has genuine mutuality. The group leader shows need and receives care from the group, challenging the normative relational style of many people in ministry. In ministry, it is easy to avoid true intimacy and growth by always taking the role of giver, advisor, or expert. This model shows that there is another way.

While participants valued the mutual relationship between conveners and participants, they also felt safe because the conveners balanced that relational component with the additional role of being the one who held the boundaries of the group. Boundaries included managing time, keeping on task, and guiding participants in how to engage each others' stories with compassion, attunement, and the right amount of challenge.

“[The convener] would ask questions like, ‘What is your body feeling/doing as you’re talking?’ – showing attunement to our emotional experiences. She seemed to know how to push at an appropriate level. I’ve had other group experiences where the leaders push too hard for the sake of being vulnerable when the person isn’t ready and not giving permission for them not to share. My [usual] posture is to say nothing – and she pushed enough that I would go further but not so much that it felt unsafe.”

“I experienced [the convener] as more of a participant than as a facilitator – different than what I had seen [before], and I had to get okay with that. Once I figured that out, it was really unique to watch a facilitator also be a participant without losing any authority that she needed to retain to facilitate. It was safe for her to show up and be who she was in that group.”



“For me, [the convener] was exactly the type of group facilitator that I needed because she was tough enough. [She was] not willing to settle for the first answer and kind of call BS when the first answer is just a smoke screen or a shield – to push for that deeper thing. And I feel that our Circle adopted that. I saw the Circle as a whole begin to be willing to do that: to not settle and to gently push for breakthrough. Not just push to needle somebody, but because the group could sense that there was something there and it was something that the Holy Spirit wanted to bring about.”



2. “Being With” Stance

Interviewees used some words over and over to describe their group experience: they felt “heard,” “seen,” “held,” and “sat with.” Part of what is so interesting about these particular words is that the third cohort of the program was entirely online due to the pandemic, but they used the same kind of embodied, sensory language that the in-person participants used. This suggests that the particular style of relating was important to developing resilience, perhaps more important than the mode of delivery.

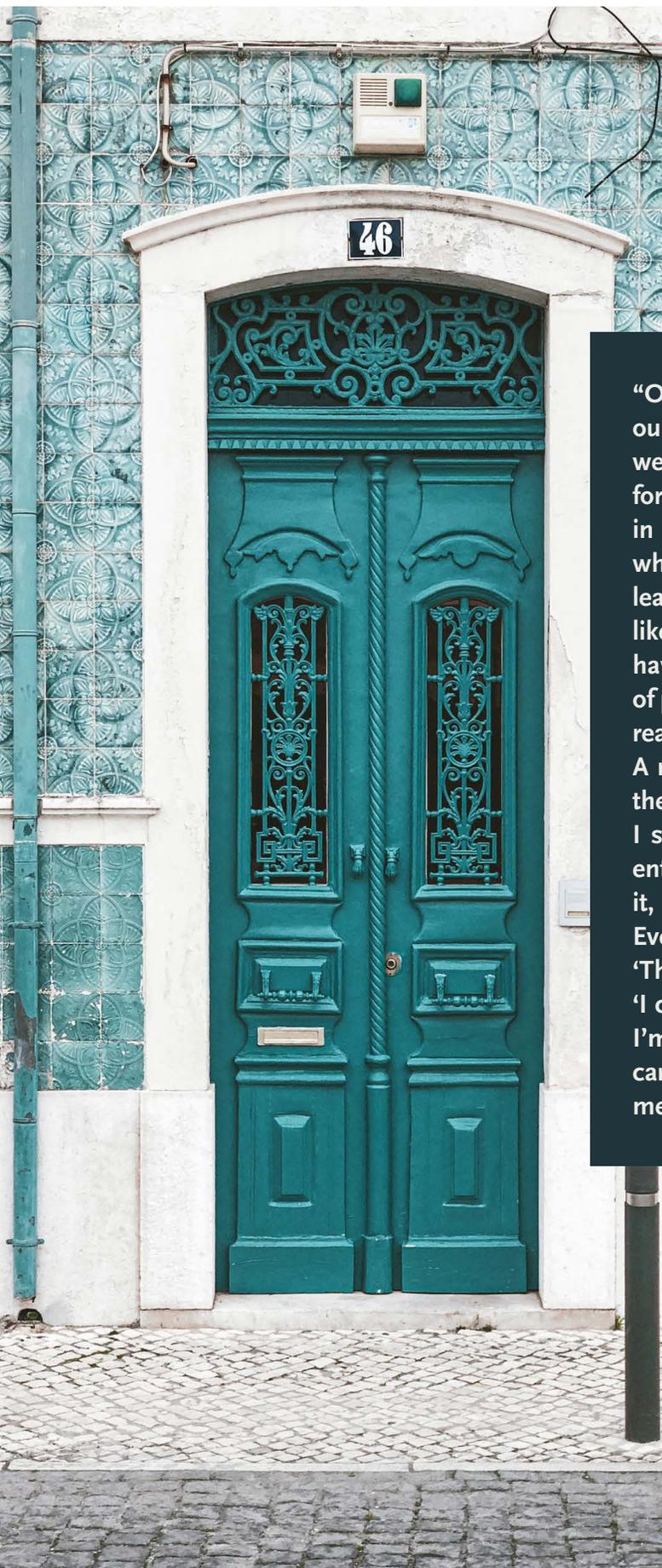
Group guidelines are shared at the beginning of the program and each time participants gather live. Guidelines begin with the principle of “No fixing, saving, or advising.”¹⁷ Then guidelines are framed in the positive: be a whole person (thinking and feeling); be present (eliminate distractions); respect where someone is today. Instead of trying to fix each other’s problems, participants are invited to simply “be with” the person who is sharing. After a person shares their story, there is often a time of silence for the group to really take in the story and notice what they are feeling before they respond verbally. Interviewees named both the silence and the kinds of responses the group offered as important.

“It was one thing to share your stories, but the most awkward part – the 30 minutes after you share when you are getting feedback – was also the best. I think, ‘Oh my goodness I feel seen – for the first time – I am completely naked – and I’m unashamed because of their kindness.’”

“There were a couple times when people were almost moved to tears by [other] people’s stories. You could tell people sat with you in it. After sharing your story and people sharing what they felt and what they heard, and you realizing ‘I am not alone. You are here with me holding my pain.’”

This “being-with” stance opened up new possibilities for participants, including more resilient forms of leadership and releasing pain instead of holding onto it tightly.

“When I came to the third module, I was in a really broken place [because of] the weight of my leadership and the culture of my church. Normally I suck it up and put on a brave face and be the person everyone is expecting me to be. I came to the group [interviewee is tearing up when talking] and looked in their eyes and I knew I didn’t have to: there was an invitation to be broken, be a mess, be not the smartest person in the room. [I was] invited to be the leader that doesn’t have all the answers.”



We want to share with you one specific, extended example of a participant's experience. The example demonstrates how the being-with stance created a community that allowed the participant to share the weight of her burden instead of carrying it on her own and how that translated into resilience. It's our conviction that, amidst the burn-out and flame-out of so many leaders, it's important and urgent that leaders have communities in which they show need, receive care, and share labor.

“One of the powerful moments was the second sharing of our [childhood] stories. I have held my life together pretty well: there have not been people to care for me, so I cared for myself. It is hard for people to digest the pain and trauma in my story, so I usually try to protect people from my story when I share it. It was my time to share, and I took a real leap of faith. Carrying my stories over my lifetime had felt like carrying sandbags up a hill. I thought, ‘How could I have people carry them with me?’ My facilitator got reams of paper from the copy room. I asked each person to hold a ream of paper with me when I told the story. They said yes. A ream of paper is light but not that light. It represented them holding the hardness and heaviness of my story. After I shared the story this second time, people engaged and entered in. I felt like people really showed up with me in it, in the feelings of it. Tears were running down my face. Everyone had tears. Jesus really showed up. People said ‘This is sacred ground.’ [It was] so powerful how they said ‘I can’t believe you have carried this for so long. It’s heavy. I’m honored to carry it with you.’ Then everyone helped carry the reams back to the copy room – they wouldn’t let me do it alone.”

3. Story-Based — From the Start

Participants said that much of the impact of the narrative process groups was attributable to the use of story work — both what kinds of stories were shared and how those stories were incorporated throughout the program.

The main story assignment came in the first module of the program. Before gathering, participants made a list of 5-10 childhood memories and wrote one of those events into a detailed story of 600-1,000 words. Participants were encouraged to choose an event that marked their life uniquely through its pain. In the first small group gatherings, participants read their stories to each other, and the convener invites the group to engage each story with observations, curiosity, and compassion. In the interviews, the participants shared that this was both an intense and effective way to develop intimacy with the group quickly. As one participant said, “The sharing of really hard things right away necessitated that you developed a lot of trust with these people, and then it played out really well.”

Exploring a painful childhood experience with the group helped participants to see patterns in their lives, especially patterns of how they relate to people in the present day.

“[Narrative processing] allowed me a space to see how family-of-origin issues were being enacted in my job. Had there not been an emphasis on story, I would have kept on going and sucking it up because that’s what you do in church work.”

“What comes to mind [as being impactful] is all the story stuff, starting with the early childhood story and the experience I had of increasing my understanding – I knew somewhat why I ended up in the helping professions, but I didn’t know how deeply broken and wounded I was and how much that influenced why I ended up as a pastor. It was a rollercoaster of ‘Holy crap, I am super broken and codependent, no wonder I chose to be a pastor. I shouldn’t have done that [been a pastor]’ – but then seeing that partial brokenness led you in that direction, that direction was part of God’s plan of redemption for me and my story. ... So it was about re-finding hope. The narrative gave vision for life – not just vocationally but ‘Who am I becoming?’”

This new awareness of how relational style was shaped in the past helped participants to see how they are with others in the present. That awareness helped participants develop an imagination for new options of how they could relate to people going forward. As one interviewee said, “Most of us without story work would be very reactive leaders instead of responsive leaders.” Slowing down to attend to stories gave participants new agency and hope.

“I can’t imagine delving into resiliency and the other things without first addressing those things in our story that we have rolled past for our whole life. Because that’s my reality, right? I rolled past things that were the [reason] for some of the brokenness that manifested out of my life. The Circle groups give you the chance to practice [new ways] and take away the opportunity to hide”

“Part of my story was having this rejection happen from my father and not ever saying anything and not ever protesting it. Not ever. So I think, for me, one of the places the Lord has me growing is how can I say no to those things? How can I protest them and yet still be Christlike in that?”



Participants also said that the story emphasis was effective because their group members remembered their stories and returned to them throughout the program as touchstones. Styles of relating and themes from those initial stories surfaced again when discussing other aspects of resilient practices or leadership styles. Participants noted that it was important to process the stories with a group instead of on their own. Several said that the group reflection on stories became an experience of transcendence.

“Part of what I would say [about why narrative process worked] is how much everyone retained about everyone’s specific story. Even at the end – I remember it being everybody – at the end people were touching back on a story that was shared back in [the beginning of the program] – ‘You talked about waves’ – oh right I didn’t even remember I talked about the waves. People shared things in that group that they said ‘I’ve never told anybody else this.’ You just realized what a sacred space that is.”

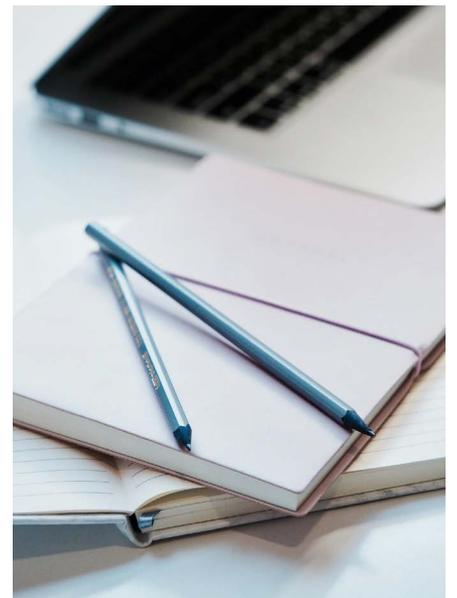
“I think I learned the importance of sharing your story with others and the richness, growth and healing – when others can reflect back to you what they see in the story and what they see in you, how they see things you didn’t even say. I saw God show up in those moments.”

4. Commonality and Diversity

In designing this program, we were intentional to include Christian leaders whose ministry is in a variety of contexts, including various roles and denominations. We define the term “pastor” broadly, though not loosely, as someone who sees their work to be in direct service to God and neighbor. Successful applicants articulated their work as motivated by their faith. Participants saw the vocational diversity of participants as a strength that added to resilience formation.

When placing individuals into small groups, we strive to balance commonalities and differences. In doing so, groups have shared affinities with varying perspectives. Participants submit their early childhood stories in advance of the first module, which a staffperson reviews. She reads stories and application documents for commonalities in experience, theme, context, or stage of life. This process results in the emergence of groups on unanticipated commonalities, such as a group that had all taken on adult-level responsibilities as children (parentified children), or a group that had experienced abandonment.

Though we were intentional in creating groups with commonalities in their stories, we did not put people in the same group if they had a shared workplace or shared denomination, as previous research on clergy support groups indicates that people feel more safety and less competition when in groups with people who are less likely to have professional affiliation.¹⁸ Spouses and friends who went through the program in the same cohort were placed in separate groups to prevent the complications of dual relationships. Group sizes are between 4 and 6 participants, plus the convener.



While commonality was the primary goal for group formation, the secondary goal was diversity. We seek group diversities of age, experience, career stage, ethnicity and cultural identity, and sex. In organizational contexts, communicating across such differences is a day to day reality. In this way, circles become a place to practice relating across differences with safety, which develops courage and resilience. Additionally, it offers a variety of perspectives.

The impacts of the commonality-not-uniformity approach named by participants included a non-competitive environment, feeling less alone, and vicarious learning.

“It was a new experience to have a small group where I felt like I could be honest and that my group could provide helpful feedback. This was not my experience in seminary or other places. As a pastor, I don’t have a lot of places where I can speak freely about things; there is always someone who is too closely connected for me to be unfiltered. My Circle was a great experience because I could be fully myself, share unfiltered and openly.”

One group in particular, in which participants shared the commonality of working in high-trauma contexts, inspired hope that people across the political spectrum could learn from and care for each other.

“I would say it surprised me how quickly and deeply our very diverse group connected. I read everybody’s profile and read as much as I could online about them (before the first Circle meeting). We confessed to each other later that we came in with some preconceived notions about each other. I came in prepared to be ‘the liberal,’ as I saw a fair amount of language that seemed conversative. The participant from [a conservative school] – I thought I would hate him. We laughed about that later.”

As we learned along the way, there are several complexities that come along with the commonalities-but-not-uniformity approach to groups. Whenever possible, groups should be composed in such a way that there are no singletons, no one who is an “only”s in some key demographics — the only person of a culture, a relational status, a gender expression, a stage of life. In our pilot cohort, because we created 2 groups out of 8 participants, we did have some singletons, and those participants noted that being a singleton was sometimes a challenge.

An additional complexity came with theological diversity. In several cohorts, we received informal feedback that we don’t say Jesus enough, don’t say God enough, and don’t say Spirit enough. Anecdotally, this feedback aligns with traditions: evangelicals want more Jesus language; mainline protestants more God language, and pentecostals or charismatics more Spirit language.

“A limitation that I experienced a little bit was people coming from a variety of backgrounds or at least I felt like I was coming from a different kind of theological tradition. And I don’t know if this is accurate or not, but it seemed to me that maybe that was because we were coming from different places and there was an uncertainty about, ‘Will we be able to respect the different traditions?’”

“For me, wondering about the beliefs of the people in my group probably caused me to be less vulnerable. Anecdotally, in processing being a female pastor, I thought I could tell that there were those in the group who did not hold that theology – so I pulled back from talking about it. I could tell there were divergent belief systems.”



5. Structural Elements

There were several structural elements of how groups were run that participants noted as important to group effectiveness. As noted in earlier sections, the time for silence and the type of feedback given in response to stories was impactful. Another impactful element was starting each group time with an entering ritual, such as lighting a candle (or when meeting virtually, everyone doing so), ringing a singing bowl, or doing a body scan.

“The simple practices of ritual were really helpful, whether that was lighting a candle or sharing a poem.”

Participants appreciated that facilitators held time boundaries, especially in story sharing times when each person had a set amount of time to read their story and receive feedback. Knowing that they had a dedicated amount of time freed leaders to take the time to be heard and to not worry about others over-sharing. One request we did hear was for even more time together as groups; one person thought that an additional hour would help, while a few others said they'd like to keep meeting with the facilitator for another six months beyond the program.

“[It gave] everyone an opportunity, space, time to share. Each person had a dedicated time, which, for many people who work in ministry, there isn't a whole lot of dedicated time to you and what you are working through.”

The content of groups was also important to participants. After the initial story-sharing sessions, many of the group times focused on reflecting on and applying the teaching presented in the program in ways that connected to and advanced the themes and insights from those initial stories.

“I really just wanted to be with my Circle to debrief what was learned.”

A final note on structure: though much of the content processed by groups was intense, the tone of the groups was not always heavy. The intense moments are perhaps over-emphasized in these interviews, as they are where change happens, but there is also laughter and play. As one participant said, “We had fun with each other too. We didn't always have to be so solemn.”

Conclusions

Christian leadership is intensely relational work. For leaders to be resilient and to grow through the challenges they face, they need deep self-awareness and self-compassion as well as community. They need relational support, especially from other leaders who understand the complexities of Christian leadership today. They need to reflect on their own stories to create healthier relationships with themselves, God, and the people they serve.

Though many kinds of small groups have been found to be effective for pastors,¹⁹ the findings of this study highlight some best practices for peer groups of Christian leaders. The Circles in Resilient Leaders Project were found to be an effective type of narrative process group, helping leaders increase their resilience through greater self-awareness, increased self-compassion, new leadership skills, and deeper relationships. Interviews with participants revealed that the effectiveness of these groups were due to five factors: (1) style of facilitation, (2) “being with” stance, (3) story-based work, (4) commonality and diversity in group membership and (5) structural elements.

As we close, we’d like to speak specifically to five groups of people who we hope to continue to learn alongside.

Denominational Leaders

... would be wise to heed the findings, here and in other research, that peer groups outside of one’s denomination may be more effective than groups within a denomination.²⁰ These findings make sense when you consider how ongoing denominational relationships impact a leader’s willingness to be vulnerable. In other professions, staff don’t see their bosses for counseling; they do not process their fears and failings with coworkers they may be in competition with for future jobs. The same is true for pastors; vulnerability is stifled within a denomination. Pastors need and deserve a sense of safety when they seek support, and denominations can better offer that through encouraging and supporting pastors’ participation in multi-denominational or cross-sector groups.

Small group facilitators

... are encouraged to reflect on their leadership style and theory of change. What stance do you take in the group — counselor, expert, participant, or something in between? What impact does that stance have on group safety and power dynamics? What boundaries and structures do you have in place to support group trust and sharing? How might you moderate your desire to fix and save by adopting an incarnational “being-with” stance?

Clergy wellness programs

and theological educators

... are invited to partner with us in using the strengths of this narrative process format in their clergy formation and support groups. We want to amplify the importance of providing a format where participants’ can deepen their understanding of how they are contributing to their own issues and isolation – while growing in self-compassion and experiencing the compassion of others. The exploration of the leader’s personal story – past and present – is key to refining relational style in ministry and to helping leaders choose more healthy practices. Working from an adversarial growth perspective helps Christian leaders to normalize and see opportunity in challenges.

Christian leaders

... It can feel like such trying, complex times demand super-human leadership. We invite you to remember that you are human — created in the image of God and gifted to serve, but with normal human limitations. It was not good for a human to be alone in the garden of Eden, and it is not good for you to be alone in ministry. Receiving community-care is even more important than self-care, and having that community in place before a crisis hits is key to resilience. We encourage you to prioritize peer relationships at any phase of your ministry life.

Grace and peace,

The team at the Center for Transforming Engagement

Appendix 1

Research Methods

Because the insights in this report had their roots in program evaluation, and because we used that participant input to shape the program over several years, the questions that we asked in this qualitative research also evolved. The first year of the program, the program evaluation manager interviewed six of the eight participants, asking broad questions. This is where the strength of Circles came to our attention as being worthy of further study. For this report, we used any information from those first-cohort interviews that mentioned Circles.

Following the next two cohorts, we asked Circle facilitators to recommend interviewees who were good at articulating their experiences, whether positive or negative, and who were demographically diverse. These interviews were focused on questions specifically about Circles. (See questions below.) In the second cohort, the program evaluation manager interviewed six of the 18 participants. In the third cohort, the program evaluation manager also served as a Circle facilitator; she interviewed five participants who were not in her group and the program manager for the Center for Transforming Engagement interviewed two additional participants who were in the evaluation manager's group, for a total of 7 interviews from a cohort of 36.

Demographics of the 19 total participants were as follows:

- Male: 9
- Female: 10
- Non-binary: 0
- Asian-American: 2
- Black: 2
- European-American: 13
- Latin American: 1
- Multiracial: 1

Denominational Affiliation: Participants were from 8 different denominations (Calvary Chapel, the Evangelical Covenant Church, Lutheran, Mennonite, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and Vineyard USA), and several participants were affiliated with non-denominational congregations.

Participants' informed consent was obtained. Not all questions were asked of all interviewees because of time limitations. To gather insights from the interviews, the program evaluation manager and the program manager separately reviewed and coded the data, then they met to agree on shared themes.

Appendix 1

Research Methods

Interview Questions for the Second and Third Cohorts

- 1 Our program is based, in part, on a model called narrative process... Narrative process helps people change by looking at how their past—their life story and their life themes—influences their present. How has participating in this narrative process group affected your understanding of your life story and how it influences who you are and how you relate to others?
- 2 In our program, much of the narrative process happens in Circles. Circles are a kind of narrative process group. In addition to helping people look at the past, narrative process groups also encourage people to reflect on how they are responding to what is currently happening in their lives. Did this narrative process model increase your resilience?
- 3 What parts of the Circle experience were most key to increasing your resilience?
- 4 What did your facilitator do to create a feeling of safety in your group so you could share deeply?
- 5 Tell me a story about a powerful or transformative moment in Circle.
- 6 Being in a narrative process group involves not only sharing your stories, but also listening and reacting to other people's sharing. Was that part of being a circle member important to your growth, and if so, how?

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