

A CASE STUDY:
PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STORIES OF RESILIENCE MERGED

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This paper briefly applies a couple of sources on resilience to a congregational situation that provides an opportunity to explore how organizations and persons rebound from traumatic experiences to create new opportunities. Although this paper does not address theological issues, it does investigate rudimentary principles that have organizational and leadership implications, against (or on top of) which theological perspectives can be laid. This paper is exploratory; it is not comprehensive.

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Effective communication between the senior pastor and the youth minister was inadequate to non-existent, but the youth group was First Church's growing edge. Then reports of sexual misconduct on the part of the youth minister began to surface. Multiple incidents were confirmed and the youth minister resigned. Shortly thereafter the senior pastor took another assignment. Following the succeeding pastor's two-year ministry, the congregation thought it was ready to enter a new era in its history. Regrettably, the new pastor developed a relationship with one of the ladies of the church.

It was just almost like we were getting hit again. I think everyone was reeling. "Why in the world would this happen? We've done everything. . .we're supposed to do." . . . The damage from the youth minister thing before was worse than this, but I think it was just that everybody said, "Boy, this is the second time around and I don't understand how this is happening." And I think we began to feel pretty good exodus of people at that point. (Organization, 2004, p. 3)

Although the degree of misconduct is still unknown, the pastor resigned.

These occurrences, violations of the congregation's theology and its practical norms, had the potential to devastate First Church, perhaps permanently. Nevertheless, the congregation has

thrived, growing to more than twice the size it was when these incidents unfolded. Several protective factors appear to have been in play. The first set of factors was, to significant degree, internal. The congregational leaders, in sorting out the situation with the youth pastor, did their homework effectively, exhibiting autonomy, focusing their attentions, and moderating their passions (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 192).

The [denominational executive] came down assuming that we were taking liberties beyond what we should as a local church body but very quickly understood by the end of the session that we had our facts together. That established that we were on the right track. We weren't out there just witch-hunting. There was a problem and we were addressing it. (Organization, 2004, p. 2)

Acknowledging that “should we be elsewhere?” conversations occurred, one leader reflected on a characteristic that he transferred from his upbringing.

My mom would say, “When I got married, we made the statement, ‘For better or worse.’ . . . That’s what marriage is about. You work through it and you go on. Just because you think something’s better elsewhere, it’s not. And that was just kind of a seed, I think, that was planted early in me . . . So I think that we just said, “No, we’re going work through this.” And we did. (Organization, 2004, p. 4)

But the leaders did more than hang in there; they were proactive, working hard to find pastors that would fit the situation. They weren’t always successful. However, they were successful enough that the congregation gained sufficient breathing room to sustain the potential for eventual resilience. The outcome might have been quite different if “we’d had two, three, or four pastors in a row where there were situations like this that happened” (p. 4). And one can hardly dismiss the “groundswell of prayers over the years” (p. 9) to which one member referred.

Another set of factors was external: strong relationships within the church, a significant number of core people—mentors and peers—who stayed the course, Sunday school classes gave members things to do together and, at the same time, “encouraged [us] to go out and serve”. Confidants were another resource.

It's been comforting to have close confidants. . . [to whom] you can say, "Peter, I need to talk to you about something because I'm feeling this way and I don't know if it's right or wrong." And I think we have several of those situations in the church, where we can go, if necessary. (Organization, 2004, p. 9)

And peer pressure, applied through shared activities like Bible studies and small groups, was very important, too.

When something happens in the organization, the first thing we do is join together. . . . I do not want to feel like I'm failing Ron by leaving. Ron does not want to feel like he's failing as a leader by leaving. And so there's also a responsibility, not just to the church itself but to the people. (p. 12)

Several turning points appear to have been instrumental in First Church's resilience. The importance of good pastors cannot be underestimated. This church was blessed by the brief but valued ministry of the pastor sandwiched between the traumas of the sexually active youth pastor and the indiscreet senior pastor. The pastor that followed was deeply respected. His pastorate covered "ten wonderful years" (Organization, 2004, p. 4). The fact that resilience is often "a process that builds on itself over time" (Higgins, 1994, p. 4) is illustrated in the observation, "It took us three or four years from when he came to feel like we could trust and we didn't even know we were there" (Organization, 2004, p. 4)

It was subtle. We didn't know it because of history. . . . To be honest with you, we—I—did not even know that we weren't trusting totally. . . . I think it took us a while to even come out of the mode because we never knew we were in the mode. . . . I mean, I never knew we were not trusting until [the pastor] told me we weren't trusting. Then you look back and talk about the evidence of that and say, "Well, you're right. I guess it was unconscious." (pp. 22-23)

The congregation and its leaders employed several strategies to address the issues and reframe the trauma. The earliest strategies included the confrontation of the pastors, the notification of the denominational authorities, the investigation of the legalities, and communication with the congregation.

You didn't want it to happen that the church board knew about it for six months and the church is just now finding out about these things. It was all handled pretty concisely, pretty prompt. Things were dealt with and the church was notified of what it needed to be aware of. This kept it from developing a cancer. (Organization, 2004, p. 14)

All of these exchanges were laced with Spirit-guided introspection.

We had first to recheck ourselves and ask, "Is this true or is it not true?" I know it always led to immediate prayer with the board. And we would talk about it and pray. In many cases, it went beyond that to a public prayer meeting, from the church's standpoint. Call a prayer meeting to come and pray and ask for God's guidance—not to talk about it in detail but to ask for God's guidance on our future. I really think we did spend a lot of time in that. . . . The other thing that I've always felt was always important, and I've been board chairman a few times, is it's not enough to have a majority. . . . If we don't have almost a unanimous decision, we shouldn't be doing it. So we've made it a practice over time, going into board meetings, going into leadership meetings, that we'll make a decision, we need to be prayed through and make a decision so that we can all feel the same. (Organization, 2004, pp. 13-14)

The church also built clear boundaries, as a protective device, and communicated those so that everybody was aware those were the group norms. Church leaders have been fairly open about this over time. Accountability structures, initially set up for pastors, have radiated outward, including lay leaders and affecting structural systems. Caution has been cultivated.

Everyone uses a term now that everyone needs to be "squeaky-clean." That goes back to our history and we all know that. So we just let that come up front. Now it's kind of hard in an initial setting to talk about a lot of these things that we've talked about. But I've just had a meeting, probably two or three weeks, ago where we've hired a new staff person. . . . And we talked about being "squeaky-clean" and why we are so adamant about being there. So I went back and talked about these same issues we're talking about. . . . I tried not to get into detail but I tried to talk specifically enough that they would know why we would be so careful about who we were getting. I think it also set the tone, like it or lump it, we love you and we care for you but we're going to be watching—the whole church—to make sure we don't get into these areas again. (Organization, 2004, p. 15)

This poses the question of forgiveness, a doctrine that the church preaches. What is the texture of forgiveness?

I know we need to forgive because when we don't we hurt ourselves more than we hurt other people. I understand all that. But I think what people tend to forget is that just because you forgive it doesn't eliminate the consequences of the action. . . . They think

forgiveness means “I’m back to where I was before.” I’m forgiven but I still have consequences for what happened. (Organization, 2004, pp. 24-25)

This congregation exercises a kind of friendly skepticism. They feel OK saying, “We’re going to be on the defense to some extent” (p. 21). The leaders with whom I spoke seem unapologetic about their need to see a discernible change of behavior over time.

Forgiveness is granted in situations where people are deeply sorry for what they’ve done, they’ve asked for forgiveness, and they’ve repented—turned around and now are going in the proper direction. In the youth minister’s situation, he came before the church and said, “I’m sorry I got caught.” What happened with him? Divorce. Then another one or two and multiple relationships. (p. 26)

Perhaps the most surprising part of this interview was that this culture of “squeaky clean” caution with active protective devices authored an unexpected ability to take a previously unthinkable risk.

Our new pastor knew [a] fellow who had been in ministry with him years ago. He was high on him but he was hesitant because he knew enough about our history. . . . He thought he could do the job well but he had these issues. When we first talked we knew about one divorce but all of a sudden there were two divorces. One of those divorces involved a bankruptcy. We, as a board, said we would be willing to talk and we would be open, but we would need some real good answers. (Organization, 2004, p. 18)

The personnel committee engaged in pointed questioning. By the end of the interview, the committee was ready to recommend that he come for a weekend interview. The church board concurred and, in a sense, deputized the “watching eyes” of the entire congregation.

We told him, in order to come, we wouldn’t expect him to tell every detail but when he came for the interview he would have to be open enough to talk to the board specifically about the situation if they asked. Then the congregational meeting, he’d probably have to refer to it, which he did. (Organization, 2004, p. 19)

The question persists, how does a church turn this kind of corner? Or, perhaps, more accurately, navigate this long curve?

I felt like we did a lot of study, a lot of thinking about him. . . . We dealt with it very specifically. The good thing, too, is we’re not closed. We let those things guide us but I

really think that we're open to God's will and checking and making sure. . . If there's problems, we want to hear about them. . .but I think we also want to be reasonable. While we set ourselves apart, are we doing these things for the right reasons? Why should we say "No" versus why should we say "Yes." I don't think there were enough reasons, after we heard his story, to say "No." (Organization, 2004, pp. 19-20)

This openness an associate that the leaders knew had fallen short of the standards that had been long, and painfully, set in place was quite different than the old, pre-youth minister naiveté, however. "I was looking for his answers," one person said. "I didn't want him to say, 'It was all her fault or it was not my fault. . . I also wanted to make sure that we had someone genuine'" (Organization, 2004, p. 20). Another said,

I think that you had to see his heart. . . . I don't think he would have been hired just over the phone. I think we had to see where he was really coming from and the manner in which he handled the questions. (p. 20)

The position was offered and accepted, and the protective devices remain active. However, the altruistic fires have been reignited. One person summarized the altruistic impulse profoundly, I think: "There's also a sense in which we're probably going to feel a part of his healing. . . . I look forward to being a part of that" (Organization, 2004, p. 22).

Reference List

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