

Kate Rae Davis: Resilience and pastoral leadership



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To acquire the resilience necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world, pastors need people, practices and purpose, says the director of the Resilient Leaders Project.

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At virtually every level, from the personal to the institutional, pastors today live in the midst of great tensions and pressures, and resilience is essential for navigating them successfully and thriving in ministry, says Kate Rae Davis.





“In this rapidly changing context, I don’t know how individual leaders -- or we as the church -- survive without resilience,” said Davis, the director of the Resilient Leaders Project, a program of The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. The project helps pastors and nonprofit leaders cultivate skills and practices that enable them to thrive in their work.

In March, The Seattle School released the project’s first report, a 25-page document on resilience: what it is, what it looks like in practice, and its implications for Christian leaders.

Among other things, the report identified three critical elements necessary for resilience: people in communities of support, practices for health and well-being, and a sense of purpose and meaning.

“It’s a three-legged stool, and we find that people tend to have one of the three,” Davis said. “There’s one leg that they lean on really hard, which I suspect for pastors is the ‘purpose’ leg.”

Overall, more than 90 percent of pastors surveyed for the report said that they have a strong sense of purpose. But that can sometimes tempt pastors to justify neglecting the other two “legs,” people and practices, Davis said.

Davis spoke recently with Faith & Leadership about the [Resilient Leaders Project](#) and the new report. The following is an edited transcript.

Q: Give us an overview of the Resilient Leaders Project.

It has three main components.

The first is our one-year program for pastors and other leaders, which includes multiday learning modules and monthly check-in meetings online.

The second is events, in which we invite thinkers and leaders to do workshops or teaching sessions with us.

And the third is research, which includes both our own surveys and looking into existing research and trying to make some cohesive meaning from it.

Q: How did the project come to focus on resilience and identify it as a key attribute of pastoral leadership?

Our grant is from [Lilly Endowment Inc.'s] Thriving in Ministry initiative. Thriving is a lovely metaphor, but it's hard to nail down what it means from a psychological perspective. We didn't quite know how to research what thriving is.

As we started, we had some conversations with pastors in the area. And what they described about what thriving meant to them aligned with the category of resilience in the psychological world. We were trying to find language that bridges the practical theological world to the psychological world and then determine how we can bring the best of the psychological world back to pastors.

As we listened and dialogued with pastors in Seattle, resilience became our own metaphor, one that resonates with people but also has research behind it.

The pastors here told us that thriving was not simply trying to survive and keep going even in the midst of hardship. Neither was it simply a matter of, "When I'm thriving, things are great."

For them, it was, "When I'm thriving, things are still rough, but I feel like I can manage it and stay ahead. I even feel like I am giving something of myself in circumstances that are often challenging."

And that raised the issue of stress, which we didn't quite hear with "thriving" but we do with "resilience."

Q: So resilience is not about avoiding the hard stuff. It's more about how you deal with it and thrive in spite of it?

Or even because of it.

A lot of our programs at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology are about trauma. All of us have some pain and trauma in our story, but it's not always debilitating. It's not always this cataclysmic event that we usually think of when we use the word "trauma." But all of us have some pain, and by understanding the pain moments in our life, we can construct a life in response to those moments that makes meaning of them. And that can reflect the divine narrative trying to speak through us.

So in [the resilience program], we start with some story work, trying to name the pain points in your life and how meaning emerged from those, which then builds faith that meaning can emerge from the pain that we're currently in as well.

Q: Why do pastors need resilience? What role does it play in pastoral ministry and pastoral leadership?

We know that 1 in 3 pastors at some point in their career will experience burnout. In the for-profit world, for top level leaders, it's 1 in 5. When we compare those, we wonder: What makes this so much harder for pastors?

There are many different theories, and it's hard to sort out. Some of them are about the person of the pastor and who's typically drawn to ministry -- generally, people who tend to be really good caregivers and love helping other people. Obviously, we need that kind of person in the church, but they often aren't very skilled at saying, "No, I will not help you past this point." And that can lead to problems.

Other questions are about the role of pastor and how that plays in community. What are a congregation's expectations of a leader? Are those made explicit, or is a leader trying to

guess at what people are hoping for from them? And beyond the congregation, there's some tension if, culturally, people don't know what a pastor is.

About a third of people in Seattle attend a church, so in a wider context, if a clergyperson in a collar is walking down the street, some people will trust the person readily -- which is probably how we're used to thinking of clergy in America -- and some people will be suspicious immediately.

That raises questions of what this person's role is with the people they encounter in the community, and on a larger scale, what the church's role is in society today. Churches used to be the center of our public discourse and our shared community life, but we're finding increasingly that's no longer so.

So there are tensions on every level, from the personal to the institutional, that leaders are trying to navigate. And in this rapidly changing context, I don't know how individual leaders -- or we as the church -- survive without resilience.

Q: You recently issued [your first report](#), which includes findings from your Resilience for Sustainable Leadership survey. Tell us about that. How did you do the survey? What are the key findings?

That was one of the first things that we did. We wanted to listen to people who are already in conversation with the school in some way. So we sent an email to all our alumni or other people who have been through programs at the school and asked them to give us feedback and reflection on their own lives and where they face challenges and where they feel they're doing well.

We did that under the overarching framework of what we had been learning from academic studies on resilience. We wanted to know: Where do pastors, and also other Christian leaders of communities that are formation-focused, already have great resilience

practices and frameworks, and where are people really struggling? Where are they feeling underresourced or feeling a lack of connection or support?

And [those findings] then helped frame what the Resilient Leaders Project designed and offered to help in those areas.

The report is as much for us as it is for anyone else. We're trying to create a cohesive understanding of this giant field of resilience studies as it applies to leadership.

Of the main takeaways that we highlight in the report, one is the need for resilience. In a rapidly changing context, pastors are under pressure.

The second is what we call the "three "strings" [or interrelated elements] of resilience.

The first of those is people -- you need a number of people around you to support you.

Second is practices, which we understand holistically, to include not just physical and spiritual practices but also emotional, relational and mental well-being.

The third is purpose, which is really purpose in [the sense of] meaning making. It's understanding your life and your identity as being a response to something outside yourself and the needs of the world. It's something God has placed on your heart, making meaning from the hardships and suffering that you have experienced in your own life in a way that is generative unto others.

Q: Unpack each of those. What should pastors be doing in each of those areas -- people, practices and purpose -- to help boost resilience?

It's a three-legged stool, and we find that people tend to have one of the three. There's one leg that they lean on really hard, which I suspect for pastors is the "purpose" leg. More than 90 percent of pastors say that they have a strong sense of purpose. Which makes sense, because if your mission is God-ordained, it is a huge call, and pastors have put in immense time and effort to get trained to do their work.

So purpose becomes something that is incredibly important but also sometimes a crutch for the other two.

Practices are the daily things that we do that make us feel cared for, that keep our bodies and minds functioning well, and that keep us feeling spiritually engaged. What those practices are seems to depend on how one feels about them. For some people, a quiet hour first thing in the morning is their lifeblood -- something that recharges them and prepares them for the day. Others who are maybe from a religious background where quiet was imposed on them might not find it a useful practice.

Practices are very storied. You have to know your own story and be attentive to what you respond to as something that provides care for you.

It's the adding up of small steps, like any pilgrimage.

Q: Why does purpose become a crutch for pastors? Is it that people with a deep sense of purpose and meaning may be more willing to neglect the other two -- people and practices -- and think they don't need to do the self-care or seek out deep communities of support?

Yes.

Most people we've talked to about the three strings of resilience know which one they rely on as a crutch and which one they're weakest in. I don't have the research to support it, but I intuitively sense that most people who are functioning "well enough" have their crutch and are using their second one well enough to make up for not having the third one.

It's when people start having two categories -- people, practices or purpose -- that are not doing well, or when one category falls apart, that burnout becomes a longer conversation.

You can't just rely on one component too heavily.

Q: Did most of these pastors you surveyed have communities of support? Did they have the people they needed?

Many of them have some people, but they have less than they wish they did.

When we talk about people, there are many different roles that you need individuals to fill. There are friends and family, of course. In the professional sphere, it helps to have partners in your organization or congregation who can help you reflect on what's happening in your context, and allies from elsewhere who can reflect with distance, and spouses, companions or mentors, people who have been through similar events in their lives and can be honest about their experience and give honest feedback.

Q: The report also talks about “cycles of resilience.” What is that?

There is a cultural misunderstanding that you'll achieve something and then you'll have it figured out. But resilience, like most aspects of well-being, requires revisiting and re-evaluating.

What gave me a lot of life when I was 22 is not the same thing that's going to help me at 32 or 42. The practices and the reflections themselves are a daily cycle, and they have to be built into my life. You don't just do the practices rotely but re-engage the meaning behind them.

You're never going to achieve resilience. It's not a thing you're going to check off your list. It's something you're always re-engaging at new heights.

Q: What's the message in this for denominational leaders?

Part of it is to tend to your flock. Even before burnout, there's a lot of stress, and it can go unnoticed. Part of the denominational leader's role is pastoring to pastors. So choose some categories to look at your people in and start conversations around how they are doing and where they need more support.

Second, denominational leaders need to be willing to reach across denominations and across difference and be allies to each other as a singular body of Christ. The Seattle School is [ideally] positioned in that we aren't denominationally affiliated, so we have the freedom to talk to many denominations and put them in conversation with each other. I would hope that denominational leaders are willing to enter into that for the good of the church.