

Increasing Resilience in Adversity

(COVID-19 version, March 2020 by Tim Dyer)

Resilience is a dynamic capacity comprising the attitudes, the skills and the resources to cope effectively with adversity, to recover quickly from unusual stress, to respond positively to significant challenges, and to adapt learning to positively tackle difficult problems. Resilience is complex involving personal attributes, acquired knowledge and wisdom, learned behaviours, important external support relationships and access to resources. The following workshop sheet is adapted for COVID-19 from training sessions conducted by The Johnmark Extension over the last 5 years.

COVID-19 is creating significant adversity in ministry and leadership – 10 issues

- 1. Pastoral load is significantly increased because of the pandemic**

Many church members are anxious and stressed. They are isolated, fearful and some may be ill and even dying. At times like this people usually turn to the church for solace and at present the lack of physical church support is very challenging for them and for us who minister.
- 2. Pastoral access however is severely restricted**

The normal leadership reflex in serious shared adversity is to call people together, to comfort and lead them in collective prayer before God. With the COVID19 pandemic the standard means of care and support have all gone and pastors need to re-create processes of pastoral ministry on the run. That fact that many might be suffering without support is a stress on pastors.
- 3. The most vulnerable are the most challenging to connect with and to care for**

Those most physically vulnerable to COVID19 are older congregational members. The Christian church has a disproportionately high demographic of older members. These also are least likely to have the means and capacity to adapt to online or mobile phone-based connections. Some are in lock-down in nursing homes with no visitors including family allowed.
- 4. Ministers potentially face more than the usual number of emotionally draining pastoral and officiating services**

Some ministers will be engaged with significant numbers of very difficult pastoral tasks like ministering to those who have very ill or dying family members and they are unable to be with them in their last hours. Some may be taking funerals with limited numbers permitted to attend in person and larger numbers present online. These are very high-pressure situations which are spiritually and emotionally draining. It is pastorally challenging to minister to parishioners who are grieving but may not be able to be present at a family member's funeral.
- 5. There are increasing family pressures in parishioners' households**

While people are isolated, house-bound, under financial pressure and also fearful and anxious around their own wellbeing, there is a household pressure cooker effect. Under these circumstances there is often an increase in family relational issues like conflict, marriage and parent-child breakdown, alcohol and substance abuse and even increased likelihood of domestic violence. Pastors are often made aware of these issues but again may be limited in the help that they can offer in current circumstances.
- 6. Pastoral ministry and team leadership is having to be re-invented**

The isolation required by this crisis is unique. Some professions are not greatly impacted and staff can simply move home and continue more or less without major change to how their work is conducted. This is much more challenging for people in ministry who have to negotiate a range of major changes to the way leadership of a now scattered faith community is engaged. Those who have centred their ministry in preaching and teaching find that this is in now completely in a different space. A 40-minute monologue in front of a camera is not the same as opening the word of God in the presence of others who respond and engage. A 'Zoom' meeting has to be facilitated very differently than a staff meeting with everyone around the table. The mechanisms of leadership are changing.

7. **Video and social networking technology is demanding**
Most ministers are on very steep learning curves when it comes to both the hardware technology and using software like skype, zoom and sound recording and video editing software. Not many clergy (although I know a few) began life as video producers. Managing social media comes with its own issues around privacy, access and managing a range of different accounts and platforms.
8. **Financial pressures**
One of the most significant stresses is that some are finding that keeping their own position is not certain as churches struggle even more than usual around finances. Normal parish income is no longer reliable as services are not being held and income from other sources may have ceased (rentals of parish halls). Not all church members give or are comfortable giving via online banking services. Many regular givers may also have lost jobs and now have significantly decreased income.
9. **Dislocation from minister's extended family**
Many clergy lived dislocated from extended family as part of their vocational calling. At times of adversity this can be very difficult if travel is limited and family members e.g. parents or children become ill.
10. **Pastors have their own personal family life and health needs**
There may be personal and family health concerns around COVID19 and pastor's own immediate family relatives. Some may have spouses who work in current high-risk areas like nursing, community services, or teaching and childcare. Some of these may need to be in isolation from immediate family while they work. Some pastors themselves have pre-existing health conditions which place them at risk of more severe symptoms associated with COVID-19.

All of the above mean that what we are experiencing is unusual adversity. This requires more than simply upscaling normal **self-care** practices. Self-care is critical and needed, however in times of adversity a different capacity we refer to as **resilience** is required.

Following are 10 components of resilience with development strategies for times of adversity like COVID-19.

1. **Reminding ourselves of our call to ministry and leadership**
One of the primary elements of resilience is for a person to maintain a deep sense of identity and purpose. For pastors this is to hold to a clear sense of call. A significant adversity may change external aspects of life and ministry, but the call to 'be a servant of others' holds a person steady. The call is to trust in God and to partner with God in serving him, his kingdom and his people through ministry and leadership even though lots of the context for this might be in flux or under threat.
 - a. This is a great time to reflect on and document the call to ministry. Re-write this in a journal or personal charter. Re-commit to responding to the call of God afresh in this current context.
 - b. Share your call with someone you trust; a mentor, peer, retreat group member, supervisor and reflect with them about what it means in the current situation.
2. **Leaning into a deeper relationship with God**
Research indicates that resilience is significantly correlated with a maturing personal relationship with God in prayer, contemplation and the Word¹. People of faith find meditation, reading Scripture and prayer deeply nurturing and a source of strength in the midst of adversity. Personal worship realigns the spirit and soul to the reality of God's love and care². Thanksgiving to God, even in the most difficult circumstances, is soul restoring. Intercession and supplication bring the needs of others and our own concerns before God in an act of trust.

¹ Southwick, S and Charney, D, *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's greatest Challenges*

² Think Paul and Silas singing in prison in Philippi (Acts 16)

- a. When adversity strikes, prayer and scripture, which are always essentials, become even more significant. Increase commitment to time with God. Focus on tried spiritual disciplines that you know personally work for you to bring you into personal engagement with God.
- b. If you have a spiritual director, mentor or are part of a peer support group, become accountable around the time you spend with God in prayer. Share your reflections, encouragements and challenges with your director, peer or mentor.
- c. Share personal devotional insights appropriately with church members by phone, skype, zoom or email. This is time for a different way of teaching and sharing.

3. **Developing disciplined mental focus – mental self-control - mindfulness**

One of the capacities resilient people is focus and disciplined thinking. This is what Paul is referring to in Philippians 4:8, where he instructs the believers in the content of their thoughts. Focus is related to mindfulness – the capacity to keep attention on the present, to appreciate and welcome the gifts of the moment in what we sense and feel. It involves choosing good thoughts and putting aside poor or unhelpful ruminations on the past or anxieties about the future. Learning to still our minds, to focus our thoughts and make good mental choices is critical in adversity. All of these processes remind us that we are not the thoughts that enter our minds and that our will can learn to have mastery over thinking processes.

- a. Read and reflect on a good article about [mindfulness](https://christiansimplicity.com/christian-mindfulness/)³ and journal some practical steps you can take to this skill to learn mental focus.
- b. Develop your own personal mind focus repertoire: passages of scripture, music, works of art, photographs, passages of good books, quotes, activities, reflections that meet the Philippians 4:8 criteria. Use these intentionally to focus mentally when needed.
- c. Cultivate gratitude - the capacity to notice what is wonderful, good, whole, beautiful and awesome. Practise seeing and giving thanks to God for these things. Keep a gratitude journal and share your thoughts with others. Again, remember gratitude is correlated with resilience⁴.

4. **Working on emotional self-awareness and regulation**

In the same vein as mental focus, maintaining emotional self-control is vital in highly stressful situations. Resilient people work out how to prevent their emotions from taking over their functioning and responses. They take a deep breath, recognise and then take concrete steps to regulate their emotional reactions. Emotions are energy and resilient people recognise that this energy can be applied creatively. They learn the actions, practices or steps which steady their emotions and apply these.

- a. Develop emotional awareness and sensitivity. Particularly in times of challenge, stress and change, take a moment several times a day to do an emotional check-in. Ask “what am I feeling and how I am managing this feeling?” Also do a quick social emotional check-in, “what are others who I am in close contact with feeling and how are they managing their emotions?”
- b. Develop a tried and practised repertoire of ways to regulate various emotions. Have a plan of what to do when you feel you might be overcome by anger, fear, anxiety, stress, or sadness. E.g. Exercising, hobbies, gardening, etc.
- c. There is an important difference between healthy and wholesome regulatory processes and unhelpful escapist strategies such as alcohol abuse, and some immersive ‘entertainment’ or ‘adrenaline’ options. Some of these escapes are addictive and potentially damaging – choose the healthy and whole options.

³ <https://christiansimplicity.com/christian-mindfulness/>

⁴ https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/in-praise-of-gratitude

5. **Cultivating a positive challenge orientation**

Resilience can be developed by learning to see difficulties and adversity as challenges to be welcomed. In all problems there are gifts of learning and growth. They are opportunities to discover more about the nature of the role, project or task that is under pressure. Adversity also provides unexpected personal insight. We learn more of ourselves. There are usually ways over, around or through problems when they are tackled with prayer, thought and commitment. Resilient people have confidence that with God's help and guidance obstacles and blockages in ministry and leadership can be faced and overcome.

- a. Name each of the challenges and obstacles before God in prayer and seek wisdom in how to see and reflect on them in fresh and different ways.
- b. Name three unexpected positives that have come from the current crisis and what can be gained in the long term from embracing these.
- c. In adversity, bigger plans and objectives usually need to be broken down to short term achievable goals – often day by day as situations sometimes change quickly and dramatically. Set two or three challenging and realistic goals for each day and steadily work through them.
- d. Adversity is a good time for creativity, adaption and innovation. Are there new or different ways to respond to the issues that have arisen?

6. **Being clear on personal and ministry strengths, capacities and boundaries**

The counter-balance that sits alongside positive hope and confidence is hard headed practical realism. Realists have a clear sense of what is possible and should be tried and what cannot be achieved and should not be pursued. This clear thinking applies generally to any situation one faces and also individually to a person's own role in the crisis. Resilient people have a healthy sense of where their strengths are and they work to maximise these in a crisis. They know what they can do competently and well, and also, when to draw on the strengths or assistance of others. Resilient leaders also have a good sense of how far they can go and do not overextend themselves, especially in adversity. Resilient people create appropriate boundaries and also maintain a margin that allows them to absorb unexpected extra stresses which are often present in critical situations.

- a. Realistic assessment requires intelligent analysis of a crisis and the capacity to gather and organise information so that wise but courageous choices can be made. Are you accessing accurate, intelligent and reliable information on the adversity being faced?
- b. What strengths do you have which need to be leveraged in the current crisis? Where is your most helpful contribution?
- c. In what areas of life, leadership and ministry do you need to create and maintain some margin so you can absorb unexpected demands?

7. **Re-establishing structure, careful planning and implementation processes**

Unsurprisingly, resilience is associated with the ability to structure, systematically plan and execute a course of action. While this capacity tends to be associated with some personality traits, it can be learned. A structured approach to problems is related to the elements of mental focus, confidence and realistic assessment. Resilient people look at situations and understand which aspects are within their locus of control (i.e. they can do something about this aspect). They then plan what to do, organise what they need and implement their plan to a schedule.

- a. What elements of the current crisis are within your locus of control and which elements are outside your control? Take two elements over which you have some control, plan and implement some responsive action which makes a difference.
- b. Develop a daily and weekly routine which provides some structure to life in the midst of crisis and adversity.

8. Training in some grit, determination and commitment

Resilience is obviously connected to good old-fashioned perseverance and gutsy grit. This is the capacity to push on through, not give up and not lose heart when things don't go quite right. Resilient people are not side-tracked, distracted or lazy, they see a commitment through even though it costs and unexpected challenges might arise.

- a. Reflect on an important task which you have struggled to complete. Identify the distractions or obstacles and deal with them clearly so that the task is completed on a schedule you set.
- b. Find an activity in which it is physically appropriate and safe to push yourself beyond your normal limits and extend your ability to persevere. Do this regularly so you build capacity for 'grit' and determination.

9. Keeping up with key supportive relationships

Problems shared are problems halved. Adversity is always easier to face if there are supportive relationships in which people feel loved and cared for. It is a myth that resilient people tough it alone. One of the most clearly established aspects of resilience is gaining not only emotional support but valuable ideas from reflecting with others. Resilient people are happy to be accountable and find this helpful. They have good friends, active mentors and understanding peers. Resilience is also significantly increased by having a loving and caring spouse and family who listen, support and encourage when things are difficult.

- a. Family relationships are important in times of adversity and stress but they often suffer rather than become a source of support. What are you doing to increase the practical and personal support you give and receive from spouse and family at present?
- b. Peers who understand your challenges in ministry are an important source of support. Who are your peers and how can you engage with them in a two-way relationship at the moment?
- c. Friends who just like and care for you (and have no real idea about what you do) are an important connection especially when ministry is under pressure. How do you connect to some of these while everything is changing?
- d. If you have a mentor, spiritual director or supervisor, keeping up appointments via skype, zoom or phone is an important source of support while ministry and leadership is being redefined. Have you arranged out your next appointment?

10. Gathering a range of external resources

The capacity to access and marshal external resources for assistance in times of adversity is part of resilience. These may be finances, materials, supplies or ideas. There are many sources of information, resource, ideas and even support available via the internet. Resilient leaders make the most of what is available and leverage these for assistance. Denominational networks, Government agencies and other networks provide assistance and support in crises. Learn where and how to access the information you need. Tune in to the best of these and draw on the expertise of others.

- a. List the most reliable and helpful resources and networks which you are a part of. Create a 'suppliers' list of those who provide the most important assistance,
- b. Take charge of working out when and how you will access what you need. Don't wait for things to appear in your social media feeds or email. Become proactive by scheduling time to research and check your best resources.
- c. Are there key resources which you are struggling to find or access? Ask for help to point you in the right direction.

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